The Kentucky Cycle Study Guide

The Kentucky Cycle by Robert Schenkkan

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Introduction

When he first conceived the idea of *The Kentucky Cycle*, Robert Schenkkan never believed that it would grow into a history making, award winning, epic drama of Americana. He began the work in 1984 after a trip through rural eastern Kentucky as a wedding present to his wife, Mary Anne. The play grew as Schenkkan researched more about the region and his desire to say something about how modern America thinks of and rethinks its past and what that history means. The Kentucky Cycle won a grant from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, which allowed Schenkkan to complete the cycle by fall of 1991 when it premiered at Intiman Theatre in Seattle. The 1992 Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama propelled *The Kentucky Cycle* to New York, where it opened to mixed reviews. Schenkkan captures the essence of America's past and its fears and translates them into a work that many critics see as the best theater in the last two decades of American drama.

The Kentucky Cycle is a series of nine plays that spans over 200 years of American history in a small portion of eastern Kentucky. Although the features are local, the issues raised in the play are universally American and draw on the very best and the very worst in America's history. The plays explore violence as a part of American life whether that violence is racial, gender-based, or environmental and how each generation deals with and works through the American tendency to use force first and ask questions later.

Author Biography

Born in 1953, Robert Schenkkan wrote the *The Kentucky Cycle* after a trip to the Appalachian mountains in the early 1980s. There he was impressed by the rugged beauty of nature and the utter devastation that strip-mining had brought to the landscape. Schenkkan was also struck by the great divide between rich and poor in such a compact area as eastern Kentucky. He says that he began writing The Kentucky Cycle in 1984 as a wedding present to his wife. The cycle of plays grew into a tale about "America from its "discovery" by Europeans to its rediscovery" in the 1960s.

Schenkkan originally began his career as an actor, appearing in films with Christian Slater and episodes of *Star Trek*: *The Next Generation*, but he soon discovered his talents for writing and scripting. His plays have won multiple awards and critical acclaim. He won the Julie Harris/Beverly Hills Theatre Guild Award in 1989 for *Heaven on Earth*, the LA Weekly's Critic's Choice Award for Tachinoki, and a "Best of Fringe" Award at the Edinburgh Festival for The Survivalist. Schenkkan has also written screenplays for Oliver Stone, Denzel Washington, and Ron Howard.

The Kentucky Cycle won Schenkkan the largest grant ever presented by the Kennedy Center for New American Plays and broke box-office records when it premiered in Seattle in 1991. In 1992, he made history when *The Kentucky Cycle* won the Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama, the first time a play had won the Pulitzer without having first played on Broadway. After the Pulitzer Prize, *The Kentucky Cycle* was also nominated for Tony, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle awards.

The Kentucky Cycle has become more than just a series of plays for its author. Schenkkan sees this work as a metaphor for how America works. It has also become his statement on the functioning of the American Dream. He originally envisioned one or two plays, four at the most, but as he wrote the story got bigger and bigger until it was a full seven hours long, with nine plays, spanning over 200 years. Schenkkan wanted his epic play cycle to reflect the beauty, the reality, and the brutality of modern American life.

Plot Summary

Part One

The first part of *The Kentucky Cycle* contains five plays: *Masters of the Trade* (1775), *The Courtship of Morning Star* (1776), *The Homecoming* (1792), *Ties that Bind* (1819), *and God's Great Supper* (1861). These plays explore the motives of violence and revenge, all in the name of family and land.

Masters of the Trade concerns Michael Rowen and how he comes to acquire the land in the first place. Michael is an Irish immigrant whose family has been killed in a Cherokee attack in eastern Kentucky prior to the American Revolution. Michael expresses no real remorse for his wife and daughter, but rather sees their deaths as an opportunity. He finds the man who sold the Cherokee their guns and he and his accomplice, Sam, kill the man. The shots bring the Cherokee warriors, who do not trust Michael, but decide to trade with him. Michael then kills Sam to show that he, Michael, can be trusted as the one to kill the man who killed their friend, Earl Tod. Michael trades the guns, powder, and shot that the Cherokee want for the land that he wants. However, Michael is not a good man. Not only has he killed two men, but the blankets that he gives the Cherokee are infected with smallpox. Michael knows that the disease will wipe out the tribe.

The Courtship of Morning Star, the second play in the cycle, concerns Michael's marriage to a Cherokee girl, Morning Star. She is one of the few survivors of Michael's smallpox plague and she knows that he is the one who has decimated her tribe. He has kidnapped her because he needs a woman to complete his plan. He needs children. Michael is brutal in his rape and treatment of Morning Star. He gives her no choice but to live with him and bear his children. When she tries to escape, he catches her and cuts her Achilles tendon. He does this so that she will never be able to run away from him again. Michael continues to threaten her. He tells her that their first child MUST be a boy or he will kill the child. Morning Star's fear and loathing for this man become clear in her speeches during her pregnancy. She mourns for her family and fears for herself. The play ends as Morning Star sings to her son and Michael expresses his fear of the child.

The Homecoming picks up the story sixteen years later as Patrick Rowen tries to make sense of his life and of his fear of both his parents. Patrick is in love with Rebecca Talbert, daughter of a neighboring farmer, Joe, but both families oppose the match. Michael is too jealous of his son and Joe just does not like the Rowens. Morning Star convinces Patrick that Michael intends to disinherit him and the only way Patrick can secure his claim to the land is to kill his father. After a trading trip, Michael returns to his home with a female slave. All successful farmers in the South had slaves and Michael was determined to be a success. Patrick stabs his father while the man is bathing in front of his mother, the slave, and, unfortunately, Rebecca and her father, Joe. However, this is exactly what Morning Star planned. She wanted to get rid of Michael and her son, but Patrick's violence was too strong for her. He killed Joe, the only man she had ever

loved, and threatened to kill Morning Star as well. Neither the slave, Sallie, nor Rebecca, whom he would rape and "marry" could help her. Patrick drinks a toast to his "wedding" over his father's dead body.

Fourth in the cycle of plays is *Ties that Bind*. This play takes place in 1819, over twenty years later. Rebecca has died in childbirth with the second of two sons, and Patrick never remarried. Zeke and Zach have grown up with Sallie acting as mother and her son as brother. They are vaguely aware of an approaching disaster, but the true depth of Morning Star's revenge becomes obvious slowly. Patrick is heavily in debt and the bank is foreclosing on his loans. The justice of the peace comes to Patrick's farm, armed to the teeth, and sets out the terms of his bankruptcy. An unidentified man holds all the loans on Patrick's land and slowly, piece by piece he forces Patrick to give up everything, including Sallie and her son, Jessie. Even the news that Jessie is Patrick's half brother does not stop him. Finally, with nothing left, Patrick begs the stranger for mercy. Only then does Jeremiah Talbert reveal himself and Morning Star appears as well. Patrick realizes that they have tricked him and his family out of everything they own and his anger burns deep. However, there is nothing he can do about it at the moment. Zach, disgusted by his father's selling of his own flesh and blood, leaves and is never heard from again. Patrick survives, nursing his hatred and vengeance.

The last play in Part One is *God's Great Supper*. This play is the climax and focal point for all the other plays. Patrick has aged to a drooling old man and his son, Zeke, and grandson, Jed, are bent on revenge against the Talberts. Jed pretends to befriend the young Randall Talbert, Jeremiah's grandson, thus alienating his own family. Jed, of course, is only doing this to please his father and his hatred of the Talberts runs just as deep as the other members of his family. Jed volunteers for Richard Talbert's unit in the Civil War and kills Talbert by pushing him off the boat after they have escaped from the enemy. Jed joins a group of outlaws for a while before he comes home to oversee the murder of Randall and the rapes of his two sisters. The Talbert family home is destroyed and Jed claims the land back as his birthright. There is no one left to oppose him.

Part Two

Part Two of *The Kentucky Cycle* has the remaining four plays: *Tall Tales* (1885), *Fire in the Hole* (1920), *Whose Side are You On*? (1954), *and The War on Poverty* (1975). All four of these plays deal with coal mining and its affects on the people of eastern Kentucky.

The first play of Part Two, *Tall Tales* narrates how Jed Rowen finally lost the land that his ancestors had fought and died over. Jed is now middle aged with a young daughter, lots of land, very little money, and less sense. His family is isolated and his wife and daughter dream of far away places and luxuries that they simply cannot afford. A storyteller, JT Wells, arrives at the Rowen farm and starts to spin his magic. Although he claims to be from the area, he says he has lived in New York City, New Orleans, and other exotic places. Mary Anne, Jed's daughter, and Lallie, his wife, are mesmerized by JT's hypnotic tales. The only one who is not happy is Tommy Jackson, who is in love

with Mary Anne and thinks that the stranger is there to steal her heart. In reality, he is there to steal her land. By fake "hard" bargaining, JT convinces Jed to sell, not only the mineral rights, but his entire farm for $ 1 per acre. This does not sit well with Lallie and she tries to convince him not to sell even a rock of his place. Jed, however, will not listen to a woman's advice and sells his property thinking he has made a great deal. Though the land was actually worth millions, Jed sells everything that he and his ancestors had built for $170. In a fit of remorse, JT tries to tell Mary Anne what the deed really means, but she cannot comprehend that other people would be so sneaky. Tommy attacks and kills JT; and Jed, again refusing to listen to a woman, stands by his signature. Mary Anne's favorite tree is the first thing the mining company cuts down.

Fire in the Hole and *Whose Side are You On*? make up the core of Schenkkan's cycle of America's rise and fall. These two plays deal with the conditions in eastern Kentucky after the mining companies take over and the workers' attempts at unionization. Mary Anne Rowen and Tommy Jackson are married and she has watched five of her six sons die of the typhoid that hits the area with horrible regularity. The mining company literally owns the entire town; there is no other employment. Tommy and Mary Anne cannot even pay for the medicine to heal their last child, Joshua. Where Mary Anne's father had once owned the entire valley, she and her family are reduced to renting a house from the company, buying food at the company store, and loading ten tons of coal a day, six days a week. The miners are not even paid in money, but given company script good only at the company store. A stranger, Abe Steinman, arrives on the scene and attempts to organize the miners. He pays for Joshua's medicine, thus winning Mary Anne's eternal gratitude and devotion. Tommy, however, is not so easily swayed. He does agree to help Abe organize the workers and even arranges to buy guns from Cassius Biggs, his cousin (although neither admit to being related). But at the last moment, Tommy panics and tells the mine owners everything. Abe and the other organizers are killed, setting off a chain of angry events. Mary Anne blames Tommy and he is dragged off and killed by other miners. She takes back her maiden name and forms the union that Tommy was afraid would destroy their lives. As with all such labor organizations, the blessings are mixed.

Schenkkan portrays these mixed blessings in the eighth play *Whose Side are You On*?. Joshua has become the president of the local chapter of the United Mine Workers Union and quite a skillful politician. He lacks the idealism of his son, Scotty, preferring instead, a jaded realism. He allows major safety violations to go uncorrected because James Talbert Winston, the owner of the mine, threatens to shut the operation down completely if he does not. James, Franklin Biggs, and Joshua play with the numbers of layoffs, severance packages, and wages without any real concern that they are playing with people's lives. Scotty has problems with his father's callous attitude and refuses to play along with his game. Joshua and James's corner-cutting on safety causes a cave-in at the mine and Scotty is killed. Even in the face of his personal tragedy, Joshua plays the part James wants him to and he passes the cave-in off as a mere accident, not something that was preventable. The play ends as Scott Rowen's name is read as one of the victims.

The final play in *The Kentucky Cycle*, is called *The War on Poverty.* It takes place twenty-one years after Scotty's death. The mining company has gone bankrupt and there is nothing left of either the company, the union, or the community. Joshua, James, and Franklin are wandering out on the land that was supposed to become the county hospital and was originally the Rowen homestead. Although Joshua does not know it, he feels a connection to the land and he is not ready to give up as the other two men are. They discover the mummified remains of a child, wrapped in bead embroidered buckskin, that was unearthed by a pair of scavengers. The audience realizes that this is the body of Morning Star's girl child that Michael had killed in 1782. While James and Franklin want to take the buckskin back to town to sell, Joshua suddenly feels the need to rebury the child. He threatens his friends with his rifle and they put the body down. Joshua feels his connection to the land and celebrates the beauty of the Kentucky landscape by howling with a lone wolf nearby.

Play One, Masters of the Trade

Play One, Masters of the Trade Summary

The play and the cycle open with a prologue: a narrator setting the scene in the wilds of Kentucky in 1775.

Earl Tod, a Scottish trader, appears, sits by his fire and starts to doze. He looks up suddenly when he hears a noise offstage. As he reaches carefully for his rifle, he calls out in Cherokee. When there's no response he tries English, threatening whoever is in the woods with death if he doesn't come out immediately.

Michael Rowen, an Irish trader, steps out of the forest with his hands in the air. He asks to sit by the fire and have a bite to eat, since he's been on the run "after all that terrible trouble at Zion." Rowen explains that a wild animal spooked his horse, and while he was getting away himself he sprained his anke. He says he's been wandering ever since. When Tod invites him to sit, Rowen limps over to warm himself. Tod cracks him with the butt of his gun, and when Rowen falls Tod searches his body. Tod finds only a small knife, and Tod tosses a canteen and a leather sack of food onto the ground. As Rowen recovers, Tod explains that he can't be too careful, especially not when there are renegade Indians around.

Tod says he saw a group of Indians heading northwest a week before, and Rowen replies that they are the band that attacked Zion, a small town that was wiped out a few days before. Rowen says that although he escaped because of an accident with his horse, he did witness the whole attack, including the murders of his wife and children. Tod sympathizes, and Rowen prays briefly that the murdered people rest in peace. Rowen then offers to repay Tod's hospitality with a little liquor, the only thing he has. When Rowen reaches into his pocket Tod points his gun at him. Rowen freezes and then carefully pulls out a flask of liquor. The two men toast each other's health.

Rowen talks about how strange it was to see Indians with guns, but he says it was bound to happen. "One man's profit is just another man's dead wife," he says. Tod offers him a few supplies and directions for getting to the nearest town. When Rowen asks if he's a trader, Tod tells him it's none of his business but then admits he *is* in trade but only enough to him in what he needs. Rowen asks what brought Tod to Kentucky. Tod says room and quiet, and Rowen responds with the comment that it's a new land where men, like himself, are arriving as servants but becoming their *own* men when their masters suddenly die.

As the men laugh at this, Rowen asks whether Tod worries about sharing his land with the Indians. Tod says he and the Indians leave each other alone. Rowen suggests that Tod and the Indians have an understanding, or a deal, and then asks in Cherokee where the rifles are. When Tod pretends to not understand, Rowen reminds him that he spoke Cherokee earlier and asks again where the rifles are. Tod nervously starts

pacing, and Rowen asks whether the rifles used in the massacre at Zion came from Tod. When Tod readies his rifle, there's a noise in the woods. Tod fires, and Rowen screams out a warning. A shot is fired from the woods, and Tod falls dead.

A young man comes out of the forest and hits Tod's body repeatedly with his fist, calling Tod names and accusing him of killing his family. Rowen slaps the young man until he calms down, telling the man that his shot probably alerted Indians from miles around. When the young man goes into the woods to get his and Rowen's packs, Rowen searches Tod's body and the rest of the campsite, looking for something but getting frustrated when he doesn't find it. He does find a gold pocket watch, which he puts in his *own* pocket.

The young man returns with the packs and asks why Rowen is so angry. Rowen tells him that he can't find any weapons or supplies. He pulls out a blanket from one of the packs, thinks for a second and tells the young man to cover Tod's body with it. He asks the young man what he's got left for supplies, but before he can answer a group of Cherokee warriors appears.

Taskwan, one of the warriors, interprets for Dragging Canoe, the leader who always speaks in Cherokee, and asks where Tod is. When Rowen greets the warriors in Cherokee, Taskwan switches to English, which surprises Rowen. The Indians discover that Tod is dead, and Dragging Canoe tells the warriors to kill the white men.

Rowen quickly negotiates a deal. He gives the Indians the gunpowder and shot in the young man's pack, throws in the blankets, and promises that there will be much more of the same. They negotiate an agreement, but as they are about to shake hands, Taskwan states that Tod "was a brother to [his] people, and his blood debt is unpaid." After a moment, Rowen understands Taskwan's meaning, whips out his knife, and stabs the young man in the stomach.

Taskwan and Rowen shake hands. Before Rowen lets go of Taskwan's hand, though, he asks for land. At first Taskwan and the Indians say that the land can belong to no-one, but when Rowen says he'll take his chances, Taskwan tells him the land is cursed because the Indians will hunt there but will not live there. Taskwan and the warriors collect the supplies, including the blankets, and leave.

The young man moans, asks for water and then asks whether he's going to die. Rowen tells him he probably is, but Rowen reassures him that there will be revenge for Zion. Rowen says the blankets he gave the Indians have been infected with smallpox, which will decimate them. As the young man dies, Rowen tells him the sun's coming up, and he welcomes the new day.

Play One, Masters of the Trade Analysis

This play is intricately plotted and full of twists and turns. This *unpredictability* is an illustration of the unpredictability of the *life lived* by the men of the time, men like Tod, Rowen and the young man. The biggest surprise, when Rowen suddenly stabs the

young man, is the play's *climax* and makes the play's biggest thematic *statement*: that a ruthless man will do *anything* to get what he wants. This theme, how far someone will go to achieve his version of the American dream, runs through the cycle.

The action in this play raises questions about Rowen's *motivation*? Why does Rowen do what he does? Is he out for power, for revenge or *just to survive*? There are *indications* that he *is* out for revenge if he is telling the truth about witnessing the massacre at Zion. This raises the question of hoe much of what Rowen say is true. Rowen probably can be believed when he talks about witnessing the massacre at Zion, but it's questionable whether his family was killed and whether he hurt his ankle and lost his horse. If Rowen's *goal* or *objective* is to find out whether Tod sold the guns to the Indians, Rowen may have faked his injury to lull Tod into a false sense of security, leading Tod to reveal the truth. Rowen was motivated by a desire for revenge, he had a goal to find Tod to get revenge and he used tactics such as faking his injury and lying to reach his goal.

When the playwright includes a particular stage direction about a particular *prop* or *character reaction,* as in this play when Rowen first picks up the infected blanket, it usually foreshadows that that prop or reaction will play an important role later. For example, when the stage directions state that Rowen looks at the blanket for a moment, we know something will *happen* with that blanket. There is also *foreshadowing* in Taskwan's comment that the land is cursed, which also *alerts* readers that as the *Kentucky Cycle* continues, tragedy may occur.

Another prop specifically mentioned in the stage directions is the *pocket watch* that Rowen takes from Tod's body. This watch shows up as a family heirloom throughout the entire cycle, and it *symbolizes* the evil that follows the family throughout the generations.

The play's *ending*, where Rowen talks about it being "a new day," is *ironic*, given that we know it's a new day *only* for him and the white people. When Rowen gives the Indians the blanket filled with smallpox, it's a *symbol* of how the presence of white men destroyed many Indian nations.

Play Two, The Courtship of Morning Star

Play Two, The Courtship of Morning Star Summary

A narrator announces the second play, "The Courtship of Morning Star," which takes place one year after the first play.

In Scene 1, Michael Rowen, the Irish trader from the first play, drags an Indian woman who struggles viciously and curses him in Cherokee on stage. He hauls her into his cabin, throws her to the floor and welcomes her home.

In Scene 2 Rowen and the woman are asleep in bed. The woman slips out from under Rowen's arm, but she discovers that her wrist is tied to his *other* wrist by a length of rawhide. She tries to untie it, but it's too tight. She grabs a log from beside the fire, but Rowen wakes up before she can hit him. They struggle and end up crouched on the floor, facing each other. Rowen laughs.

In Scene 3, the woman sits at a table. She is no longer tied to Rowen, who brings her a bowl of food. When she refuses to eat, he says he's not much of a cook but it's not *that* bad. He tells her his name is Michael, and he tries to get her to say her name. She finally tells him her name is Knox Sanale, which he translates as Morning Star. He calls her to him, pulls her into his lap and kisses her. She allows him, but when he gets even more excited she smashes one of the bowls into his face. Rowen falls to the ground and the woman breaks a chair over his head. Morning Star runs off, and Rowen staggers off after her.

In Scene 4, Morning Star stands at the stove and stirs a large iron pot. Rowen sits at the table and tells a story of how, at age 7, he killed a fox hunter who was hunting with hounds. Rowen describes the barking of the hounds as being like "the sound of a hungry child crying [himself] to sleep." The hunter fell off his horse, and young Rowen went over to him, looked down and stepped on his neck, breaking it. Rowen talks about how much land he has now and how he's richer than that little boy ever thought possible.

Rowen says, however, that something isn't right. He says he's working the rich land and saving for the future, but he feels empty and wonders what the point is, if ten years after he dies the forest takes over the land again, or worse, a stranger buys it. Rowen realizes that he needs to father a child. Morning Star limps over to him and ladles some stew into a bowl. She has a bandage on her ankle. Rowen examines her injury and tells her that the cut was clean and she will always be able to walk, but she will never run. He raises a glass to his firstborn son, and he vows to leave a daughter on the top of a mountain.

In Scene 5, there are three pools of light. Rowen is in one, silent. Morning Star is in the second, and a body double for Morning Star who acts out giving birth in the third while

Morning Star speaks. Her words are interrupted by screams of pain from the Double. Star prays to her ancestors, particularly to her grandmother. She says that she feels alone and betrayed. After a particularly intense scream from the Double, Star tells her unborn child that she used to hate it because she used to think of it as Rowen's. But then she says that the first time she felt the baby move, she realized it was part of *her*, and they are one life , one blood and one flesh, and they have one thought: to bring death to Rowen. The child is born. Morning Star tells Rowen he has a son and announces that the baby was born with teeth.

In Scene 6, Morning Star nurses the baby and sings a song to him, calling him a warrior and urging him to grow strong. Rowen says she should teach him a proper lullaby, but when she challenges *him* to do it, Rowen protests he doesn't know any and insists that Star not teach the baby to speak Cherokee. The baby continues to cry, and when Rowen asks why he's crying, Star says she doesn't know and that crying is what babies do. Star offers the baby to Rowen to hold him. Rowen backs off, and when Star asks if he's afraid of his own son, Rowen replies that he's no gift for babies. Rowen goes outside but doesn't leave the stage. Star laughs softly to herself and dangles the gold pocket watch that Rowen took from Tod as a plaything for the baby as Rowen watches.

Play Two, The Courtship of Morning Star Analysis

Rowen's struggle to control Morning Star *symbolizes* the struggle of traders and pioneers such as Rowen to control the land. Rowen *symbolizes* progress, while Morning Star represents *nature*. The tension between Rowen and Morning Star is the first sign that Taskwan's comment in the first play that Rowen's land is *cursed* may be *correct*.

In Rowen's story about killing the fox hunter, it's never stated but the *implication* is that the fox hunter is British. Ireland has been under various types of British control for centuries, and Rowen clearly sees his killing of the fox hunter as an attempt at independence. This is *ironic* because Rowen constantly defeats Morning Star's attempts at independence to the point where he hurts her to prevent her from running. When we realize what he's done, it hits us with the same kind of shock as Rowen's killing of the young man in the first play. Once again, the playwright surprises us with how brutal his characters can be, another aspect of his *thematic statement.* Rowen and his descendants *represent* humanity's capacity for destruction and ruthlessness, and they are people who will do *anything* to achieve their version of the American dream.

Rowen's comment that the baying of the hounds sounds like the cry of a hungry child *foreshadows* the crying of his own child at the end of the play. Because the baying of hounds during a hunt suggested that a fox was about to be caught and killed, the implication of this image is that the child may one day call for, or play a role in, his father's death. Another piece of *foreshadowing* comes when Rowen talks about abandoning a daughter to the wild, which we're told in the next play is exactly what he's done.

The climax of this play is the birth of the child and Morning Star's prayer to her ancestors. Showing reverence for those who have gone before is an important part of the spirituality of native North Americans. As the Double *physically* acts out the child's birth, screaming from the pains of labor, Morning Star talks about her thoughts and feelings and how they changed as her pregnancy advanced. Her belief that she and her baby share the desire to kill Rowen *foreshadows* the action in the next play.

Finally, the pocket watch appears as a plaything for Star and Rowen's baby, suggesting that the ruthless greed that led Rowen to kill for the watch also will be part of this baby's life.

Play Three, The Homecoming

Play Three, The Homecoming Summary

A narrator sets the scene, which is the wilds of Kentucky, 16 years later.

In scene, one, the baby born to Rowen and Star at the climax of the previous play is now a 16-year-old named Patrick. Patrick hunkers down on a mountain ridge looking out over a valley. He's joined by Rebecca, a young woman who teases him about being able to sneak up on him. They admit that they missed each other, and after kissing him, Rebecca explains how she found him.

She says she looked in the fields, and when she didn't find him there she asked Star where he was. Star didn't say anything. Rebecca asks Patrick why Star doesn't like her, saying that every time Star comes over to visit Rebecca and her dad, Star ignores her. Patrick is surprised because Star doesn't visit anybody. Rebecca explains that Star has been using herbs and native medicines to cure a cut on her father's arm. Patrick says that Star never said anything about that to him, but he let's it go.

Rebecca finishes her story about how she found Patrick, telling him that she tried to think like he would when hunts, like the animal that's being hunted. Patrick tells her that it's not about thinking like the animal, it's more just being *with* the forest instead of *in* it, "like [he] was still waters and green pastures 'stead of hunger and lead.'"

Patrick and Rebecca kiss, and they are about to go further when she asks him whether he'd talked to his father yet. Patrick hesitates and rolls away. Rebecca becomes angry because he'd *promised*. When Patrick says it isn't that easy to talk to his father, Rebecca suggests that they elope. Patrick tells her that he's not leaving the land that's rightfully his, and he promises to talk to his father as soon as his father returns from Louisville, which should be any day now.

Patrick tells Rebecca that every time his father comes back from Louisville he brings a special gift for Star, which turns out to be something that hurts or irritates her. His father's gifts have included a mirror, which Star thought would steal her soul, and a tin bathtub for her to soak her leg in when it stiffens up. When Rebecca asks why Patrick always calls his father *him* and never *Pa*, Patrick tells her about his baby sister, whom "he" took away shortly after she was born. Patrick says he used to look for her grave but never found it.

After a brief conversation about Rebecca's younger brother Jeremiah, Patrick tells Rebecca to be still. He sees the glint of a gun in the trees, and he says it's probably Rowen. Before he can head for home, Rebecca makes him promise to talk to Rowen that night. Patrick tells Rebeccas he loves her and leaves. Alone with the forest, Rebecca tells herself everything will be fine.

In Scene 2, Patrick arrives home and sees Star bringing out buckets of water. When Star greets him in Cherokee, Patrick replies in English. Star asks him if he if doesn't speak Cherokee because he's ashamed of his ancestors. Patrick says that he just doesn't see the point. He takes the buckets of water from Star and pours them into the tin tub in the yard. Star goes into the house and returns with Patrick's supper. She asks him what he did all day. Patrick admits that he spent most of it on alone the ridge thinking, but Star says she knows that Rebecca went up to visit him. Patrick tells Star that he knows she's been visiting Rebecca's father. Star says she does it to have a little money of her own that she can give Patrick, and she admits that she hides it from Rowen so he won't get mad at her. Patrick puts his head in Star's lap and asks her in Cherokee to forgive him. Star kisses him and forgives him.

When Star asks why Patrick wants to marry Rebecca, he says he loves her and has his eye on a section of land owned by her father that is adjacent to Rowen's land. Star says Patrick is always wanting more just like his father, and she warns that it will lead to an unhappy life. Patrick says that Rebecca makes him happy, and he asks for Star's help in talking to Rowen, saying that he's seen Rowen on his way. Star asks when Rowen will arrive, and Patrick says within a day or two. Patrick suggests that they use the argument about the land to convince Rowen, telling him that it will give the family a third as much land. Star says it will give his *pa* a third again as much, and when Patrick says it all amounts to the same thing, Star falls silent.

Patrick becomes suspicious, and he asks Star what she means. Star gets Patrick to rub her bad leg, the one that Rowen injured so she couldn't walk, and she tells Patrick that she believes that Rowen has another woman in Louisville, a white woman who has given him a white son. Star says she has seen this woman in a dream in which the woman is crossing a muddy river. Patrick says that means death and suggests the woman is dead. Star says that might be possible. Patrick protests that he's the oldest and the land is his by right under the law, but Star laughs and reminds him that Rowen has never paid a lot of attention to the law. She then presses Patrick to admit that he knows that Rowen hates him, and she tells Patrick that Rowen is also *afraid* of him. She says that when Rowen arrives Patrick should ask him about the land and about Rebecca and see what happens.

At that moment, Rowen *does* show up. He sees his wife and son waiting and orders Patrick to bring him a jug. When Star asks Rowen what he brought her *this* time, Rowen sarcastically wonders why he didn't get any embraces or kisses first. Rowen sees the tub and comments sarcastically that he likes to see her using the gifts he brings home. When Star asks again what he brought *this* time Rowen calls her greedy. Rowen takes a long pull off the jug that Patrick brings and whistles sharply.

A black woman, bruised and chained and carrying a pack, steps out of the forest. Rowen boasts that she's an African princess who he he paid 30 silver dollars for. He says he will use her to work in the field. Star protests that she won't last a day, but Rowen ignores her and lectures Patrick on the value of thinking ahead. Rowen says he's not really thinking of the woman in the field, he's thinking of her children. Star asks

who the father of those children will be, and Rowen lets her draw the conclusion for herself. Rowen says that he hopes his new family will be better than the old one.

Star sends Patrick off for more hot water for Rowen's bath. Star gestures to the tub, and Rowen climbs in, a little drunk. Patrick returns with more water, which Star pours over Rowen's head. As she begins to wash Rowen, Star tells him that Patrick is making plans to marry Rebecca. Patrick and Rowen argue, and Star deliberately pushes soap into Rowen's eyes. As Rowen screams, Patrick pulls his knife out and stabs his father to death. Patrick then goes behind the house and throws up.

Star immediately makes plans to cover up the murder, and she tries to calm Patrick, who remains upset. She suddenly calls out to someone she senses in the forest. Rebecca and her father Joe, the man who Star treated for an injured arm, appear. Joe is holding a rifle, and he tells Rebecca to fetch the gun off the porch. As she does, Star tells Joe that Rowen brought a slave from Louisville and was planning to have children with her. This shocks Joe deeply but doesn't change his mind. Joe tells Star that he plans to Patrick into town to face trial.

Star argues with Joe, saying, "If you love me Joe, you stop this." The fact that Star and Joe are in love surprises Patrick and Rebecca. Rebecca suggests that she and Patrick just run away. When Joe says Rebecca isn't going anywhere, Star tries to convince Joe to let Patrick go or at least give him a day's start. Joe isn't sure because he doesn't want to have to worry about Patrick coming back to kill him to keep him quiet. Star makes Patrick give Joe his word that Joe is safe. Joe agrees, but only if Patrick leaves without a gun. As Patrick protests that he'll die without a gun, Star asks for his forgiveness. Patrick asks Joe permission to bury his pa before he leaves, and when Joe agrees, Patrick grabs Rowen's gun from the pants that Rowen took off before his bath and shoots Joe. Patrick says that this is his land and he's not going anywhere.

Star, shocked and grieving for Joe, vows to see Patrick hang, but Patrick says there's no way he'll be convicted of anything on the word of a black slave and a Cherokee. When Star mentions Rebecca, Patrick says "a man's wife can't witness against him." He orders Rebecca into the house and tells Star that if he finds her anywhere on his land after the next morning she's dead. Star wishes him a long life and many sons, and she leaves.

Patrick finds a key around Rowen's neck and releases the slave, who tells Patrick that her name is Sallie. Patrick tells her to get the shovel from the barn, follow the creek down to a large oak tree and dig a hole there to bury his pa. Sallie leaves after Patrick tells her that Joe's not worth burying. Patrick goes through Rowen's clothes, finds the gold pocket watch, sits on the porch and cries.

Play Three, The Homecoming Analysis

In this play, *thematic parallels* between "The Kentucky Cycle" and Greek tragedy begin to become apparent. In "Kentucky Cycle" and several Greek tragedies, among others

those based on the myths of Oedipus and Agamemnon, the effects of evil choices fall on generation after generation. Parents are killed by their children, who are killed by *their* children, often because the *first* generation had a *character flaw.* In the case of Oedipus it was *arrogance*, in the case of Agamemnon it was *self-righteousness* and in the case of Michael Rowen, it is *greed*.

Parallels between the "Cycle" and the Greeks also can be seen in the *action*. Patrick and Star share an intimacy similar to that shared by Oedipus and *his* mother. The difference is that Patrick and Star are *emotionally* and *spiritually* intimate while Oedipus and Jocasta were *sexually* intimate. Rowen is stabbed in the bathtub, as was King Agamemnon. Agamemnon brought the princess Cassandra home from the Trojan War as a slave, and Rowen brings home the African princess Sallie home from Louisville as a slave. Oedipus was abandoned on a mountain but survived, as was Patrick's baby sister, although she died. In the *first* play of the "Cycle," when Taskwan tells Rowen that the land Rowen wants so badly is cursed, it *parallels* the curses found at the heart of the action in Greek tragedies. The gold pocket watch, which shows up again at the end of the play, represents the curse.

These parallels make it clear that "The Kentucky Cycle" is about more than the struggles between individuals. In the way that the Greek tragedies were extended metaphors for life in society and life in general, "The Kentucky Cycle" is an extended metaphor for life in *this* society and, again, life in general. It is not as much the story of a particular family, or even the story of a state, as it is the story of *America* and of the other spirit of work in its early years. The *prime* spirit is the spirit of freedom, equality and individuality that America celebrates. The *other* spirit of conquest and greed that Patrick and Rowen represent is the mirror image or the *dark side* of the American dream.

"The Kentucky Cycle" *differs* from Greek tragedies in that it is still about individuals and their relationships. In the tragedies, characters generally were larger than life and dealt with society-changing events in a stylized, melodramatic way. By contrast, in "The Homecoming" and the other plays in the "Cycle," genuine, complex human emotions lead people to extreme choices. These show up as details of character or emotion that generally are missing in Greek tragedies, which are painted with broader strokes on bigger canvases. Details in this play include Patrick's silence when Rebecca asks about the bathtub, as it's obvious that Patrick that Rowen injured Star to keep her from running away; Rowen's vicious, sarcasm directed at Star; and Patrick calling Rowen "pa" for the first time when he's about to bury him.

The final point of note about this play is Patrick's story about his baby sister, who symbolizes innocence and a new beginning, but not necessarily in this play. Her body is not recovered until the end of the cycle, and we realize that innocence virtually disappeared from the family with the baby's death and burial, something that the contemporary descendants of the Rowen family learn almost too late.

Play Four, Ties That Bind

Play Four, Ties That Bind Summary

A narrator announces the title and the setting for this play as the same place, 27 years later (1819).

The action begins with a playful wrestling match between Zach, a young white man, and Jessie, a young black man. Another young white man, Zeke, sits on the porch and reads the Bible. Zach suddenly starts spitting blood. Jessie runs for Zach's father, but Zach says not to because Jessie will get in trouble. Zach reaches out a hand, but when Jessie starts to help him up, Zach hauls him down and the wrestling match is back on. It doesn't last long, as Jessie pins Zach without a problem.

When Jessie lets Zach go, Zach gets angry at Zeke for not helping him. Zeke says it hurt to see his brother trapped like that, but Zeke figures it was time that Zach learned a lesson about keeping the Sabbath holy. Zach calls him a coward who hides behind the scriptures. Jessie teases Zeke about not being controlled by the Bible but by a young woman named Joleen. Zach joins in the teasing, and Zeke's temper blows. Zeke jumps off the porch and wrestles his brother until their father Patrick Rowen, now a man in his fifties, breaks them up. Patrick asks what happened, and Zach says it was his fault. Patrick blames Zeke, who Patrick says should have known better because he's the oldest. Patrick tells his sons to go inside and clean up, and he tells Jessie to bring his mother to the house because company is coming. Zeke goes inside. When Zeke returns, Patrick orders him to apologize and Zeke does, but he isn't happy about it at all.

When Zach goes inside to clean up, Patrick hints to Zeke that the company that's coming is the circuit court. When Zeke worries about how much land they're going to use, Patrick tells Zeke to go inside and get a couple of guns ready. Jessie returns and says his mother will be there as soon as she can. Patrick tells Jessie to take care of the visitors' mules, and if he hears shooting he should make sure the mules can't be found easily. Jessie heads off as Zeke and Zach come back. Patrick tells them to watch for a signal from him, and if they see it they should go in the house, get the guns and start firing.

The visitors arrive, led by a fat man who introduces himself as Judge Jim Goddard. Patrick introduces his sons by their full names, Ezekiel and Zachariah. A well-dressed man arrives at the same time as Jessie and his mother Sallie. Patrick offers the judge a drink. The judge accepts, and he is just about to have a second drink when the well-dressed man indicates it's time to get down to work. When Patrick asks the man's name, he introduces himself as Jeremiah and reminds Patrick and his men that Jeremiah was another Biblical prophet, who "sent the whole Hebrew nation □ from their homes and sent them wanderin' in the desert for seventy years!"

The judge calls the session of the circuit court to order, and he directs Patrick's attention to documents that Jeremiah hands to him. The documents confirm that Patrick has three outstanding loans that have been used to buy land to expand the Rowen farm. When Patrick protests that he *owns* that land, the judge informs Patrick that all he owns is the *paper* on that land and a large debt. The judge also says that Jeremiah purchased Patrick's debts just before the bank that Patrick had been dealing with folded. Now Patrick owes Jeremiah, not the bank.

The Judge and Jeremiah begin to make a list of Patrick's assets and his net worth. They value his land and his assets, including the original homestead and Patrick's tools. Patrick protests that his whole family is buried on the land and he's not giving it up, but the Judge and Jeremiah continue making their list. When they get to the animals, Zeke shouts it's not fair, but Patrick calms down and gives the secret signal for the boys to go in the house. The Judge insists that the boys stay outside, and Zeke and Zach stay. Patrick tells Jeremiah he doesn't look much like a farmer, but Jeremiah says he's actually a speculator, who he describes as "a man who buys things people need before they know they need 'em." Jeremiah then tells Patrick that Patrick still owes hundreds of dollars. Patrick offers him farm equipment, and Jeremiah asks for the guns as well. Patrick tells him the guns aren't for sale. Jeremiah accepts that, and he offers $80 for every lock, stock and barrel.

Patrick offers Jessie and Sallie to Jeremiah. Zach tries to protest but Patrick will have none of it. Jeremiah says that Sallie is useless to him, and he only wants Jessie. Sallie tries to join the conversation, but Patrick and Jeremiah are too busy making their deal to pay attention. Finally Sallie yells out that Jessie is Patrick's brother. She reveals that Michael Rowen fathered Jessie with her before he was killed. When Zach says there's no deal, Patrick continues negotiating as if nothing had been said. When Zach protests again, Patrick tells him that nobody tells him what to do on his land, and he knocks Zach to the ground.

Jeremiah asks what he has left. When Patrick can't actually say it, Jeremiah says it for him. Patrick has the house and the original land, which still leaves Patrick owing Jeremiah. Patrick pulls out the pocket watch. Jeremiah takes it, but Jeremiah still wants the rest of his money. Patrick pleads with Jeremiah to leave Zach and Zeke something because they didn't do anything wrong. Jeremiah makes Patrick get onto his knees and beg.

Patrick begs, and Jeremiah agrees to allow Patrick and the boys stay on the land as sharecroppers, which means that they will work the land but Jeremiah will get three quarters of what they grow. The amount remaining on the loans will continue to gather interest, as will any unpaid interest. Patrick has no choice but to agree. When the judge asks Jeremiah to get the documents ready, Jeremiah says he's got one more piece of business. He calls out to the woods, and what looks like an old man comes forward. When Jeremiah says the agreement has been made, the old man reveals himself as Star, Patrick's mother. Star says she wanted to come back and see Patrick humiliated, but now that it has happened she doesn't feel much of anything. Star says that maybe

she came home to die. She tells Jeremiah she doesn't need to see any more, and she leaves.

Jeremiah introduces himself as Jeremiah *Talbert*, Rebecca's younger brother, who has been plotting revenge against Patrick for killing their father for years. He orders the Rowens to come to his homestead in two weeks, where they will build him a big house where he can sit on his porch and watch them work. Jeremiah leaves, and the judge and the deputies follow.

Zach gets his gun from the house and starts off in the opposite direction from the judge and Jeremiah. Patrick asks Zach where he's going, and Zach says anywhere. Patrick yells that if Zach goes, he can never come back. Zach disappears. Patrick suddenly breaks down at having lost everything. Zeke comforts him and vows to get everything back even if it takes years, but Patrick continues to break down. Zeke says they will be just like the Hebrews, wandering in the desert, but then God will bring them home. And then, Zeke says, they will get even.

Play Four Analysis

There are several moments of intense dramatic power in this play. Most of them have to do with sudden *revelations* or truths. The most intense moment is when Patrick literally *begs* to be allowed to remain on his farm. The action of this play and the whole *cycle* has been building to this moment when the powerful, ambitious Patrick Rowen, the living *symbol* of the dark side of the American dream, falls to his knees in defeat. The *irony* is that Patrick is *not* defeated by someone who could be described as *good.* Patrick is defeated by Jeremiah's thirst for revenge, a different aspect of the same dark spirit. Nothing good comes out of this moment, except perhaps that Zach seems to be trying to break free of his family. When Jeremiah takes his revenge on Patrick, Zeke plots to take his revenge on Jeremiah. It takes years and a few more plays for it to actually happen, continuing the cycle of revenge.

The gold watch again shows up in *this* play as a *symbol* of the dark spirit of the American dream. When Patrick hands the watch to Jeremiah, it *represents* the fact that for the moment, Jeremiah's ambition and evil have won out over Patrick's. This victory, however, will not last forever.

There are several elements of *foreshadowing* and *irony* in this play, such Zeke being teased about Joleen *foreshadows* his marriage to Joleen in the next play. The wrestling match between Jessie and Zach foreshadows the verbal wrestling match between Patrick and Jeremiah over the repayment of the debt. When Jeremiah refers to the actions of the Biblical Jeremiah in sending the Hebrews into exile, it *foreshadows* what *this* Jeremiah is going to do to the Rowen family at the end of the play and what Patrick is going to do to Zach. The confrontation between Zach and Patrick that causes Zach to leave foreshadows a similar battle between another father and son later in the cycle (Play Eight, *Whose Side Are You On?).* The principal *irony* of this play is that Patrick

feels so passionately about his land and about keeping it in the family, which may appear to be a positive trait, but he gained *control* of the land by murdering his father.

This play is the last we see of the Biggs family (Sallie and Jessie) until the seventh play, "Fire in the Hole."

Play Five, God's Great Supper, Part 1

Play Five, God's Great Supper, Part 1 Summary

A narrator sets the scene as the Rowen homestead in 1861, 42 years later.

Jed Rowen, who is 28, tells us about a dream. It starts with the sound of crows fighting and continues with his father Ezekiel (Zeke from the previous play) preaching from the the Book of Revelations in the Bible. As Ezekiel reads from the book, Jed continues the story of the dream. He goes to a church picnic in an orchard, where he sits and eats plate after plate of food brought to him by a woman. The whole time William Clarke Quantrill, who was a rebel and guerilla soldier during the Civil War, sits opposite him. Two women dressed in rags appear and address us as they recite a list of names. When they get to Jed's name, Jed says that's when he wakes up. The lights disappear on Jed and the two women.

The lights come back up on the Rowen homestead where Patrick, now 85 and blind, sits in a rocking chair. Ezekiel sits leaning on a post, and a well-dressed little boy carrying a bundle tries to sneak past, looking for Jed. Patrick is too quick for the boy and catches him by the scruff of the neck. Ezekiel shouts at the boy, whom he identifies as Randall *Talbert*, and accuses him of spying. When the boy denies it, Ezekiel keeps shouting. The noise brings Joleen, Ezekiel's wife, out onto the porch. She tries to calm Ezekial down and says she's trying to sleep.

Jed comes on and tells Ezekiel to let Randall go. Ezekiel releases his grip, and Jed asks Randall what he wants. As Joleen soothes Patrick with some chewing tobacco, Ezekiel goes on about how "little snakes grow into big ones." Randall tells Jed that he wants to come live with them because Randall hates his dad. When Jed tells Randall to not talk that way about his father, Randall says it doesn't matter because he's going away to fight the Yankees. Randall says he wanted to go with his father, but his father said Randall was too young. Randall says that's when he decided to run away. As Randall unties his bundle, Jed asks when Randall's father is leaving. Randall says his father went around the county collecting people to go with him and that they are leaving the next morning. Randall shows Jed his father's pistol. Jed and Ezekiel look at it admiringly, then Jed tells Randall he shouldn't have taken his fathers's gun and that Randall cannot live with them. Jed suggests that Randall sneak back home and put the gun back where he found it.

As Randall wraps the bundle back up, his father, Richard Talbert, comes on dressed in a brand new Confederate uniform and a large hat with a feather. Richard speaks angrily to Randall for disobeying his order not to go to the Rowen homestead. Richard whips Randalls hand hand in punishment, and he sends Randall home.

Richard tries to convince Jed to join the Confederate Army. Richard says it's time to put the bad blood between the two families to rest and join forces against a common enemy

in the name of a "principle," which Ezekiel describes to Joleen as "one of those sweet nothin's the big boys whisper in your ear while they pull your pants down." Richard angrily says the war is about having people who live far away telling folks nearby what to do and that it's the kind of war that Jed's grandfather and great grandfather would have thought. He calls Jed just about the best shot in the area, and he says the army needs him. Ezekiel shouts out his growing suspicions, and Randall says that while Jed is riding with him, he'll knock a nickel off what they owe him. Richard says the war will be over in six weeks anyway, and there is not much in the area that will be more exciting. Richard urges Jed to be adventuresome and see what lies beyond the mountains.

Jed tells his father to save his preaching for Sundays. Ezekiel loses his temper, and while he's quoting Bible verses Jed agrees to ride out with Richard. Seeing that Jed has made up his mind, Ezekiel and Joleen go into the house. Richard tells Jed the soldiers are leaving at sunrise, and when Jed asks about a uniform, Richard says he will try and find something for him. Richard leaves, and Ezekiel and Joleen return, asking if Richard bought it.

Ezekiel and Jed have apparently planned for this situation. They also have planned that when Jed is with Richard he will find an opportunity to *kill* Richard and get revenge for all the humiliations the Rowens have suffered at the hands of the Talberts, which began with Jeremiah Talbert making Patrick beg in the previous play. As Jed talks about finding the right time to kill Richard, Ezekiel discovers Randall hiding under the porch. Ezekiel drags Randall out, slaps him a few times and tries to make him reveal what he heard. Ezekiel doesn't believe Randall when Randall says he didn't hear anything, and Ezekial sends Joleen into the house to make dinner. When Joleen is gone, Ezekiel says they will have to kill Randall now. Randall cries out to Jed in terror, and Jed laughs and turns the situation around. He convinces Randall, with Ezekiel's help once Ezekiel figures out what Jed is up to, that everything that Randall heard was a joke and that they knew Randall was under the porch the whole time. Jed asks Randall to get out his knife and makes them into blood brothers. Ezekiel says a prayer over them. Jed makes Randall promise to never tell anyone what just happened, and he sends Randall home.

As Ezekiel helps Patrick into the house, he warns Jed to not get too fond of Randall and to get used to the idea that the Rowens will kill *all* the Talberts. This scene blends into the next scene as Jed narrates the story of what happened when Richard and his army left for the war.

Play Five, God's Great Supper, Part 1 Analysis

Jed's dream is both a beginning and an ending, not just for the play but to the large *symbol* that forms the *subtext* for this play. The story of Jed fighting on the side of the Confederate Army against the Yankees is *also* the story of Jed fighting on the side of his *family* against the Talberts. In both battles Jed believes he's fighting for a cause, and in both battles Jed discovers that that cause is *not* as righteous nor as godly as he was led to believe. Jed discovers in both battles that the men *leading* the battles, Quantrill and

Ezekiel, are unreasonable to the point of being insane, and in both battles Jed is traumatized by the deaths of innocents (in the Civil War by the deaths in Lawrence; in the family wars by the death of Randall). Play Five is an extended metaphor illustrating the *theme* of the *entire cycle*: the dangers of giving in to the lust for revenge, or the darker side of the American Dream.

In Jed's dream, the food he eats represents the *revenge* he's forced to take. Quantrill represents the *spiritual decay* that results from that revenge. The women represent the *victims* of that revenge and the names the women recite, as we find out later, are the names of the people who took that revenge with Jed.

Jed and Ezekiel's plan for fooling Richard is clever, but it's never clearly stated *when* they made the plan. Because Joleen knows what's going on, it suggests that there *has* been some discussion about what to do if Richard did come by to draft Jed. This trick *foreshadows* the deceit played when Randall overhears Jed and Ezekiel's plan. The difference is that Jed and Ezekiel almost completely improvised the second plan. Ezekiel's eagerness to *kill* Randall *foreshadows* what Ezekiel does to Randall at the end of the play.

Play Five, God's Great Supper, Part 2

Play Five, God's Great Supper, Part 2 Summary

Richard starts the journey with a rousing speech to the troops and then heads off in the wrong direction. Jed points out Richard's mistake, and Jed states that the group of soldiers ran into conflict quickly. Jed and the other sharecroppers Talbert convinced to join him fight cautiously, and Richard and the Union colonel in charge of their unit call them cowards. The Union colonel is shot immediately when he stands to lead the charge, and Jed tells Richard to sit down before Richard gets shot as well. The Yankee Army advances, but Richard and his unit retreat and Richard falls and breaks his ankle. Richard asks Jed to help him, but Jed picks up Richard's pistol and is about to shoot him. As Richard begs for his life, a fellow Union soldier runs by and Jed holsters the pistol. Jed helps Richard to a nearby ferry, where they struggle with other retreating rebels to get on board. Jed forces his way on with the pistol and takes Richard with him. But in the middle of the river, Jed shoves Richard overboard and watches him sink.

Jed says there there was no way to get back to Kentucky with the Yankee Army on the other side of the river. Jed hooks up with William Clarke Quantrill, a Union soldier who Jed says "fought the war full time and by his own set of rules." Jed states that that if he could he would have headed back home then, but since there was no way to get there he told himself it was a war and lived with it. Jed changes his mind, though, when he sees Quantrill execute the innocent citizens of Lawrence, Kansas, in the name of his brother Charley, who was killed by Yankees.

Jed says that fter Lawrence, they went into Kentucky with an entire army after them. Jed says that he didn't know whether Quantrill was tired or just didn't care, but Quantrill was careless and his band was ambushed. While they are hiding in the woods, Jed asks whether Quantrill has had enough revenge for Charley's death. When Quantrill tells Jed there *was* no Charley, Jed and a few friends decide that is the moment to leave. Jed says he then made his way home.

At home, Jed discovers that Patrick has died and been buried that very morning. Jed introduces his friends from Quantrill's unit. Joleen offers them food and shows them the way back to the homestead. When Jed tells Ezekiel that Richard is dead, Ezekiel embraces his son and tells him they will go to the Talbert house in the morning. Jed says there's nothing there that they need, but Ezekiel tells him that the revenge isn't complete until every last Talbert is gone. Jed tells him that he's sick of the killing and asks when it's going to end. Ezekiel says it will end tomorrow. Joleen tells Jed that what he's really fighting for is freedom for his future family. This wins Jed over, and he agrees to one more day.

Jed narrates what happened that day. The Talbert home was burned down, the family and the slaves were all killed except for a slave family named Biggs who Ezekiel let go, and Richard's younger brother was hitched to a plow and forced to plow salt into the

fields. Jed says that the land is barren to this day, and he then narrates what happened to Randall. Jed gave Randall the chance to run into the woods and hide, but Randall ran into Ezekiel, who breaks Randall's neck and leaves him dead on the ground.

Jed says that the well was poisoned, everything standing was burned to the ground and the animals that weren't killed were taken back to the Rowen homestead. Jed says that Ezekiel didn't take anything for himself except "an old gold pocket watch."

Jed describes how he let the two Talbert women go, after his men were finished with them, saying "what can women do." At the same time, the two women from Jed's dream appear. As Jed buries Randall, they recite the same list of names as they did at the beginning, with the addition of Ezekiel. These are the men who destroyed the Talbert home.

As he finishes burying Randall, Jed describes the end of his dream. He feels the shadows of the past surrounding him and it feels like spring. The "first, dark shoots" reach up for Jed and his family, shoots that were planted in fields of decay and appetite. Then, Jed dreams of the harvest.

Play Five, God's Great Supper, Part 2 Analysis

This play dramatizes the *extended metaphor* of revenge with fast-paced action, sharp imagery and powerful narration. There is the strong sense of Jed being carried away, of being caught up in the overwhelming *energy* and *drive* of the powerful emotions associated with the desire for revenge. As a result the audience is carried away as well and feels the intensity of war, death and grief with him.

For the first time, the audience feels that there are *tragic* elements to this cycle. Iinnocents suffer and are killed after being caught up in these same waves of emotion. The death of the young man, who is also an innocent, at the hands of Michael Rowen in Play One is powerful as are the deaths of the people of Lawrence, Kansas, at the hands of Quantrill, but they don't have the same effect as the death of Randall Talbert. To some degree this is because we don't really know the young man or the citizens of Lawrence in the way we get to know Randall. The main reason, however, is the motivation *behind the killing*. The young man dies because Michael Rowen is greedy and wants to impress the Cherokee. His killing is very casual. The citizens of Lawrence die because Quantrill has lost his reason, and again, the killings are casual. Randall dies because Ezekiel's *deliberate* and *malicious* act. In other words, Randall is deliberately *murdered* while the other deaths are merely *killings*. Randall's death *represents* the death of innocence at the hands of bloodthirsty revenge, in this play and *in the cycle.*

Quantrill was a real soldier, and the massacre in Lawrence did happen. It's not a matter of historical record whether Quantrill lied about his motivations in the way Jed tells us. This is an example of *dramatic license*, in which actual events or people are re-shaped to make a dramatic point.

The Biggs family is only *mentioned* in this play and not seen. They are the only people on the Talbert homestead who Ezekiel spares. It is never explained why, but we assume it's because Ezekiel remembers that they are family, and he frees them from the Talberts in the same way that he has freed the Rowen side of the family.

The gold pocket watch shows up again, Ezekiel reclaims it for the "rightful owners." This *represents* that control, fueled by the desire for revenge and greed, is back in the hands of the Rowen family.

The final images of this play *symbolize* the destructive power of revenge. The dream that takes place in the spring *represents* the idea that revenge, like new plants in spring, always grows new and fresh, feeding on itself generation after generation. The shoots are dark, rather than green and bright, representing the idea that what's growing is actually *death* and *destruction*. These shoots grow in the "fields of appetite" for more people and more lives to destroy. Revenge's hunger is endless, the final images say, and yields a harvest of sorrow.

Play Six, Tall Tales, Part 1

Play Six, Tall Tales, Part 1 Summary

In the prologue, a narrator states that this play is set in 1885, 24 years after the previous play. The story begins with a poetic prologue, in which Mary Anne, the adult version of the 14- year-old girl we see playing by a stream, tells us about the beauty of spring in the Kentucky mountains and how someone once told her that there were no *real* mountains there at all. "If you stood high enough, you could see it was all just one big mound that had been … cut up into so many hills and valleys by the spring runoff that it looked like mountains." She says that was his story, at least, and that she doesn't believe much in stories any more.

In Scene 1, the light fades off adult Mary Anne and J.T. Wells, a slick, salesman, comes on. He watches young Mary Anne playing, and he throws a pebble into the creek and startles her. When she turns, J.T. says he's a friend and apologizes for scaring her, using a lot of big words to charm her. When J.T. comments on how pretty it is, Mary Anne agrees and tells him the history of her favorite tree, a big old oak called the Treaty Oak. That's where, according to Mary Anne's daddy, her great-great-grandfather Michael Rowen bought the family's land from the Indians. She says it's her favorite spot in the whole world. J.T. introduces himself, and when Mary Anne introduces herself J.T. calls her by what he says is the Italian version of her name, Mariana.

Mary Anne's boyfriend Tommy appears, carrying a shotgun. Mary Anne tells him to be nice, but there is a lot of tension between J.T. and Tommy. When it looks like it might become violent, Mary Anne jumps between them and tells Tommy that unless he behaves, she is never going to speak to him again. When Tommy asks what J.T. is doing there, J.T. says he's a storyteller and that he's there to see Jed Rowen, Mary Anne's father.

Play Six, Tall Tales, Part 1 Analysis

The writing in the prologue is richer with imagery and poetry than almost any other part of the cycle. It effectively dramatizes, through the use of language, the *character* of young Mary Anne in all of her innocence and joy and indicates that there still is something of that innocence and joy left in adult Mary Anne, even if it is only memory. The language is also *ironic* in that the story that adult Mary Anne is about to show doesn't have much poetry in it at all.

The destruction of young Mary Anne's innocence begins almost as soon as J.T. appears and begins weaving his spell. It's clear that as soon as J.T. starts speaking that he is trouble, which puts creates suspense as the audience wonders how tall his tales are going to get and what will happen to Mary Anne and her family as a result. The *irony* is that Tommy sees through him immediately, but Mary Anne is so desperate for J.T. to like

her that she is blinded to his dangers. This *itself* is ironic, or will seem to be ironic in the *next* play, where it's Mary Anne who sees the real danger and Tommy, who becomes her husband in the next play, who doesn't.

Play Six, Tall Tales, Part 2

Play Six, Tall Tales, Part 2 Summary

In Scene 2, J.T. and the Rowen family have just finished dinner. The family consists of Jed (from the previous play), his wife Lallie and Mary Anne. Tommy is also there. J.T. tells Jed that he's a lucky man because he has his independence, his own farm and has fought with other people like him for the Great Cause in the Civil War. Mary Anne begins the story of how Jed fought with Quantrill, which sounds a little different than the story in the previous play, but Jed stops her and says that J.T. is the story teller at the table. Jed offers J.T. a drink of homemade liquor, which JT accepts before beginning a story.

The first story J.T. tells is about a hunter with a lot of luck. The hunter got trapped by an angry mother bear on one side and a rattlesnake on the other with a flock of geese overhead. The hunter had one shot left, and he fired, but the gun blew up in his face. Instead of blinding him, the mother bear was killed and a piece of the stock killed the rattlesnake. The barrel flew up into the sky and killed the lead goose, which fell into a nearby lake. When all the other geese followed the leader, the hunter walked into the lake to fish them out. While in the lake, the hunter's boots filled with fish.

The Rowens applaud the tall tale, but Tommy doesn't believe it. J.T. sets out to impress him with the story of two families named Montage and Caplet who've been feuding for years. Two young people, one from each family, love each other and plan to get married. Before it happens, though, young Jack Montage runs into a group of Caplets, kills about five of them because he's such a good shot, then heads out of town for fear of getting killed in revenge. He leaves a message for his girl, Juliet Caplet, to meet him in Louisville. She makes plans to go, but her father is determined that she's going to marry a man named Thomas.

Juliet goes to a local witch woman for help. The witch woman gives her herbs that will make people think she's dead and promises that when Juliet's buried, the witch woman will get word to Jack to come back and dig Juliet up so they can be married. Juliet takes the herbs, appears to die and is buried by her family. The witch woman, however, becomes disabled by arthritis and can't get her message to Jack, who hears that Juliet is dead and goes crazy with grief. Jack comes back, all set to say goodbye to Juliet and kill himself, when he runs into Thomas. They fight, and Juliet wakes up and sees them. She grabs a shovel, and bashes Thomas' head. Juliet and Jack run away to New York City and live happily ever after.

Tommy loses his temper and attacks J.T. Jed grabs him and tells him to go. Tommy warns him that J.T. and Mary Anne are likely to make a fool out of him by morning. After Jed refuses to give him his gun back, Tommy leaves, promising to never forget J.T.

J.T. apologizes for making trouble and tells a third story, in gratitude for Jed and Lallie's hospitality, about how Jesus Christ came to Kentucky disguised as a poor beggar and

looking for a couple of good souls. Jesus repeatedly was turned away, but he finally found shelter in the home of an elderly couple named Philomen and Baucis. The next morning, Jesus reveals his identity and asks how he can bless the couple. Philomen and Baucis tell Jesus that they have spent so much time together that they would like to die together. Jesus says he figures that's possible, and years later when the time comes, Philomen and Baucis stand together, hold hands and are turned into two big oak trees whose branches whisper, "I love you," whenever a breeze blows.

While Lallie and Jed smile at each other happily, J.T. asks what will happen to them when they get older and how their family will be taken care of. When Jed says he doesn't know, J.T. proposes a solution. J.T. says he knows people who will pay for the rights to mine the rocks from his land. J.T. shows Jed a contract, which gives the rights to all the minerals under the groundsoil to the company J.T. represents. Lallie is uneasy, but Jed is readyl to sign. J.T. reassures Lallie and ups the price.

Just before he signs, Jed asks for a little more information. When J.T. admits that roads may need to be built and some of the water may need to be used, Jed changes his mind and refuses to sell unless the price goes up again. J.T. can't believe what he's hearing, but Jed holds firm at a dollar an acre. J.T. finally agrees, but when Jed pauses before signing for a second time, J.T. says that the price will not go any higher. Jed admits that he can't write his name. J.T. tells him that an X on the dotted line will do. Jed signs, and J.T. passes over a bank draft that is good at any bank. J.T. asks Jed not to tell any of the neighbors about the deal they made, and Jed agrees. When it comes to business, Jed says, it's every man for himself.

J.T. gets up to leave. Mary Anne asks him to stay the night, but J.T. says he's got to get moving and he would appreciate help getting back to the road. Mary Anne offers to guide him. J.T. says his thank yous and goodbyes, and he and Mary Anne leave.

In Scene 3, J.T. and Mary Anne walk through the woods toward the road, and J.T. talks about how thousands of years ago the whole land was underwater. He says that the mountains aren't really mountains but a plateau cut through by hundreds of years of runoff. Nothing, he says, is what it seems. J.T. gets up to go, but Mary Anne doesn't move. J.T. tells Mary Anne that he can't take her with him and that she belongs where she is. Mary Anne says she's not going to show him the road unless he kisses her first. J.T. does, telling her it won't change his mind about leaving. Mary Anne says she knows, and when they kiss again she pulls him down to the ground with her.

Tommy jumps out of the shadows and attacks J.T. J.T. fights back, weakens quickly and calls to Mary Anne for help. Mary Anne kicks Tommy in the side, and J.T. kicks and beats him viciously, stopping only when Mary Anne makes him. As he calms down, J.T. realizes that Mary Anne saved his life and asks why. Mary Anne says she loves him.

J.T. says he still can't take her with him, and when Mary Anne says she knows, J.T. breaks down and cries, saying he can't do it any more. When Mary Anne asks what, J.T. tells her that everything he told Jed about the mineral rights was a lie. The homestead is sitting on *millions* of dollars worth of coal and the mining company will destroy the land,

cut down all the trees, dump their waste into the wells and move on. J.T. tells Mary Anne that everything that was talked about at dinner was just stories, including the story about Quantrill. He tells Mary Anne that Quantrill was a thief and a murderer, and when he died people danced in the streets. Mary Anne asks him if it's all stories, then what's left? When J.T. is alone, who is he? J.T. says that Mary Anne should tell him what she wants to hear, and then he'll tell her why he kissed her. Mary Anne slaps him hard. J.T. tells her to take Tommy home, marry him and live happily ever after. He hands her Jed's contract and tells Mary Anne to tell Jed to tear the contract and the bank draft up.

In the epilogue, young Mary Anne sits by Tommy. Adult Mary Anne tells us that she went home and told Jed everything that J.T. said. Jed said JT. was lying because Jed got the better of him in the deal and was trying to get out of it now. Mary Anne says she also asked about Quantrill, and Jed tells her she'll have to make up her own mind about that story. Jed says Mary Anne could her own father or a stranger, and if she chooses the stranger, she could tear up the contract. Adult Mary Anne says she didn't *want* to believe J.T., and so she didn't tear up the contract.

Mary Anne says that J.T. did tell the truth, probably for the first time in his life. A few years later the mining company came and did exactly what J.T. described. Mary Anne says that the forest, now that the trees are gone, is barren of color with nothing to hold the soil down. When it rains, the water creates a whole lot of mud. She says she tries to tell her son what the land *used* to be like, but he doesn't believe her. He says Mary Anne's just telling stories.

Play Five, Tall Tales, Part 2 Analysis

Jed is still haunted by what happened to him in the previous play. His reluctance in talking about Quantrill and his yelling at Mary Anne to keep quiet are as much about his discomfort talking about his past as it is about wanting to hear what J.T. has to say. This *foreshadows* what J.T. says later about everybody having stories and that nothing is really the truth.

J.T.'s first story about the lucky hunter is a tall tale told for pure enjoyment. The second story is a retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet.* Instead of feuding families in Italy, this story has feuding families in Kentucky; Romeo is Jack, the Friar who assists Romeo and Juliet is a witch woman who understands herbs and the man whom Juliet is supposed to marry is named Thomas instead of Paris. J.T. makes this change to get Tommy to lose his temper. J.T. knows that Tommy sees through him and needs to get rid of him so J.T. can con Jed. The other major change to J.T.'s version of *Romeo and Juliet* is the ending. Instead of Romeo and Juliet dying, they end up alive and living in New York, although given Jed's views of Yankees, living in New York is probably as bad as being dead.

The third story takes a classic Roman myth and transforms it into a Christian one. The original Philemon and Baucis were visited by the god Mercury, *not* Jesus Christ. J.T. makes the change to appeal to the hillbilly Christianity of the people he's trying to con.

The ending of the story, where the couple is transformed into a pair of oak trees, remains the same.

While J.T. is telling stories, Jed and his family are softening for what J.T. really wants to do.. When J.T. finally gets to the real purpose of his visit and starts negotiating for the land, the suspense created when J.T. first appeared is resolved and the questions about his motivations are answered. Jed's pleasure at getting a better price for his land is *ironic* because whatever J.T. is *really* after is worth much more than what Jed will get.

For the first time in the cycle, the manifestation of the Rowen family curse is not related to revenge. This time, hey are simply being taken advantage of by someone whose only motive is profit. If J.T. had been a Talbert, the common thread of revenge would have still been followed through. As it is, this play *sets up* the revenge that adult Mary Anne and her son Joshua take in later plays. The revenge motif hasn't disappeared. It's just twisting around in a different way. There is, however, a certain sense of *poetic justice* in what J.T. does to the Rowens, a certain sense of *what goes around comes around*. The Rowen family is on this land in the first place because in the beginning of the cycle, Michael Rowen tricked Earl Tod in *exactly the same way* that J.T. tricks Jed.

There is no mention of the family pocket watch in this play.

Jed's comment that in business it's every man for himself is *ironic* because that is the way the company that J.T. works for seems to view their work, and Jed himself is being destroyed by the same ethic he espouses.

J.T.'s speech about stories and how there's no real truth is *ironic* in that *we're* watching a story which, according to J.T.'s logic, may or may not have any truth in it at all. A *secondary* theme, the question of what's *true* as opposed to what's *believed*, is dramatized effectively in this play. The *warning* in this play, to Mary Anne and to the audience, is to listen carefully with as wisdom and perspective to hear, and learn, the truth.

Mary Anne's reference to rainwater and mud in her final speech *symbolizes* and *sums up* this theme. The rainwater *represents* lies and stories, the earth *represents* the truth and the *mud* represents the mess created when the two mix.

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 1

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 1 Summary

A narrator sets the scene as 1920, 35 years after the last play, in Howsen County, where the Rowen farmstead used to be. Now there is a coal mine.

In Scene 1, adult Mary Anne, who is the same age as she was when she narrated the last play, says that the Rowens lost their land in 1920 and moved into a company mining camp. She and Tommy got married, Tommy found work in the mines, they had five children and every year for four years fever took away one of their sons. Only Joshua survived, but as the play begins he is delirious with the fever that killed his brothers.

On another part of the stage three men work in the mine: Tommy, Cassius Biggs, a descendent of the Biggs family of slaves set free by Ezekiel in Play Five, and Mackie. They continue to work in spite of knowing that the wooden pillars supporting the ceiling are weak and improperly set. Tommy sets a fuse, Mackie panics and runs off and the mine collapses. At that moment Joshua sits up in bed and screams. Mackie is trapped.

Back at the house, a doctor arrives to look at Joshua and apologizes for being late. The doctor says he was delayed because he had to attend to the collapse of the mine. He tells an anxious Mary Anne that he doesn't know who survived, but reassures her that Tommy is tough. As the doctor looks at Joshua there's a knock on the door. Mary Anne answers it and meets Abe Steinman, who is looking for a place to stay while he looks for work in the mine. Mary Anne tells Abe they have no room and very little food, and he offers to pay. Their conversation is interrupted by Joshua, who's having a spell of fever-induced restlessness.

On the other side of the stage, Andrew, a descendent of the Talbert family, orders all the men out of the mine. Everybody goes but Tommy, who keeps digging for Mackie but finally gives up in frustration.

Back in the house, the doctor is packing up. Mary Anne asks the doctor what's wrong, but it's Abe who identifies the illness as typhoid. When the doctor asks for his fee, Mary Anne says she has no cash and offers him the gold watch. The doctor rejects it because the watch doesn't work. Abe offers to pay, saying it's an advance on his rent. The doctor gives Mary Anne medicine for Joshua and leaves. Tommy walks in, goes straight to see Joshua and asks who Abe is. Mary Anne introduces Abe, and Abe excuses himself so that Mary Anne and Tommy can discuss whether he can board. Tommy is reluctant, but Mary Anne talks him into it. Tommy makes an agreement with Abe.

In Scene 2, Tommy takes Abe to meet Andrew, who is happy to hire Abe and lays down the basic rules. Abe leaves, and Andrew asks Tommy to stay and tells him the company can't offer him any more credit. Andrew knows Tommy is short of cash, and he offers

him a little extra if Tommy agrees to pass on "certain kinds of information." Tommy meets Abe outside Andrew's office and tells Abe that he knows Abe told a lie about where he was from. Abe admits he's from West Virginia, where the miners have a union, and he thanks Tommy for helping him out. Tommy tells Abe can stay as long as Tommy's family needs the money.

In Scene 3, Mary Anne and Abe sing a lullaby to Joshua, who's still feverish. Abe shows Mary Anne how to bring Joshua's fever down, and Abe suggests that the family boil the water because the water is causing the fever. Abe tells Mary Anne that she reminds him of another strong woman named Mother Jones. Mary Anne asks whether Abe is a union organizer. Abe confesses that he is, and Mary Anne says she wants no trouble. A drunken Tommy enters and asks what's going on. Joshua sits up. His fever has broken.

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 1 Analysis

Joshua's name is from the Bible and *represents* a hero of the Hebrew people who led them into the Promised Land, just as Joshua in later plays in the cycle leads the union. This continues the pattern in this cycle of the actions of contemporary characters echoing the actions of Biblical heroes they're named after. Jeremiah Talbert bargains the Rowens into servitude just as the biblical Jeremiah did to the Hebrews; Ezekiel Rowen is a fiery preacher like Ezekiel in the Bible and Mary Anne becomes a *symbol* of the ultimate mother, just as Mary the mother of Christ became. Anne was the name of the biblical Mary's mother.

Joshua's fever *represents* the problems of the mining community. The miners work in dangerous conditions, become physically ill from their work and are treated with contempt by the owners. This *symbol* is illustrated *visually* by having the mine and Joshua's bedroom onstage at the same time. Joshua's troubles mirror the mine's, and vice versa. Joshua's fever breaking at the moment that Abe admits he's a union organizer *represents* the hope that the union brings to the miners and their families.

The gold watch shows up again in this play. The watch represents *revenge, greed* and the dark aspects of the American dream, and the doctor's *rejection* of it because it has no value *represents* the lack of value that the drive for revenge ultimately has.

The relationships between the Rowens, Talberts and Biggs are the same as they always were. The Talberts have the power and victimize the Rowens, and the Biggs remain friends and allies with the Rowens.

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 2

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 2 Summary

In Scene 4, a crowd of miners cheers as Tommy beats another miner in an informal boxing match. Abe buys Tommy a beer, tells Tommy he's heard nothing but good things about him and says that Tommy is fighting the wrong people. Before Abe can go any further, Tommy leaves.

In Scene 5, Abe mends his pants as Mary Anne comes from the garden and Joshua, now healthier, comes out of the house. Mary Anne tells Joshua he can stay out for a little while and then gets him a glass of water, which Joshua says tastes funny. Mary Anne tells Joshua to drink it if he wants to get better, then asks Abe about Mother Jones. Abe starts to tell a story about her, but as soon as Joshua shows an interest, Mary Anne shoos Joshua back into the house. Abe tries to convince Mary Anne that "she ain't the only one hurtin'" and that there are still possibilities for hope. Mary Anne tells Abe she just can't.

In Scene 6, Abe is carving on the porch when Joshua comes out and asks Abe to finish his story about Mother Jones. Abe begins, but stops the story when he sees Mary Anne listening. Mary Anne tells him to go on. Mother Jones herself appears as Abe continues the story of how she got the union going in West Virginia. When Abe finishes the story, he hands Tommy one of Mother Jones' pamphlets and tells him to read it out loud as though he was reading to a crowd of people. Tommy comes in at that moment and rips the pamphlet out of Joshua's hand.

In Scene 7, a preacher arrives and asks why Tommy asked to see him. Tommy says that Joshua's wants to go down in the mines but they can't prove he's the right age because his birth certificate is missing. The preacher says he can get a new one, but it's expensive. Mary Anne, Joshua and Abe come in as Tommy and the preacher negotiate a price. Mary Anne realizes what that Tommy is getting a fake certificate, and she searches for the real certificate and finds it just as the preacher leaves. Tommy tears the certificate up in spite of Mary Anne's pleading that Tommy is too young to start mining and that she wants better for him. Tommy thinks Mary Anne wants Joshua to be better than *Tommy*, and Tommy hits Mary Anne to the ground. Joshua tries to defend his mother, but Abe holds him back.

Tommy tells Abe to get out in the morning and leaves. Abe helps Mary Anne up, and when Mary Anne asks what she's going to do now, Abe tells her it's not the end of anything. Abe says it took years for the mining company to take over, and she must have the same patience. Abe tells Joshua to look after his mother, and Abe leaves

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 2 Analysis

This play begins Mary Anne's journey of transformation from downtrodden miner's wife to union activist. She is the first Rowen *in the cycle* to take action to better her life that comes from a *positive* impulse, a desire to help her family, rather than from a *negative* one, such as a desire for revenge, power or money. It could be argued that Jed, in the previous play, tried to do something positive for his family, but he primarily was motivated more money and greed. Mary Anne just wants a better life for her son. This scene is also the starting point for the intense *loyalty* that Joshua and Mary Anne have for each other that is seen throughout the rest of the cycle.

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 3

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 3 Summary

In Scene 8, Tommy and the miners come in, ready to start their shift. Mary Anne and Joshua meet them as the miners tease Tommy and Joshua about Joshua's shortness. Andrew steps forward, and Tommy shows him the papers testifying to Joshua's age. Mary Anne watches as Joshua and the other miners go down into the mine.

In Scene 9, Tommy gives Joshua some pointers on how to survive down in the mine as they break for lunch. Tommy tells Joshua some of the family history, such as how losing the Rowen family land almost broke Mary Anne's heart, and how she's all Tommy ever wanted. There's a sudden explosion, and the stage is goes dark. Tommy and Joshua call out to each other as Mary Anne and the other miner's wives gather outside the mine, waiting for news. Andrew appears, calling for a doctor. The miners emerge carrying the dead and wounded on homemade stretchers. Cassius Biggs' wife Sureta cries over one of the bodies.

Joshua comes out, and as Mary Anne gives him a hug, she tells Tommy that Joshua is never going back down there. Tommy protests that the men always go back, but Abe reminds him of the men who lost their lives and tells Tommy to tell Joshua what happened. Tommy says that the mining company didn't cut the support beams strong enough, and when Joshua asks why, Tommy says because it's cheaper. Abe tries to convince Tommy to fight back, and when Tommy says he doesn't know how, Abe tells him he *does*. The first thing Joshua needs, Tommy says, is some guns to fight back when the company uses force to keep the union down. Mary Anne gives Joshua the Rowen family watch and tells him to buy guns so her family can be protected.

In Scene 10, Tommy and Abe meet up late at night with Cassius Biggs, who at first doesn't admit to being a gun dealer, but changes his story when he finds out that Abe served in World War One in France. Cassius fought in France, and he discovered while on leave in Paris that there was actually liberty there, real liberty, like the kind he was supposed to be fighting for. Cassius says that when he came back to America, he found out he was still just a nigger. He still denies he has guns, but when Abe and Tommy leave Cassius he talks with his wife Sureta, who's been hiding in the shadows. Sureta, whose brother was killed in the last cave in, tells Cassius that she trusts Abe and persuades him to sell Abe some guns.

In Scene 11, Mary Anne states that Cassius and most of the other miners joined with the union cause, and she started to hope again. On the other side of the stage, Joshua confesses to Abe that he's scared and asks for reassurance that "they're gonna win." Abe tries to reassure him, but Tommy shows up and sends Joshua to bed. Tommy asks Abe the same question, and both men admit they are scared. They notice the sound of an approaching train, realize there's something unusual about a train running that late at night and douse the lamps. As the train passes, machine gun fire rips through the

miners' camp. When the train's gone there are miners dead and injured, and miners are more determined than ever to win the battle for the union. Cassius promises to get them guns and to wreck the train tracks so the train can't run any more. The men leave, but as the scene changes Tommy remains behind.

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 3 Analysis

In the brief conversation between Joshua and Tommy before the mine explosion, Tommy shows a soft side as he reveals that he is motivated by his love for Mary Anne. This makes Tommy more likeable, but it later turns out to be the weakness in his resolve to establish the union. Tommy's desire to keep Mary Anne safe leads him to tell Andrew about the union in the next scene, which makes this conversation between him and Joshua both *ironic* and *tragic*.

Mary Anne standing up to Tommy about Joshua going back into the mine is the *next step* in her *journey of transformation*. In the past, she would never have had the courage to do what she does in this moment. This moment, however, is still *ironic.* For her to save her son's life, she pulls out the Rowen pocket watch so that Abe and Tommy can pay for guns. The watch, as always, becomes connected to *violence,* this time violence against the mine owners. Granted, it's violence in what Mary Anne and the other union organizers see as a righteous cause, but it seems as though wherever there are Rowens and the watch, there will be bloodshed.

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 4

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Part 4 Summary

Scene 12 blends with the previous scene, and Andrew comes in to talk to Tommy. When Tommy says he wants his job back and wants his family to be safe, Andrew tells him it's too late because he's bringing in the Army. Tommy offers to give Andrew names of the union organizers if Andrew keeps the Army out. Andrew gives him his word, and Tommy tells him about Abe and Cassius and that the guns will be handed over the following evening. Andrew leaves and Tommy is left alone. The scene changes to the next evening as Abe and Cassius join Tommy.

Cassius tells the others to follow his lead, and he whistles into the woods. Someone Cassius was not expecting jumps out. Cassius suspects a trap. Abe says go ahead, and the man pulls out a gun just as other men step out of the shadows. There's a scuffle. Cassius escapes and Abe is subdued. Andrew then steps out of the shadows, forces Abe to his knees and shoots him execution style in the back of the head. Andrew leaves, followed by the other men. Tommy goes to Abe's body and pulls the pocket watch out of Abe's pocket. Joshua appears and accuses Tommy of killing Abe. Joshua is about to run off, but Tommy holds him there and tells Tommy that the Army was going to come and kill them all and that he loves him. Joshua weeps, and Tommy rocks him. This scene blends with the next as Cassius, Sureta, Mary Anne and the other miners and their families come in. Tommy and Joshua join them.

Sureta suggests that someone sold them out. Tommy accuses Cassius, but Joshua tells them what really happened. Tommy accuses Joshua of lying, but Joshua takes the pocket watch out of Tommy's pocket and shows the crowd. Tommy tries to justify what he did by telling the crowd that the Army was coming in and saying that he was protecting his family. Mary Anne confronts Tommy, telling him that she always believed he wasn't a quitter. Even though Tommy drank, and even though he hit her, Mary Anne stuck with him because he wasn't a quitter. Now Tommy has quit, and Mary Anne is done. "My name is … Mary Anne Rowen … and this man is a stranger to me," she says. The miners drag Tommy off as he screams Joshua's name.

Joshua asks Mary Anne what's going to happen next, but Mary Anne walks away, saying she doesn't know. As Sureta and the other women bitterly debate their options, Mary Anne suddenly screams, "NO," and, in a long speech she convinces the women that no matter how hard the fight for the union is going to be, watching husbands and children and fathers and brothers and *each other* die is even harder. Marty Anne gets the women and the miners into a noisy demonstration. Joshua narrates as the demonstration builds, describing how Mary Anne led a march to the company offices.

Mary Anne confronts Andrew with a box of dynamite and says if the union doesn't get a contract they will blow his entire operation up. When Andrew see that Mary Anne is serious, he signs the contract and leaves. As the miners and their wives celebrate,

Joshua stands off by himself. When Mary Anne asks Joshua what's wrong, he says he misses his dad. Mary Anne tells him he can't think about his dad any more. Mary Anne says the union will be his family now and he has a job to tell his children and grandchildren the story of what happened. She tells Joshua to be loyal to his new family, the union.

Play Seven, Fire in the Hole, Scene 12 Analysis

The title of this play is *symbolic* on two levels. First, it's the phrase that miners call out when the dynamite, used to blow the coal out of the rock, has been lit and about to explode. This is the incident we see at the start of the play Mackie is trapped. Secondly, and most importantly, the phrase "fire in the hole" *represents* what happens to Mary Anne and the other miners when the possibility of a union arises. The fire of passion and commitment is lit when the second cave-in occurs. The *explosion* comes when Mary Anne and the miners confront Andrew with the dynamite and he backs down.

The sections of this long scene blend seamlessly into each other without the blackouts that often separated the other scenes in this play. This keeps the action not just *moving* but *speeding up*, building toward the *climactic* confrontation between Mary Anne and Andrew. This confrontation also is the climax of Mary Anne's *journey of transformation.* She is now the woman she'd never thought she'd be. She is strong, independent and powerful. The *irony* is that she's now the woman she *could* have been. Young Mary Anne in the previous play seems to be the sort of girl that *could* have been this kind of woman all along, but marrying Tommy Jackson turned her into something else. At the end of the play there is a sense that Mary Anne is now the woman she was always meant to be.

Once again, the Rowen pocket watch leads to someone's death. We may believe that Tommy deserves what's coming to him for betraying the union to Andrew, even though his intention to protect his family was a good one. But the fact remains that as mentioned before, wherever and whenever the pocket watch shows up, violence follows.

So how does this play fit in with the theme of the full cycle? This play suggests that the cycle of revenge can be broken, that the dark, ambitious, greedy, selfish, destructive side of the American dream doesn't *have* to triumph. We find out in the other plays of the cycle whether this is actually *true*.

Play Eight, Which Side Are You On, Part 1

Play Eight, Which Side Are You On, Part 1 Summary

The narrator sets the scene, 34 years after the events of the previous play. The action is set in and around the United Mine Workers Union Hall.

Joshua, now in his mid-40s, speaks to a crowd of out-of-work miners. He tells them he knows they're in trouble, angry and frustrated. He knows how that feels because it was exactly the way the miners who first formed the union felt, and that at the union's darkest hour, Abe Steinman reminded them that the union was like family, and family always took care of its own. Joshua leads the crowd in a chant of "UNION! UNION!" that becomes louder and louder, filling the blackout that follows with sound.

In Scene 1, the crowd clears and Joshua's wife Margaret in an armchair with a drink in her hand. The setting is Joshua's home. Joshua's son Scotty, a discharged Marine, comes in. Margaret is overjoyed and surprised to see him. Scotty says he got away a day early. She bustles about offering him a drink and some food and apologizes for the messy house. When Scotty asks where his father is, Margaret explains that Joshua is out giving a speech. Margaret says she wants to talk about Scotty and his experiences. She says she's seen all kinds of pictures. Scotty says he doesn't want to talk about it. Margaret starts to talk about how Scotty will work with his father down at the union, and she says that now that Scotty is back, everything will be fine.

In Scene 2, Joshua gives a speech of welcome the next night at Union Hall. Joshua says he wishes that Mary Anne could be there, but since she's gone, it's up to Joshua to pass on the family history. Joshua gives Scotty the Rowen watch, which has become legendary in the union since Mary Anne used it to buy the guns that got the union started.

Joshua introduces James Talbert Winston and Franklin Biggs, two family friends and businessmen who also welcome Scotty back. Scotty accepts the welcome and promises to do his best to live up to his family's history. As Joshua's secretary Lana hands out cake and Joshua's assistant Stucky gets Scotty a drink, Joshua quietly tells James they have to have a conversation about the contract. They agree to meet the next night.

In Scene 3, the next night, Joshua and Lana wait for James and discuss the contract. When Lana starts to leave, Joshua tells her he'll see her at her place later. James arrives as Lana goes, and Joshua immediately tells James that the union will have big problems with the new contract, specifically with all of the layoffs. James tells Joshua that the layoffs are non-negotiable and makes a counterproposal. As James laughs, Franklin walks in. Joshua says he brought Franklin into the conversation because

Franklin is concerned about the layoffs as well. The majority of people being let go are black. Joshua and Franklin say they can't guarantee peace if the contract goes through. James and Joshua negotiate to reduce the layoffs in exchange for the union backing off on safety concerns. Joshua also negotiates the building of a hospital for the miners and insists that Franklin's company contribute $10,000. Franklin insists that the hospital be open to blacks as well, which James has trouble with. Joshua tells them to calm down and make the deal. Scotty appears, saying that he and Joshua have plans to have a drink. Joshua forgot, and they plan to meet the following week because they are too busy to do it sooner. Scotty leaves, and Joshua asks for an assurance that the conversation about the contract will remain private. When the men all understand each other, Joshua says he'll take the contract to the local presidents. If they don't buy it, it's back to square one.

In Scene 4, at a bar the following week, Scotty and Joshua meet for their drink. Over beer, Scotty asks whether the family will get together for a holiday. Joshua says with things being so busy it's not likely, and when Scotty begins to talk about Margaret, Joshua shuts down the conversation. Scotty then tells Joshua that the men are pretty unhappy about the new contract, particularly about the pension situation. Scott tells Joshua that one of the men who marched with Joshua and Mary Anne has been turned down. Joshua confesses that the pension plan is short on cash and the head office has had to tighten up on the qualifications.

When Scotty asks why Joshua couldn't just come out and say that, Joshua tells him there's a rule from the head office that says only the people who *need* to know *can* know. Scotty angrily protests that he's not going to live that way again because the need to know rules got his unit torn apart in Korea. Joshua pleads with Scotty to support him on this in the hope that in three years the economy will be better and they can negotiate something better. Scotty asks Joshua to just tell him the truth and tells Joshua that there are serious safety concerns at one of the mines. Joshua says he'll take care of it, and they raise a glass to better times.

Play Eight, Which Side Are You On, Part 1 Analysis

This play continues the process of change the Rowen family is experiencing. In the previous play, Mary Anne *began* the process by fighting for a better life for her family and using her anger and passion to fuel the fight for justice. She passed this passion on to Joshua, who tries to pass it on to Scotty. This is represented by the *pocket watch*, which has become a positive symbol to the Rowen family and to the union. This makes the symbol of the watch *ironic* because the audience knows its real origins.

This re-definition of what the watch represents illustrates the play's *secondary theme*, the power of story telling. In Play Six, *Tall Tales*, this theme is introduced with the character of J.T., who says that nothing's true and everything is just stories. In this play, the current story about the pocket watch has *obscured* at least part of the truth, another aspect of the power of stories. This is also illustrated by the lie that Joshua tells at the

Union meeting, when he says that Margaret is "under the weather." It's clearly another *story* because Margaret is an alcoholic.

It's clear to us that Scotty came back from his tour of duty in Korea very troubled, but because it's never stated what happened to him, we wonder more about how it's going to affect his work with the union and the action of the rest of the play. In Scene 4 Scotty reveals that he witnessed atrocities in Korea, many of which involved innocent people. This fuels his passion for fighting for the miners and their families, whom he sees as innocents themselves. The *irony* is that Scotty is probably just as passionate as Joshua was when he started with the union. Josh has lost this idealistic passion as he has dealt with the politics and realities of his situation.

The end of Scene 3 touches on one of the main social issues of the time. In the mid-1950s, the civil rights movement in America was just getting underway. The relationships between Joshua, James and Franklin play out that national conflict on a more personal scale and *represent* the cultural and social divisions of the time.

Play Eight, Which Side Are You On, Part 2

Play Eight, Which Side Are You On, Part 2 Summary

The rest of this play consists of one long scene, set in the union hall.

Joshua and Lana wait for the presidents of the local unions to arrive for discussion of the new contract. While they're alone, Lana tells Joshua that her plans for Thanksgiving are changing, but Joshua senses that she wants to talk about something else. Before they can get into that conversation Scotty and Stucky come in and announce that all the local presidents have arrived.

Joshua begins the meeting by talking about the good news in the contract, but the local presidents want to talk about layoffs and safety. Joshua tries to smooth-talk them, but the presidents don't go for it. One of the local presidents tells Scotty that Joshua said he'd take care of safety problems at the Blue Star mine personally, but it hasn't happened. Scotty heads off to pull the miners out of the unsafe mine. Joshua tries to hold him back, saying if the miners from that mine walk, management will back out of the contract. Scotty heads for the door. Joshua threatens to "cut [him] out of [the union] like a boil" if he leaves, which is exactly what Scotty does.

When one of the other presidents question Joshua, he says he'll take care of Blue Star himself and turns the conversation back to the contract. The presidents warn Joshua that it will be difficult to sell the contract to the members of the union, but they'll do their best. The presidents leave, and Joshua asks Stucky to get him a drink. Joshua tells Lana to get James on the phone. Lana tells Joshua that James has already left and is probably already on his way. Joshua tells Lana to get Franklin on the phone, then tells Stucky to go down to Blue Star and keep an eye on the situation there. As Stucky leaves, Joshua tells Franklin to get over to the union hall quickly.

Joshua then admits to Lana that he knew Blue Star was in trouble, but he let it slide because he had to let it build to the point where it became trouble. That way he could use it as leverage to get James to bend a little on the contract. Joshua then takes a call from Margaret, who announces she's coming down to the hall. He takes out his anger at Margaret on Lana, who tells him that their affair is ending and leaves.

James arrives, accompanied by a sheriff. Joshua proposes that James shut down the mine and clean it up, which will set things right with the men. Before James can respond, Stucky returns with the news that the men are prepared to strike at midnight. James tells the sherriff to get his men ready to arrest the strikers for trespassing. James urges him to stop, but Joshua tells him it won't make any difference. Before anyone can proceed, there's a huge explosion from the mine. James assumes it's a bomb, but Joshua tells him that it was dust from one of the mines *going off* like a bomb.

As James, Stucky and the sheriff leave to investigate, Franklin runs in and asks what's going on. Stucky quickly returns with a wounded man in his arms, saying the man must have been thrown clear. The man gives Joshua a sign in sheet with the names of all the men who were in the mine when the explosion happened. Joshua tells Stucky to go back to the mine and keep an eye out for Scotty. James returns just as the wounded miner is scrawling a note: *dust*.

The sheriff returns with news that emergency crews are on their way, but a news team has already arrived. The team was covering a truck turnover on the highway nearby and diverted. Joshua tells the sheriff to send them in right away, but James negotiates for ten minutes. The sheriff runs out, leaving Joshua, James and Franklin to discuss what to tell the press. Joshua says it has to be the truth, that the company let safety concerns slide. James counters by saying that the Union could have pulled its men out a long time ago. Franklin adds that they are in this situation together. Stucky returns, saying the rescue crews need Joshua at the site of the explosion and the news crew need to talk to someone. Joshua says he'll be down in a few minutes, and he tells Stucky to take the injured miner out.

Franklin looks at the crew list and learns that Scotty was the last person to go down the mine. As this news sinks in, Margaret arrives, drunk, and asks where Scotty is. When Joshua tells her Scotty was down the mine and that he was helping the men get out of an unsafe situation, Margaret accuses Joshua of killing her "little boy" and runs out in tears.

Joshua is in shock. James volunteers to go out and talk to the press. Stucky comes in and says they want to hear Joshua. James suggests that he'll say a few words first and then Joshua can have his turn. James and Ray leave, and they are immediately surrounded by reporters. As their press conference begins, Franklin gently pushes Joshua to consider what's important.

James tells the press that the primary concern of the company is the men and that the most important thing is to do everything possible for the men who are still in the mine. When Joshua comes out and is confronted in the reporters, he calls what happened a tragedy, promises an investigation and urges everybody to remember that mining is a dangerous business.

James steps forward and reads the names of the missing miners. Scotty's name is read last. When it's read, everybody turns to look at Joshua.

Play Eight, Which Side Are You On, Part 2 Analysis

In terms of dramatic structure, this section of the play *telescopes* the passage of time to quite an extreme degree. Incidents happen more quickly than they would in reality. In real time, the conversation with the local presidents would take longer, it would take longer for Scotty to get to the mine and get down inside and it would take longer for

Margaret to get to the office. This is another example of *dramatic license*, or the way reality is *altered* to make a dramatic point or tell a good story.

Lana represents Joshua's *conscience*, or the part of him that knows he's damaged and has lost the ideals that brought him to the union in the first place. The fact that they're having an affair at the beginning of this play *represents* the possibility that Joshua still has some ideals left. Lana leaving *represents* his complete *selling out* of those ideals in the name of playing the political game with James and Franklin.

These political games are another *aspect* of the darker side of the American dream that shows up throughout the cycle. As time moves on, as men and technology become more sophisticated, the drive to have *more*, to gain *advantage*, remains the same, and the means of achieving that gain become more sophisticated. This play shows that the weapon of choice is no longer guns but *political power*, who can make the other bend the most. This means that the bargaining that goes on between James and Joshua in this play is no different from the bargaining that goes on between Jeremiah and Patrick in Play Three. Thus the "Cycle" shows how the cycle of behavior repeats itself.

This point is illustrated in other ways in this play. The confrontation between Scotty and Joshua echoes the confrontation between Patrick and Zach in Play Four. Both fathers are selling the bulk of the family heritage to keep at least some of that heritage alive. Patrick is selling the family's land, and Joshua is selling out the union. Both sons are fighting for an *ideal*, or a *principle,* that the family heritage was built upon. Zach is fighting to keep the land and the family's dignity, and Scotty is fighting to honor the family's commitment to the union. Joshua uses *exactly the same words* to threaten Scotty as Patrick used to threaten Zach. as both Joshua and Patrick vow to cut their sons "out like a boil."

History also repeats itself when Margaret accuses Joshua of "killing" Scotty. Her *maternal instincts* are the same as the instincts to that drove and inspired Mary Anne to start the union in the first place. The *irony* is that by his actions, Joshua himself created the situation that led to his son's death. In other words, maternal instinct saved Joshua, but it came too late to save Scotty.

Scotty's death is *tragic* in that he was a good man who died in service to an ideal. Ironically, his idealism is also his *weakness*. It led him to rash, impulsive action that resulted in destruction. In some ways it is similar to what happened to Jed in Play Six. Jed's impulsive desire to do good for his family led to J.T. taking advantage of him.

Coal dust thrown into the air when coal was drilled or blown out of rock was a constant danger to miners and an expensive risk for companies to control. Mines had to be hosed down constantly to keep dust from filling the air, and any spark or overheating could case the dust to ignite and set off a chain reaction of explosions that could destroy a mine and kill hundreds of men.

We assume that the Rowen watch is still down in the mine with Scotty.

Play Nine, The War on Poverty

Play Nine, The War on Poverty Summary

A narrator sets the scene, on the site of the original homestead that has been destroyed by the mining company. All that remains is rock and the occasional young pine tree. It's 1975, 21 years later.

Joshua is now 65 and looks worn down. He describes a dream where he hears Scotty calling to him from across a muddy river. Joshua sees Scotty standing with his father and Mary Anne and a large group of other people. They are calling to him, but he can't hear what they're saying because the noise of the river and the wind is too loud.

The lights change, and two men are digging in the ground at the homestead. As they study a bundle of buckskin by the light of a camping lantern, they are shot at and they run off, leaving the lantern and buckskin behind.

Joshua appears with a rifle. He looks at the men running off , then down into the hole and then at the landscape around him. Franklin Biggs, who is also older and heavier now, joins Joshua and is soon followed by James Talbert Winston, who is older but more distinguished. As Franklin and James look at a map, Joshua says the men they chased off are grave robbers. Joshua says that's the biggest industry around since the mine shut down.

None of the men can figure out where they are. As they discuss what to do, it is revealed that they have come to take one last look at the property before it's sold. Franklin and James try to convince Joshua to sell and get on with it, but Joshua says there's something in him that won't let him do it and tells the others to back off.

As Franklin and James bicker about who's going to put another log on the fire, Joshua asks whether they noticed the big old oak stump on the other side of the river. Joshua talks about remembering his mother telling stories about how the trees used to be like skyscrapers and how he didn't believe her. Josua also tells the other two how he's given up drinking because his last alcoholic blackout nearly killed him.

James urges Joshua to hurry up, but Joshua asks James what he knows about the work of the mining company planning to buy the land. James speaks enthusiastically about a new mining technique of using huge scoops to scrape up the topsoil and dig out the coal much more quickly than a whole raft of miners ever could. When Joshua worries about the effect on the land, James tells him it's much safer than the old way, which ran the risk of explosions triggered by coal dust and that. "[Joshua] of all people should appreciate that," James says.

Joshua to lose his temper and swears at James, who loses his temper. Franklin calms them down, and then he and James try again to convince Joshua to sell. Joshua tells them again that he won't be rushed and that in the last couple of months he's been

remembering the day the destroyed mine was unsealed. He recalls the memorial service and the moment that Stucky returned the gold watch to him after taking it from Scotty's body. Joshua says that once the mining company moves in and digs everything up, it will be like nothing in the past ever happened.

Franklin tells Joshua that he must learn to accept things the way they were and the way they are. Joshua reminds Franklin of the first union meeting they attended as children, how they stood on the top of a cart, how they looked out over the crowd and the mountains and how it looked to Joshua as though it was all mountains and people together, all one thing. Franklin tells him it was a long time ago and moves away.

James returns with the bundle of buckskin that the grave robbers dropped. They see the beauty of it because the embroidery and the beadwork are still there. As they unwrap the bundle, they discover that it's a baby girl who is perfectly preserved. Her hair and fingernails are intact. Franklin wonders what to do with it, and James figures she must be pretty valuable. James and talks about selling her to a collector.

The three men argue about who has the right to decide what to do with that baby, who found her and who gets to put her back.. Finally Joshua loses his temper and points his rifle at James, telling him to put the baby down. Franklin convinces James to put down the baby and Joshua to lower his gun. James accuses Joshua of still blaming him for the explosion at the mine, and he tells Joshua that no matter what Joshua does the new company will buy the land. As James goes, Joshua tries to talk Franklin into joining him and fight James, but Franklin only says he'll think about it and also leaves.

Joshua wraps the baby in his coat and starts to bury her, but before he does he takes the Rowen watch, which has been hanging on a leather thong around his neck, and puts it in the bundle with the baby. He buries them both, sits back and lowers his head.

Behind him, characters from the previous plays rise and surround him: Star; Joe and Rebecca; Sallie and Jessie; Richard, Randall and Jed; Scotty, who puts his arm around Joshua; Mary Anne and Tommy, who reaches out to Joshua and Scotty.

After a long moment, a wolf howls. Joshua jumps to his feet, grabs a gun and aims for the wolf. He stops when he sees how beautiful and powerful the wolf is. Joshua raises his gun into the air, fires several shot, and shouts at the wolf to run.

Play Nine, The War on Poverty Analysis

Joshua's dream contains an image similar to one that first appears in the third play of the cycle. In that play Star refers to a dream she had about the white woman that Michael Rowen is having an affair with, and she describes that woman as crossing a muddy river, a dream image that stands for death. In this play, the image of a muddy river also appears with the addition of his dead ancestors on the other side of the river. This suggests that Joshua is dreaming of his own death.

It's never stated outright, but given that James displayed hints of racism in the previous play, the *subtext* of Franklin and James' argument about putting a log on the fire suggests that their disagreement is racially based. Franklin thinks that James asked *him* to do it because James still thinks of him as a slave.

Joshua's memory of Mary Anne's story of the trees is interesting. In the words that he recalls Mary Anne saying, oak trees are compared to skyscrapers, which Mary Anne never actually saw, as far as we know. Mary Anne only heard about them through J.T., showing that Mary Anne was influenced by J.T. in more ways than she perhaps realized.

When Joshua talks about his drinking binges, it is clear that he's become a serious alcoholic since, and perhaps even because of, Scotty's death and the incident at the mine in the previous play.

As the men look at the buckskin bundle, the audience realizes they have the girl baby that Michael Rowen buried hundreds of years before. The baby is wrapped in buckskin embroidered by Star. This is a powerful *symbol* of the past coming into the present, and given that the baby in the earlier play represented hope, in this play the discovery of her body represents the *return* of hope to lives that had long since *lost* hope. This is especially true of Joshua, whose life is changed forever by this discovery. James isn't changed at all. His immediate impulse to sell the baby and the buckskin is pure Talbert and represents the desire for profit and power that has led through to trouble throughout the entire cycle.

Joshua's burial of the watch represents his acceptance of new hope and his letting go of the past. He lets go not just his *personal* past of alcohol abuse, which we believe he actually *will* put behind him, but the past of his family being victimized by the dark spirit of greed and revenge. The burial of the watch *symbolizes* the end of that part of the Rowen family's journey.

The image of the past returning to the present, and of Joshua accepting the positive aspects of his family's history, is developed further when Joshua's ancestors appear and gather around him. Michael, Patrick, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, J.T. and Andrew Talbert, the characters who *gave in* to the spirit of greed and revenge, do not appear. The characters who do emerge, with the exception of Richard and Randall Talbert, are the ones who struggled *against* the dark spirit throughout the play. Richard and Randall fought in that struggle, but to different degrees they were *victims* of that struggle. They stand with Jed because he too was a victim. He was taken advantage of and manipulated by that "dark spirit" in the same way.

The wolf *represents* the new mining company that wants to take over the land. Joshua firing the gun into the air and scaring it off represents how he will fight the company as long and as hard as he can. The wolf *also* is a *second symbol* of the dark spirit represented by the watch, and: Joshua firing into the air represents how he's going to fight that as well.

This moment is the climax not only of this play but of the entire *cycle*. The dark drives of greed, ambition, revenge and hunger for power that appeared in the very first scene and which have troubled so many lives and caused so many deaths are finally put to rest, and we are left with a deeply powerful sense of hope for the future not just of this family, but for America, as represented *by* the Rowen family.

Characters

Franklin Biggs

Franklin Biggs is a black man, descended from Sallie Biggs, Michael Rowen's slave. He "controls" the African-American population in Howsen County. He makes deals with both Joshua and James, neither of whom seems to really like him, but he does not care. He gets what he wants for his community. He is a successful business man, who can deliver the "black vote" and can influence his community to go along with whatever Blue Star Mining wants. Franklin also lacks any connection to the land and does not share in Joshua's joy at seeing the wolf.

Sallie Biggs

Sallie Biggs is the slave Michael Rowen brings home just before Patrick kills him. She is pregnant with Michael's son, but she does not tell anyone who the father is until Patrick tries to sell the boy to pay off debts. She begs Patrick not to sell her son, but he does anyway. Her descendants lead the civil rights struggle in the latter parts of the cycle.

Tommy Jackson

Tommy is Mary Anne's husband. He has been in love with her for most of his life. He took a mining job when all the farm land was sold to the Blue Star Mine. He works hard and tries to help with the unionizing effort, but gets frightened at the end. He sells out his fellow organizers and Mary Anne publicly rejects him and he is killed by a group of angry strikers.

Morning Star

Morning Star is Michael Rowen's Cherokee wife. He kidnaps her from her tribe, rapes her, and treats her badly. After she attempts to escape, he cuts the tendons in her leg so that she will always limp. Morning Star becomes resigned to her fate; she teaches her son, Patrick, to hate and fear his father. She finally convinces Patrick to kill his father so that she can finally be free to live with her lover, Joe Talbert. When Patrick kills Joe as well, Morning Star is devastated, but swears revenge. Years later, she forces her son and grandsons to forfeit their land to Talbert's heir. While Morning Star may love her son, she never forgets that he is his father's child, nor what his father did to her and her people. Nor does she forgive.

Ezekiel Rowen

As Patrick Rowen's direct heir, Zeke (also known as Ezekiel) inherits not only his father's bloodlust, but also his grandfather's as well. Zeke becomes a minister bent on revenging for his family against the Talberts. He devises a plan to kill all the male Talberts, including ten-year-old Randall, and destroy the two daughters (through rape and torture) so that there will be no one to stop the Rowens from reclaiming the land. Unlike his brother, Zeke does not see anything wrong with Patrick selling his own half-brother, nor in threatening Randall, nor anything wrong with a minister planning rapes and murders.

Jed Rowen

Jed Rowen carries on the family tradition of lying and murder when he kills Richard Talbert and then oversees the murder of Randall Talbert and the rapes of his sisters, Rose Anne and Julia Anne. Jed reclaims the Rowen land but proves to be just as unlucky as his grandfather was. He sells the mineral rights to his land for a dollar an acre when it is worth $15,000 to $20,000 per acre.

Joshua Rowen

Joshua Rowen, along with James Talbert Winston, and Franklin Biggs, is one of the major characters in the last part of The Kentucky Cycle. He is, unlike the rest of his ancestors, an honorable man. He is president of the local miners' union and tries to balance what is good for the individual members and the overall industry. He agrees to allow the mine to keep operating even though it is not safe and his son, Scotty, is killed in a cave-in. Joshua feels a connection with the land, raped and neglected as it is, which the other characters do not feel. He is connected to the land in a way that not even Michael or Morning Star were. He feels the land's pain and rejoices in the opportunity to save it at the end of the cycle. He discovers the body of Patrick's sister, buried 200 years before and forces the other men to return the mummified body to the earth. Joshua ends the cycle in the sheer joy of the wilderness as he watches a wolf run across the ridge.

Mary Anne Rowen

Mary Anne is Jed's daughter. She is almost destroyed when the mining companies come in and cut down her trees and rip the guts out of her mountains. In a final defeat, she marries a local boy, Tommy Jackson, and watches as all of her sons die of typhoid. Abe Steinman encourages Mary Anne to think about a miners' union. After his arrest and Tommy's betrayal of the cause, Mary Anne rejects her husband, takes back her maiden name, and leads the fight for a union in the mines. She becomes a mythical figure who inspires future generations of miners and their families.

Michael Rowen

Michael Rowen is the founder of the Rowen family and the main character in the first two plays. He also establishes the moral tone of the plays. He is a thief, a liar, and a murderer. As the cycle opens, Michael kills Earl Tod, the Scottish trapper who trades with the Cherokee in the area. He then kills his accomplice, Sam, to prove his "trustworthiness" to the Cherokee. Michael's bloodshed continues as he infects the Cherokee with smallpox and kidnaps a young Cherokee woman, Morning Star and makes her his wife. He continues to threaten her and even kills the girl child that she has after giving birth to a son. The violence, rage, and murder within Michael get passed down to all of his descendants, so Michael is the key character to understanding the other characters in the play.

Patrick Rowen

Patrick Rowen is Morning Star and Michael's son. Their other child, a girl, is killed by Michael when she is born. Patrick never forgot that action and hates his father for it. He also fears his father. He feels victimized by everyone around him: his father, his mother, his love, Rebecca, and her father, Joe Talbert. He kills his father, Rebecca's father, forces his mother to flee for her life, and rapes Rebecca in a watered-down version of his own parents' "marriage." When Morning Star returns years later, she witnesses Patrick selling everything to an unnamed stranger who owns the mortgage on his property. Patrick even sells his own half-brother, Jessie Biggs. His own son, Zach, cannot stand Patrick's actions and flees. Unlike his father, Patrick lives to be an ancient man who drools and fantasizes about revenge.

Zachariah Rowen

Zachariah (also known as Zach) Rowen is Patrick's youngest son. He sees no difference between himself, his brother, and Jessie Biggs, the son of his family's slave, Sallie. When he finds out that Jessie is actually Patrick's half-brother, he pleads with his father not to sell him, and when Patrick does, Zach leaves the farm never to be heard from again. Zach represents the Rowens' conscience and without him they descend into moral depravity.

Abe Steinman

Abe Steinman is a union organizer who decides that The Blue Star Mine, built on what used to be the Rowen land, is ripe for unionizing. He is successful in getting the miners' wives and some of the miners to join him, but they are betrayed by Tommy and he is killed.

Jeremiah Talbert

This is Joe Talbert's son, who returns to get revenge against Patrick. Aided by Morning Star and the legal system, Jeremiah forces Patrick to sell him everything he has and forces him to become a sharecropper on his own land.

Richard Talbert

Richard Talbert is Jeremiah Talbert's son and so owns the land that was formerly Patrick's land. Zeke and his son, Jed, plan their revenge and begin with Richard. Jed joins Richard's Civil War company and kills Richard in the middle of a battle.

James Talbert Winston

James is the owner of Blue Star Mine, descendant of Jeremiah Talbert, and an emotionless capitalist. He does not care about the safety of his workers, but only his profit margin. When the cave-in kills over twenty miners, including Joshua Rowen's son, James cannot really apologize because it is his fault. However, he and Joshua and Franklin Biggs become friends as the movers and shakers of Howsen County. He digs up the body of Patrick Rowen's sister and wants to sell the beautifully beaded baby quilt Morning Star had made for her doomed infant. At the end of the cycle, he realizes that mining is a dead profession, but he cannot see any value to the land nor can he feel any connection to this place. He, like Franklin, looks on as Joshua yells with the wolf, thinking he has gone crazy.

Zach

See Zachariah Rowen

Zeke

See Ezekiel Rowen

Themes

Violence

Violence looms large in the text of *The Kentucky Cycle.* Every play contains physical and emotional violence, or the threat of that violence. Schenkkan wants to explore the role of violence in the shaping of American history. Michael Rowen murdered, stole, and raped his way to a family legacy. That legacy was continued with Patrick's violence, Jed's murdering the Talbert men, and finally the way the Blue Star Mining Company raped the earth and the lives of its workers. Violence becomes an inescapable part of American life in these plays, although Schenkkan suggests that when violence is used to protect the land, as when Joshua threatens to shoot James and Franklin, or for benefit of others, as was the case with the unionizing miners, it can be productive. However, in most respects, violence simply breeds more violence and revenge in an almost never-ending cycle.

The American Dream

The idea of the American Dream, a land where anyone can come from nothing and become someone, is a powerful theme in American literature. All of the characters in the first half of Schenkkan's cycle want the American Dream, but they rarely find it. Michael Rowen is killed by his own son before he can realize his dream of "owning" all the mountains, while both Patrick and Jed see their portion of the dream legally stolen out from under them. Yet, through it all, the dream remains alive, as it does in real life when it is battered by reality. The characters in the second part of the cycle have all given up, except for Mary Anne and Scotty. Mary Anne is able to forge a better life for her son, but Scotty's idealism dies at the hands of his father's cynicism.

Rewriting American History

In one of his speaking tours after winning the Pulitzer Prize, Schenkkan suggested that this cycle of plays is the American history that remains unwritten, a cultural "dirty little secret." In this sense, *The Kentucky Cycle* is a mirror for America and its blood-spattered past. No one likes to think about how the settlers moved the native peoples out of the way. It was done through murder and disease. No one wants to think about slavery or the treatment of women, or the way some Americans swindled other Americans out of their homes and farms. Yet everyone likes the stories of the wild frontier, brave mountain men living by their wits, gun in hand. Everyone likes to hear the rags to riches story of successful Americans like John Paul Getty and Andrew Carnegie, but no one talks about the workers who were underpaid, underfed, and overworked as the means for these men to attain the wealth they did. Schenkkan wants his audiences to realize exactly how much pain, heartache, sorrow, and bloodshed went into making the America of today.

Personal Integrity versus Greed

The characters in *The Kentucky Cycle* have problems with personal integrity. Except for Mary Anne and Scotty, virtually all of them place personal greed above morality. Michael does not care that he killed dozens of people as long as he has his land and family. Morning Star does not care about her child except to see him broken and begging, Patrick, Zeke, and Jed live only for revenge and murder, while Joshua thinks only about the art of the deal. The only character who succeeds is Mary Anne, because she puts the needs of her community above her personal needs. Scotty tries, but gets caught in his father's lies and pays the ultimate price. Joshua is redeemed by his connection to the land and the ghost of his ancestor when he refuses to give into the greed consuming James and Franklin. Ultimately, Schenkkan seems to be saying that personal integrity is more successful and rewarding than greed can ever be.

Style

Classical Greek Structure

Schenkkan uses a traditional plot structure, borrowed from classical Greek tragedy, which combines climactic structure on the level of the individual plays with episodic structure for the entire cycle of plays. Each play focuses on individual characters, involving them in a series of ever-greater complications and bringing them to a startling climax. Together these plays function as a series of episodes in the entwined family histories of the Rowens and the Talberts. Each family is bound up in the fate of the others, yet each generations follows the path of the previous ones. The Talberts are generally always in control while the Rowens are always fighting to reclaim something that they had stolen in the first place. Like the chorus of a Greek tragedy, the Biggses live on the fringes of the action, providing both labor and an audience for the feud between the Talberts and the Rowens. The use of classical Greek tragic elements includes the character flaws that run through all the major characters: violence and greed. The long hard fall of the Rowens from land owners to sharecroppers to day laborers is also a familiar trait of Classical Greek Tragedy.

Setting and Set Design

Since this cycle of plays takes place over 200 years and involves over thirty characters, setting and set design are major elements in how the play is put together. Throughout the entire cycle, the physical setting does not change except for a few scenes where the action is not on the thirty-nine acres Michael Rowen originally bought from the Cherokee. The stage directions are purposefully spare since Schenkkan is not aiming for realism, but rather for mood. In the preface to the plays, he suggests a large box of dirt to represent the land with the actors adding tombstones as the plays progress. He suggests that excessive properties (props) and costuming will get in the way of the message, and should be minimized as much as possible. The sparsity of the stage and set design helps to focus attention on the words of each character.

Dramatic Irony and Cycling

The characters in *The Kentucky Cycle* are caught in a never-ending circle of murder, betrayal, and revenge. Schenkkan uses the repetition of situation and events to build dramatic irony and tension. The struggle seems pointless since the next generation is just going to do the exact same thing that the previous generation did. However, this cycling builds the dramatic irony to its highest point in The War on Poverty. In this play, the audience knows, although Joshua does not, that he is standing on the land of his forefathers and that the found body is that of Patrick's sister killed so long ago by her own father. Here is the irony. All Michael, Patrick, Zeke, Jed, and Mary Anne ever wanted was to carry on the family name, but they were completely cut off from their

strength, the land. Yet, Joshua, whose only child is dead, and with whom the Rowen line will die out, realizes his connection to the land and his responsibility toward it. This last member of a dying family rejoices in the sight of a wolf in the wild. Wolves were supposed to be extinct in most of the United States in 1975, save for Wisconsin, Minnesola, and North Dakota. The cycle of life, like The Kentucky Cycle itself comes full circle and the play ends were it began: a futureless individual in the wilderness.

Historical Context

There is a greater difference than is often thought between the mid to late 1980s and early 1990s, on the one hand, and the later 1990s, on the other. The 1980s saw the creation of huge personal wealth for some; but this was contrasted with the widespread problems of unemployment, homelessness, and lack of universal healthcare, as well as the expansion of the national debt to grotesque proportions. To many, the Reagan-Bush era in American politics seemed meaner than those of the 1970s; the policies of "trickle-down economics" and bankrupting the Soviet-bloc countries seemed harsh and expensive. Cast against this political background, there was a growing "green" or environmental movement pushing for stricter enforcement of air pollution laws, automobile exhaust emissions standards, and awareness of the devastating effects of strip-mining and coal burning factories on the environment.

By the late 1980s, America was again involved in foreign wars that did not seem to serve any real American interests or obligations. The economy was in recession, federal money for social programs was being used to make interest payments on the national debt, and people were ready for a change and a new beginning. Issues like race relations, women's rights, and the state of the environment became less urgent, not because they were solved, but because people got tired of talking and thinking about them. In this atmosphere, Robert Schenkkan wrote The Kentucky Cycle as a way to force people to reexamine these issues.

This cycle of plays specifically took on the issues that were dying in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Schenkkan wanted to force people to explore treatment of and attitudes towards women, African-Americans, and the poor in America. He wanted to exploit the righteous anger many people felt at seeing the destruction of the Appalachian mountains by strip-mining and turn it into action to reclaim the land for the people of the area. He wanted people to recognize the inherent violence in our history, in an America based on conquest and blood rather than community and cooperation.

Critical Overview

The production of a piece as large and grand as *The Kentucky Cycle* can hardly be met without both praise and disdain. While it has won many awards, including the Kennedy Center New American Plays Award, the Critics' Choice Award and the Pulitzer Prize, Schenkkan's work has not been heralded by all. Many critics doubt its value and some saw it as being the death of American theater. However, most reviewers found it powerful in its message, sparse in its presentation, and humbling in its catharses.

The early reviews were the best. The reviews in Seattle, at its premiere, and Arizona were stunning. Theatre Week called the production marvelous and brutally honest in its depiction of American history. The California reviews were just as good. *The Kentucky Cycle* started to run into critical problems when Schenkkan decided to take the play to Broadway after winning the Pulitzer Prize. Many New York theater critics found the plays boring, too long, and too unsophisticated for the New York audience. As it turned out, The Kentucky Cycle performed well in New York, although not as well as Schenkkan had hoped. The plays' popularity did get a boost from Stacey Reach's appearance on Good Morning America as he was starring in the plays at the time.

Many critics felt that the lack of stage design and the use of actors for multiple roles detracted from the cycle's power and dramatic force. New York critics, basking in the age of Andrew Lloyd Webber's lush productions like *Cats, Jesus Christ Superstar, and Phantom of the Opera* seemed disappointed in Schenkkan's ideas of dialogue-inspired drama instead of set-driven spectacle. They wanted a costume piece, but he wanted to talk about America. Schenkkan intended for a group of about ten to twelve actors to play all the roles, thus putting the burden of dramatic production on their skills and on the audience's "willing suspension of disbelief." However, many New York critics found this burden to be too heavy, and panned the plays. In regional theaters and touring shows, The Kentucky Cycle fared better, and struck a chord with most of its audiences.

Academic criticism has been relatively sparse. Both Marianthe Colakis and Charles Edward Lynch take Schenkkan to task for his approach to language and violence in the cycle, while Lynch criticizes the playwright more harshly for what he sees as an insult to the people of Appalachia. Harold Dixon, an enthusiastic supporter of Schenkkan and *The Kentucky Cycle*, understands the reluctance of people in Kentucky to embrace the play: "the characters are ignorant, their speech is rough. But this play is not meant to put down Kentucky. Rather, it's a play about America that happens to be told through the particularities of the Bluegrass State." Jim Stoll, another supportive critic, states that "The Kentucky Cycle is exciting, compelling and memorable. The critics who say it is not worthy of its Pulitzer Prize become irrelevant once the lights dim. Whatever else it is, it's a damn good show."

Whatever the critics say, in performance *The Kentucky Cycle* moves its audiences. Some find it boring, guilty of regional stereotyping, and silly; and some find it wrenching, an important milestone in modern American culture, and inspirational; but most audiences say that the six hours the complete cycle takes is well worth it.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Rex has a Ph.D and specializes in literature, poetry, and drama. In the following essay he explores the intersection between gender and violence in Robert Schenkkan's series of plays.

Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky Cycle* has been called one of the best examples of unwritten American history; the stuff Americans do not like to talk about. Violence, racism, and domestic abuse are America's dirty little secrets. The West was the great Frontier, our "Manifest Destiny," but how often do Americans truly look at what "moving West" meant? The lands beyond the Eastern seaboard were already populated and America's expansion meant that these peoples must be displaced. Schenkkan suggests that this primary displacement of the native peoples tainted the West and the American identity. *The Kentucky Cycle* shows that violence, particularly men's violence, has become an inherent part of American life and history. The characters of Michael, Jed, and Mary Anne Rowen clearly show that male-dominated thinking and action causes the rise in the level of violence and the degeneration of the American Dream.

Michael Rowen is a bad man from the very beginning of the cycle. *The Kentucky Cycle* opens shortly after the Cherokee have massacred a white settlement. Michael finds Earl Tod, the man who sold the guns to the Cherokee and plays the innocent survivor in order to get information out of Tod. Michael shows no remorse for the deaths of his wife and children nor for the other settlers. Instead, he sees this as an opportunity to stake his claim to the land. This is Michael's first mistake. In the world that Schenkkan creates, land cannot be "owned." It simply exists. Michael violates the land by the means he uses to obtain it. He kills Tod and then kills his young accomplice, Sam, without thought or remorse. Michael's purchase comes with the shedding of blood. Even the Cherokee are not safe from Michael's evil. Although he makes a deal with them for guns, lead, and gun powder in exchange for land, Michael cannot deal honestly with them. The blankets that he gives them are infected with smallpox. As the title of the first play suggests, Michael is a "master of the trade" of death, evil, and the double cross.

Michael's evil becomes more focused in the next two plays, *The Courtship of Morning Star* and *The Homecoming.* Both of these plays expose Michael's hatred and fear of women and his own mortality. Michael is evil and Schenkkan goes to great lengths to portray that evil as a fundamental part of the American character. Michael realizes that all of his work will be for nothing if he does not have children to establish his legacy. However, he does not have the time, energy, or character to convince any woman to live with him. In a macho feat, he kidnaps a young Cherokee girl whose tribe has been practically destroyed by Michael's "gift" of smallpox. She tries to escape, but Michael is determined. He does not ask her if she wants to be with him; he makes her his property through rape and torture. After her first escape attempt, he cuts the tendons in her leg to keep her from being able to run. Michael is such a disgusting creature that he knows that no woman would want to be around him, much less have children for him, without force.

Michael insists that a family and children are what he wants from Morning Star, but his violence and evil dominate even in this aspect of his life. He threatens Morning Star that if her first child is not a boy, he will kill the child. Here, Schenkkan is displaying Michael's utter ignorance of biology; most people today know that the man determines the sex of the child, not the woman. Yet even when Patrick is born, Michael cannot bring himself to touch the child, much less love him. Michael is disgusted by the fact that Morning Star's breasts bleed as she feeds the baby; milk and blood together are what makes him a Rowen. However, Michael is afraid of his son, afraid of what having a child and growing older means. Violence can only rule while the tyrant is strong and young enough to physically enforce his/her rule. This fear becomes manifest in *The Homecoming.*

The Homecoming is pivotal in the development of violence because it shows that the violence crosses both gender and generation lines. Patrick seems like a much better man than his father. There is a hint that he cares for Rebecca Talbert and that he will reject the evil ways of his father. However, Morning Star's hatred for her husband and Michael's own evil character force Patrick to behave exactly like him. Michael returns from town with an African slave. Again, Michael could not get a woman to be with him voluntarily; he has to capture or to buy them. Michael, reenforced by Morning Star's earlier conversations with her son, pushes Patrick beyond his breaking point, by calling him a half-breed and hinting that he, Patrick, will never inherit Michael' s land. In an almost instant replay of how his father got his land and wife in the first place, Patrick stabs Michael, shoots Rebecca's father, forces her into the house where he will rape and marry her, and banishes Morning Star. Michael can die because Patrick has become just as evil and violent as he was.

The violence in the Rowens continues to flow through the generations. Patrick's evil matches that of his father when he sells Jessie Biggs, his own half-brother. The violence seems to skip a generation only because Zeke does not have the opportunity to wield it as his father and son do. However, Zeke's violence is possibly more dangerous. He has tainted his son, Jed with a lust for vengeance and a taste for blood. Jed's violence is less obvious that either of his ancestors. He is devious and pretends to be a trusted friend and companion. He seems to like Randall Talbert, the ten-year-old son of Richard Talbert. Randall worships Jed as only a young boy can worship his hero. Yet, Jed is part of an evil plot to destroy the Talbert family. The Rowens, drenched in blood and violence, see nothing wrong with murdering the Talbert men and raping the Talbert women. Again, violence has become a way of life, integral to the functioning of society.

The depths of Jed's evil only become apparent after he has joined Richard Talbert's regiment. While Richard is going to fight for honor and the Southern way of life (things unworthy of protecting anyway), Jed could care less. He is only waiting for an opportunity to kill Richard. Unlike Michael, Patrick, and even Zeke, who are open about their hatred, violence, and anger, Jed pretends to be Richard's friend. He saves Richard in a battle only to push him off the boat as they cross the a river escaping from the enemy. Richard, fool that he was, never realized nor suspected that a product of such violence could be violent himself. Jed carries on this mission when he rides with the outlaws and returns home to oversee the destruction of the Talberts. Without remorse or even hesitation, he kills Randall, and rapes both of his sisters. The cycle of violence has

come full circle. The Rowens once again are in possession of the land, which they got through blood, violence, and murder.

One of the most interesting aspects about *The Kentucky Cycle* is the intersection between violence and gender. The Rowens, in Part One, are all men. The only Rowen daughter, born to Morning Star, was killed by Michael, only a few days after her birth. Schenkkan seems to be chastising American society for the way it has raised boys. Boys and men, in this cycle of plays, are violent, bloodthirsty, murdering thugs who cannot get enough of whatever it is, be it money, land, or women.

The only Rowen woman born to the family and allowed to live is Mary Anne, Jed's daughter. Schenkkan states in his "Author's Note" that Mary Anne is based on and named after his own wife. She is also the only admirable, good character in the entire cycle. All the other characters, even the other women, are evil or, at least, manipulative. Mary Anne, on the other hand, seems pure of heart and genuine. She first appears in *Tall Tales* as both a heart-broken adult and a wide-eyed girl of fourteen. As a young girl, full of hope and love, Mary Anne dreams of a future and far-off places. She is the first character who seems to love the land for itself, not to own or for what it can produce, but just for itself. The loving description she gives of Spring in the opening of *Tall Tales* displays more than just a foreshadowing of what is lost to strip-mining. It gives the audience an insight into Mary Anne's soul. Here is a character without the bloodlust and violence that has tainted her family. She does, however, have a touch of greed about her.

Mary Anne wants something different than what her community can offer. She wants to see London, Paris, New York, and New Orleans. She wants to experience life and love and joy so badly that she does not realize that she has all of that right at home. Even after JT Wells has tricked her father into selling his land for a tiny fraction of what it was worth, Mary Anne believes in the myth JT has spun at the dinner table. She, pure of heart and without the violence that taints her family and society, cannot conceive of people so mean and devious as the mining companies JT represents. In the end, that innocent trust costs her all that she held dear. Schenkkan seems to be saying that murder, bloodshed, and vengeful violence are not the answer to survival, but neither is wide-eyed, trusting innocence.

Mary Anne is shocked out of her innocence by the actions of the mining companies and the presence of one man, Abe Steinman. Mary Anne had been trapped in the life of a miner's wife, watching her husband kill himself in the mine, watching her children die of typhoid, watching her mountains die from rape and exposure, and her community collapse under the weight of suffering. She feels helpless and defeated. Then Abe comes. Abe arrives to organize a union among the miners. Mary Anne latches onto the idea of community, working together rather than separately. This idea inspires Mary Anne, fuels her, and allows her to overthrow the legacy of blood and murder in her family. Although there is violence associated with the Union and its efforts, Schenkkan suggests that this kind of violence is necessary to prevent the soul-destroying violence of corporate greed. Mary Anne is successful in establishing a union that is supposed to fight for the community and provide what the people need in terms of education, health

care, and social healing. Mary Anne, because she is female and because she has rejected the vengeful bloody violence inherent in the American identity comes closer than any other character to catching and holding her dreams.

Violence, whether for good or ill, is a part of America's heritage and history. *The Kentucky Cycle* exploits this tendency in Americans, showing that violence can be useful, as in the character of Mary Anne. However, violence in the name of personal or corporate greed, murder, or domination is never anything but evil. All Americans, women and men, are susceptible to the taint of violence that seems inherent in our very national character.

Source: *Michael Rex, in an essay for Drama for Students, Gale, 2001.*

Critical Essay #2

In the following review, Kauffman presents "The Kentucky Cycle" negatively through its lack of themes.

A decade after MTV confirmed that the American attention span has been reduced to approximately two and a half minutes, it's more than a little ironic that playwrights are offering endurance tests in lieu of dramas. Less than a year after the highly praised Part I of Tony Kushner' s epic Angels in America opened on Broadway, Robert Schenkkan' s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Kentucky Cycle* has finally arrived on the Great White Way. Consuming six hours of playing time evenly divided two discrete seatings (as compared to the roughly seven hours of Angels in America), *The Kentucky Cycle* is more an event than a play. Its commercial success will depend on how many people are willing to invest $85 or $100 for seats to prove that their power of concentration is greater than that of their neighbors. But what, ultimately, is there to concentrate on?

Like so many other plays and performance pieces that have emerged in the aftermath of the Jesse Helms-N.E.A. imbroglio over the past few years, *The Kentucky Cycle may be relentlessly* politically correct but it's also dramatically wrong, even vacant. Set in eastern Kentucky and spanning 200 years in American history beginning in 1775, Schenkkan's cycle of nine one-act "plays" focuses primarily on one family line as it sets out to debunk the myth of the American frontier, among other things. For the scope of its ambitions, the media have been invoking everyone from Aeschylus and Wagner to Shakespare, in a misguided effort of accommodate Schenkkan's achievement.

One might find more natural comparisons to Eugene O'Neill and August Wilson for their similar efforts to capture a sprawling history of this violent and materialistic continent through a marathon cycle of plays. Though O'Neill wrote only two of his intended nine-play cycle (*A Touch of the Poet* and the unfinished *More Stately Mansions*), and one might quibble about the relative merits of the different plays in Wilson's ongoing oeuvre (having thus far engendered *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Fences, Joe Turner's Come and Gone, The Piano Lesson* and *Two Trains Running*), both of these playwrights point to the principal weakness in Schenkkan's scheme. Not only does Schenkkan lack the poetry that they sometimes achieve, but the nature of his aspiration pales in comparison with their more epic undertakings.

Ironically, in spite of its imposing length, *The Kentucky Cycle* (at the Royale Theatre) proves too brief to develop any of its seventy-odd characters or to sustain any of its themes in anything other than bromidic ways. It's a matter of ambition masquerading as art. But it's precisely the kind of ambition that a television-saturated culture can latch on to and promote simply for its gargantuan body.

Rather than joining the ranks of great playwrights who have endeavored to portray the human dilemma over a vast period of generations, Schenkkan owes his real inspiration of TV miniseries, by now generic, with their bite-sized morals and vestpocket characters engulfed by byzantine plots of mammoth proportions. It's not a six-hour attention span

that Schenkkan is catering to (or banking on) but a thirty-minute one, which is more or les what each "play" in the cycle requires to be performed. The only things missing from the enterprise are commercial breaks.

On its own limited, soap-opera terms, *The Kentucky Cycle* does make for superb and efficient storytelling. It provides lurid melodrama, suspense and violence at practically every turn, to the point where it becomes ludicrously predictable as one generation of the Rowen family bleeds into the next. The first of Schenkkan's long line of evil protagonists is Michael Rowen, an Irish indentured servant. In the opening "play" (in any other context, this twenty-minute scenario would be referred to as a prologue or a scene), called "Masters of the Trade," Michael tracks down Earl Tod, a Scottish trapper who smuggles guns to the Cherokees. Both Michael and his young sidekick Sam have lost family members in a recent Indian massacre, and they're seeking revenge. But moments after Sam kills Tod, it's Michael himself who offers gunpowder to the Indians to save his own skin. To further appease the Cherokees who considered Tod their friend, Michael brutally stabs Sam. "What kind of animal are you?" ask the Cherokees. "A necessary animal," responds Michael.

By offering to supply them with more rifles, Michael secures a promise from the Cherokees that he can live on the land, although in the first of many obviously portentous lines, they warn him that the land is "cursed" and "dark and bloody." Just to indemnify himself against betrayal, Michael gives the Indians blankets contaminated with smallpox.

In such obvious fashion does Schenkkan load the villainous deck not only against Michael Rowen but against all his offspring. Presented as a paradigm of the American frontiersman and, as we shall see, not only of his descendants but of all Americans except female Americans, African-Americans and Native Americans Michael Rowen sets the stage for the greed and backstabbing vengeance that will follow over successive generations, taking us up to 1975. But what really emerges in the first of Schenkkan' s nine-part cycle is a formula for reductive dramatic tactics and revisionist history, puerile devices that ultimately undercut consideration of any of his more meaningful themes.

To make his primary cardboard villain more villainous still, Schenkkan retains Michael Rowen as a character in the next two "plays." In "The Courtship of Morning Star," set in 1776, or a year after the opening, Michael goes about the messy business of taming his Cherokee wife, Morning Star: first by chaining her to him while they sleep at night, and finally by cutting a tendon in her leg to prevent her from ever running away. Michael tells Morning Star that he wants her to bear him children, but he admonishes that he will murder any female offspring, since they're of no use in him a heinous deed he eventually commits.

"The Homecoming," set sixteen years later, focuses on Michael's son Patrick, who is being wooed by Rebecca Talbert. Patrick intends to marry Rebecca for her father's land, which he covets and which adjoins the Rowen property he expects to inherit. But after learning from his mother that his hateful father won't bequeath the family land, Patrick

shades of Marrat! brutally stabs him while he's bathing. His mother encourages the murder so she can pursue her love affair with Joe Talbert, Rebecca's father. But in one of many melodramatic eavesdropping developments, Joe and Rebecca were offstage, in the ostensible bushes, where they observed Patrick's patricide. And when Joe threatens to turn Patrick over to the authorities, Patrick has no recourse but to kill him as well, in the process banishing his mother from the family homestead.

From Michael to Patrick, the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree, like father like son, and the child is father to the man. The superficial mortality and greetingcard mentality that mark the first third of *The Kentucky Cycle* become the basic roots of the remainig six "plays." In "Ties That Bind," set in 1819, the Talberts legally recover the land from the Rowens vow to get it back, and do so forty-two years later (in "God's Great Supper") by killing off much of the Talbert clan in the midst of the Civil War.

Between the Rowens and the Talberts, the cycle quickly becomes more than a little reminiscent of old Devil Anse and the Hatfield-McCoy feud, as the eras roll by and the plays pile on. Even more ludicrous is the token introduction of a black family line, which commences with a woman slave Michael Rowen brings back from Louisville but remains in the subservient background throughout the entire cycle.

In 1890, the Rowens sell the mineral rights to their recovered property to "those Standard Oil people." By 1920, they're forming a union to combat poor working conditions in a coal mine run by, of all people, the Talberts. But even as the plays become longer and more detailed, somehow it all becomes murkier and harder to keep track of who's a Talbert, who's a Rowen, much less to care. By 1954, the coal workers' union is contending with infighting and under-the-table deals. Joshua Rowen, president of the local chapter, loses his son Scott in a mining accident that could have been avoided had he not cooperated with management by overlooking certain safety violations.

Though this particular development is straight out of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons,* it's not Joshua's guilt as much as Schenkkan's apparent reluctance to end pessimistically that permits this final Rowen character to break with the past. We're given to understand that the pattern of greed, vengeance and bloodshed that ruled in these here parts for 200 years is suddenly, and inexplicably, erased. Joshua discovers the corpse of the infantt girl murdered by his great-great-great grandfather, Michael, and returns it to its proper burial site. There are other symbols, of course, such as a pocket-watch that gets passed down from generation to generation and connects these playlets more handily than the script does; or a giant oak tree on the Rowen homestead that is cut down by the mining concerns.

According to Schenkkan, it was only after his cycle of plays grew that he began to realize it transcended the history of eastern Kentucky to be "about America. It had become an unintended exploration of the process of 'myth making': that alchemy of wish fulfillment and political expediency by which history is collected and altered and revised, by which events become stories, and stories become folklore, and folklore becomes myth. Ultimately, I realized that the play was about American mythology."

In an author's note to the script of *The Kentucky Cycle*, Schenkkan proceeds to discuss the Myth of the Frontier, which he further subdivides into the Myth of Abundance and the Myth of Escape. The first he uses to point out "our ruin on a great scale," our rape of natural resources. The second has led to an avoidance of our past and a loss of identity. "Without the past, what is there to connect us to the present?" asks Schenkkan rhetorically. "If actions don't have consequences, how can there be a mortality? Individuals who display such a cavalier attitude toward their own lives are currently diagnosed as 'sociopaths'; but what do you call a society that functions that way?"

This is all to be applauded even as it suggests a simplistic glimpse of grave and complicated issues. Though many of the cycle's plot twists resemble those in Greek tragedy and Shakespeare's revenge plays, what's missing is subtlety and depth to flesh out the characters' motives. To be at all effective, the cycle must rely on the resources of the staging and the energies of its overworked, twenty-one-member ensemble.

As conceived by the author in collaboration with the director Warner Shook, the spartan scenic elements are geared to emphasize the theatricality of the event. When they aren't part of the action on stage, the actors can be seen sitting on the sidelines, bearing "witness" to what transpires like so many members of a Greek chorus. With exposed scaffolding, a rear brick wall and little more than costumes to indicate the specific period, it all becomes a throwback to Thornton Wilder. (*The Kentucky Cycle* is essentially an *Our Town* gone wrong, which is yet another manifestation of Schenkkan's revisionist look at history.) The sweep and the movement of the ensemble are more directly borrowed from *Nicholas Nickleby*. But Shook never derives the ingenious moments of magic and felicity that Trevor Nunn obtained in his staging of that marathon Dickens classic a decade ago.

Stacy Keach, the one "name" in the cast who joined *The Kentucky Cycle* company last summer in time for its run at the Kennedy Center prior to Broadway, is imposing as various Rowen patriarchs. And Scott MacDonald is particularly effective as a number of Rowen sons. Lillian Garrett-Groag and Jeanne Paulsen stand out as a few of the Rowen wives and matriarchs, who are women and therefore noble victims in keeping with Schenkkan's sopho-moric scheme. But the players have all they can do to differentiate the many characters they portray, let alone rise above the cliches they embody.

Despite the ensemble's efforts, there is more drama and mystery, for that matter in how this work managed to come to Broadway than there is in the cycle itself. Much has been made of the fact that it's the most expensive nonmusical in theatrical history. But because it's essentially two plays, its $250 million price tag should be halved for a more accurate assessment. There's been even more brouhaha over its being the first play to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama before playing in New York. This isn't exactly true either, however, since Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* won the Pulitzer technically before it opened on Broadway a few years ago.

But even if *The Kentucky Cycle* set a precedent by winning the Pulitzer in 1992, or a good year and a half before it arrived on Broadway, it's more telling that such an

occurrence became a pattern when Angels in America won this past season, also before opening on Broadway (indeed, even before Kushner finished writing the second half of his marathon work). It's all rather indicative of pressure on the Pulitzer committee to honor the regional theater movement, which has grown dramatically in the past decade. Without the kind of momentum and advance publicity the Pulitzer bestows, it's doubtful that a play like *The Kentucky Cycle* would make it to Broadway at all. But to mention that *Why Marry?, Beyond the Horizon*, *Icebound*, and *Hell-Bent Per Heaven* were four of the first six plays to win a Pulitzer is to throw into question the ultimate value of the prize in the first place.

The phenomenon that is *The Kentucky Cycle* is even more revealing in terms of cultural competition between the West and East Coasts, if not the different sensibilities they seem to represent. Perhaps predictably, what wowed them in Seattle and Los Angeles, where *The Kentucky Cycle* was nutured, is being less warmly welcomed in New York. But in this case, it isn't just a matter of "Your play's not good enough for us." It's rather that the theatricalization of what amounts to a TV miniseries was more apt to have an appeal and be mistaken for "art" in Los Angeles than it was in New York. And the poor folk in the middle of the country, let's say Kentucky, may be forgiven for not knowing who to believe anymore. Or what to watch.

Source: *David Kaufman, "The Kentucky Cycle," (review) in The Nation, Vol. 257, No. 20, December 13,1993, p. 740.*

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Brustein explores the study of American materialism despite the play's several limitations.

Robert Schenkkan' s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Kentucky Cycle*, now stopping at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater in Washington before it goes to Broadway, is in nine acts and two parts, consuming about six hours of playing time. Aside from any values it might have as a work of the imagination, The *Kentucky Cycle* is yet another sign that American dramatists are beginning to fashion their plays into protracted journeys at the very moment when audiences are apparently losing patience with sitting in the theater at all.

Marathon plays, of course, have been a commonplace of dramatic literature since *The Oresteia*. One thinks of Marlowe's two-part *Tamburlaine*, Goethe's two-part *Faust*, Ibsen's Brand and *Peer Gynt*, Strindberg's trilogy *The Road to Damascus* and Shaw's "metabiological *Pentateuch" Back to Methuselah*, among others, all of which attempted to endow the drama with something approaching epic form. But until the last few years, there was little evidence that American dramatists had a similar appetite for theatrical giantism, apart from Eugene O'Neill, whose monumental works culminated in a projected nine-play cycle about American materialism.

O'Neill's cycle was left unfinished (*A Touch of the Poet* and an early draft of *More Stately Mansions* are the only surviving remnants), but there have recently been a number of American efforts to achieve O'Neillian scope, among them Preston Jones's *The Texas Trilogy,* Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and Robert Wilson's early large-scale extravaganzas (one of which took seven days to perform). Now comes *The Kentucky Cycle*, designed to be precisely what O'Neill originally envisioned an epic study of American materialism as seen through the prism of family life.

Whatever one thinks of Schenkkan's achievement, one has to admire his nerve. *The Kentucky Cycle* is a construct of domestic plays endowed with the dimensions of a national saga. In the program, Schenkkan provides a genealogical chart to help us follow the extended progress of three different families tied to each other by marriage and hatred. Beginning with the Indian wars of 1775, the play ranges through 200 years of American life, touching on the Civil War, the unionization of coal miners in the 1920s, the compromises of the umw in the 1950s and the aftermath of the Korean War in 1954, finally ending in 1975 with an epilogue devoted to tying up the strands of plot and theme. Although the references to recorded history are often muted, and the canvas is geographically narrow, it is clearly the author's intention to provide a general historical overview of this continent through the device of familial events.

Schenkkan's central theme is the despoilation of the American landscape by greed and rapine. There are virtually no heroes in this work, only plunderers and their victims. The one pure element, aside from a few black characters, is the land itself, and that is gradually reduced to mud and rubble. To reinforce this point, most of the action takes

place in Howsen County, in the Cumberland district of eastern Kentucky, marked by a thick forest and a magnificent oak tree that serves as the central symbol. Neither the forest nor the oak survives the ravages of rapacious men. The property belongs to the Rowen family after its patriarch Michael procures it from the Cherokees in exchange for guns (though the Indians believe that "no one owns this land, it cannot be given"). It is entirely consistent with Rowen family behavior throughout the next 200 years that Michael also trades the Indians contaminated blankets that will infect most of the tribe with small pox.

Although Schenkkan' s Indians are not exactly noble savages, they are contrasted with the white man in a manner clearly influenced by the racial assumptions of the movie Dances with Wolves. (There is even a howling wolf to begin and end the play.) "Here the savage was taught his lessons in perfidy by masters of the trade," reads the epigraph by Harry Caudill, whose *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* was the inspiration for Schenkkan's research. The Cherokees stick to their bargains; the settlers are invariably mean and treacherous. Treachery, in fact, is almost a leitmotif of the play, and its repeated reversal device is an offer of friendship followed by an abrupt and savage murder. Rowen even betrays his own wife, an Indian woman named Morning Star, first by cutting her tendon to prevent her departure, then by killing their infant daughter and finally by fathering a child on a slave girl he bought at an auction (thus initiating a related black family line). He is rewarded in kind when his half-breed son, Patrick, stabs him to death in a tub.

The only vaguely moral figure in this murderous family is Patrick's grandson, Jed, but even he is involved in a series of grisly actions. After the Talbert family, a rival clan though also related by blood, has reduced the Rowens to sharecroppers on their own property, the Rowens take delayed revenge by slaughtering all but the Talbert womenfolk. Jed joins Quantrill's raiders during the Civil War and participates in a scurvy ambush of Union soldiers.

After the war, Jed makes the mistake of selling mining rights to his recovered land for a dollar an acre, and Standard Oil, strip-mining for coal, creates a sulfurous scene of havoc and pillage that more than compensates for the sins of the family. The unionization of the coal miners is marked by similar acts of treachery. Mary Ann Rowen's husband, Tommy, characteristically betrays a friendly union agitator who is gunned down by the owners. When their son, Joshua, eventually becomes the president of the district union, he betrays his own local by compromising on safety standards. In the inevitable catastrophe, his own son is killed. The play ends with Joshua recovering a 200-year-old infant corpse, wrapped in buckskin, which happens to be the murdered baby daughter of his ancestor Michael.

As my synopsis might suggest, this remorseless depiction of the white settler's duplicity and meanness eventually grows tiring, even to a spectator with no particular illusions about the benevolence of human nature. Occasionally a character, usually a woman, will detach herself from the contemptible crowd to express a decent emotion. But for the most part, everyone acts like a survivalist, sacrificing friend and foe alike for the sake of personal gain. It's as if only Snopeses inhabited Yoknapatawpha County. There is no

sentiment in this play, but, curiously, Schenkkan's endless parade of base-hearted men eventually becomes a reverse form of sentimentality. One leaves the theater persuaded of the human capacity for evil but also confirmed in one's own virtue.

Where the author excels is in his storytelling. Despite its length, the play is never boring, and despite its growing predictability, it is often engrossing. The scene in the first part called "Ties That Bind," in which Patrick Rowen is dispossessed of his land by a venal judge and a vengeful neighbor, is a subtle portrait of relentless retribution, as satisfying as a morality play. Even here, however, where a suspenseful plot carries the action forward, one wishes for language that would deepen it. Schenkkan's dialogue is never less than serviceable, and his hillbilly dialect usually sounds authentic. What is missing is the poetry that could plumb emotions beyond vengeance and hatred.

In short, for all its ambitions, *The Kentucky Cycle* rarely escapes melodrama, and its panoramic sweep suggests that it would be most comfortable as an epic film or a television miniseries. I don't say this patronizingly, only as a way of suggesting that its limitations might be better disguised by authentic locations and rural landscapes. Schenkkan's laudable desire to universalize his theme is often trivialized by domestic twosomes involved in table arguments. And the importance he attaches to the land as a central symbol is not reinforced very well by a set composed of wood platforms and steel pipes.

Given these limitations, Michael Olich's abstract scene design is very flexible, and Warner Shock's direction is a model of fluidity and economy. The twelve-member cast, supported by an eight-member chorus that acts as townfolk, scene changers and silent witnesses, transforms into a variety of characters with considerable authority. Stacy Keach, playing a medley of black-hearted Rowen characters, gives his most ferocious performance since *Macbird*. Jeanne Paulsen displays towering strength in a number of matriarchal roles. And Gregory Itzin, Randy Oglesby, John Aylward, Jacob (Tuck) Milligan, and Ronald Hippe create a range of colorful Kentuckians, making Howsen County seem a lot more populated than it really is.

So, with all my cavils, and with no small doubts about how it will fare in the commercial theater, I wish this epic well on its journey to New York. Evolved by a system of resident theaters, it is a testimony to the creative health that sometimes manages to flourish there, against all odds.

Source: *Robert Brustein "The Kentucky Cycle," (review) in The New Republic, Vol. 209, No. 18, November 1, 1993, p. 28.*

Critical Essay #4

In this review, Horn portrays "The Kentucky Cycle " as a mythological study in the American past.

Arriving in Kentucky's Cumberland hills in 1775, the patriarch of the Rowen clan kidnaps for himself a Cherokee bride. When she proves unwilling and tries to escape, he lames her by slashing her tendons. Fifteen years later, this resourceful pioneer coos to his captive bride his sweet memories of their "courtin' days."

Such distortions of memory both personal and historical are at the core of *The Kentucky Cycle*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning 6 -hour drama that opened last week at Washington's Kennedy Center before heading to Broadway this fall. Encompassing 200 years and nearly 100 characters, the play is not only a darkly revisionist view of American history but a meditation on the process by which history is constructed, varnished and mythologized. In playwright Robert Schenkkan' s vision, the proud frontier myth is itself the source of much of America's social and environmental decay. His cycle of nine one-act plays seen over the course of two evenings demands of audiences a less romantic confrontation with their past. Depending on sensibilities, the controversial drama is either a thrillingly theatrical study in historiography or yet another politically correct slander against the American past.

The genesis of the play came more than a decade ago, during Schenkkan's own chance encounter with America's first frontier. On a trip with a friend to the "hollers" of Appalachia, in a one-room shack with a dirt floor where an unemployed teenage couple were struggling to raise two small children, Schenkkan discovered the "smell of poverty as though you had taken a corn-shuck mattress, soaked it in piss, covered it with garbage and coal and set it on fire." Even more disturbing was his visit to the gleaming mansion nearby, where a coal mine owner scorned the playwright's pity for the "lazy welfare queens."

The desire to understand the "unacknowledged relationship" between such extremes of wealth and poverty led Schenkkan to the searing accounts of Appalachian history by Kentucky legislator Harry Caudill and, eventually, to the creation of the two great rival clans whose enduring blood feud provides the spine of Schenkkan's cycle. It is through the prism of these families the rich land-owning Talberts and the poor laboring Rowens as well as the Biggs family, descended from Michael Rowen's slaves that Schenkkan traces America's two centuries of history. To their few hundred acres of "dark and bloody land" come the Indian wars and the Civil War, coal mines, company towns, strikes, corrupt unions and, finally, shattered war veterans and abandoned, alcoholic wives.

Just as important as the history is the way that history is transformed over time. Neighbors murder one another's children and poison one another's land; their greed prevails over even the laws of kin. But as quickly as crimes are committed, they are also forgotten, masked with patriotic cant or the preaching of hellfire and the righteous

vengeance of God. "There ain't no truth," says the sweet-talking con man who swindles the Rowens out of the mineral rights to their land. "All there is is stories."

Debunking myths. Stories, Schenkkan believes, can be a dangerous thing, the denial of the past as destructive for a nation as it is for a human being. In his own life, Schenkkan has struggled to accept the loss of his stillborn first child, despite the urgings of friends that he "be quiet and move on." From that experience he learned the hazards of "misguided forgetting" and was propelled toward the extraordinarily ambitious task of exposing stories that obscure painful memories and whitewash heinous deeds. Three cherished myths are particular targets of his angry debunking. The myth of wholesome pioneer life and the white man's civilizing influence on the savage falls in the blaze of cold knives and hot lead that rips through this saga. The violence in today's urban streets is not some aberration, Schenkkan insists, but a manifestation of an enduring American tradition. The myth of abundance, of the inexhaustible bounty of the land, also crumples as the small piece of Kentucky these families covet and kill for is finally skinned and bled dry.

Above all, Schenkkan assails the myth of escape the idea that what one did in the past doesn't matter, that a man can endlessly reinvent himself and begin anew. The villains of this saga are those who forget too easily. Michael Rowen won his land by giving smallpox-infected blankets to the Cherokee, but just one generation later his descendants boast of the Treaty Oak where their grandfather purchased his land. "If there's no connection between the past and the present, then actions don't have consequences," says Schenkkan. "And if actions don't have consequences, morality is impossible."

The play's austere production reflects its desire for a direct, unembellished encounter with the past. On a rough-hewn stage, where bare scaffolding and light racks serve as everything from mine tunnels to river barges, the tale unfolds in the simplest story-theater style. Those actors not in a scene sit visibly on the sidelines, like ancestors and descendants watching their families' crimes unfold. At times a banjo or guitar chimes in, being plucked in a Cherokee lullaby or Baptist hymn. Yet for all its plainness, the epic sustains an emotional intensity sometimes difficult to endure. Reminiscent of a dime-store Western, full of outsize characters and adventure, it also has a high, almost classical tone, with incantatory language, allusions to the Bible and Greek tragedy, operatic leitmotifs and a heavily laden symbolism.

Signs of success. By most measures, *The Kentucky Cycle* is already an enormous success. At its run last year at the Mark Taper Forum it won five Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Awards and broke box office records. At $2.5 million, it will be the most expensive nonmusical ever to come to Broadway. And, in what seems an inevitable move, it is currently being made into a miniseries for Home Box Office.

But some critics have damned the drama as "politically correct, "with attitudes, in the words of the *Chicago Tribune*, "that seem more formulaic than deeply felt."

University of Kentucky English professor Gurney Norman calls it "L'il Abner with fancy literary pretensions." With its "quaint, violent, brutish, generally lowdown and sorry" hillbillies, he says, it "serves everyone who feels that they are hip to Schenkkan's little urban sophisticated ultraliberal agenda."

Schenkkan remains unmoved by such criticisms. His play is not remotely a documentary, he points out, but "a work of art, in an honorable American tradition of plays about families and their emotional and psychological legacies." He has no more tolerance than his critics for the politically correct inclination "to impose contemporary concerns over historical events." Nor is he interested, he insists, in assigning blame. Even Michael Rowen, the vile white European male settler who abuses women, Indians and slaves, is treated with generous compassion by the playwright. Still, Schenkkan rejects the "libel" that to be critical of history is to be unpatriotic.

He is also more hopeful than despairing, convinced that damage acknowledged is damage that can be undone. The *Kentucky Cycle* is less a eulogy for the nation than it is massive group therapy. As Harry Caudill once wrote: "The Cumberlands are a great many things, but most of all, a warning."

"The problems of the Cumberland are not simply political or economic or social; they lie somewhere in the bewildering maelstrom of corrupting legacies that has trapped the people and the region in recurring cycles in a poverty that is as much spiritual as physical." Robert Schenkkan

Source: *Miriam Horn, "The Kentucky Cycle," (review) in U.S. News & World Report, Vol. 115, No. 11, September 20, 1993, p. 72.*

Adaptations

In 1995, Robert Schenkkan sold the film rights to *The Kentucky Cycle* to Kevin Costner and his HBO production partners. While Schenkkan was hired to rework the plays as a film or mini-series script, Costner has postponed production indefinitely. He does claim that he wants to do a film version of *The Kentucky Cycle*, but not until he can devote the proper attention to it.

The *Kentucky Cycle* has been performed at various theaters all over the country between 1992-1996, particularly at college drama departments and civic theater groups.

Topics for Further Study

Research the European settlement of Kentucky during the late eighteenth century. Compare the historical accounts to the events in the first two plays in The *Kentucky Cycle*.

How does strip-mining work? Why would strip-mining and the condition of mine workers in the 1920s cause them to want to unionize?

How do the Rowens, specifically Michael, Patrick, Jed, and Mary Anne, display the ideas of the American Dream?

After researching the environmental damage done by strip-mining, explain why Joshua feels the joy he does when he sees the wolf at the end of *The Kentucky Cycle.*

How do the women in the plays react to the violent natures of the men in their lives? What makes the difference between the women of the earlier plays, Morning Star, Rebecca, and Joleen, and Mary Anne in Part II?

Compare and Contrast

1700s-1800s: Women do not have any rights under the law. Women can be raped by their husbands, have no rights to the property or money they may have earned, and their children belong to their husbands.

1920: The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gives women the right to vote in local, county, state, and federal elections.

Today: While women today still earn less than their male counterparts for equal work, the gap is narrowing and laws against sexual harassment and gender discrimination are being enforced.

1700s: Slavery is common in the early years of the United States. Kentucky is a "slave state," but it does not secede from the Union during the Civil War. Owners routinely father children by their female slaves and consider those offspring slaves as well. Families are often broken up and sold to different people, especially as punishment for misbehavior.

1960s: Lead by men like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and women like Fannie Mae Johnson and Rosa Parks, African-Americans demand an equal share in the glory and goods that is America during the Civil Rights Movement. Although both King and Malcolm X are assassinated, their desire for unity and harmony among the races live on.

Today: Relations between the white and black peoples of the United States are better in some ways, but still do not approach the color-blind society that King envisioned. African-Americans are financially better off now than in the 1960s, but they still earn less than whites, have less access to health care, and are more likely to smoke and abuse alcohol.

1700s-1800s: Land is seen as a possession and a never-ending resource. After the Revolution, settlers are encouraged to move west in order to stake America's claim to the land, to drive out the native population, and turn the country into farmland.

1900s: The idea of an endless frontier becomes part of the American Myth. The Homestead Act of 1882 and the purchase of Alaska from Russia in the 1870s help fuel the western expansion and the illogical and wasteful use of land. When the Census Board closed the frontier in 1890, Americans had to find new ones. Hawaii is conquered in 1892; her last queen arrested, tried, and executed by an American court. Alaska becomes the "New Frontier" with the gold rushes of the 1900s and 1910s. American culture does not believe in conserving or protecting land or its ecosystems.

Today: The environment is an important political issue. April 22 is celebrated as Earth Day and most major cities have recycling programs to reduce waste going to landfills. Politicians in Washington are reexamining the ways land is used in the western states in

an attempt to improve the health of the environment. Major spills and chemical leaks are also being cleaned up.

1700s-1800s: In a young America, particularly in its frontier, violence is just a part of life. Native peoples are often hostile (with good reason) as are other settlers when supplies ran low. Men and women both learn to shoot and defend themselves.

1800s-1900s: While violence has not changed, the type of violence has. It is no longer customary for civilized people to carry firearms. Violence becomes more socialized and more civilized.

Today: Violence ranks as the most pressing social problem in the United States. However, violent crimes have been on the decrease since 1992, with the murder rate by firearms falling fastest. Most major cities have restricted gun ownership, require trigger locks on new guns, and outlawed guns for children. While the number of real guns has fallen across the country, the level of real and pretend violence is just as much a part of our national identity as it was in 1775.

What Do I Read Next?

Aeschylus's classic trilogy, *The Oresteia*, traces the events leading up to the Trojan War and Clytemnestra's revenge on her husband for the murder of their daughter. The other two plays deal with the outcome of Agamemnon's death at the hands of his wife and Clytemnestra's death at the hands of their son, Orestes. A smash hit since 458 B.C.E., *The Oresteia* has influenced the development of tragic drama ever since.

Medea, Euripides's fourth-century B.C.E. blood tragedy explores the impact of characters caught in a cycle of revenge and murder. Much like Morning Star has Patrick kill Michael and then has Jeremiah punish him, Medea kills her children to punish her unfaithful husband, Jason. Everyone in the play gets caught up in the web of bloodshed and murder and they all pay for their crimes, save Medea who is carried off to safety in a snake-drawn chariot.

Arthur Miller's classic 1952 play, *The Crucible*, also explores a dark chapter in American history the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. Miller uses this setting to explore concepts of justice, evil, and mass hysteria while giving his audience a glimpse into how good people ended up hanging nineteen of their own. The ideas of violence inherent in the American identity are also present in Miller'splay.

In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry produced her award-winning play, A Raisin in the Sun, a bittersweet story about hope and hard work in an African-American family. It became an instant classic and forever changed American theater. Hansberry broke all the stereotypes and presented African-Americans as real people with hopes, dreams, desires, and problems. The play does have a happy ending, another rare element in American drama of the 1950s and early 1960s.

Centennial, James Michener's mammoth mid-1970s novel of the American West, peopled with Native Americans, European trappers, and American settlers, treats much of the same territory as Schenkkan does. Michener's prose is denser and geared more toward story-telling without all the moral allegory in The Kentucky Cycle.

Fly in' West, by Pearl Cleage (1992), much like The Crucible and A Raisin in the Sun uses a historical setting to explore contemporary issues of family, domestic violence, and racism. Cleage sets her story in the all black Kansas town of Nichodemus and shows just how far a group of women will go to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their way of life.

Theresa Rebeck's 1992 Spike Heels takes on modern day ideas about gender class, sex, and violence with a wit and humor rarely seen in contemporary theater. Georgie, the heroine, is torn between the lover who would be "good" for her and the man who wants her. In many ways, Spike Heels is a modern version of George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion, only a lot funnier.

Further Study

Caudill, Harry, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands, a Biography of a Depressed Area*, Little Brown, 1963.

This work is a sociological study of the Cumberland Plateau, full of rich characters, violence, and courage. The study reads in a theatrical style and deals with many of the same issues expressed in The Kentucky Cycle.

Evans, Greg, "'Cycle' Rolls into Broadway's Red Sea," in *Varitey,* December 20, 1993, pp. 55-58.

Robert Schenkkan's two-part *The Kentucky Cycle* is expected to join a growing group of straight plays with losses that once were the sole province of expensive musicals. The play grossed only $170,951 of a potential $349,299 on Broadway for the week ending Decembers, 1993.

Mason, Bobbie Ann, "Recycling Kentucky," in *The New Yorker*, November 1, 1993, pp. 52-60.

In "The Kentucky Cycle," Robert Schenkkan set out to redress the exploitation of Eastern Kentucky, but some Kentuckians wish he hadn't. One criticism of the play is that it portrays the victims as bringing about their own downfall.

McCarthy, Cormac, *The Stonemason*: *A Play in Five Acts*, Ecco Press, 1994.

McCarthy's play explores the effects of racism, sexism, and daily life on a family of African-Americans in Louisville, Kentucky in modern times.

Morris, Rebecca, *The Kentucky Cycle*, in *The London Times*, January, 1994, p. 64.

The set design for the New York City production of The Kentucky Cycle at the Royale Theater is discussed. Set designer Michael Olich thinks of his work as more of a scenic installation than a traditional set.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

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Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

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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

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Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535