Mulatto Study Guide

Mulatto by Langston Hughes

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Introduction

Langson Hughes's *Mulatto: A Play of the Deep South*, which is usually referred to by the shorter title of *Mulatto*, was the writer's first full-length play. Although it was not published until 1963, when it was published in *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, it was written in the early 1930s and first performed on Broadway in 1935. This stage production set a record for the number of performances of a play by an African American but, nevertheless, only hurt Hughes's image. The play was produced by Martin Jones who dramatically changed the written play by adding a rape scene and other sensational elements to make it sell better on Broadway. The play was so controversial that it was banned in Philadelphia. Like many of Hughes's works, *Mulatto* highlights the less than desirable stereotypical qualities of African Americans of the time, such as uneducated speech. Elements like these often provoked harsh criticism of Hughes within the African American community.

Many critics cite the autobiographical elements of the play, which detail the racial conflict between a white plantation owner, Colonel Thomas Norwood, and the mulatto son Robert, whom he refuses to recognize as his own. Hughes's own father rejected him, an event that deeply affected the course of his life and the themes in his works. Some scholars believe the play was adapted from a short story by Hughes entitled "Father and Son," since Hughes noted this in some of his story notes; others believe that this is impossible, claiming that "Father and Son" was written later than the play. In any case, the play takes place at the same time it was written, in the depression-era 1930s, when most people were glad to have any form of job. For this reason, Robert's headstrong refusal to work in his father's cotton fields would have appeared even more daring to contemporary audiences. In addition to American racism, the world was also witnessing the effects of racial relations on a much grander scale as Hitler and his Nazi party attempted to wipe out the Jewish population of Europe. A current copy of *Mulatto* can be found in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 5, The Plays to 1942:* Mulatto *to* The Sun Do Move, which was published by the University of Missouri Press in 2002. One final note: readers should not confuse this play with the poem by the same name, which was written in 1926.

Author Biography

Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. His African American father left the family to move to Mexico. In addition, his mother left Hughes with his grandparents in Kansas while she tried in vain to pursue a career in the theater. This parental rejection profoundly affected Hughes, who spent most of his time alone reading. His grandmother—whose first husband had fought and died for John Brown, a noted abolitionist—instilled in the young Hughes a desire to achieve social and racial equality. Hughes was an intelligent child who excelled in his classes despite the prejudice that he faced. In the mid-1910s, he moved to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his mother, who had divorced his father and remarried. Hughes moved again in 1916 to Cleveland, where his writing talent ultimately helped to make him popular enough to be the class poet in his senior year. After high school, he tried living in Mexico for a year with his father, then entered Columbia University in 1921. Due to racial prejudice, Hughes quit school and worked at various odd jobs, including serving on a number of sea vessels. On one voyage, in 1924, he left his post when they reached Paris and stayed in the city for several months.

At the same time, he was publishing many pieces of poetry in magazines and in 1926 published his first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues*. His second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), elicited harsh commentary from some members of the African American community who did not approve of Hughes's use of stereotypical African American dialects. Nevertheless, this volume helped to establish him as a writer. Hughes and his writings were soon identified with the Harlem Renaissance, an African American literary movement that featured other writers such as Zora Neale Hurston. Hughes continued to travel, and also resumed his schooling at Lincoln University, where he graduated in 1929. The next year, he began writing his play *Mulatto*, which many critics believe stemmed from Hughes's own feelings of parental rejection. The play, which was performed on Broadway in 1935, was a success, partly due to the sensational changes that the producer made without Hughes's consent. Hughes had trouble collecting the royalties from his play and went back to living with his mother in Ohio.

Hughes continued to write plays, poetry, and nonfiction for the rest of his life, many of which were radical and advocated social change. In 1940, he published the first volume of his memoirs, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. In 1942, Hughes moved to Harlem, where he began writing a column for the *Chicago Defender,* an African American newspaper. In 1956, Hughes published his second volume of autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*. In the last decade of his life, he wrote several more works, including *Ask Your Mama* (1961), a book-length poem influenced by jazz; and *Tambourines to Glory* (1963), a play. Hughes died on May 22, 1967, in New York, of congestive heart failure. A number of works were published posthumously, including two children's books of poems: *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book* (1994) and *The Block: Poems* (1995)

Plot Summary

Act 1

Hughes's play *Mulatto* begins in the Big House on a Georgia plantation, a setting that does not change throughout the play. Colonel Thomas Norwood, the white plantation owner is frustrated that Sallie Lewis, the youngest of his mulatto children by his African American housekeeper Cora, has not left yet to catch the train that will take her to school for the semester. He discusses his frustration with Sam, his personal African American servant. Another of Norwood's mulatto children, Robert, whom Cora calls Bert, is supposed to drive Sallie to the station, but Bert has driven to town to get some radio tubes without Norwood's permission. Norwood says that Bert should be in the fields picking cotton and threatens to have him whipped.

Sallie, a very light-skinned mulatto who could pass for white, comes down to say goodbye to Norwood. She thanks him for sending her to school and he is pleased to hear that she is learning cooking and sewing. She says she wants to become a teacher and Norwood dismisses the idea, saying that he will probably send her north to live with her older sister whom he thinks is a cook. Robert arrives from town and picks up Sallie. At the same time, Fred Higgins, a county politician, arrives and warns Norwood that Robert was causing problems in town. Robert picked up his package of radio tubes, but they had been destroyed in the mail and the post office refused to return his money. When he argued with the white woman behind the counter, the mail clerks threw him out. Higgins is concerned that Robert is going to rile up other African Americans to think they are as good as whites.

Higgins tells Norwood that he should marry again instead of just sleeping with Cora. He says that it would be more socially acceptable and that having a white woman around the house would help keep Norwood from being too soft on the African Americans on his plantation. Norwood and Higgins leave to go look at Norwood's cotton fields; on the way out, Norwood tells Cora that he wants to talk to Robert. Cora notices a doily that Sallie sewed and points it out to William, the oldest of her mulatto children by Norwood. Billy, William's son, asks if Norwood is his white grandpa and William says that Robert has been broadcasting the fact that Cora's children are Norwood's. Cora and William discuss the first time that Norwood beat Robert, when little Robert called him papa in front of a group of important white visitors. They talk about the fact that Robert is going to get himself and the rest of the African Americans on the plantation in trouble if he does not stop his brash behavior.

Robert returns to the Big House, calling himself Mr. Norwood. However, he drops his act when he sees his mother crying over the distress he has put her through. Robert says that he is half-white and will act like his white half. He says that his six years at school have shown him that not all African Americans have to yield to white people like they do on the plantation. Robert and William get in a fight and Cora breaks it up, sending William into the kitchen so that she can talk to Robert. She tells Robert that she is

scared that his behavior is going to hurt them all in the end and she is even more concerned when she hears about Robert's behavior at the post office that morning. She tells him to be respectful to Norwood when he returns and act like the African American man that he is. Robert tells her that he is not going to work in the cotton fields anymore, and Cora notes that they all have to do things they don't like, such as lying to the Colonel about the fact that Sallie is really studying typewriting, not cooking and sewing.

Norwood arrives in his car and Cora tries to hurry Robert into the kitchen. However, Robert refuses to use any door but the front door, like white people do. As a result, when Norwood comes in through the front door, he almost runs into Robert. Shocked, he threatens Robert with his cane, but Robert stands up to Norwood who drops his cane in fear. Robert stalks proudly out the front door and Norwood, in a rage, grabs his pistol from a drawer. He is too nervous to use it, however.

Act 2, Scene 1

Later that evening, the Colonel requests to see Robert, and Cora tells her son to agree with whatever Norwood says. Robert agrees as long as Norwood does not try to hit him again. Cora returns to her room and Norwood comes into the room to talk to Robert. He asks Robert why he is causing problems, but tells him that before he answers, Robert better speak to him like an African American. Robert says that he is Norwood's son and Norwood says that Robert has no father. Norwood tells Robert to leave the plantation, and when Robert refuses, Norwood pulls the pistol on him. Robert disarms Norwood and chokes him to death. Cora hears the struggle and comes down, horrified to see Norwood lying on the floor. She tells Robert to escape into the swamps. He grabs the pistol and runs out the front door, narrowly missing two white men who have come to see Norwood. When the two men see that Norwood is dead, they call the sheriff to get a mob of white people to chase Robert. The men leave and Cora talks at Norwood's body. She criticizes Norwood for lying there when she should be helping Robert, his son. She then says that she knows Norwood is faking, that he is not lying there and that he is really out there running after Robert. By her comments, the audience can see that Cora is insane. Cora goes upstairs to make a hiding spot for Robert under her bed.

Act 2, Scene 2

An hour later, Sam and the undertaker discuss Robert's fate and the fact that there are only African Americans left on Norwood's plantation now. The undertaker expresses interest in Cora and has Sam go get her so that they can get some alcohol. However, when Cora comes out, she says that she will only take orders from Norwood and that she is waiting for him to return. The undertaker realizes that Cora has been driven insane. The undertaker leaves and Sam tells Cora she is a fool for acting like that. Then he realizes that with Norwood dead, he is free, and leaves. Livonia, the cook, comes into the room and tells Cora that almost all of the African Americans on the plantation have fled, except for William, who comes to speak with her. William says he is leaving and tries to take his mother with him, but Cora says she is waiting for Robert and

Norwood to return. William is frightened at his mother's crazy talk and leaves. Cora talks to the empty room, remembering how she became Norwood's mistress when she was fifteen. The mob arrives outside looking for Robert and he runs into the house amidst gunfire. He says that he has one bullet left in his gun and that it is for him. Robert runs upstairs and shoots himself before the white mob can capture and hang him.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The play begins on a fall afternoon in 1930s Georgia. The first two characters introduced are Colonel Thomas Norwood, a plantation owner who is about 60, and Cora Lewis, Norwood's housekeeper and mistress of thirty years; she is in her forties.

As the action opens, Norwood and Cora are discussing the imminent departure of Cora's (and Norwood's) daughter Sallie for school. Talk quickly turns to another child, their son Robert ("Bert"), and the fact that he has taken the car into town without permission. The Colonel makes it clear that he is angry at Bert's disobedience and will not tolerate such insolence from a "darkie" – especially his own child.

We are next introduced to Sam, an elderly black man who is a personal assistant to the Colonel. Sam asks if it would be acceptable to take Sallie's luggage out the front door to the car, as the back steps are difficult to maneuver. The Colonel refuses, and Sam slyly informs him that he has seen Bert using the front door. Before he can fully process this affront, however, Sallie comes in to say good-bye.

Sallie, 16, is shy, and has come to thank Norwood for his kind treatment of her and the other "colored children." She is careful not to acknowledge their true parentage. They discuss her schooling, and though Sallie wants to become a teacher, Norwood insists that she will be joining her sister to work at a hotel in Chicago. Talk turns to Bert, and Sallie tries to plead his case; Norwood becomes angry with her as well. Luckily, Bert pulls up outside and they leave for the airport.

As Sallie departs, Norwood's friend Fred Higgins arrives. Higgins is an elderly, traditionally Southern politician. He has come ostensibly to warn the Colonel of the growing resentment of the white community towards Bert. Higgins relates Bert's latest offense – demanding his money back at the post office after receiving a shipment of broken radio tubes. The real outrage was that Bert dared to argue with a white woman; Higgins says that Bert is also riling up the white townspeople by driving recklessly and acting as "good as a white [man]." He sends the Colonel over the edge by telling him that Bert has been telling everyone his last name is Norwood, not Lewis, and that he is half-white. Higgins chides the Colonel for keeping a black mistress in his home like a wife, and warns him that if Bert does indeed get arrested for his behavior, there is a good chance the white man might break into the jail and lynch him. The two men visit, talking politics and drinking.

After Higgins and Norwood leave, Cora enters again. Soon after, her son William comes in. He is the first-born son of Cora and the Colonel. Accompanying William is his young son Billy. Little Billy begins playing on the furniture, and makes an innocent comment that he knows the Colonel is his grandpa. Cora first blames William, then realizes blame lies with Bert. The two discuss that they are worried about Bert's headstrong ways,

recalling an incident from the past. Once, when he was a young boy, Bert accidentally referred to Norwood as "papa" in front of the Colonel's rich white friends; the Colonel beat Bert mercilessly. Cora and William reflect that up until that point, Bert had been his father's favorite, but from then on, resentment had grown on both sides.

As they continue to worry that Bert will never "know his place," he enters. He and Cora and William stay on the subject of Bert's perceived arrogance. They try to explain that his behavior may end tragically for him and the rest of his family, but Bert dismisses their concerns. He has gone to school out of town, and has experienced more equal treatment in the big cities. He tells them the same tale of the radio tubes that Higgins told the Colonel earlier, but in this version, Bert is proud of and defends his actions.

He tries to justify his position; because he is half-white and Norwood's son, he doesn't believe he should have to work out in the fields like the other field hands. He then informs Cora that he is no longer going to work in the fields. They begin to argue again, with Cora telling him that he needs to understand that he is no longer living up North and that he needs to tone down his behavior. She then tells him that the Colonel wants to speak to him when he returns; she pleads with Bert to "[T]alk to him right."

Bert is indignant – he knows he is neither black nor white, and he looks just like Norwood. He refuses to run away out the back door when they hear the Colonel coming, even when Norwood comes in and orders him out that way. As the Act comes to an end, Robert walks proudly out the front door; the Colonel starts to follow him with a pistol, but Cora stops him, reminding him that Bert is their son.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

In the 1930s, when this play was written, sociopolitical themes were very prevalent. Critics blasted Hughes early on for his supposedly "uneducated" depictions of African Americans, citing as especially offensive many of his characters' stereotypical speech. *Mulatto* is, however, more than a traditional race play. Though it is, of course, a study of the racial tensions facing the South after the end of slavery, it is also a tale of father and son relations, and of personal responsibility.

The line of responsibility is drawn and re-drawn by Cora, Norwood, and their children. Sallie slips at one point but quickly recovers, when she says to Norwood " You been might nice to your – I mean to us colored children." Fred Higgins also walks the fine line between acknowledgement and denial, referring to Bert as "your boy," but leaving the term vague. Even young Billy knows the truth, saying of Norwood, "Ain' he ma white grandpa?" It is as if, even though Norwood has indeed played more of a role in the life of his "colored" children than most plantation owners of the time, he had made the situation worse by sending mixed messages. There is a sense that Norwood may know this, at least subconsciously, when he is unable to hit Bert with his cane.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

The first scene of the second act begins at sunset on the same day as the first act. We hear Sam talking to himself, saying that he needs to tell Cora that the Colonel wants to see Bert at six o'clock. He exits to find her.

Cora and Bert enter. She informs him that the Colonel wants to talk to him at six, but since she was afraid he might be late, she had invited him to have dinner with her. He had dinner with William, he tells her. However, though he is on time, the Colonel is not. Cora takes the time to try one more time to convince Bert to treat Norwood with respect. She tells him again that she is scared for him, and that he should just agree with everything Norwood says. He reluctantly agrees, but he doesn't seem to mean it. Cora advises him to wait patiently for Norwood, and that she'll see him at the back door when he leaves.

Finally, Norwood enters the room. He starts off by telling Bert that he doesn't want to have to beat him the way he did that once, when he was a little boy. He tries to make the point that he as never had any trouble with any of the "colored folks," except for Bert, because they all know their place. He speaks of the fair treatment he has shown his "darkies," saying that he has done even more for Cora's children. He tells Bert that he isn't going to tolerate his disrespect, and warns him that his "impudence" is putting him in danger. Finally, he says Bert is allowed to talk to him, but tells him he must "talk right." This sparks an argument.

The argument quickly when Norwood tells Bert that he is "Cora's boy," saying that her children have no father. Tempers get to the point that the Colonel finally tries to throw Bert out – when he refuses, things become violent. Though the Colonel holds his pistol, he does not shoot Bert. After a struggle, Bert strangles Norwood while still taunting him to shoot.

Cora comes down the stairs and is horrified at what has happened; Bert picks up the pistol and seems completely unremorseful. He knows the white men will be coming for him, and he plans to take some of them down with him. Cora tells him to go through the front door and hide in the swamp – he agrees, but tells her he will be back to his father's house if they get to close. As he leaves, he passes the slave overseer, Talbot, and the storekeeper in the driveway. Talbot enters and they find Norwood; making the connection between the departing Bert and Norwood's death, they begin to form a posse to track him down.

The scene ends with Cora speaking to Norwood. She blames him for all that has happened, and with his death, she is finally able to stand up to him.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

This scene, while containing much of the play's action, also crystallizes the character conflict stemming from the lack of acknowledgement by Norwood. Bert tries to force the issue when he declares "But I'm not a nigger, Colonel Tom. I'm your son." The Colonel, again, compounds the problem by replying, "You're Cora's boy …. Nigger women don't know the fathers." Both men, so much alike, let their pride dictate their lives.

The most telling line is spoken by Norwood, after Bert has denied his black roots but said that he wants to kill all the white men. Norwood asks him, "You don't like your own race? You don't like white folks either?" This sums up Bert's quandary; he hates both the side of himself that is forced to submit to the white men and the white men that deny him. When he finally kills Norwood, he is, symbolically, killing off his white side.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Scene 2 begins an hour later – it is now night. The scene opens with the Undertaker talking to Sam. He asks Sam if Colonel Norwood had any relatives; he says no. The Undertaker asks Sam to find Cora – she has the keys to the liquor cabinet, plus he says he'd "like to see how she looks."

Cora enters. The Undertaker begins to order her around, trying to get her to open the liquor cabinet. She refuses, telling him she only takes orders from Colonel Norwood. When the Undertaker tells her the Colonel is dead, she claims he is actually out with the mob chasing Bert. The Undertaker decides Cora is crazy and leaves. Sam is upset and scared about the disrespect Cora showed to the white Undertaker – he decides that with the hunt going on for Bert, he would be safer staying in town with his family.

William arrives next and tries to get Cora to leave with him and his family. She says Bert will be back. When William tries to warn her that the white folks are coming, she says yes, the Colonel *will* be back; William realizes she has lost her grasp of reality. He tries one more time to convince her to leave with him, but she says no. She says William is too much like her, that he doesn't go against anyone and neither would she, "till tonight." William finally goes, leaving Cora to talk to the spirit of Norwood about their past.

The angry mob is heard outside the house, chasing Bert. He runs in, and Cora locks the door behind him. He says that there is no time to hide; he says there is one bullet left, and it is for him. Cora tells him yes, it is for him, and to go upstairs and lie down. As Talbot comes in downstairs, a gunshot is heard from upstairs; Robert has shot himself. The play ends with Talbot telling a disappointed mob that they are too late. He leaves, slapping Cora across the face on his way out; she does not move.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

This final scene encapsulates Bert's struggle to come to terms with his parentage. When he finally takes his own life, it is essentially his acceptance of his black roots, while at the same time, his destruction of them. It is his statement to the world that he will not live in it, or be taken from it, on any else's terms.

Cora, as well, comes to the same conclusion. Though throughout the play she has been emotional, terrified, and defiant, we see in the final scene she has been hardened. She is also, however, described as "calm." The two men who had been at the center of all of the conflict in her life are gone; in some ways, this is a relief. From here, she may be able to finally grasp the burgeoning freedom around her.

Characters

Bert

See Robert Lewis

Mr. Fred Higgins

Fred Higgins, a local politician, is a friend of Colonel Norwood's and a man who believes in the racial superiority of whites. Higgins comes to warn Norwood that Robert has been causing trouble in town, and warns Norwood that Robert's actions might lead to his death. Higgins also criticizes Norwood's relationship with Cora, saying that it is okay to have sex with her, but that living with her like he has been is a scandal. Unlike Norwood, Higgins rules over his African American workers with an iron fist.

Cora Lewis

Cora Lewis is the black housekeeper and mistress of Colonel Tom Norwood, with whom she has four living mulatto children. Cora first met Norwood when she was fifteen years old, when he first had sex with her. When Norwood's wife died, Cora, who was already pregnant with William, moved into the Big House on Norwood's plantation, and has been living with him like a wife for thirty years. Cora yields to her new life without a fight and as a result, Norwood is sometimes nicer to her and their mulatto children than he is to other African Americans on his plantation. Because of this, Cora tries even harder to keep the peace in the house, buries her own feelings and does whatever is necessary to earn the best life for her children. While she is able to get most of her children to act the same way, Robert does not.

At first, Cora criticizes Robert for his behavior and is worried that Robert's actions might hurt all of her family in the end. Throughout the play, Cora tries in vain to smooth over the conflict between Robert and Norwood, first by appealing to Norwood to go easy on Robert, then by appealing to Robert to act respectful to Norwood. However, in the end she is unable to stop Robert from killing Norwood. This act, and perhaps the strain of bottling up her own emotions for so long, drives Cora insane. She speaks to Norwood's corpse as if he is still alive and refuses to believe that he is in the undertaker's wagon, even when others try in vain to tell her that he is. Even after Norwood's body has been taken away, Cora believes that he is one of the mob who is chasing after the fleeing Robert. Through her conversations with Norwood's corpse and then with the thin air, the audience realizes that Cora has never been happy with the fact that Norwood did not admit his paternity, and the fact that he beat their children. She curses the dead man, and wonders why God has forsaken her, since she has always tried to live right. Ultimately, she watches as Robert runs upstairs to kill himself, and tells herself and the mob that arrives that her boy has gone to sleep.

Robert Lewis

Robert Lewis is the youngest mulatto son of Cora Lewis and Colonel Thomas Norwood; his actions cause the conflict in the play and lead to the murder of Norwood and Robert's own suicide. Since he was a boy, Robert, who Cora calls "Bert," has shared both the physical characteristics and the headstrong ways of his father, Norwood. As a child, Robert is Norwood's favorite mulatto child, until Robert calls him his father in front of an important group of white people. Norwood beats the young Robert, a beating that he never forgets. Norwood also sends Robert away to school for six years, so he does not have to be around him. However, this backfires on Norwood. Since Robert has been heavily educated outside of the plantation, when he returns he finds it impossible to be subservient like the other African Americans who work for Norwood.

This sense of personal confidence and self-esteem, which is lacking in many other African Americans, gets Robert into trouble. When a C.O.D. order arrives broken at the town post office, he argues with the white woman at the counter, trying to get his money back. This incident, which is viewed as outrageous by the white community, also helps to put him in direct conflict with Norwood. Robert adds fuel to the fire by refusing to use the back door of the house like the other African Americans, and by driving faster than white men like Higgins. Ultimately, this behavior, which is generated from Robert's desire to act more like his white half than his African American half, leads to a final confrontation with Norwood. The latter pulls a gun on Robert, but Robert easily overpowers his father, then chokes him to death. When Robert realizes what he has done, he flees the mob that he knows will be sent after him. Ultimately, he is unable to leave town, and so he returns to Norwood's house, where he shoots himself before the mob can catch him and hang him.

Sallie Lewis

Sallie Lewis is the seventeen-year-old mulatto daughter of Cora Lewis and Colonel Norwood; she is so light-skinned that she could pass for white. In the beginning of the play, Sallie leaves to catch her train for her semester at school. Although she wants to be a teacher, Norwood says she will be a cook like her older sister. Sallie, like her mother and the others, lie to Norwood and say that Sallie is learning cooking and sewing at school, when Sallie is really learning how to type.

William Lewis

William Lewis is the oldest mulatto son of Cora Lewis and Colonel Norwood; he is dark-skinned like his mother. At twenty-eight, William has no ambition to be anything more than a field hand. He has a family including a boy, Billy, and wants only to live out his life. As a result, he is concerned and angry at the way that Robert provokes Norwood and causes trouble in town. William and Robert start to get in a fight over this, but Cora breaks it up. At the end of the play, after Robert murders Norwood, William, like many of

the other African Americans on the plantation, plans on fleeing to the safety of the local church house or getting out of town altogether.

Colonel Thomas Norwood

Colonel Thomas Norwood is a sixty-year-old Southern plantation owner who is also the father of Cora Lewis's four living mulatto children. Norwood is a widower with a quick temper which he often unleashes on his personal servant, Sam, or his mistress, Cora. For the most part, Sam, Cora, and most of the other African Americans on the plantation fear Norwood. As a result, even though he is harsh, he treats them better than most plantation owners treat their African American workers. This is especially true with his mulatto children. Although he does not acknowledge his paternity, he does try to help them out by sending them to school. However, when it comes to Robert, this is his undoing. An educated Robert refuses to submit to Norwood's will, which angers Norwood. When Norwood finds out from his friend, Fred Higgins, that Robert has been causing trouble in town, including naming Norwood as his father, Norwood is irate. He is also concerned about his reputation since Cora has been his only lover since his wife's death—a relationship that is frowned upon in the Southern white society in which he lives. Norwood insists on speaking with Robert. The conversation does not go well, and Norwood eventually pulls a gun on Robert. However, Robert disarms Norwood and chokes him to death.

Sam

Sam is Colonel Norwood's personal servant, who believes in going with the status quo. In the beginning, Sam is one of the ones who notes Robert's brash behavior, and worries about the effect that Robert's actions will have on his own life. However, at the end, Sam gets over his fear and realizes that with Norwood dead, Sam is free to leave the plantation.

Themes

Racism and Discrimination

Although slavery was technically illegal after the American Civil War, racism and discrimination were still alive in many areas, especially in the American South. The play, which takes place on a Georgia plantation, explores the social roles of African Americans and whites during this time period. Most whites believed that they should be superior to the African Americans, who often worked for them in cotton fields as their grandparents had when they were slaves in the 1800s. For the most part, African Americans accepted their fate because they knew that there could be disastrous consequences if they tried to challenge the status quo. William says it best, when he is speaking to his mother, Cora: "A nigger's just got to know his place in de South, that's all, ain't he, ma?"

Interracial Relationships

For African American women, their place often meant becoming the mistresses of white men. This is what happens to Cora, whom Norwood chooses when she is just a teenager. She notes this when she is having an imaginary conversation with the dead Norwood and remembering their first meeting. Cora says, "I'm just fifteen years old. Thirty years ago, you put your hands on me to feel my breasts, and you say, 'you're a pretty little piece of flesh, ain't you?'" In this Southern culture, black women like black men were thought of as no more than pieces of flesh that could be molded and used in whatever way suited white people. Norwood's friend, Fred Higgins, is a perfect example of the Southern white man who felt that black women should be used by white men for sex, but not for relationships. Higgins says about Cora, "And living with a nigger woman! Of course, I know we all have 'em—I didn't know you could make use of a white girl till I was past twenty." Although Norwood is somewhat better in this regard, because he tries to help his mulatto children by sending them to school, he still possesses this Southern attitude of treating women like property that can be traded or sold. He says to Higgins, "(*Winking*) You know I got nice black women in this yard." Perhaps the most callous example of this attitude is at the end of the play. The undertaker and Sam casually discuss the fact that Cora's son, Robert, will be dead by the end of the night for killing Norwood. Then, without missing a beat, the undertaker expresses sexual interest in Cora, knowing that she is available after Norwood's death. The undertaker says about Cora, "(*Curiously*) I'd like to see how she looks."

Mulattoes

This interracial sex leads to the birth of many mulatto children. As the play shows, white men generally rejected their paternity when it came to their mulatto children. Although Norwood tries to help out his mulatto children by sending them to school, he refuses to

call them his own. Norwood says to Cora when discussing Robert's behavior, "Cora, if you want that hard-headed yellow son of yours to get along around here, he'd better listen to me. He's no more than any other black buck on this plantation." Mulattoes were often called "yellow" since their skin tones were usually lighter than brown and darker than white, a sign of their mixed genetic heritage. Despite the fact that mulattoes had one white parent, it was socially unacceptable for mulattoes to point this out. Robert does this when he is a little boy, calling Norwood "papa" in front of some important white guests. Although Norwood beats Robert, he is also angry with Cora. Cora, remembering the incident while she is talking to William, says, "And he were mad at me, too, for months. Said I was teachin' you chilluns who they pappy were."

However, while most African Americans and mulattoes on the plantation accept the fact that they are considered inferior to whites, Robert does not, which creates the conflict in the play. Robert is confused and angry about his heritage. He shares many of the white features of his father, Norwood. Cora says to Robert when he is getting ready to speak to Norwood, "Talk like you was colored, cause you ain't white." Robert responds, "(*Angrily*) And I'm not black, either. Look at me, mama. (*Rising and throwing up his arms*) Don't I look like my father? Ain't I as light as he is?" Cora even tries to stand up for Robert in the beginning by noting that Robert inherited his attitude from Norwood. Cora says, "He don't mean nothin'—just smart and young and kinder careless, Colonel Tom, like ma mother said you used to be when you was eighteen." Despite these genetic links, Norwood denies that he is Robert's father. Norwood tries to say that Robert is Cora's son, and tells Robert that "Nigger women don't know the fathers. You're a bastard."

While Cora spends most of the play trying to prevent Robert from getting in trouble with Norwood or other white people, she goes insane once Robert kills Norwood. In her insanity as she is speaking to Norwood's dead corpse, Cora finally stands up for herself and admits that Norwood should accept Robert as his own son. "Why don't you get up and stop 'em? He's *your* boy. His eyes is grey—like your eyes. He's tall like you's tall. He's proud like you's proud."

Style

Setting

The setting is extremely important in the play. Although African Americans were discriminated against in the northern American states, too, it was in the South that they faced the most racism. Robert's behavior at the post office is astounding to white men like Higgins, who warns Norwood that the white people of the area are not going to put up with behavior like that. Higgins says, "The white folks at the Junction aren't intending to put up with him much longer." When Robert claims his heritage as Norwood's son to the assembled crowd in town, he crosses another line, as Higgins notes to Norwood. Higgins says, "Now, Tom, you know that don't go 'round these parts o' Georgia, nor nowhere else in the South. A darkie's got to keep in his place down here."

However, as Robert notes, this is not true everywhere in the South. As Robert says to his brother William, he has "seen people in Atlanta, and Richmond, and Washington where the football team went—real colored people who don't have to take off their hats to white folks." While racism was still apparent in these cities, African Americans usually experienced the worst racism in rural areas where they had little recourse against the racist behavior of whites. The expected social roles of African Americans and whites in the South were especially enforced on cotton plantations, like the one in the play. During America's long history of slavery, African Americans were forced to work in cotton fields on plantations like Norwood's. After the Civil War, some African Americans felt they had no other option but to work in the cotton fields, the only work they knew and so stayed on willingly as hired hands or sharecroppers. Because of this, they did not realize that in certain areas, like the cities that Robert mentions, society was starting to change. Robert says, "Back here in these woods maybe Sam and Livonia and you and mama and ever'body's got their places fixed for 'em, but not me."

Language

The division between African Americans and whites in the play is due to more than just skin color; the language also separates them. This is apparent from the first exchange of dialogue in the play. Norwood asks Cora, "I want to know if that child of yours means to leave here this afternoon?" This clear form of English differs heavily from the accented form of English used by most African American characters in the play. When Cora responds to Norwood, she says, "Yes, sir, she's goin' directly. I's gettin' her ready now, packin' up an' all. 'Course, she wants to tell you goodbye 'fore she leaves." Cora's response is filled with incomplete words, like "gettin" instead of "getting." The overall effect is one of heavily accented speech, which many audience members would have recognized as stereotypically African American. This type of speech indicates the lack of education of most African Americans—especially those who worked on plantations. Because of this lack of education, many African Americans picked up English by listening to others instead of being taught. As a result, their accented speech often

contained many grammatical errors. For example, in another line of Cora's dialogue, when she is talking to Norwood about Robert's trip into town, she says, "Said he were lookin' for some tubes or somethin'nother by de mornin' mail for de radio he's been riggin' up out in de shed." In this sentence, Cora incorrectly says "were" instead of the grammatically correct "was." She also combines several words, "something or other," into the made-up word, "somethin'nother." These types of deviations from standard English helped to enforce the division between African Americans and whites.

For this reason, Robert becomes a threat to the status quo. Since he has been educated, he talks like a white man does, in clear, grammatically correct English. Robert says in his first lines in the play, "Hello ma! Your daughter got off, and I've come back to keep you company in the parlor! Bring out the cookies and lemonade. *Mr.* Norwood's here." By his correct speech and confident actions, Robert tries to act like a white man. However, since he has an African American mother, Robert, like other mulattoes, is expected to act like he is African American. When Norwood asks Robert to talk to him, he says, "Now, I'm going to let you talk to me, but I want you to talk right." As the resulting dialogue indicates, Norwood is expecting Robert to speak like the other African Americans do. However, Robert refuses, saying, "Oh! But I'm not a nigger, Mr. Norwood, I'm your son."

Foreshadowing

Several clues in the story foreshadow or predict, Robert's murder of Norwood and Robert's own suicide. Throughout the play the other characters, both African American and white talk about the bitter end that Robert will come to if he keeps on trying to act like a white man. From the very beginning, Robert's behavior is associated with his death. When Norwood hears from Sam that Robert has been using the front door of the Big House like a white man, Norwood says, "Let me catch him and I'll break his young neck for him." When Higgins comes to visit Norwood, he tells him about Robert's behavior at the post office, and warns Norwood that Robert might have problems in town in the future. Higgins says, "It might not be safe for him around there—today, nor no other time.'" Cora notes the impending danger to Robert, when she is talking to William. Cora says, "Colonel Tom has to take him in hand, or these white folks'll kill him around here." In addition to the characters' expectations about Robert's death, Hughes gives the audience other clues, such as Cora's prophetic dream. Cora says to William, "I had a bad dream last night, too, and I looked out and seed de moon all red with blood." These clues, as well as the introduction of props like Norwood's pistol all increasingly indicate the murder of Norwood and Robert's resulting suicide.

Historical Context

The Great Depression

The setting notes for the play say that it takes place in the present time, but it takes a little digging to figure out what Hughes means by present time. Although the play was not published until the 1960s, it was first performed in 1935, written in 1930, and copyrighted in 1932. Because of this, Hughes most likely means for the play to take place sometime in the early 1930s. This was a volatile time in America, which was undergoing the devastating financial crisis known as the Great Depression. When the stock market crashed in 1929, the mainly African American population assumed that this was a white problem since African Americans did not typically own stocks. In fact, Norwood alludes to the Great Depression in the play when talking about buying a new car. Norwood says, "Been thinking about getting a new one myself, but money's been kinder tight this year, and conditions are none too good yet either. Reckon that's why everybody's so restless." However, as it turned out, African Americans, especially those in the cities, were some of the hardest hit since they typically worked in unskilled jobs—positions that were often cut by companies who were looking to tighten budgets and weather the financial storm. For these reasons, African Americans like those on Norwood's plantation felt grateful to have any kind of a job at all, even if it was working in the hated cotton fields that were a living symbol of their ancestors' slavery.

Racial Bigotry

Many southern whites during this time believed that blacks were racially inferior. Jim Crow laws varied from state to state in the south and had been created to enforce racial segregation in jobs, public schools, parks, restaurants, hotels, trains, and buses. Jim Crow laws were used for more than 60 years. The term "Jim Crow" came from a character frequently found in travelling minstrel shows that portrayed a derogatory image of blacks, thus the term became a racial slur that aided the views of white supremacy. Jim Crow laws gave sufficient support to punish lawbreakers, sometimes by lynching. From 1889-1930, more than 3,700 men and women were hanged in the United States, most of them southern blacks. To fight segregation in the 1930s, the NAACP began a campaign to challenge segregation through the legal system. This case eventually found its way to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 as the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education. Brown vs. Board of Education essentially overturned the principle of "separate but equal" and made it illegal for public schools to remain segregated.

Critical Overview

Mulatto received mixed criticism when it was first produced on Broadway in 1935. As James A. Emanuel notes in his entry on Hughes in *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online,* "*Mulatto* was widely reviewed. Most critics called it artless, interesting, or sincere." The diversity of criticism was due in part to the fact that the Broadway version of the play was radically different from what Hughes had written. The producer, Martin Jones, changed the play significantly from Hughes's written version. As Deborah Martinson notes in her 2000 entry on Hughes for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Jones "rewrote large parts of it, added a gratuitous rape scene, and emphasized sexual aspects to draw a Broadway audience.'" Unfortunately, while the play was extremely successful and set a record by running on Broadway for a year—at that time, longer than any other play that had been written by an African American—it did not do much for Hughes's image. Martinson says, "This production of *Mulatto* established Hughes's reputation as a successful but not a serious or particularly talented playwright."

In fact, since the play was not published in the version that Hughes intended until 1963, when Hughes published *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, much of this early criticism could be attributed to the changes introduced by Jones. However, even in the 1960s, critics had mixed comments about the play. For example, in his 1968 *CLA Journal* article, Darwin T. Turner notes that *Mulatto* "is an emotionally engaging drama," but says that it is "marred by melodrama, propaganda, and crudities common to inexperienced playwrights." Turner acknowledges that the play is powerful, but goes on to criticize Hughes at length for the play's inconsistencies.

Since the 1960s, *Mulatto* has found new respect in many critics' eyes. Martinson says that, "While the plot is melodramatic, as some critics complained, its wrenching themes are neither trite nor exaggerated." She also feels, as other critics do, that "Cora seems most tragic of all the characters, as her life—over which she has had little control—comes tumbling down on her because of societal insistence on racial division and hierarchies." In Arnold Rampersad's entry on Hughes for *African American Writers,* he notes the power of the play's message—the effects of the segregation in the American South. Rampersad says, "the denial of the humanity of blacks and their essential part in the nation" leads to "the disaster awaiting the republic as a result of that denial." For Rampersad, the death of both Norwood and Robert indicates that there are no winners in segregation, which will ultimately take the lives of both whites and African Americans. Modern-day critics, such as Catherine Daniels Hurst, in her entry on Hughes for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* also note the "obvious autobiographical elements" of *Mulatto*.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Hughes's message in Mulatto.

As many critics have noted, *Mulatto* is an extremely emotional play. The drama builds throughout the work, highlighting the race-driven conflicts that took place between African Americans and whites in the American South in the 1930s, and culminating in a tragic end. Ultimately, this highly charged drama has a purpose—to demonstrate that whites should accept African Americans as equals, since everybody loses in a race war.

All of the conflict in the play at first appears to be caused by Robert, who instigates many fights with Norwood. However, it is Norwood's genes and contradictory behavior which lead Robert to become who he is. Norwood is sympathetic to African Americans, and even seems to enjoy the exclusive relationship that he has with Cora. The Undertaker notes this at the end of the play, when he talks about the fact that Norwood, unlike Higgins or other white men, did not keep a harem of black women, "Just this one b—h far's I know, livin' with him damn near like a wife. Didn't even have much company out here." Cora's relationship with Norwood is unusual for the times because she sleeps in the plantation house with him, whereas other African American mistresses often had to live elsewhere. When Cora is young, and Norwood first expresses interest in her, Cora's mother tells her that she will not have to work much if she lives with Norwood. As Cora notes in one of her monologues at the end, "It all come true. Sam and Rufus and 'Vonia and Lucy did de waitin' on you, and me, and de washin' and de cleanin' and de cookin'."

Cora is so much like a white wife that Norwood even tells her his secrets. Cora remembers a time when a white mob hung a black man. She addresses the dead Norwood, saying "you sent yo' dogs out to hunt him. Then next day you killed all de dogs. You were kinder soft-hearted. Said you didn't like that kind o'sport." Although Norwood tries to act tough around his African American servants, he has a hard time dealing with the murder of any African American. In fact, when Robert angers him at the end of the first act, the stage notes indicate that Norwood opens a cabinet, "*takes out a pistol, and starts toward the front door. Suddenly he stops, trembling violently, puts the pistol down on the table, and sinks, ashen, into a big chair.*" When Norwood gets his gun, he is intending to chase Robert and kill him. However, he is unable to do it, most likely because of his feelings for Robert.

While Norwood has betrayed feelings for some of his African American servants, like Cora, he has an especially complex relationship with Robert. When Robert was little, as Cora notes, he was Norwood's "favorite little colored chile round here." However, when little Robert calls Norwood his father in front of some important white visitors, Norwood beats him and does not seem to like him anymore. However, as Cora notes, Norwood's shunning of Robert affects Norwood himself. Cora says, "He had your ways—and you beat him! After you beat that chile, then you died, Colonel Norwood. You died here in this house, and you been living dead a long time." Cora is saying that Robert is so much

like Norwood that, when Norwood denies him, he denies his own happiness. As Deborah Martinson notes in her entry on Hughes for *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* "His white privilege and his subsequent ambivalence toward blacks rob him of his pride in his mistress and his children. Thus, racism separates him also from sympathetic human interaction." Norwood is unable to accept the fact that Robert is his son in many ways. Cora says in one of her monologues to Norwood's corpse, "He was always yo' chile. Good-looking, and kind, and headstrong, and strange, and stubborn, and proud like you." In fact, despite himself, when Robert tells Norwood that he liked him until he beat him, Norwood betrays some emotion. Norwood says, "(*A little pleased*) So you did, heh?" Given the racial politics in the American South at the time, however, Norwood can never admit that he has feelings for Robert, or that Robert is too much like him. As a result, he sends Robert away as a child. Cora says, "That's why he sent him off to school so soon to stay, winter and summer, all these years."

But this backfires on Norwood, since Robert ends up getting more education than any of the other children. The play emphasizes the fact that many white Southerners viewed the education of African Americans in negative terms. Higgins says about Robert, "That's one yellow buck don't know his place, Tom, and it's your fault he don't—sending 'em off to be educated." Norwood gives many excuses as to why he has sent his mulatto children to school. He tries to pass it off as a favor to Cora, saying that he does not want her children to be as "dumb as the rest of these no-good darkies—need a dozen of 'em to chop one row of cotton, or to keep a house clean." However, as Robert notes, Norwood is not doing them any favors if he expects them to fulfill the stereotypical African American roles when they return from school. Robert says, "No, I'm not going to work in the field. What did he send me away to school for—just to come back here and be his servant, or work in his hills of cotton?" In fact, unknown to Norwood, a quiet revolution has been going on amongst his mulatto children. Cora says about Bertha, "She ain't workin' in no kitchen like de Colonel thinks. She's in a office typewriting. And Sallie's studyin' de typewriter, too, at de school, but yo' pappy don't know it."

So, even though Norwood thinks he has everything under control and knows what is going on, he does not realize that some of his mulatto children—and even Cora—are scheming behind his back in an attempt to achieve equality with whites. Robert has seen what this equality can look like since he has witnessed African Americans "in Atlanta, and Richmond, and Washington where the football team went—real colored people who don't have to take off their hats to white folks or let 'em go to bed with their sisters." As a result of being exposed to this more progressive culture through his education, Robert tries to get others to accept him in his hometown, starting with his father. William says to Cora as he is talking about how Robert tried to shake Norwood's hand, "Just like white folks! And de Colonel just turns his back and walks off. Can't blame him. He ain't used to such doings from colored folks." At this point, African Americans like William are too afraid to challenge white men like Norwood, or the status quo that keeps them in power. However, Robert is not afraid. Higgins says, "Comes in my store and if he ain't waited on as quick as the white folks are, he walks out and tells the clerk his money's good as a white man's any day." White men such as Higgins realize that people like Robert can be dangerous because they help inspire other

African Americans to want equality with whites. Norwood's failure to realize this has hurt his reputation and limited his opportunities for advancement in the white community. Higgins says, "You been too good to your darkies, Norwood. . . . Maybe that's the reason you didn't get that nomination for committeeman a few years back."

Through the act of killing his father, Robert realizes, once and for all, that whites ultimately do not have power over all African Americans. Robert says, "He didn't want *me* to live. Why didn't he shoot? (*Laughing*) He was the boss. Telling me what to do. Why didn't he shoot, then? He was the white man." Robert then realizes that he can steal his father's weapon, and use it against other whites, and he feels empowered by this. Robert says, "Niggers are living. He's dead. (*Picks up the pistol*) This is what he wanted to kill me with, but he's dead. I can use it now."

While Robert is getting ready to fight, most of the other African American characters are getting ready to flee. William comes to Cora frightened, and she tries to reassure him. "Ain't nothin' gonna hurt you. You never did fight nobody. Neither did I, till tonight. Tried to live right and not hurt a soul, white or colored." However, in the course of trying to reassure William, she realizes that, even though she has lived in peace and tried to do everything right by yielding to the wishes of whites, in the end it has gotten her nothing. Her children are posing as whites to earn a living, working like slaves, or being hunted down. She realizes that African Americans will only stay repressed for so long because, once they realize, as she is now, that submitting can get one nowhere, they may be more apt to fight, like Robert. Cora says, "White mens, and colored womens, and little bastard chilluns—that's de old way of de South—but it's ending now."

In fact, other African American characters start to realize that they can break out of their submissive lifestyles. For example, although Sam is terrified and panics at first when Robert kills Norwood, thinking that he is going to be punished, too, Sam eventually realizes that he is free to leave. Sam says, "I don't have to stay here tonight, does I? I done locked up de Colonel's library, and he can't be wantin' nothin.' . . . I's gwine on a way from here."

In the end, Hughes is not advocating that African Americans commit violent acts against whites, although it may appear at first that this is his message. Actually, he intends the opposite. He wants to show that, when it comes to racial conflicts, nobody wins. If whites try to repress African Americans, they will eventually rise up against whites, using their own weapons against them. As Robert's actions demonstrate, whites are not invincible, and can be killed just as easily as African Americans. In addition, since whites in this time period feel it is okay to sleep with white women, they are inadvertently producing a number of mulatto children. In the case of mulattos like Robert, white America could literally be creating the means of its own destruction. Like Robert, some of these children may share the characteristics of their white fathers. In Norwood's case, these qualities—including stubbornness and pride—ultimately lead to his own death at the hands of his son, after Norwood denies him.

Norwood's denial underscores the denial of African Americans and mulattos by most whites in this time. As a result, Hughes's play has wider implications. As Arnold

Rampersad notes in his entry on Hughes for *African American Writers,* the play uses a tragic drama to illustrate the tragic qualities of race relations, especially "in the segregated South, with its denial of the humanity of blacks and their essential part in the nation, and the disaster awaiting the republic as a result of that denial." The stage notes at the very end of the play, when the white mob breaks into the house and charges up the stairs after Robert, indicate Hughes's global view of racial conflict. "(*The roar of the mob fills the house, the whole night, the whole world.*)" Hughes is saying that both whites and African Americans had better be careful because racial conflicts will inevitably lead to violence and tragedy for both races.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on *Mulatto,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Dell'Amico is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, Dell'Amico explores Hughes's examination of race relations in the United States.

Langston Hughes, a major U.S. writer, came into prominence in the 1920s as a poet with exceptional gifts. He is still most well known as a poet although he published prolifically in numerous literary genres, including short fiction, children's fiction, literary criticism, and drama. *Mulatto*, one of many plays Hughes wrote during the 1930s, was first staged in 1935 and was well received by audiences who appreciated its trenchant treatment of race relations in the United States.

The term mulatto, which is no longer used in the United States, in the 1930s referred to a person of mixed African and European descent. It originated in the country as a term to describe mostly the children of Euro-American men and slave women, and gradually expanded in meaning to refer to all persons of mixed African-European descent. Mulatto characters appeared quite often in literary works in the pre-Civil Rights era for a number of reasons. On the one hand, as in *Mulatto*, the special problems of such persons were a concern. For example, if the mulatto is both white and black, with which ethnicity and culture should he or she identify? Given the strict separation of races at the time, it was difficult for such persons to identify as both. They felt therefore that they were forced to deny a part of themselves and consequently were often depicted as tragic figures, torn by conflicting allegiances and a general sense that they belonged nowhere-and a special term, the "tragic mulatto," was coined. Cora's children are the principal mulatto characters in Hughes's play.

On the other hand, mulatto characters allowed writers to explore a number of major contradictions in pre-Civil Rights U.S. culture. One of these contradictions was that, since many mulattos "passed" as white and succeeded in white society (severing ties to the black population usually with great guilt, however), they gave the lie to the racist belief that blacks-or anybody with so much as "one drop" of black blood, as racist thinkers said-was inferior. Further, insofar as the mulatto embodies so perfectly the intersection of white and black, he or she symbolizes U.S. culture: it is a culture whose distinction is the way in which it is an amalgam of the cultures of all of its diverse peoples. Yet, the dominant white culture in the U.S. pretended that African Americans and other ethnic minorities contributed little to U.S. culture.

Bert is a "tragic mulatto" in Hughes's play, a character driven mad by his conflicts, so mad that he ends up murdering his white father and ensuring his own demise. Further, through the relationships of Colonel Norwood and Cora, and Colonel Norwood and Bert, *Mulatto* dramatizes the tragedy of Southern culture in general at the time, which was the way that blacks and whites were drawn to each other only to be torn apart by the pernicious notion that Europeans must remain removed from their African counterparts. Hughes's play illuminates the complex workings and effects of a culture infected by racism. It lays bare the doubleness of such a society for African Americans, who would perform obedience and subservience in the presence of whites and in private express

themselves truly. It shows also how blacks might internalize racist tenets. Bert, it is clear, even as he defends his blackness and believes in racial equality, believes also that his whiteness somehow makes him better than other blacks. Further, Hughes explores the means and repurcussions of rebellion at the time in the rural South, showing how Cora rebels successfully because she does so undercover, how Colonel Norwood is taken to task for crossing the "color bar," and how Bert is told that in rebelling he is not only endangering his own life, but also the well-being of all other blacks in the surrounding community.

Cora and Colonel Norwood are the first characters to appear on stage in Hughes's play. The colonel calls for Cora, she responds to his call formally, "Yes, sir, Colonel Tom," and so the audience concludes that Cora is the colonel's housekeeper. Yet over the course of their conversation about Cora's child Sallie (who needs to be taken to the train station), the audience learns the complicated truth of the couple's relation. Sallie is the colonel's child also, as is Cora's son Bert who will drive Sallie to the station. The central revelation and first shock of the play are thus delivered. The colonel and Cora are akin to husband and wife; yet Cora must behave in public as if she were his employee, displaying submission, deference, and calling him "sir."

Hughes underscores the outrageousness of such an arrangement, as well as its demeaning and difficult nature for Cora and the children, as the problem of Sallie's luggage is discussed. The household servants have been removing Sallie's suitcases from the upper level of the house down a narrow back stairway and side exit. However, Sallie has a trunk that does not fit into the narrow stairway and so a servant asks if it can be taken down the main stairway and through the front door. The colonel is alarmed, instructing the servant to use the main steps but then to remove the trunk through the back door: "Don't let me catch you carrying any of Sallie's baggage out that front door here." Sallie lives within the colonel's main house, not in servant quarters, and so she is somehow different from an employee; yet in other ways the colonel treats his daughter as he treats his household servants. The colonel's daughter, the mulatto Sally, inhabits a border world, not quite white, not really black, and the colonel is conflicted. How much should he love his daughter and where does she belong in his life? What he does not do is publicly recognize her as his daughter. She does not have his name and her parentage remains an unspoken "secret" in the community.

The opening events of the play present Colonel Norwood as a hypocritical, conflicted, but fairly typical southern white with firm racist beliefs, a view that is confirmed when a new character, Higgins, is introduced. Higgins is an old friend of the colonel who comes visiting to report on Bert, who caused a scene at the town's post office that morning. Bert demanded a refund of postal charges since the goods arrived destroyed. The local whites view his assumption that he deserves fair treatment as presumption, the attitude of an African American rebelling against his lowly place in the scheme of things. Higgins blames Bert's pride on the colonel asserting that "You been too decent to your darkies, Norwood. That's what's the matter with you. And then the whole county suffers from a lot of impudent blacks who take lessons from your crowd.... Guess you know it. Maybe that's the reason you didn't get that nomination for committeeman a few years back." Higgins is pressuring the colonel, telling him that his crossing of the color bar is eroding

white power. He is attempting to draw the colonel more tightly into his fold of southern whites, who maintain the strictest of distance between the two populations.

Bert, if for different tactical reasons, is also taken to task for threatening the status quo, most often by his mother. We learn, for example, that Cora has been telling the colonel that the girls are learning the basics and cooking at school, but in fact they are becoming professionalized. Cora not only intends that her daughters will not be domestics, she also lies to the colonel as to what he is paying for in schooling the girls. Cora may feel some genuine fondness for the colonel, but she will never view him as a true friend, because she understands that their interests are fundamentally divergent. Thus, when she lectures Bert to curtail his openly rebelliousness acts, this is not because she feels he is wrong. Rather, she understands that the colonel, in reaction, would likely cease contributing to the children's education, including Bert's. Furthermore, she tells Bert that in acting the way he does he is inciting the colonel to crack down on his black employees generally:

> Hard as I's worked and begged and humbled maself to get de Colonel to keep you chilluns in school, you comes home wid yo' head full o' stubbornness and yo' mouth full o' sass for me an' de white folks an' ever'body. You know can't no colored boy here talk like you's been doin' to *no* white folks, let alone to de Colonel and that old devil of a Talbot. They ain't gonna stand fo' yo' sass a-tall. Not only you, but I 'spects we's all gwine to pay fo' it, ever colored soul on this place.

Cora understands, in short, that open rebellion at the time in the rural South endangers not only the well-being of the agitator, but others as well, and that Bert must learn, like she has, duplicity and caution.

Bert's story exemplifies the sufferings of mulattos and underscores the way in which racism not only demeans those who are discriminated against, but also those who discriminate, eroding their humanity. Hughes shows that the colonel has feeling for his son, as he is touched when Bert tells him how he used to "like" him, before he beat Bert for calling him "papa" in front of whites, an event which led to the colonel establishing a stricter distance between them. Hughes's stage notes say that the colonel is to respond as if "pleased" by Bert's confidence: "So you did, heh?" Yet, despite this and other evidence of the colonel's feelings for his son, he has every intention of denying them: "Nigger women don't know their fathers. You're a bastard." Bert tells his father to refer to his mother respectfully, but then also says: "Oh! But I'm not a nigger, Colonel Tom. I'm your son." Bert's calling of his father "Colonel Tom" shows his untenable, painful position, the way in which he must speak to his father as to a stranger and superior. He yearns to be publicly recognized and accepted by his father, viewed and embraced as his "son." He demands respect for himself and his mother, yet he finds it all too easy to say that he is not a "niggers," exhibiting a part of himself swayed by the notion that to be white is to be different in a superior way. This attitude contradicts his otherwise

egalitarian views, the way in which he declares that blacks and whites are and should be considered human equals: "I've learned something, seen people in Atlanta, and Richmond, and Washington where the football team went—real colored people who don't have to take off their hats to white folks . . ." Bert is confused and angrily rebellious, and the rural South is an unsafe place for the rebellious. If the offending person did not escape or find protection with the courts, they could become the target of white supremacist vigilantes, who taking the law into their own hands, hanged them. Higgins refers to four such hideous crimes: "They've broke [the jail doors] down and lynched four niggers to my memory since [the jail] been built." The conclusion of Hughes's play is forceful. Bert is definitively rejected by his father and in a fury of hurt and anger kills him. This act seals his fate. A group of whites organize to find him and lynch him, Bert knows what is in store for him, and he kills himself. Lengthy monologues delivered by Cora punctuate the final events of the play. They are a lyrical if tragic blending of past and present, fantasy and reality, hope and dream, a mixing of registers that points to Hughes's dream of reconciliation.

Source: Carol Dell'Amico, Critical Essay on *Mulatto,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Bienvenu examines the nuances of racial prejudice practiced by blacks against other blacks in Mulatto.

It is obvious that Langston Hughes's 1935 play *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South* concentrates on the unrelenting abuse that Southern blacks suffered at the hands of whites in the first part of the twentieth century. Continually, grotesque white characters come in and out of the play like ogres, ready to pounce upon nonwhite victims at the slightest provocation. But while such racist abuse is perhaps the most prominent feature of this story of racial mixing in the Deep South, it is certainly not the only concern to which Hughes calls attention. Like many writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes is also concerned with prejudice within the black race. Mulatto displays, as effectively as any Renaissance work, the peculiar situation of blacks' harboring prejudices against fellow blacks. In this essay, I will examine how intracaste prejudice, as harbored and projected by Robert Lewis, the tragic mulatto of the play, contributes significantly to his tragic experience.

Before beginning my argument, I must stress that I am not supposing that, if Bert Lewis had been free of white racist views concerning blacks, he would not have experienced the problems with his father and with other whites that eventually lead to his death. No person of color possessing talents such as Bert's would have gone unmonitored by whites in the area and era depicted in Mulatto. Bert is an intelligent, capable, insightful black man with leadership skills, and even if Bert were an Uncle Tom, he would have been a threat to all white racists who defend their notions of supremacy on an insecure belief in non-white inferiority. I must also stress that I am not exonerating the white racist characters—above all, Colonel Norwood—for their complicity in Bert's tragedy. After all, if the racist regime established and maintained by people similar to Colonel Norwood, Fred Higgins, and the various members of the mob had not existed, a promising youth of Bert's potential—not to mention his birthright—would likely have risen to the top of his society instead of being smashed to the bottom. In addition, it is clear that Colonel Norwood's brutal treatment of Bert as a racial inferior and his rejection of Bert as a son bring about the main conflicts that propel Bert toward destruction. What I wish to show in this essay is that Bert has shut himself off from the reciprocal support, advice, affection, and acceptance of the black community, and that such rejection of his black side in favor of a white side that will not accept him figures directly in his downfall and makes his "exorcism" at the hands of whites all the more tragic.

The first information that the reader gets about Robert Lewis occurs in the opening description of the characters, in which Hughes notes that the youngest mulatto son of Colonel Thomas Norwood and his black mistress Cord Lewis "resent[s] his blood and the circumstances of his birth." Hughes, interestingly enough, does not specify white or black blood here. Robert's "blood" would seem to include both black and white, and it is plausible that the mixing of the two strains is "the circumstance of his birth" that Robert most resents. While it might seem from this initial description that Robert hates both

bloodlines equally, the circumstances of the play reveal that he has a predisposition toward one side over the other.

Early exposition reveals that, since Bert's return to the Norwood plantation, he has reminded both blacks and whites of his white parentage. Fred Higgins, in a condemning manner, informs Colonel Norwood how Bert is doing this among the townspeople, and William Lewis tells Cora how his brother is doing it among the plantation blacks. After Cora inquires how her grandchild Billy has come to speak boldly about his white grandfather, William says, "Bert's the one been goin' all over de plantation since he come back from Atlanta remindin' folks right out we's Colonel Norwood's chilluns. . . He comes down to my shack tellin' Billy and Marybell they got a white man for grandpa." Furthermore, when Bert first appears in the play, he refers to himself as "Mister Norwood"—defying the fact that he is an illegitimate son of the Colonel—and starts recounting what he believes to be the benefits of his white paternity. Thus, the earliest reports of Bert's activity as well as the words that accompany his appearance show Bert's insistence on publicizing his white lineage—not his black ancestry—in the expectation that people will treat him deferentially because of it.

In addition to his futile attempts to stress his whiteness over his blackness, Bert sets himself up for further frustration by harboring contempt for both blacks and whites in the area. Among whites, it is ironically his father—the person on whom Bert has built his white identity—against whom Bert holds the deepest grievances. But Bert's rebellious contempt for Norwood is not surprising, since it results from almost a lifetime of abuse heaped upon Bert by a father who will not acknowledge the paternity of his mulatto offspring. More specifically, Bert's bitter feelings toward his father stem principally from two instances in which the Colonel had not treated Bert as a white son.

The first cause for Bert's filial bitterness was a traumatic childhood episode that not only altered his relationship with his father but also affected his entire outlook on the racial politics of the South. Cora and William discuss this critical turning point in Bert's life, an occurrence that took place long before the play begins:

Cora: [Bert] went runnin' up to Colonel Tom out in de horse stables when de Colonel was showin' off his horses—I 'members so well—to fine white company from town. Lawd, dat boy's always been foolish! He went runnin' up and grabbed a-holt de Colonel and yelled right in front o' de white folks' faces, "O, papa, Cora say de dinner's ready, papa!" Ain't never called him papa before, and I don't know where he got it from. And Colonel Tom knocked him right backwards under de horse's feet.
William: And when de company were gone, he beat that boy unmerciful.
Cora: I thought sho' he were gonna kill ma chile that day. And he were mad at me, too, for months. Said I was teaching you chilluns who they pappy were. Up

till then Bert had been his favorite little colored child
round here.
William: Sho' had.
Cora: But he never liked him no more. That's why he
sent him off to school so soon to stay, winter and
summer, all these years.
Colonel Norwood fails to "blacken" his son by
slapping any notion of whiteness out of the child just v as he fails to break any remaining filial bonds by
imposing academic exile on the youth.

Norwood remains powerless to change Bert's feelings of both kinship and whiteness because, prior to the episode in the stables, the Colonel himself had been the one who, through preferential treatment of his youngest son, had inadvertently encouraged such sentiments. (Core, after all, had not dared to stress to her children "who they pappy were.") Similar notions of whiteness and kinship to the Colonel had not surfaced among Norwood's other mulatto children precisely because they had grown up "in their place," enjoying none of the partialities lavished upon the Colonel's "favorite little colored child." Bert, on the other hand, the spit and image of Thomas Norwood, grew to recognize both his resemblance to his father and the special treatment that it elicited from the Colonel. By the time of the important white guests' visit to the stables, Bert felt secure enough to proclaim publicly his relationship to the most prominent white man in the area, while at the same time denying any ties to blacks—referring, for example, to his mother as Cora instead of Ma. That Norwood publicly rejected the relationship and replaced the preferential treatment with brutality at the very moment when Bert was most sure about his identity accounts for both the trauma engendered by the episode and the intense hurt and indignation Bert felt from then on.

For Bert, the scene at the horse stables was very much like the crisis experience that many mixed bloods of American fiction encounter upon realizing that they are not part of the white class to which they have previously thought they belonged. It is through Cora and William's retelling of the stables episode that the audience begins to sympathize with Bert's plight and to understand, in part, his obsession with being recognized as Norwood's true heir and, hence, as a white man. ordered by the ruling class to remove all notions of whiteness from his mind, after his white father has indirectly encouraged such notions, Bert still refuses to replace his self-concept of white scion with that of "yard rigger." This stance propels him into and feeds the unending conflict of his life. William rightly tells his mother, "Bert thinks he's a real white man hisself now." As will be seen in other passages, the more Bert is forced to remember his blackness, the more he insists upon his whiteness.

The second cause of Robert's filial belligerence is the type of work that his father has forced upon him since his return to the plantation after years of absence. Norwood himself recounts his degrading treatment of his intelligent, college-educated son, and offers his opinion of the youth in complaining to Cora about Bert's use of the Norwood car:

He's no more than any other black buck on this plantation—due to work like the rest of 'em. I don't take such a performance from nobody under me—driving off in the middle of the day to town, after I've told him to bend his back in that cotton. How's Talbot going to keep the rest of those darkies working right if that boy's allowed to set that kind of an example? Just because Bert's your son, and I've been damn fool enough to send him off to school for five or six years, he thinks he has a right to privileges, acting as if he owned this place since he's been back here this summer.

The fact that Norwood wishes to have Bert treated in the same fashion as the lowliest field hand, and not even as a house or yard servant, is made more clear as Norwood continues:

There's no nigger-child of mine, yours, ours—no darkie—going to disobey me. I put him in that field to work, and he'll stay on this plantation till I get ready to let him go. I'll tell Talbot to use the whip on him, too, if he needs it If it hadn't been that he's yours, he'd-a had a taste of it the other day.

The indignation that Bert must be feeling under the harsh treatment that Norwood himself describes evokes a sympathetic response from the audience. For even if the Colonel does refuse to recognize Bert as a son, his blatant lack of good judgment in assigning an educated and highly capable "servant" to do the work of an unskilled laborer is foolish, if not unpardonable. Norwood's action probably would have been viewed even by his landowning peers as a waste of potential, since Bert's abilities could have been channeled into more profitable service. It would not have been out of the question—and it might even have been deemed appropriate— to have a black of Bert's caliber (not to mention his relationship to the owner) in a supervisory position on the plantation.

Nonetheless, Cora and William implicitly condone Norwood's disciplining of Bert, however unjust and / or unwise, following the youth's return to the plantation. Cora, for example, observes that

De Colonel say he's gonna make Bert stay here now and work on this plantation like de rest of his riggers. He's gonna show him what color he is. Like that time when he beat him for callin' him "papa." He say he's "wine to teach him his place and make de boy know where he belongs. Seems like me or you can't show him. Colonel Tom has to take him in hand, or these

white folks'll kill him around here and then—
oh, My God!

Because Cora views Norwood's intervention as necessary for Bert's protection, she can accept the Colonel's manner of discipline. Above all, she and William believe that Norwood's actions will be more effective than theirs in saving Bert's life, for Cora and William realize that they cannot bring Bert to the fundamental realization that surviving as a black person in their part of Georgia means living within the confinements imposed by white society. The two have repeatedly reminded Bert of this reality, but in vain. Rather than see Bert die at the hands of a white mob for refusing to follow the racial codes of the area, Cora and William would prefer to have him under the protective, if punitive, discipline of the most powerful white man in their locale. Furthermore, recognizing that Bert considers himself better than any other black in the area and, hence, that he will not listen to their advice, Cora and William view the tight reins that the Colonel attempts to impose on Bert as the only means of insuring the youth's continued existence. To their way of thinking, if Colonel Norwood can "break" Bert and put him "in his place," then perhaps Bert will be with them a little longer. They, like Norwood, fail to see that Bert cannot function in or tolerate a system that denies his rights and capabilities and that confines him to a position that he considers beneath his dignity.

While it could be argued that Bert's indignation arises over the injustice of his particular work assignment as well as the injustices of the entire Southern labor system, Bert's feelings seem more clearly to be governed by the racial preferences on which he has based his identity. As Bert tells his mother of the labor his father has imposed on him, "He thinks I ought to be out there in the sun working, with Talbot standing over me like I belonged in the chain gang. Well, he's got another thought coming! (Stubbornly) I'm a Norwood—not a field-hand rigger." While Bert's reaction to the work is, in large part, justifiable, considering his intelligence and education, the intense indignation that he feels springs from something deeper than the injustices done to his capabilities. He is in no way sensitive to the indignation that other blacks must feel in being relegated to certain types of demeaning labor and barred from more rewarding forms of work. Bert is enraged over the summer assignment above all because it places him in the role of what he considers to be the lowest of all blacks—the field hand. This reduction in status is especially cloying since Bert not only considers himself not black but a Norwood heir. Bert goes on to assert that he is not going to do the work assigned to him, work which he views as being as much beneath his capabilities and his training as it is beneath his (white) race and his (assumed) name. Thus, Bert's protest is framed in terms of pride and self-interest, not universal human rights.

After Colonel Norwood recounts his treatment of Bert, the attention shifts to Bert's sister Sallie. Contrary to what Darwin T. Turner claims, the scene with Sallie is not a distracting digression from the action of the play; Sallie serves as a direct foil for Bert both in her character and in the better treatment she receives from Norwood. The Colonel allows Sallie to return to school after she has worked and resided in the "big house" during the summer, whereas Bert is prevented from returning to school and

forced to live in a shack in the quarters. Sallie has even had servants such as Sam at her beck and call while on vacation, whereas Bert is ordered to "bend his back" in the field. When Norwood observes Sam carrying out Sallie's luggage, he remarks, "Huh! Darkies waiting on darkies! I can't get service in my own house. Very well." Norwood's comments regarding his half-white daughter's privileges indicate resentment over the situation in his household, yet he allows the privileges to continue. Such preferential treatment of Sallie contrasts markedly with the abuse he heaps upon Robert, especially considering the fact that Bert was once Norwood's favorite.

The discrepancies between Norwood's treatment of Sallie and Bert are the direct result of each child's behavior; and that behavior, likewise, is a direct result of how the mulatto offspring views his or her whiteness and blackness. Sallie treats her peculiar situation diplomatically. Above all, she does nothing to rile her father, and that improves her chances of getting what she wants from him. Sallie's farewell words to Norwood indicate an astuteness that some might easily mistake for servile self-effacement:

I just wanted to tell you goodbye, Colonel Norwood, and thank you for letting me go back to school another year, and for letting me work here in the house all summer where mama is. (Norwood says nothing. The girl continues in a strained: voice as if making a speech.) . . . You been mighty nice to your—I mean to us colored children, letting my sister and me go off to school. The principal says I'm doing pretty well and next year I can go to Normal and learn to be a teacher. (Raising her eyes) You reckon I can, Colonel Tom?

It is evident from this passage that Sallie knows that placating the man whom she cannot openly recognize as her father and assuming the role of a meek black servant around him and his ilk are the best means of getting what she wants from him and from the white world in general. And she gets it.

After Norwood offers a few lines that indicate that he has not been paying attention to Sallie, she continues, ". . . I want to live down here with mama. I want to teach school in that there empty school house by the Cross Roads what hasn't had a teacher for five years." Apparent in this passage is the fact that Sallie, though perhaps the whitest of Norwood's offspring, does not deny her blackness. Rather, she openly acknowledges it—above all, by revealing her ambition to return to the area after graduation to teach black children who have been denied an education for years. Instead of scorning ignorant blacks, as Robert has done after receiving his education, Sallie wants to better herself in order to help the less fortunate members of her race. If the price to be paid for that opportunity is kowtowing at times to whites, the goal for Sallie is worth the seeming, yet actually disingenuous, self-effacement. As William tells his black mother about his sister, "Sallie takes after you, I reckon. She's a smart little crittur, ma."

"A smart little crittur" like her mother, Sallie has fooled the white world in the same way that Cora has. By disingenuously remaining "in their place," Cora and Sallie have milked the white overlord for all that they can. Though the two might be referred to officially as the Norwood maids, neither undertakes many of the tasks of domestics. Rather, Cora and Sallie have domestics in their service and enjoy many of the luxuries that a white wife and a white daughter of a rich planter would. As long as they disguise their privileges under seeming servility to Norwood, as long as they forego the use of the front door and do not proclaim their true relationship to the Colonel (Core calls him "Tom," but only in private), the benefits to be reaped from the white authority are innumerable. In the end, these advantages are invested in the future of the black community. Even though Sallie enjoys the white luxuries that other blacks do not have, she will return to the black community to teach black youth the skills necessary for getting ahead in American society.

On the other hand, Bert—like his white father, headstrong, stubborn, and as blind as he is proud—does not have the insight or the inclination to use covert means to secure benefits from the white world. This is not surprising, since everything Bert desires is overt: From whites he wants to be recognized as more white than black, and from his father he seeks public recognition as a legitimate heir. obsessed with these futile goals, Bert cannot direct his energies toward efforts that would prove more beneficial to himself and to other blacks. Nor can he content himself with the advantages to be sapped by the cleverly clandestine manipulation that some blacks have learned to exert upon their white bosses. on the surface, Bert's cause might seem more honorable and sincere than Sallie's or Cora's, since what Bert openly demands is honesty from his father and equality with others of white parentage. But at its base, Bert's campaign is egocentric and inconsiderate (to state it mildly) of blacks. Bert argues for better treatment for himself—not better treatment for all blacks—on the grounds that he is part-white. Furthermore, as a Norwood, he considers himself better than most full-blooded whites. However honest he may be in expressing what he wants, Bert is not working for the good of others. The same cannot be said for Sallie and Cora, however sly they may seem to be in procuring what they desire.

Bert's obsessive sensitivity to being discriminated against in any fashion leads him into militant behavior that would not be accepted even from a white youth. When Fred Higgins comes to visit Norwood, Higgins complains that Bert nearly ran his car off the road and that Bert left a trail of dust in his wake, a lack of courtesy and respect that any older person might report to the parent of a child committing such an offense. Furthermore, Higgins discloses that Bert had been bickering with a postal worker over a policy of not providing refunds on money orders, a policy that probably would not have been breached even for a white customer. To make matters worse, Bert's reckless driving in town poses a threat to both black and white lives. Higgins adds that Bert

> comes in my store and if he ain't waited on as
> quick as the white folks are, he walks out and tells the clerk his
> money's as good as a white man's any day. Said last
> week standing out on my store front that he wasn't all
> nigger no how; said his name was Norwood—not

> Lewis, like the rest of his family—and part of your plantation here would be his when you passed out—and all that kind of stuff, boasting to the walleyed coons listening to him.

Even when filtered through Higgins's racist language, it is apparent that Bert's belligerence stems from the fact that he wants to be treated the same as a white man not because he feels that all blacks should be treated equally with whites but because he is part-white himself. Also implied in Higgins's paraphrasing is Bert's sense that he is different from his non-white relatives and more affiliated with Norwood than they are. They may be Lewises, but he is a Norwood. That Bert haughtily considers himself apart not only from other blacks but even from members of his own family is further revealed when he and Cora discuss his upcoming meeting with the Colonel:

> Robert: Maybe he wants to see me in the library, then.
> Cora: You know he don't 'low no colored folks in there 'mongst his books and things 'cept Sam. Some o' his white friends goes in there, but none o' us.
> Robert: Maybe he wants to see me in there, though.

It is a curious elitism derived from an awareness of his paternity, his resemblance to his father, and his individuality that causes Bert to expect as his lot more than might be due him even if he were a full-blooded white man.

Hence, when Cora reminds Bert that his sister Bertha is passing for white up North, he responds bitterly—not from any disapproval of what Bertha is doing but from the fact that she has surpassed him on the color and social scales. His uncharacteristically terse response, "I know it," indicates embarrassment: He, the true heir of Colonel Thomas Norwood, has not been able to achieve what a female Lewis has; he is too yellow to pass for white, too rusty at the elbows, as Norwood will remind him in their climactic confrontation.

Bert's hyper-elitist stance and his hypersensitivity to any racial prejudice directed toward him also blind him to the rather exceptional privileges that he has been granted—no matter how enmeshed with racial inequality and parental rejection or abuse these privileges may be. The Colonel tells Bert in a last-ditch (albeit stern and patronizing) attempt to end the conflict between them,

> . . . to Cora's young ones I give all the chances any colored folks ever had in these parts. More'n many a white child's had. . . Sent you to college. Would have kept on, would have sent you back today, but I don't intend to pay for no darky, or white boy either if I had one, that acts the way you've been acting. (emphasis added)

Implied in the Colonel's last statement is an explanation of his previous disciplining of Bert through the summer work assignment—an explanation that might be lost on the audience if not highlighted for discussion. Norwood has treated Bert in a harsh manner over the summer as much for the latter's filial disrespect as for his disregard of other people. Norwood's discipline has also been intended as a chastisement aimed at calming Bert down, at making him realize what he has been offered, and at stopping him from striving after what he cannot attain. While Norwood is far from admirable in both his role of father and that of plantation owner, he has given Bert more advantages and more leeway than many other white men would give the mulattos or even the white children they have fathered.

It is also interesting to note that Norwood, despite his harsh treatment of Bert, has still cut the youth some slack. For example, early in the play Norwood warns that he will let Talbot use the whip on Bert if he needs it, but Bert has long been behaving in a way that Talbot would have returned with violence had it not been for the Colonel's intervention. Norwood's Freudian slip accounts for why he has been postponing Talbot's punishing Bert: Bert is a "rigger-child of mine, yours, ours," Norwood tells Cora. However much Norwood may refuse to acknowledge this fact outwardly, it is still an operating factor in his treatment of Bert. It may even account for Bert's "exile" having been academic rather than overtly punitive. Equally operant is the affection for Cora that Norwood cannot suppress.

In his final argument with Bert, the Colonel reveals perhaps the most remarkable privilege that someone of his racist bent could extend to Bert:

> I don't usually talk about what I'm going to do with anybody on this place. It's my habit to tell people what to do, not discuss it with 'em. But I want to know what's the matter with you—whether you're crazy or not. In that case, you'll have to be locked up. And if you aren't, you'll have to change your ways a damn sight or it won't be safe for you here, and you know it—venting your impudence on white women, parking the car in front of my door, driving like mad through the Junction, and going, everywhere, just as you please. Now, I'm going to let you talk to me, but I want you to talk right.

Even though the Colonel belittles Bert in this invitation to dialogue, he is interested in learning why Bert is behaving in a way that the Colonel cannot understand. In addition, one cannot help noticing some parental concern on Norwood's part when he says that, if Bert does not change his ways, "it won't be safe for [him] here." Perhaps Norwood's eventual banishment of Bert is intended as much as a protection of the mulatto son as a removal of an ugly problem. Unfortunately, Norwood's telling Bert to "talk like a nigger should to a white man" does not facilitate communication; and the pride of both father

and son breaks off dialogue, refuses compromise, and results only in continued conflicts for Bert with Norwood, with the whites of the area, and even with the local blacks.

Bert's prejudice against what he considers the lowest type of black is clearly seen in William's account of what Bert has been telling the Norwood plantation hands:

> . . . you can't talk to him. I tried to tell him something
> the other day, but he just laughed at me, and said we's
> all just scared riggers on this plantation. Says he ain't
> no rigger, no how. He's a Norwood. He's half-white,
> and he's gonna act like it.

It is William above all who receives the brunt of Bert's prejudicial criticism. After William chides Robert for using the front door of the Norwood mansion (mainly because of the repercussions William fears such "impudence" might visit upon his family and the other Norwood blacks), Robert, whose natural speech approximates standard white, mimics his brother and inflicts a racial slur: "Yes, like de white folks. What's a front door for, you rabbit-hearted coon?" It is evident in this passage that Bert detests his brother's behavioral resemblance to "Uncle Tom" blacks. That William, the darkest of Norwood's mulatto children, is not ashamed of the complacent lifestyle that he has adopted by choice is made clear when he retorts, "Rabbit-hearted coon's better'n a dead coon any day." Bert continues to defend himself, reminding William that they themselves are "only half-coons." Then the younger brother reveals what is at the center of his difficulties: ". . . I'm gonna act like my white half, not my black half." Clearly, Bert believes that any step toward self-improvement and strength is characteristic of whites and that self-denigration and cowardice are the lot of blacks, who are by nature Uncle Tomish—although Bert makes a major exception in the case of his mother. For Bert, proof of such correlations is to be found in looking at the skin and behavior of himself and his darker brother.

There can be no doubt as to Bert's grievances against his blackness and his wishing to disaffiliate himself from blacks. Even when he says, a few lines later, "I might stay here awhile and teach some o' you darkies to think like men . . . ," he is speaking as would a white man who considers himself superior to his black listeners. That Bert is thus condescending toward his elder brother—and even to his mother, who is also listening—implies a rejection of them. Bert continues to blast his family's conformity:

> You can do it if you want to, but I'm ashamed of you.
> I've been away from here six years. (Boasting) I've
> learned something, seen people in Atlanta, and Richmond,
> and Washington where the football team went—
> real colored people who don't have to take off their
> hats to white folks or let 'em go to bed with their
> sisters . . . Back here in these woods maybe Sam and
> Livonia and you and mama and everybody's got their
> places fixed for 'em, but not me. (Seriously) Nobody's

gonna fix a place for me. I'm old man Norwood's son.
Nobody fixed a place for him. (Playfully again) Look
at me. I'm a 'fay boy. (Pretends to shake his hair back)
See these gray eyes? I got the right to everything
everybody else has. (Punching his brother in the
belly) Don't talk to me, old slavery-time Uncle Tom.

Although Bert speaks about "real colored people" in this passage, he seems to bring them into the argument for the benefit of his mother and William, whom he considers far more "colored" than himself. What prompts Bert into demanding better treatment for himself is, again, not a belief in equality for all but indignation over the fact that he, the son of the most prominent white landowner in the area, an "[o]fay boy" with gray eyes, is treated like what he considers a common black. As in his other loud demands for better treatment for himself, Bert here voices, more than anything else, his feelings of superiority—a superiority that he bases on his independence, his education, his travels, and, above all, his paternal ancestry and resemblance to whites.

Bert's dislike of William arises from Bert's seeing in his brother too little of what he deems white and too much of what he detests in rural Southern blacks. In addition, Bert mocks the town blacks and reveals his scorn of them, just as he has mocked and scorned his brother. When he tells his mother about his encounter with the whites at the Junction that morning, he points out, pejoratively:

'Bout a dozen colored guys standing around, too, and
not one of 'em would help me—the dumb jiggaboos!
They been telling me ever since I been here, (Imitating
darky talk) "You can't argue wid whut folks,
man. You better stay out o' this Junction. You must
ain't got no sense, nigger! You's a fool."

Bert's scorn for the locals is further revealed as he tells his mother, "Besides you, there ain't nobody in this country but a lot of evil white folks and cowardly niggers." obviously, one of Bert's main grievances against the local blacks is that they are not "real colored people," like the blacks he has seen in Atlanta, Richmond, and Washington—or even like his mother. But, again, Bert seems to distinguish between blacks here chiefly for his mother's benefit. At the same time, he fails to realize that the local blacks refuse to band with him as much out of protest against his outrageous behavior as from fear of white retaliation. He asserts, in a typical refrain, that he is "half-white" and "no nigger," and implies again that since he is the son of the richest white man in the county he is superior not only to blacks but also to most whites in the area. Elitism remains at the core of Bert's scorn, his indignation, and his insistence on better treatment for himself.

Bert's most vehement denial of blackness and his loudest acknowledgment that he is obsessed with being recognized as Norwood's son occur during his penultimate conflict

with his father. Bert and Norwood quickly become heated over Bert's twofold insistence on recognition when they encounter each other in the hallway of the big house:

Robert: . . . I'm not a nigger, Colonel Tom. I'm
your son.
Norwood: (Testily) You're Cora's boy.
Robert: Women don't have children by themselves.
Norwood: Nigger women don't know the fathers.
You're a bastard.
(Robert clenches his fist . . .)
Robert: I've heard that before. I've heard it from
Negroes, and I've heard it from white folks. Now I
hear it from you. (Slowly) You're talking about
my mother.
Norwood: I'm talking about Cora, yes. Her children
are bastards.
Robert: (Quickly) And you're their father.

Perhaps what is most distressing to Bert in this exchange is that for the first time he hears his father denying his children's paternity, something Norwood had not done vocally even when he had beaten Bert at the stables. But now the Colonel brutally echoes what blacks and whites have been telling Bert all along: that he is just a black bastard who cannot claim with any certainty who his father is. These words coming from Norwood's mouth are especially damaging to Bert, since he knows that he is unquestionably the Colonel's son and since he even considers himself legitimate because of Cora's fidelity to Norwood.

As his outrage continues to be fueled by Norwood's taunting denials, Bert proceeds desperately:

Robert: How come I look like you, if you're not
my father?
Norwood: Don't shout at me, boy. I can hear you.
(Half-smiling) How come your skin is yellow and
your elbows rusty? How come they threw you out of
the post office today for talking to a white woman?
How come you're the crazy young buck you are?

Norwood now uses the stereotypes associated with mulattos to push Bert back into the "nigger night" (an image for the black world Hughes uses in his poem "Mulatto" and to disaffiliate the youth from the white world. Bert has what the white-racist views as the unquestionable physical markings of African ancestry—yellow skin and rusty elbows—that linger long after miscegenation has occurred. Norwood also views the youth as having the mental disorders some believe to result from the mixing of black and white blood.

Bert, incensed by his father's stereotypic dismissal of mulattos and indignant over being thrown in with blacks of the lowest status, asserts that Norwood "had no right to raise that cane today when I was standing at the door of this house where you live, while I have to sleep in a shack down the road with the field hands. (Slowly) But my mother sleeps with you."

Norwood: You don't like it?
Robert: No, I don't like it.
Norwood: What can you do about it?
Robert: (After a pause) I'd like to kill all the white men in the world.
Norwood: (Starting) Niggers like you are hung to trees.
Robert: I'm not a nigger.
Norwood: You don't like your own race? (Robert is silent.) Yet you don't like white folks either?

At the same time that he is asserting his whiteness most vehemently, Robert is forced to view as never before his denial of his blackness. Norwood's accusations of Bert's denial of blackness—no matter how full of ludicrous stereotypes these accusations may be—halt Bert as much as Bert's boast of killing all the white men in the world startles Norwood. (A boast, it should be noted, that occurs only after Bert is rejected summarily by the white father on whom he has built his white identity.) Instead of listening to Bert, on whom Norwood feels he has squandered many an indulgence that even white children could not expect from their fathers, Norwood links Bert to what whites consider the worst of blacks—the savage brutes, the would—be murderers, rapists, and insurrectionists that are hung from trees. As is evidenced by Bert's momentary silence, Norwood's remarks—as familiarly devastating as they are racist—drive an important message home: Bert cares for neither white nor black, nor anyone other than himself.

It is noteworthy that Robert ends up killing the person who gets him to recognize his prejudiced and self-supremacist stance. The last thing Bert tells his father before he starts choking the white man is that "I'm not your servant. You're not going to tell me what to do. You're not going to have Talbot run me off the place like a field hand you don't want to use any more." Similarly, Bert will, later in the play, not let the white mob murder him as they would a detested or scapegoat black. Insisting on being his father's son, Bert follows his father in death. Having killed Norwood with his own hands, Bert will end his own life as well.

In a fleeting moment of truth immediately after killing his father, Bert finally owns up to his blackness—and to the repercussions of being black in Georgia. But it is too late for such realizations to save his life:

Robert: (Wildly) Why didn't he shoot, mama? He didn't want me to live. Why didn't he shoot? (Laughing) He was the boss. Telling me what to do. Why didn't he shoot, then? He was the white man.

Cora: (Falling on the body) Colonel Tom! Colonel Tom! Tom! Tom! (Gazes across the corpse at her son) He's yo' father, Bert.
Robert: He's dead. The white man's dead. My father's dead. (Laughing) I'm living.
Cora: Tom! Tom! Tom!
Robert: Niggers are living. He's dead. (Picks up the pistol) This is what he wanted to kill me with, but he's dead. I can use it now. Use it on all the white men in the world, because they'll be coming looking for me now.

Bert, in killing his white father, obviously feels that he has killed his own whiteness; for much of his identity as a white man has been tied up with being Colonel Norwood's son. As Arthur P. Davis notes, "We sense that[,] with the death of the Colonel, the bottom has really dropped out of Bert's world." For the first time, Bert refers to his father and to himself as racial opposites. The white man, a phrase Bert uses repeatedly here to refer to his dead father, implies a distancing of his father from himself that Bert has heretofore not allowed. At the same time, in saying, "I'm living," followed by "niggers are living," Bert equates himself with blacks in a way he has not done previously. The equation, at this point, can bring with it only a recognition of doleful consequences. Bert knows that what awaits him, as the non-white killer of a white man, is a gruesome death at the hands of an angry white mob—an abuse that the white world reserves for those it considers the most contemptible of blacks. Unfortunately, Bert's awareness of all the ramifications associated with being black in Georgia, as well as his identification with blackness, comes too late to do him any good. Rather than suffer the inescapable disgraces—torture, mutilation, hanging, burning—at the hands of whites, Bert kills what he has just recognized as his black self.

If any doubt remains as to which parental line Hughes depicts his tragic mulatto as preferring before the latter's admission of his blackness, one need only go to Hughes's 1927 poem "Mulatto," in which the only words that the audience knows for sure that the title character speaks are: "I am your son, white man!" It is equally clear that the mulatto is trying to convince his white half-siblings of his kinship to them, for they tell him,

Naw, you ain't my brother
Niggers ain't my brother.
Not ever.
Niggers ain't my brother.

Full-blooded white half-siblings are absent from the play Mulatto, but Colonel Norwood is all too similar to the white father of the poem, who tells his mulatto son, "You are my son! / Like hell!." The father, or the half-siblings, or probably both then try to push the mulatto son back into the dark world of the "nigger night": "Git on back there in the night, / You ain't white." But the mulatto son is like one of the "yellow stars" against the

"Southern night," a similarity Hughes emphasizes by the way in which he places both son and stars in contrast to darkness in the poem:

A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A little yellow
Bastard boy.
and
The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.

The yellow child does not fit into the black world, just as the yellow stars are separate entities from the Southern or "nigger" night. Undoubtedly, such imagery further illustrates that Hughes is stressing in both poem and play that his mulatto figure is one who seeks whiteness over blackness and that this futile, lifelong attempt is what makes Hughes's mulatto tragic, at least in these two works.

Arnold Rampersad notes that Hughes himself referred to Mulatto as an example of Afro-American defeatist literature. Clearly, Bert does not come to the resolution that the mulatto narrator of Hughes's famous poem "Cross" does. Alive when the poem ends, the speaker of "Cross" forgives his white father in the first stanza and his black mother in the second; then, in the third and final stanza, he acknowledges with detached resignation that he himself is "neither white nor black" and does not know where his bloodline will lead him, on the other hand, Robert Lewis of the play Mulatto dies. Bitter to the end, "resenting his blood and the circumstances of his birth," he hates his white father for not accepting him as a white son and rejects all that the race of his black mother has to offer. Bert has been forced to live in the shack but insists on dying in the big house. He must kill himself for the latter to happen.

Source: Germain J. Bienvenu, "Intracaste Prejudice in Langston Hughes's *Mulatto,*" in *African American Review,* Vol. 26, No. 2, Summer 1992, pp. 341-52.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Barksdale explores the many differences surrounding Hughes's and Sheldon's plays, despite their common theme of miscegenation.

On 4 December 1909, at Broadway's New Theatre, the curtain went up on a new three-act play written by Edward Sheldon. Although it bore the somewhat inflammatory title *The Nigger* and dealt with the intriguingly controversial topic of racial miscegenation, the play was apparently well received by the playgoing public—so well received, indeed, that it was published in book form by Macmillan in 1910, with a reprinted edition following in 1915. In 1909 Broadway enjoyed a lively season, and the competition was vigorous and stimulating. *The Nigger's* big competition was *The Fortune Hunter* starring that scintillating star of the stage (and later the screen), John Barrymore. As far as race relations in America were concerned, 1909 was also an interesting year. For this was the year that a group of concerned white northern liberals—Oswald Garrison Villard, Joel Spingarn, and Mary Ovington White—met to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Joining them in this enterprise was the young black scholar, William E. B. Du Bois, whose Niagara Movement in 1905 and 1906 became a model for the NAACP. The NAACP's founders were motivated to organize their association because of the ever-increasing turbulence in race relations throughout the nation. They were particularly concerned about preventing further race riots like those in Brownsville, Texas, in 1906 and in Springfield, Illinois, in 1908. So Sheldon's play's title blended with the racial climate of the times and evidently reflected white America's interest in this aspect of black-white relations.

Almost twenty-six years later, on 24 October 1935, Langston Hughes's *Mulatto* opened at Broadway's Vanderbilt Theater. Like Sheldon's play, Hughes's two-act play dealt with the theme of miscegenation and enjoyed a relatively long Broadway run (270 performances) and then successfully toured the nation for eight months. This was considered to be a fairly remarkable achievement for a play in the middle of the depression. However, *Mulatto*'s publication history was quite different from that of *The Nigger.* Hughes's play was not published in English until 1963, twenty-eight years after its first Broadway run. Ironically, during this time, the play was translated into three foreign languages—Italian, Japanese, and Spanish—and play proved popular in Italy, Japan, and Argentina. But there was no American publication of *Mulatto* until Webster Smalley's *Five Plays by Langston Hughes* was published by Indiana University Press in 1963.

Between 1909 and 1935, some conditions and circumstances in America had changed and some had remained agonizingly constant. America's racial climate had changed little. Blacks in the South were still voteless, powerless, and legally segregated; and blacks in the North lived, in the main, in poverty-stricken ghettos. In other words, although by 1935 Booker T. Washington had been dead for twenty years, the conditions about which he had prophesied blacks and whites could be as separate "as the fingers on the hand" still existed. One interesting item of evidence attesting to this state of affairs was that, in 1935, Hughes was not given complimentary orchestra seats to

attend the opening of his play at the Vanderbilt because the theater management had "reservations" about seating blacks in the orchestra section.

Some things had changed. In New York City proper, blacks no longer lived in the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill areas in mid-Manhattan where they were to be found in 1909. After the infamous Tenderloin District riot in 1902, they had begun moving over into Brooklyn and then, after World War I, they had moved in great numbers into Harlem. By 1935 this area of Manhattan housed over 360,000 blacks and had become the most populous black metropolis in the world. In the early 1920s it had been a heavenly refuge, but by 1935 the refuge was rapidly becoming a ghetto. Another interesting change of circumstances occurred on Broadway. In 1909 there were no black playwrights on Broadway, whereas in 1935 at least one enjoyed a somewhat tenuous status on the Great White Way. Hughes's status is termed "tenuous" because the production and staging of *Mulatto* proved to be a traumatic and discouraging experience for him. Indeed, the story of how *Mulatto* found its way to Broadway is evidence of the bizarre nature of a black playwright's lot in the 1930s.

According to Faith Berry, Hughes, just prior to his departure for the Soviet Union in June 1931, gave Blanche Knopf a manuscript copy of *Mulatto*. At that time the author had no idea that four years would elapse before he could return to New York City and inquire about his manuscript. He returned to the States in the summer of 1933, but he came back to California via Vladivostock, Shanghai, and Tokyo. In California, Hughes stayed with friends in Carmel in order to complete his first volume of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*. From Carmel, he traveled to Reno, Nevada and thence, in December 1934, to Mexico to assist in settling the estate of his father who had died in November 1934. Unfortunately, once in Mexico Hughes found himself stranded; his wealthy father had left him nothing, and he found himself without funds to return to the States. So he stayed in Mexico with friends until May 1935. Even then, he did not return to New York to inquire about the *Mulatto* manuscript. Instead, he accepted an invitation from his friend Arna Bontemps to visit with the Bontemps family in Los Angeles in the summer of 1935. As a consequence, Hughes did not return to New York City until late September 1935.

To his amazement, he found upon his return that *Mulatto* was not only in rehearsal but was scheduled for an October 1935 opening. He also discovered something else. When he attended his first rehearsal, he found that Martin Jones, *Mulatto*'s producer, had drastically revised the brief two-act plot. For instance, where Hughes had Sallie, Cora's illegitimate mulatto daughter, leave to attend a northern college early in act 1, Jones, in order to retain a sex-*cum*-violence emphasis, canceled Sallie's departure in act 1 so that she could be raped in act 2 to climax the racial violence at the end of the play. As a consequence, Hughes's emphasis on the tragic consequences of miscegenation was somewhat diluted in the acted version of *Mulatto*. For there is no doubt that Hughes had intended to probe the psychological impact of miscegenation in his play just as he had done in his poetry (*"Cross," "Mulatto"*) and in his short story, *"Father and Son."* In other words, his emphasis had consistently been on the vitiating aftereffects of miscegenation and its accompanying evil, black concubinage. The South's penchant for racial violence was certainly an important area of concern, but Hughes was primarily interested in the

emotional stress and psychological insecurities of children born of forced interracial liaisons. In his view, they developed identity problems which, in turn, adversely affected their social behavior and their personal self-esteem.

Ironically, the changes introduced by Martin Jones in Hughes's play script to gratify the tastes of Broadway playgoers reflect, in some respects, the story line of Sheldon's *The Nigger.* That play, too, has an interracial rape scene and an off-the-set lynching. It also has an overly romantic love plot. The major difference, among several to be noted later, is that *The Nigger* is a tawdry melodrama with a happy ending; *Mulatto* is a tautly written drama with an unhappy ending.

A difference of less significance is that in Sheldon's play the social and moral collapse of the Old Plantation South is writ large. This is in contrast to Hughes's pointed analysis of a small unit of that South.

At this point, one can almost hear violins sobbing beautifully in the background. But Sheldon is not through; and, after a few moments of well maneuvered suspense, he serves up, at the play's end, his melodramatic pièce de résistance. The crowd has gathered before the Capitol Building, and Phil goes out to announce to all and sundry that he is a "nigger." But the cheering crowd and the band's playing of the national anthem drown out his words. In vain, he raises his hands for silence, but "the band crashes through the national anthem and the roar of voices still rises from below" as the curtain falls.

So Sheldon's *The Nigger* suggests two truths about miscegenation. The first is that miscegenation could be borne and accepted especially if the race-mixing had occurred during slavery time—a time when the superordinate white male master held full sway over his black female slaves to use and abuse as he wished. The second truth suggested is that there always existed the possibility that white men of high position and status could have "tainted" blood as a result of a grandfather's sexual *mésalliance.* Undoubtedly, a play with these implications in 1909 reflected a Northern liberal bias and could not have been presented in Charleston or Richmond or Atlanta.

As has been suggested above, Hughes's *Mulatto* differs from Sheldon's play in many respects. It is shorter, has a more restricted focus, and is much more concerned with the psychological consequences of miscegenation from the black perspective and not with the sociological consequences from the white perspective. Moreover, *Mulatto* is much more than a "sociopolitical statement," as Webster Smalley-suggests. The father-son conflict is intense throughout; in fact, the miscegenation theme is almost lost when Robert Lewis, the black illegitimate son, in a scene of Oedipal fury slays his white father, Colonel Norwood. At this point, race seems to be of little concern. Rather, the emphasis is on an aborted filial love and a callous and inhumane rejection of the offer of that love.

So Hughes's play castigates a system that turned father against son, son against father, and made a mockery of the family as a unit. Slavery left blacks, once they were freed, poor, fearful, and illiterate; but, in Hughes's view, slavery's worst heritage was the psychological damage done to the mulatto boy or mulatto girl whose mother, like Cora

in *Mulatto*, was forced to be her master's concubine. Hughes could have explored the full dimensions of concubinage in slavery, had he written a third act in which Sallie, Cora's daughter by Colonel Norwood, would also have been forced to become her own father's concubine. Had Hughes devoloped his plot in this direction, his play would have revealed how incest was the most sordid aspect of the sexual victimization and depravity inherent in American slavery. But even without any mention of incestuos concubinage, Hughes's play does stress the fact that white men often felt constrained by custom and tradition from recognizing their mulatto children.

It is also appropriate in this context to state that Hughes's emphasis on the father-son conflict in *Mulatto* strongly suggests his own conflict with his father. The son of parents who divorced when he was a boy, Hughes had a harried childhood living with his poverty-ridden mother. When he went to live with his father in Toluca, Mexico, following his graduation from high school in Cleveland, Ohio, he found that he and his father were not compatible. According to the author's own report in his 1940 biography, *The Big Sea,* his father had become a hard-driving, profit-seeking businessman who had no patience with his poetry-writing son and no sympathy for the plight of his fellow blacks in the States. Thus, when the young Hughes, in compliance with his father's wishes, left Toluca to enroll, with considerable reluctance, as a first-year engineering student at Columbia University, the father-son relationship was tense and embittered. And when the year at Columbia proved to be an academic disaster, Hughes eventually got a job on an Africa-bound freighter and never saw nor corresponded with his father again.

Another difference between Sheldon's *The Nigger* and *Mulatto* is that Hughes's play places considerable emphasis on the psychological dilemma of Cora, Colonel Norwood's concubine and the mother of his three mulatto children—William, Robert, and Sallie Lewis. The longtime partner of the Colonels bed but never the wife of his bosom, Cora is torn between her mother's love for her self-assertive and aggressive son Robert and her respect for the Colonel who is angered by his bastard son's attitude and life-style. In the Colonel's eyes, Robert does not behave the way a black bastard should behave; where he should have been obsequious and humble, Robert is aggressive and demanding. In fact, he demands the recognition that he is a Norwood who can walk into the Norwood front door and do anything that a white man can. Caught in a cross-fire of anger between father and son, Cora tries unsuccessfully to serve as peacemaker. Then, when the actual physical struggle takes place between Norwood and Robert and the son strangles the father, Cora's first thought is to help her son escape the lynch mob that she is sure will be formed to track her son down. Scene 1, act 2, closes with Cora's highly emotional soliloquy in which she converses with the Colonel's corpse:

Don't you come to my bed no mo'. I calls for you to
help me now, and you just lays there. I calls for you to
wake up, and you just lays there. Whenever you called
me, in de night, I woke up. When you called for me to
love, I always reached out ma arms fo you. I borned
you five chilluns and now one of 'em is out yonder in
de dark runnin' from yo people. Our youngest boy out
yonder in de dark runnin'. (*Accusingly*) He's runnin'

from you too. You said he warn't your'n—he's just Cora's little yellow bastard. But he *is* your'n, Colonel Tom. (*Sadly*) And he's runnin' from you. You are out yonder in de dark, (*Points toward the door*) runnin' our chile, with de hounds and de gun in yo' hand . . . I been sleepin' with you too long, Colonel Tom, not to know that this ain't you layin' down there with yo' eyes shut on de flo'. You can't fool me . . . Colonel Thomas Norwood, runnin' my boy through de fields in de dark, runnin' ma po' lil' helpless Bert through de fields in de dark to lynch him . . . Damn you, Colonel Norwood! Damn you, Thomas Norwood! God damn you!

As the play draws to a close and the sounds of the lynch mob pursuing her Bert grow louder, Cora, in another long soliloquy, bitterly recalls how her concubinage with the Colonel began: "Colonel Thomas Norwood! . . . Thirty years ago, you put yo' hands on me to feel my breasts, and you say, 'Yo' a pretty little piece of flesh, ain't you? Black and sweet, ain't you?' An' I lif' up my face, an you pull me to you, an we laid down under the trees that night, an' I wonders if yo' wife'll know when you goes back up da road into de big house . . . An' ah loved you in de dark, down thuh under dat tree by de gate, afraid of you and proud of you, feelin' yo gray eyes lookin' at me in de dark." And at one point, she observes: "White mens, and colored womens, and lil' bastard chilluns—tha's de ol' way of de South—but it's ending now."

Mulatto ends when Robert takes his own life rather than be taken by the lynch mob. The last person on the stage is Cora. She stands quietly and does not move or flinch when Talbot, the white overseer, vents his frustration by slapping her. Her personal slavery as a white man's concubine has come to an end, and *Mulatto*'s message also seems to be that no black person is truly free as long as one black woman is kept as a white man's concubine.

Obviously, Hughes's 1935 statement on miscegenation is far more psychologically penetrating and direct than Sheldon's 1909 statement. The principal cause for this difference is not that the intervening twenty-four years bred a greater awareness in the body politic of the social and psychological implications of miscegenation and black concubinage. Rather, the difference in approaches stems from the fact that Hughes's view is a racially interior view and Sheldon's is the racially exterior view commonly held by Northern liberals in appraising Southern mores and racial practices. Indeed, Sheldon, in the end, presents miscegenation as just another regional foible bespeaking the legendary moral turpitude of the sinful South. Hughes, on the other hand, had, like many of his fellow blacks, some experiential proximity to the problem. His father, like Colonel Norwood, had abandoned him for selfish and appetitive reasons. Moreover, Hughes had had a much-revered great uncle, John Mercer Langston, who, like many other black race leaders of the nineteenth century (P.B.S. Pinchback, Francis and Archibald Grimke, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, William Wells Brown, and others) had a slave-master father (Ralph Quarles, a wealthy planter from Louisa

County, Virginia). One can therefore conclude that because Hughes, in his own life and career, had been close to the problem, his play has an emotional tautness and psychological intensity Jacking in *The Nigger.* Sheldon had aesthetic distance from his subject, but this very fact robbed his play of the emotional intensity that differentiates good drama from melodramatic entertainment.

Source: Richard K. Barksdale, "Miscegenation on Broadway: Hughes's *Mulatto* and Edward Sheldon's *The Nigger,*" in *Critical Essays on Langston Hughes,* edited by Edward J. Mullen, G. K. Hall and Co., 1986, pp. 191-99.

Topics for Further Study

Research the social acceptance of mulattoes in the United States today. How have perceptions towards interracial relationships changed since the 1930s? How have they stayed the same?

Research the Civil Rights movement and plot its major events on a timeline, offering a description for each event.

Pick a famous mulatto from any point in history. Write a short biography about this person paying particular attention to how this person was received by their society.

Research the psychology and sociology of racism and discuss the different ways that people develop racial attitudes. Try to find at least three major causes for racism.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: America experiences the Great Depression, a huge financial tragedy that many attribute to the recent stock market crash. During the Depression, the unemployment rate rises.

Today: America experiences a recession, a financial tragedy that many attribute to the massive drop in stock prices in recent years. Although the government tries to take steps to improve the economy, such as lowering federal interest rates, unemployment remains high and consumer confidence—one indicator of the health of the economy—remains low.

1930s: Although the Civil War of the 1860s has been over for more than six decades, racist attitudes still remain in many areas of the United States, most notably the American South. This is especially true in rural areas, where whites often punish unruly African Americans with lynch mobs and other forms of small-town, vigilante justice. African Americans often have little recourse against actions like these.

Today: Although the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s has been over for more than three decades, racist attitudes still remain in the United States. Southern Congressman Trent Lott grabs national headlines after he makes racist comments. In the aftermath of this highly publicized event, the African American community is in an uproar, and Lott ultimately resigns his seat as the Republican majority leader in the United States Senate.

1930s: America and other Allied nations prepare for World War II. Hitler is viewed as a fascist dictator who must be removed from power if there is to be world peace.

Today: America and some of its allies engage in war with Iraq, who they believe is hiding weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein, Iraq's leader, is singled out as a dictator who must be removed from power if there is to be peace.

What Do I Read Next?

(Harold) Athol Fugard, a white South African who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s, attempted to resist the racism that other white South Africans practiced at this time. However, at one time, Fugard forced his black servants to call him Master Harold and spit in the face of one servant whom he regarded as a close friend. Fugard, who later become one of South Africa's most vocal writers against the racial segregation known as apartheid, recalled this less-than-proud incident in his life in his play *"Master Harold" . . . and the Boys* (1982).

Some scholars believe that *Mulatto* was based on one of Hughes's short stories entitled "Father and Son." However, the story, which describes a conflict a mulatto son faces with his white father, did not appear until 1934, when *The Ways of White Folks* was published—after Hughes wrote *Mulatto.* The story serves as a good comparison to *Mulatto* since Hughes is developing a similar theme.

In *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1996), James McBride explores the identity crisis that many mulatto children face because of their mixed heritage. Unlike in *Mulatto,* the white parent in *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother,* McBride's mother, accepts the mulatto child, battling racism, poverty, and other factors to do so.

Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) details the problems that Chinese American women face when trying to reconcile both their Chinese and American heritages. Set in San Francisco in the 1980s, the majority of the book is told in flash-backs and is organized into sixteen separate tales that explore what it is like to be Chinese American. All of the stories are narrated by either a Chinese-born mother or her American-born daughter.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), a classic novel about the challenges faced by African Americans, concerns the story of Bigger Thomas, a young African American man in 1930s Chicago. The racism and poverty that he experiences leads to his unintentional murder of a white woman. After this act, Thomas finds that he has very few options left.

Further Study

Aptheker, Herbert, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States,* Vol. 3, *From the NAACP to the New Deal,* Carol Publishing Group, 1993.

Unlike many other volumes of African American history, Aptheker's historical study, originally published in 1973, relies on original documents, including essays, reports, speeches, letters, and news articles, from people who lived during this time period. Collectively, the book offers a good picture of what life was like for African Americans from 1910 to 1932.

Berzon, Judith R., *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction,* New York University Press, 1979.

This book examines the various mulatto characters that American authors have introduced into their fiction. The author explores the dilemma that many of these characters faced in trying to reconcile their mixed heritage.

Earle, Jonathan, *The Routledge Atlas of African American History,* Routledge, 2000.

This book chronicles the four centuries of African American history and culture in the United States, from the arrival of the first African slaves in the early 1600s to the present day. The book contains short essays on several topics, each of which is illustrated with a variety of photographs, charts, graphs, maps, and other illustrations. The book also features a chronology of African history from 3200 B.C. through the late 1990s.

Rampersad, Arnold, *The Life of Langston Hughes,* Vol. 1, *1902-1941, I, Too, Sing America,* Oxford University Press, 1988.

Rampersad offers a critical biography of the first part of Hughes's life, which contains the author's formative experiences. Of particular note is the effect that the rejection of Hughes by his father had on his life and writing.

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BOOKRAGS

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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

Research
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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:

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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