Mule Bone Study Guide

Mule Bone by Zora Neale Hurston

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Introduction

Mule Bone was written in 1930. It was a joint collaboration between noted African-American authors Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, who joined forces to write a play based on a folktale, "The Bone of Contention," that Hurston had discovered in her anthropological studies. Both writers conceived the play as representative of authentic black comedy. Shortly after the play's creation, however, Hurston copyrighted the play in her name only. The two authors had a falling out and did not speak to one another again. A legal battle ensued and, because of those legal issues, the play could not be produced during either writer's lifetime.

Mule Bone remained locked away. Few people read the play and it was largely forgotten until critic and historian Henry Louis Gates discovered the play in the early-1980s. *Mule Bone* was not performed on stage until 1991.

In many ways, *Mule Bone* has the ability to evoke both discussion and controversy. Hurston and Hughes felt that by incorporating a black folktale and southern black vernacular English into their play, they could refute a racist tradition of black characters as ignorant. However, when the play was finally developed for the stage more than sixty years later, there were concerns that this comedy might, instead, recall stereotypes and bring back the very issues that the authors had hoped to refute. It was thought that the play, as viewed by a audience in the 1990s, might appear to cast blacks as backward or ignorant. The director sought to mitigate that problem by including a section of Hurston's writings that explained her views on black vernacular English. Each writer brought separate talents to the writing of *Mule Bone*. Hughes was primarily a poet; Hurston was an essayist and novelist. Their quarrel ended what might have been a successful collaboration. As it stands today, *Mule Bone* is still considered a significant work of drama and is notable as an early work of African-American theatre.

Author Biography

Zora Neale Hurston was born January 7, 1891, in Eatonville Florida. She was forced to leave school at age thirteen so that she could care for her brother's children. She was later able to return to school and eventually studied Anthropology at Barnard College and Columbia University. During this time, Hurston began publishing short stories. In 1927, together with Langston Hughes and other artists, she founded a literary magazine, *Fire!,* which was devoted to African-American culture. The magazine quickly folded, and after graduation, Hurston returned to Florida to complete research for her anthropological studies.

The information she gathered on Negro folklore became the basis for much of her writing. Hurston published her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* in 1934 and a collection of short stories, *Mules and Men,* in 1935. Her most famous work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* was published in 1937. By the 1940s, Hurston's career had begun to fail. Publishers, who thought that her recent work lacked the depth and insight of previous efforts, rejected her work. An autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road,* was published in 1942, and her last published novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee,* was published in 1948.

Hurston spent the last years of her life in Florida, where she worked variously as a cleaning woman, a librarian, a newspaper reporter, and a substitute teacher. She died penniless at the Saint Lucie County, Florida, Welfare Home January 28, 1960. Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave in the Fort Pierce segregated cemetery.

(James) Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902. Hughes' s parents separated shortly after his birth. His father eventually settled in Mexico, and his mother left him in the care of his maternal grandmother, who raised Hughes until her death in 1910. For the next four years, Hughes lived with family friends and relatives until he joined his mother and new stepfather in Ohio in 1914.

Having encountered racism at Columbia University, Hughes dropped out of college after his freshman year and began working a series of odd jobs. While working as a bus boy in a hotel in Washington D. C., Hughes placed three poems on poet Vachel Lindsay's dinner plate. The resulting attention eventually led Hughes to a critic who helped him publish his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues,* in 1926. Shortly after this publication, Hughes enrolled in Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where he continued writing.

Hughes' s first collection of short fiction, *The Ways of White Folks,* was published in 1934, and a series of sketches known as his "Simple Tales," which were about a black Everyman, were published in the *Chicago Defender*. The Simple Tales were very popular with black readers and were eventually published in a series of books. Hughes also began writing drama in the 1930s, but he always considered himself primarily a poet. Although his work sometimes received mixed reactions from blacks who were concerned that he emphasized lower-class life and presented an unfavorable image of his race, Hughes' s work was a critical success and he received many honors and

awards during his life, including a Guggenheim fellowship for creative work in 1935. Hughes died May 22, 1967, of congestive heart failure in New York City.

Plot Summary

Act I

Act I takes place in the area immediately in front of Joe Clarke's store. On this Saturday afternoon, a number of men are gathered on the porch talking, chewing sugar cane, whittling, or playing cards. There are children playing in the dirt in front of the store and women, who are shopping, are entering and leaving. The opening of this act introduces a number of minor characters who enter the stage for a few moments and then exit. Mrs. Roberts is the first to interrupt the group of men gossiping in front of the store. She is a huge woman whose role is to badger and whine her way into convincing Clarke to extend her more credit and more meat. After she leaves with her meat, the conversation turns to a mule bone that is brought into the store.

The audience learns that the bone is from a legendary mule. The mule is remembered as especially strong, stubborn, and even evil. Then the men began to speak of Daisy. This young woman is especially beautiful, but the discussion changes when two other young women enter the stage. Both of these women, Teets and Bootsie, used to date Jim and Dave. But both men are now enamored of Daisy instead.

In this manner, the audience learns that two young men, the best of friends since childhood, are now courting the same young woman. The audience also learns that Jim and Dave are not as close as they once were and that Daisy has come between them. Daisy enters briefly and is asked which man she prefers, but she declines to pick one. The men gathered on Clarke's porch continue gossiping, and a brief discussion about religion ensues. This establishes that there is some conflict in town between the Methodists and the Baptists. The audience also learns that there is no jail, and that the town marshal is really an errand boy for Clarke, who controls most elements of the town.

Eventually Jim and Dave enter. They have made some money playing and singing, and when Daisy appears and asks them to entertain, they do so. There is some jealous banter between the two men, but it is controlled until Jim notices Dave dancing in a corner with Daisy. Jim quits playing, and the two men begin to argue over the Daisy. Dave and Daisy enter the store to buy soda, and as they exit, Dave accidentally steps on Jim's foot. The two men begin to fight and Jim strikes Dave on the head with the mule bone, knocking him out. Clarke orders the marshal to arrest Jim and to lock him up in the barn.

Act II, scene 1

The action in this scene occurs on the street. Notice of the pending trial is being nailed to a tree. A number of women are gathered and begin talking. The audience learns from this conversation that Clarke is very antagonistic toward the Methodists, especially their

minister, Elder Simms. The women state that this is because Simms is the only one who will stand up to Clarke, who has had control over the town since he bought land and built the basis of the town.

When Clarke enters, the women question him about trying Jim. Clarke defends his actions as maintaining order. The entry of other town women results in a confrontation that is largely accusations about religious differences. Even the town children enter into the fray and begin quarreling. At the end of the scene, both Methodists and Baptists exit the stage to begin preparing for the trial.

Act II, scene 2

The trial is set in the Baptist church. This scene opens with a great deal of arguing that threatens to become violent. Two of the women need to be restrained. Clarke attempts to maintain order but has only minimal success. When he asks that all testifying witnesses move to the front of the church, almost everyone present rises to do so. When questioned, their response is that although they were not present when the incident occurred, they have a biblical right to testify. An additional problem presents itself when Daisy's mother refuses to allow her daughter's name to be spoken in court.

Finally the testimony begins with Marshal Lum, who admits he did not see anything. In fact, no one who is called upon wishes to testify against Jim. Finally, Dave is forced to tell what happened. When it begins to look like Jim might be found guilty, Elder Simms, the Methodist minister, begins a defense that centers on the bible, which fails to identify a mule bone as a weapon. Simms reasons that Jim cannot be guilty of assault, since he had no weapon (or at least none that is recognized in the Bible). Elder Childers, the Baptist minister, argues that an ass bone killed thousands according to the bible and that a mule is descended from an ass; therefore, since offspring are always more dangerous than their parents, the mule bone is a dangerous weapon. Clarke seizes on this latter argument, declaring Jim guilty and ordering that he be banished from town.

Act III

This act opens just outside town where Jim is preparing to leave. Daisy enters on her way into town to learn of the trial. She is clearly upset at the turn of events, since she claims to never have desired any animosity between Jim and Dave. Dave enters, and the two men begin bickering about Daisy. Daisy is asked to choose, and after Jim offers the most romantic pledge, she chooses him. But upon her insistence that he get a real job and quit playing his guitar, Jim hands her over to Dave. Daisy appears to accept this change easily enough, but then Dave insists that he□like Jim□does not want to work as a yardman or handyman, as Daisy wishes.

In the end, Dave would rather sing and dance than labor as Daisy's husband. Rejected, Daisy leaves the stage, Dave and Jim decide to continue their entertaining together, and both decide to return to town. Although Jim has been banished, it is clear that neither man fears Clarke or his authority.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Mule Bone is a three-act play by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston about the lives of Negroes in rural Florida in the 1930's. The play, which was written as a comedy, addresses the issues of love, romance and loyalty in an attempt to introduce Negro life to a broad audience.

As the play opens, many local men are gathered on the steps of Joe Clarke's general store on a Saturday afternoon, which is their ritual activity. Joe, who is the town's founder, also serves as Mayor. Sitting with Joe on this afternoon are Deacon Hambo, Deacon Goodwin, an old man named Matt Brazzle, Will Cody, Sykes Jones, Lum Boger, the town's marshal, Lige Mosely, Walter Thomas and Tony Taylor.

There are also many children playing in the area, as their mothers shop in the store. As the men talk and chew on sugar cane, a loud woman, named Mrs. Roberts, interrupts them. She has come to beg Joe Clarke for some meat for herself and her children, because her husband does not provide enough. Joe contends that Mrs. Roberts already owes too much on her bill at the store, but ultimately concedes and gives Mrs. Roberts some salt pork.

Mrs. Roberts leaves the store, still complaining about her plight. The men on the porch agree that they are pleased that she is married to someone other than themselves. A man named Joe Lindsay enters the scene carrying a rifle and a huge bone, which is from Matt Brazzle's mean-spirited mule that died last year. Joe has found the bone during a bird-shooting outing and brings it to the store for the men to see.

The men are soon interrupted by the arrival of two young women, named Teets and Bootsie, who like to dress up and parade around at Joe's store. The men agree that both young women are pretty, but neither is as good looking as Daisy Taylor. Daisy had gone up North to work for a white family for a while, but has returned to Florida and is especially interested in the affections of two local young men, Dave and Jim.

Daisy arrives at Joe's store to pick up a few things for her mother. The men on the porch ask her which man she prefers, Dave or Jim. Dave and Jim had been friends all their lives, until they both become interested in Daisy. Now, their friendship is tenuous. Daisy will not confirm a preference for one man over the other. Some of the men on the porch offer their affections, which are summarily declined.

As the evening progresses, the men alternately play games of cards and checkers. Their conversation turns to religious issues and the decided rift between the Baptists and the Methodists in the area. A growing group of children begins a game of Hen-and-chicks, until Joe chases them away, because their noise disturbs his concentration during the games.

Deacon Simms soon arrives at the store, and the men scramble to hide their cards and winnings. The men quickly turn the conversation to the problem of snakes in the area. Deacon Simms joins in on the conversation, adding that the snakes continually kill his chicks. He says that the problem will be solved, if people were to cut down some of the undergrowth in the area.

Deacon Simms seizes the opportunity to preach to the men on the porch and declares that in addition to cleaning up the area, the town also needs a jail. Deacon Simms has never ministered to a town with such lawlessness. Joe Clarke takes offense to the comments, as the town is his pride and joy, having personally fronted the money for the land and development years ago.

Joe and Deacon Simms continue their heated debate about the town, until Joe and Dave arrive fresh from singing and playing guitar at a club for white people in the area. The talk turns to the subject of Daisy Taylor, and the men want to know whether it will be Joe or Dave who will win her heart.

Before long, Daisy arrives once more at the store and comments that she heard Joe and Dave's music coming down the road. She says that she likes it. Both young men playfully spite each other in an attempt to garner Daisy's attention. Daisy encourages Jim to play the guitar. He willingly obliges, until he sees Dave dancing with Daisy. Jim accuses Dave of manipulating the situation, and Dave escorts Daisy into the store to pick out a treat.

Daisy and Dave emerge from the store, each with a bottle of red soda. Dave inadvertently steps on Jim's outstretched foot resting on one of the porch steps. Jim rises furiously to strike Dave, which splatters the red soda all over Dave's white shirt. The two men fight in the dirt, until Jim strikes Dave unconscious with the mule bone.

The noise from the crowd draws Joe Clarke from the store. After sizing up the situation, Jim orders Lum to arrest Jim for assault and battery. Lum takes Jim to a local barn, where he will be incarcerated until his trial on Monday.

Act 1 Analysis

The setting for the play is a town called Eatonville, Florida, in the 1930's. The population is never defined, but its rural setting. The fact that every person seems to know everyone else indicates that the town is a very small one. Adding to this assumption is the lack of any formal government or justice system, including a jail.

Historically, the town of Eatonville is the home of one of the authors, Zora Neale Hurston, as well as being one of the first all-Negro towns established in America after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Hurston chooses Eatonville for the play's setting, because it is a microcosm of Negro life in this time period. She wants to capture and share it with the purpose of educating the world about the culture and heritage of Negroes in America.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

As the scene begins, two women, named Sister Lucy Taylor and Sister Thomas, are discussing the notice of Jim's trial tacked to a big oak tree in town. Soon, more women join the scene. The conversation turns to the topic of the differing positions on Jim's guilt between the Methodists, led by Deacon Simms, and the Baptists, led by Reverend Childers and championed by Joe Clarke.

As the women discuss whether or not they will testify on Jim's behalf, Joe Clarke approaches, and the women challenge Joe's right to try Jim for a crime. Joe contends that his position as Mayor of the town entitles him to determine right from wrong. He is determined to do just that.

When Joe leaves to tend to the upcoming trial, the women remain and fight amongst each other over their religious beliefs. Eventually, even some of the local children join in the fracas. The time is near for the trial to begin, so the differing sides break apart and move toward the Baptist Church, where the proceedings will occur.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The authors introduce the theme of religion in this scene, as well as the irrational activity that ensues when religious beliefs are challenged. The imminent trial has become less an issue of right versus wrong, and more an issue of which religion is superior. The hysteria that results from the mob mentality about religion is an ironic twist implemented by the authors, as they fight frantically about religion, which has peace as its central belief.

The authors also use local color and dialect throughout the play to add to the authenticity of the characters. For example, when the women are discussing whether or not they can take time out of their day to testify for Jim, Sister Taylor says, "I done went an' crapped a mess of collard greens for supper. I better go put 'em on 'cause Lawd knows when we goin' to git outa there an' my husband is one of them dat's gointer eat don't keer what happen. I bet if judgment day was to happen tomorrow he'd speak I orter fix him a bucket to carry long."

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

This scene takes place in the Macedonia Baptist Church, where Joe Clarke presides over Jim's trial. The congregation is divided visibly between Methodists and Baptists. The tension over the religious issues heats up once more, and mayhem ensues. Joe's attempts at establishing order are thwarted by the barbs tossed about by Deacon Simms and Reverend Childers representing their respective affiliations.

Joe calls for a show of witnesses to the assault. Most of the congregation stands to testify, not because they had been present at the scene, but because their religious convictions spur them to do so.

When testimony finally begins, Daisy is named as the source of the argument between Jim and Dave. Daisy's mother vehemently protests the mention of her daughter, whom she has raised to be a lady. Each time someone begins to mention Daisy in the proceedings, her mother objects. Finally, the assault appears to have occurred over something irrelevant.

In fact, no one who comes forward is willing to testify against Jim, and it is up to Dave to tell his version of the events. Jim and Dave squabble in the courtroom about Daisy. Ultimately, Dave returns to his seat, and Jim resigns himself to his guilty fate.

Deacon Simms presents the belief that Jim is innocent, because everyone knows that a mule bone is not a weapon and legally. Jim cannot be tried for assault, if there is no weapon present. Deacon Simms contends that the incident was simply a spat between two old friends vying for the attention of one woman.

Reverend Childers contends that this is not a logical argument, because it is written in the Bible that the jawbone of an ass killed three thousand Philistines. It is common knowledge that a mule has ass parentage, and mules are even stronger than asses, making the mule bone a very potent weapon.

Deacon Simms objects to this line of thinking, but Joe Clarke rules in favor of Reverend Childers' position, finds Jim guilty, and banishes Jim from Eatonville for two years. Joe dismisses the court with the admonition to the congregation that they must leave church property, if they should decide to carry on their feuding.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

By this point in the play, the real crime has almost been forgotten in favor of the religious zeal exhibited by the opposing factions in the trial. Each side of the argument is willing to bring ridiculous claims proving that God is on their side, in not only the trial, but in life in general.

There is comic relief in the play, too. For example, when Reverend Childers tries to explain his view on the lethal qualities of a mule bone as a weapon, he says. "I say Jim Weston did have uh weepon in his hand when he 'ssaulted Dave. 'Cause y'all knows if de daddy is dangerous, den de son is dangerous too. An y'all knows dat de further back you gits on uh mule de more dangerous he gits an' if de jaw-bone slewed three thousand people, by de time you gits back tuh his hocks, it's pizen enough tuh kill then thousand. "Tain't no knives nor no razors ever kilt no three thousand people. Now, folkses, I ast y'all whut kin be mo' dangerous dan uh mule bone?"

The authors use the mule bone as a symbol of strife and stubbornness, both between Jim and Dave, and the warring Methodists and Baptists. Known for its obstinate behavior, the mule characterizes the willfulness of the opposing parties. The mule bone is the icon around which the opposites rally.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

It is sundown of the same day, and Jim is resting on a stretch of railroad track outside of town. The stress and strain of the past few days shows in Jim's demeanor, as he alternately looks toward the direction of the town from which he has been evicted, and the opposite direction where he must find a new place to live.

Jim is surprised by Daisy, who is headed to town to find out what has happened to Jim. Daisy tells Jim that she wanted to attend his trial, but that her employer would not let her off work. Daisy admits to Jim that she cares for him, and that she sincerely regrets the trouble that she has caused between Jim and Dave. Jim's mood lightens considerably when he understands that Daisy has romantic intentions toward him.

Before long, Dave appears. Jim accuses him of intending to walk to the house where Daisy works to spend time with her. Dave denies this speculation, and he and Jim begin to fight once more over Daisy's affections.

Jim and Dave begin to offer up outrageous claims of love to Daisy, and she ultimately chooses Jim as her love. Dave realizes that he is defeated in this issue but is reluctant to leave without Jim, because they have been musical partners for so long.

Daisy offers up the idea that it is time that Jim and Dave part company, so that Jim can find real employment such as the position of yardman available at the house where she works. Jim does not like the idea of being tied to a schedule and locked into the drudgery of everyday work, preferring to make his living by playing his guitar.

By this time, Dave realizes the restrictions that Daisy would place on a relationship with either he or Jim and declines any involvement with Daisy in favor of the free lifestyle he and Jim share as partners. Daisy loses both men and walks away, as Jim and Dave sadly watch her go.

Dave encourages Jim to return to town with him, regardless of the banishment, because Dave contends that the altercation had been between them, and no one in the town can tell them how to manage their lives. The long time friends head back toward town with Jim strumming the guitar, and Dave dancing along the way.

Act 3 Analysis

While the authors wanted to portray Negro life accurately, their intentions were also to write the play as a comedy. This includes the use of Negro dialect and euphemisms which, unfortunately, when read today, portray the Negro people in a negative, stereotypical way, making the intended play more of a parody of Negro life. Obviously, the authors did not want this negative perception associated with their play. It is

incumbent on the reader to remember the context and time period in which the play was written.

Characters

Mrs. Dilcie Anderson

A Methodist housewife who, although she was not present at the fight, insists she can testify, since she heard all about it from her husband.

Daisy Blunt

Daisy has just moved back to town. Since her return from up North, she has emerged as the object of most men's attention. She is a flirt who enjoys seeing the men compete for her attentions. She is a domestic servant who must work and so does not come to the trial. After the trial ends, she meets up with both Jim and Dave just out of town. First she chooses Jim and suggests they live with her employers. But when Jim declines her invitation to work as a yard man, she chooses Dave. However, Dave would rather sing and dance. In the end, she has neither man.

Marshal Lum Boger

Boger is the town Marshal. His primary duty as the play opens is to chase after the small children who play in front of Clarke's store. He is subject to Clarke's orders and behaves more like a servant than an officer of the law. Most people make fun of Lum.

Dave Carter

Dave is a singer and dancer, who, with Jim, makes a living entertaining people. He is in love with Daisy. He and Jim have been friends all their lives, long before they began quarreling over Daisy. When Dave and Jim fight, Dave gets the first punches but is then hit in the head by Jim, wielding a mule bone. Dave recovers, and after Jim is found guilty and told to leave town, he searches out his friend. Although Daisy initially chooses Jim, she changes her mind and wants Dave, if he will get a job. Dave misses Jim and their entertaining. He rejects Daisy's offer and chooses to reunite with Jim instead.

Elder Childers

Childers is a long-time resident of the town. He is the Baptist minister and is calm and confident, willing to assume responsibility. Childers counters Simms argument at the trial and points out that a mule is kin to an ass and thus an ass bone is a weapon according to the bible.

The Mrs. Reverend Childers

Mrs. Childers is the minister's wife. She is focused on details.

Joe Clarke

Clarke is both the mayor of the town and a storekeeper. He bought the land on which the town was built and has been mayor since its inception. When Jim hits Dave, Clarke orders him arrested and decides to try the case in the Baptist church of which he is a member. Clarke sets himself up as judge and declares Jim guilty. Clarke is disliked by the Methodists, who say that he is dishonest.

Although Clarke is the mayor and founder of the town, there is no point in the play where he is clearly in charge. He orders his wife and Lum around because they are dependent on him, but even the town ladies know Clarke can be pushed and manipulated, and no one is afraid of his authority. As an authority figure, Clarke is just a subject of ridicule.

Mrs. Mattie Clarke

Mattie is the shopkeeper's wife. Joe sends her back in to work every time she emerges from the store. While her husband socializes on the front porch and struts his authority, Mattie is responsible for the actual running of the business.

Ada Lewis

Ada is the town tramp, whose reputation for promiscuity embarrasses her mother.

Della Lewis

Della is Ada's mother. She is a Baptist and considered to be a poor housekeeper.

Willie Nixon

Nixon is one of the Methodist men.

sub Heading goes here

Bootsie is a flirtatious young woman and a friend of Teets. Before Daisy came to town, Bootsie was seeing Dave.

Elder Simms

Simms is the Methodist minister. He's only been in town three months and is in conflict with Clarke over how the town should be run. He is aggressive and ambitious. Simms argues in court that Jim's use of a mule bone to hit Dave does not make it an assault, since the bible says that a mule bone is not a weapon.

The Mrs. Reverend Simms

Mrs. Simms is a very large woman, the object of some jokes because of her size.

Daisy Taylor

See Daisy Blunt

Walter Thomas

Thomas is a village gossip who hangs out in front of Clarke's store.

Jim Weston

Jim plays guitar and with his friend Dave, the two make a living as entertainers. He is in love with Daisy and in competition with Dave for her attention. When a fight breaks out, Jim grabs a mule bone and strikes Dave with it, knocking him out. He is a Methodist, somewhat arrogant, and aggressive. Jim has more talent with words than Dave, and ultimately, he is able to sweet-talk Daisy into choosing him. However, after winning Daisy, Jim realizes he does not want a career as a yard cleanup man, as she suggests. He offers to give her back to Dave, but his friend also declines to work as a laborer. Like Dave, Jim realizes that there is greater value in his lifelong friendship with his partner than there is in romancing Daisy.

Themes

God and Religion

The conflict between the Methodists and the Baptists has divided the town into factions, with each side aligned with either Jim or Dave. That there is fundamentally little difference between sides is not apparent to either group. Both are Protestant and both believe in one God, and yet, each side is prepared to battle over which religion is superior. The argument and near-violent confrontation that opens Act II, scene 2, illustrates the ridiculous nature of the conflict.

Human Condition

Hurston and Hughes use black vernacular English to illustrate a type of black comedy. But the play's reliance on the common language of the people also reveals a great deal about the inhabitants of this small village. These people know one another intimately. They know each other's business and they feel free to comment upon their neighbor's private lives. Gossip is a big force in their lives. There is poverty, and Clarke carries most of the people in the accounts of his general store. Extending credit is expected among neighbors in this small town, but even though the people owe him money, they still feel free to rebel against his claims of authority. Their language is populated with shortcuts and abbreviations that all the inhabitants know. This common language also helps to establish a sense of community. They are poor and they argue about religion, but they also argue as a close family does.

Justice

Clarke establishes himself as mayor and authority for this small town. He appoints the marshal and then he controls how the marshal enforces the law. When someone needs to be imprisoned, it is to Clarke's barn that he is taken. The trial is set in the Baptist church, of which Clarke is a member. Clarke presides over the trial and he pronounces sentence. Clarke finds it difficult to maintain order at the trial, and when Jim returns to town and ignores his banishment, it becomes clear that justice in this small village is more a matter for ridicule than it is a governing force.

Language and Meaning

Hurston and Hughes' s decision to use black vernacular English illustrates the differences that exist in English. Most Americans define English according to the formal rules of grammar that are taught in primary and secondary education. But the language of this play is also the language of southern blacks. To the untrained ear, the villager's language may lack meaning or be difficult to understand. Such language may even be judged as ignorant or illiterate. In this way, people attach meaning to language. When it

does not fit the accustomed model, listeners may seek to dismiss language as illegitimate. Hurston and Hughes sought to prove that, though unconventional, southern black vernacular English does have a role in defining a group of people within a particular location and time.

Race

Race is less a theme of the play than it is an issue for the audience. Because of the play's use of back vernacular English, there is a chance that the audience will make assumptions about the characters. The biggest fear is that members of the audience will embrace stereotypes of rural blacks as ignorant, silly, or as objects of ridicule. Blacks have worked hard to dispel old stereotypes and there exists a possibility that an uneducated audience might too quickly forget the reality of black life and fall victim to racial stereotypes.

Sex

In a play that focuses on romance, sexuality would be expected to be a motivating force for a character's actions and words. Teets and Bootsie are former girlfriends of Jim and Dave, and both young men are now intent on pursuing Daisy. These serial relationships, though intermingled, appear devoid of sexual tension. Teets and Bootsie have gone on to other young men. There is much gossip about which young man Daisy will ultimately choose, but there is no question about possible impropriety. Another man, Cody, has married and yet, in the months since his marriage, no one has seen his wife. The villagers gossip about this, but no one makes jokes about newlyweds. It is clear that people are intensely interested in personal gossip, but no one gossips about intimate matters. Sex is present in romance and marriage, but it is not a subject for idle talk.

Success and Failure

Jim and Dave are successful entertainers. That they make a satisfactory living can be based on their happiness with their work and because both appear to have access to available cash. They both consider what they do a success. But according to Daisy, neither one is really "working." She defines employment success as a job that involves physical labor and a salary, such as the position of yardman that she suggests Jim might assume. She will not marry a man who is not a success□according to her definition of success. This definition limits her prospects, since neither Jim nor Dave wants to meet her requirements. However, at the conclusion of the play, while both men seem slightly regretful as Daisy walks away, they are also clearly happy with their choices. Thus, their lives are a success by most definitions.

Style

Audience

Authors usually write with an audience in mind. Hughes and Hurston intended Mule Bone as a vehicle to bring southern black comedy to a larger audience. The two authors saw it as a way to keep live black vernacular English and the rural folktales of southern blacks.

Character

The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. Characterization is the process of creating a life-like person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation.

Drama

A drama is often defined as any work designed to be presented on the stage. It consists of a story, of actors portraying characters, and of action. But historically, drama can also consist of tragedy, comedy, religious pageant, and spectacle. In modern usage, drama explores serious topics and themes but does not achieve the same level as tragedy.

Genre

Genres are a way of categorizing literature. Genre is a French term that means "kind" or "type." Genre can refer to both the category of literature such as tragedy, comedy, epic, poetry, or pastoral. It can also include modern forms of literature such as drama, novels, or short stories. This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, comedy, or romance. *Mule Bone* has elements of drama but is primarily considered a comedy.

Plot

This term refers to the pattern of events that take place in a play. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also sometimes be a series of episodes that are thematically linked together□as in the epic plays of Bertolt Brecht *(Mother Courage and Her Children)*. Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms;

themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus the plot of *Mule Bone* is the story of a fight and of the trial that ensues. But the themes are those of religious tolerance, friendship, and success.

Scene

Scenes are subdivisions of an act. A scene may change when all of the main characters either enter or exit the stage. But a change of scene may also indicate a change of time. In *Mule Bone,* Act II has two scenes. The scenes indicate two separate locations, a street and the interior of the Baptist church.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The locations for *Mule Bone* are all located in or near a small village. They include the front porch of Clarke's store, a street, the Baptist church, and the railroad tracks just outside town. The action occurs over a period of twenty-four hours.

Historical Context

In October of 1929, the American financial markets collapsed. By Christmas of 1929, the Great Depression had begun, and by the time *Mule Bone* was written two years later, the United States was solidly in the grip of a huge financial depression that affected almost everyone. The years after World War I had been prosperous for citizens of the United States. Employment was up, and the need for newly developed products had created a successful economy. For the first time, credit became an accepted way to buy durable goods. When people lacked enough money to buy something, they borrowed against future earnings. Demand for goods increased; jobs increased, and unemployment was down. When the market collapsed, jobs were cut, and there was no way to meet the demands of creditors. In a short time, the United States' economy collapsed. Banks closed and a lifetime of savings disappeared.

In the rural South, credit to buy automobiles or household goods never approached the levels it did in the larger cities to the North. Instead, credit was more often just as it appeared in *Mule Bone;* small country stores extended short lines of credit to steady customers. In a period when cash was often short, people's existence might be determined by the line of credit at a town grocery. This avenue for food was not available in many other American locations. Hunger was a serious problem. Many people lacked even the minimal food required to aintain nutrition. The United States' birthrate declined during the Depression because a lack of basic nourishment could not sustain life.

The hardships increased for blacks, many of whom had moved to northern cities from the rural South. Racism was never worse than it was during the Depression when jobs became scarce. Blacks were just more competition for already limited job opportunities. Blacks were not the only victims of discrimination in a shrinking job market, however. All racial minorities, such as Hispanics and Native Americans, found that jobs were reserved for white males. Even women, who had traditionally found work as domestics, discovered little opportunity for employment. To add to the already dismal picture, a severe drought in the southeastern United States created a dust bowl of once fertile farm land and added even more poverty and hunger to an already dismal picture.

Blacks had always been outsiders in the rural South, and little had really changed since the end of the Civil War. Although black men had joined the army and navy to fight overseas, they returned to the United States after World War I to find a life that was as segregated as it had been before the war. Blacks had been told that they were fighting for liberty and democracy, but they found little of either. Racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan reached a level of new strength in the years after the war, and lynchings and violence against blacks increased.

How serious this racism was became evident in the Scottsboro case when nine black youths were convicted of raping two white women on a freight train in Alabama. In a case that involved questionable evidence, a lack of defense representation, jury problems, and which resulted in multiple trials and appeals, the defendants were finally

all convicted and sent to jail, where they served a total of 130 years. Blacks not only had to combat the hunger and poverty of the Great Depression, they had to fight virulent racism just to survive.

Critical Overview

Although written in 1931, *Mule Bone* was not performed on stage until 1991. In those intervening sixty years the world changed a great deal. Where Hurston and Hughes had envisioned a need for authentic black theatre in 1931, playwrights like August Wilson *(The Piano Lesson),* Amiri Baraka *(Dutchman),* and Alice Childress *(The Wedding Band)* had stepped in to fill the void. Black theatre had moved from minstrel shows to dramas that reflect the black experience, and *Mule Bone,* which sixty years earlier might have been the start of black theatre, now seems more like a dated epilogue. This is the problem most often noted in the mixed reviews that greeted the play's debut at the Barrymore Theatre in February of 1991. In his review for the *New York Times,* Frank Rich found the play "innocuous." Rich stated that the play was "so watered down and bloated by various emendations that one can never be entirely sure if Lincoln Center Theatre is conscientiously trying to complete and resuscitate a lost, unfinished work or is merely picking its carcass to confer a classy literary pedigree on abroad, often bland quasi-musical seemingly pitched to a contemporary Broadway audience."

While acknowledging that the play occasionally makes clear what Hurston and Hughes intended, Rich argued that the play appears dated. However, Rich did find that the trial scene in Act II and the final scene between Jim, Dave, and Daisy were especially good. As his review concluded, Rich summed up the problems with *Mule Bone:* "the roduction design is mostly hokey, the performances often aspire to be cute, and even the fisticuffs are not played for keeps. While the authors intended *Mule Bone* to be funny, this production confuses corny affability with folk humor."

The *Daily News'* s Howard Kissel found the play more likeable than Rich, but he also noted the "aimless first act." In praising the play, Kissel pointed out that the work's strongest features are its "earthy dialogue and the irresistible humor." Noting the especially large and strong cast, Kissel observed that there was "an abounding affection for the material and for this irretrievable, innocent past."

Another positive review was offered by Clive Barnes of the *New York Post*. Barnes stated that *" 'Mule Bone'* positively sparkles with its rich dialect and vivid language, and it shines with the unaffected simplicity of a folk tale." Barnes also enjoyed the music (something many other reviews were divided on) and the dancing, which he felt added "savor to the play." But the strongest elements of the play, said Barnes, are "the sheer vigor of its life, the hyperbole of its language, the crosscut of its genial insults, the sharp-etched caricatures of its characters. And, of course, the acting."

Offering a contrasting view, Linda Winer of the *New York Newsday* suggested that *Mule Bone* "missed its real time and now feels more like a vivid work of archeology than a universal work of theatre." She pointed out that the play had "no tension, not much shape, just a 30-member cast of experts dipping deep into their history to reclaim a tradition." Among the problems, stated Winer, are "the weak plot and a lack of dramatic momentum." An additional problem is that "much of the first act's nonstop chatter was hard to understand from the fifth row." Winer stated that the play's success may depend

on the audience's patience "for caricature farce and one's willingness to hang around townfolk for a couple of hours and watch them amuse themselves."

John Beaufort, writing for the *Christian Science Monitor,* had few reservations about recommending *Mule Bone*. Citing the play's "exuberance," Beaufort singled out the "animated dialogue scenes" and the play's music for special note and referred to the play's debut as a "theatrical event." Proving that no two reviewers see or hear a play in quite the same way, Edwin Wilson's review in the *Wall Street Journal* referred to *Mule Bone* as "a pleasant but uneventful depiction of life in the small town of Eatonville, Fla., in the 1920s." Wilson stated that the "songs are mildly appealing but largely incongruous" but that the production lacks fire. Citing the last act as "sustained drama," Wilson stated that the play should have "gotten on track well before its final 15 minutes."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is a Ph.D. specializing in literature and drama at the University of New Mexico. In this essay she discusses some possible reasons why Mule Bone *has failed to find an audience*.

When *Mule Bone* finally opened on Broadway, it enjoyed only limited success, closing after sixty-seven performances and mixed reviews. Given the eager anticipation that greeted the play's opening and the audience's willingness to find a reason to accept and enjoy this long-awaited play, this brief run indicates that *Mule Bone* encountered some difficulties. Foremost is the fact that Hurston and Hughes left the play unfinished. The two wrote Acts I and III together, and Hurston wrote Act II later, but he drama never received the kind of polishing and finishing that a play typically receives just before performance.

Although Hurston and Hughes quarreled over the play's completion and over authorship, *Mule Bone* was briefly scheduled to open in February 1931. When the two writers quarreled again, the play's production was canceled, and the play remained untouched for sixty years. Had the play opened as scheduled when both of its authors were still living, many of the problems might have been resolved. Instead, when *Mule Bone* finally opened in 1991, both playwrights were dead and any hope that some of the play's more confusing aspects might be cleared up died with them.

Even ignoring the play's unfinished state, however, significant problems with the large cast and with the play's use of black vernacular English make it difficult for the majority of audiences to make any connection with *Mule Bone*.

One significant reason for the play's lack of success is that there is no central protagonist with whom the audience can identify. While their music offers a few moments of entertainment on stage, the audience does not get to know either Dave or Jim well enough to cheer for one or both of them. It is important that an audience be able to identify with a play's protagonist. Quite simply, audiences need a focus. While both characters are funny, neither is endearing. Both men enter two thirds of the way through Act I. Their romance with Daisy has been discussed but only briefly. They fight, and Jim strikes Dave over the head with a mule bone. Both men appear briefly in Act II during the trial. But in this case, they are both more easily defined as onlookers and not participants.

The play's action seems to occur because of the duo's dispute, but the reality is that Jim and Dave serve more as a vehicle to center a plot around religious conflict. In the folktale upon which the play is based, the fight between the two men was about which one shot a turkey. It could have as easily been the same in the play, since it really does not matter why the men fight or even that they do. What is important is that the Baptists and the Methodists are permitted the opportunity to display their wit, to compare and contrast the benefits of each school of thought.

Unfortunately, this focus on the conflict between two competing religious factions means that the relationship between Jim and Dave has no focus or meaning for the audience until the third act, when both men appear on stage together. Although they are only alone on stage for a few moments before Daisy enters, these brief moments reveal what this play might have been.

Another reason why *Mule Bone* fails to capture our allegiance is found in the large cast of characters. John Lowe's analysis of this play suggests that the real voice of the play is a community. But even a community has to have a unifying force. This community of Eatonville, Florida, may have a purpose, but it is not readily identifiable to the audience. The cast, numbering nearly forty, is too large, too broad, and too unwieldy to keep track of. Who are these men, women, and children? They pop on and off stage, most with only a few lines of dialogue. There is no stage direction to provide context for their lines or their role. The audience receives neither background nor the nature of the relationships.

Consequently, too many characters remain anonymous as they speak their few brief lines. Except for a few characters, who play pivotal roles, the rest of the cast could have easily been filled by anyone. And that is the problem. Even characters listed as minor need to have appeal. To add confusion, in this case, actors listed in the play as major characters appear on stage with only one or two lines. Hurston and Hughes may have known these people's roles and their relationship to one another, but unless it is printed on the program, the audience does not. For example, Dave's aunt, Katie Carter, is listed as a major character, and yet, she has no dialogue. So how can the audience identify her as his aunt? Why make her a part of the cast?

Possibly, Hurston and Hughes intended to expand such roles, but since the play was never completed, they add more confusion. One effect of so many characters is that there is little left over for the leads. *Mule Bone* comes to life in Act III. Why? Because all the minor, ill-defined characters are offstage. Only Jim, Dave, and Daisy remain. The focus is on their roles and on their relationship to one another.

In his discussion of the play in the Henry Louis Gates noted that those lines reveal patterns of early black courtship. They reveal important cultural observations that are both humorous and revealing about black culture. According to Hurston's biographer, Robert E. Hemenway in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography,* this is what Hurston and Hughes intended□to bring the humor inherent in black folktales to an audience who would then find these new black comedies a more honest depiction of black life than the stereotypical minstrel shows that too often were identified with black life. Instead the large cast eclipses the small individual roles that are so central to a play's success.

Another problem with the play's large cast of undistinguishable characters is that, for the audience, the experience is akin to attending a huge reunion gathering□as the spouse of a member. Everyone is enjoying himself or herself, telling jokes, remembering stories, instantly understanding the kinship or relationship of all the other members. Everyone is laughing and exchanging in a kind of informal banter, everyone except the spouse, the

outsider who feels left out. That is the experience that many viewers of *Mule Bone* have. The audience does not know these people and they do not know their stories.

The impression is of one arriving in the middle of a conversation. This can be effective in a limited arena, but in *Mule Bone* it is the entire long, first act of the play. During the first act, roughly thirty characters speak, most only a line of two. Many of the speakers are identified by name, although the name is essentially meaningless without some sort of context. Many of the speakers are simply referred to as Villager, Lounger, Voice, Man, Woman. All the audience can do is listen, smile politely, and hope that someone will explain the joke. It just is not fun to feel left out, and in *Mule Bone,* the audience feels excluded. John Lowe stated in the *Southern Quarterly* that the American theatre expects "individual central plots." Instead, this play delivers broad characterization, a large cast, and little plot to capture the audience's interest.

Even if an audience is willing to accommodate all the characters, there is another problem for the play which is even more difficult to overcome: the stereotyping of characters and of language is difficult to ignore. Even with an explanation of what Hurston and Hughes intended, the language appears condescending and racist. Even with an understanding of the authors' motives, this play seems a step backward to a period most African Americans do not want to revisit.

In her analysis of the play in the *Langston Hughes Review,* Lisa Boyd pointed out that when the play was first discussed in 1988, there was immediate concern about the language and depiction of characters. She stated that the play was "revamped, toned down, and made more innocuous for the 1991 production." Use of the pejorative "nigger" was reduced to only one instance. But, in spite of this editing, many problems with language remained. The use of black vernacular English calls to mind an earlier period in American history. This in itself would be fine, except that this earlier period was fraught with racism and the odious practice of slavery.

For many blacks, the hope and need is to move beyond such a period, to build beyond it. *Mule Bone* is a little like moving backward, and even though it is only a perception, it is an illusion that no one desires. White audiences are made uncomfortable for much the same reason. Although most white members of the audience may have harbored no racist ideology, they feel a part of the community that created such a racist environment; they share a collective guilt. For both black and white, the language of *Mule Bone* creates an uncomfortable listening experience. Boyd maintained that *Mule Bone* makes critics so uncomfortable that they, instead, focus on the quarrel between Hurston and Hughes rather than the play's content. One exception is Gates, who championed the play and who acknowledged that this drama presents risks. Gates stated that the "precarious political and social condition within American society warrants a guarded atti tude toward the way images of their culture are projected." While Gates's affection for *Mule Bone* is clear, his concern about language only serves to illustrate the gravity of the problems facing any production of *Mule Bone*.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

Weales reviews a 1991 production of Mule Bone, *the play's first in sixty years. The critic finds the play a "slight tall tale" that is "buoyed by its tremendous sense of fun."*

For years, the phrase "Broadway play" has been a favorite pejorative in critical circles□academic ones, particularly. It was familiar even when works like *Death of a Salesman* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were Broadway hits, but no one ever knew precisely what it meant. Commercial? Predictable? Unlikely to disturb the patrons? Any or all of those, I suppose, but Broadway has never been quite the pigeonhole that play sorters have imagined it to be. There have always been producers who took chances on unusual works□not good ones necessarily□that outsiders, with the wisdom of the uncommitted, could recognize as sure losers. Even now, with fewer and fewer plays on Broadway, there have been some odd creatures turning up and, for the most part, disappearing before I could get a review into print. Come to think of it, most of the things I review are gone before my comments appear, but that is because much of the interesting work today is produced by nonprofit organizations for limited runs. The three plays I briefly consider here, however, were presumably hoping for old-fashioned Broadway success.

Mule Bone may be a special case since it was produced by the Lincoln Center Theater, heavily financed by foundation grants, but it was at the Ethel Barrymore because the Lincoln Center's own main stage was filled by the long-running *Six Degrees of Separation*□a Broadway play, if I ever saw one. *Mule Bone* was written in 1930 by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, a collaboration that dissolved in disagreement, and it did not find its way to the stage or the page for more than half a century. For Hurston, presumably, it was still another of the works in which she wanted to present black life anecdotally in black vernacular; for Hughes, a poet who shared Hurston's concern with black language, it may have been an opportunity to turn to theater, a dream that would continue to draw him for the rest of his life.

This version of the play has been given a prologue and an epilogue by George Houston Bass, who according to a *Playbill* biography, is "responsible for melding the 1920s sensibilities of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston with those of the audience in the 1990s." That means that he doctored the original script into stage life, greatly helped by the music of Taj Mahal. The play is a very slight tall tale□not unlike many of Hurston's stories□in which two friends, joined by the music one plays for the other to dance to, are split apart by a flirtatious young woman who likes the attentions of both. They finally fight over her, one knocking the other out with the titular mule bone, an event that leads to a trial which is mostly a confrontation between rival churches, an epic trading of insults which provides the main vitality of the piece. In the end both men reject the woman□who expects the man who gets her to take a real job□and stick with one another, their friendship, their music, and their freedom being more attractive than sparking which might turn into the trap of marriage. At the end, everyone forgets that the bone-wielder has been banished from the town, and the entire cast gets together for a musical finish which celebrates community that transcends any local quarrels. Those

insults were never more than grand rhetoric, appreciated by insulter and insultee alike. *Mule Bone* ran for a few months, buoyed by its tremendous sense of fun and by a setting that drew black audiences who presumably had no desire to check out *La Bête* or *I Hate Hamlet*.

Source: Gerald Weales, "To Hate or Not to Hate" in *Commonweal,* Vol. CXVIII, no. 11, June 1,1991, pp. 373-74.

Critical Essay #3

Simon is one of the best-known theatre critics in America. In this excerpt, he reviews the debut production of Hurston and Hughes's play, finding itworthwhile theatrical entertainment. While the critic calls the source material "skimpy," he nevertheless praises the presentation, stating "it was worth waiting 60 years for so accomplished a production to reach the stage."

Mule Bone was to have been the play (suggested at a 1930 party by Theresa Helburn to Langston Hughes) that would be neither heavy social drama nor minstrel show but a real comedy of black life that would extend the Harlem Renaissance to the stage. Hughes enlisted Zora Neale Hurston, and they started converting her brief folktale "The Bone of Contention" into the three-act *Mule Bone*. It was never quite finished because, under various inner and outer pressures, the co-authors quarreled, for reasons still not fully understood. The story of "The *Mule Bone* Controversy," now published together with the play, is longer and at least equally fascinating reading.

At the Barrymore, we get the play as edited by the late George Houston Bass, supplied with his prologue and epilogue and with music by Taj Mahal. In the story, two young hunters from an all-black Florida town each claim to have shot down the same wild turkey; in the ensuing fight, Jim knocks Dave unconscious with a handy mule bone. The mayor conducts a trial in the Baptist church, where the Baptists side with their boy, Dave, and the Baptist preacher defending him; the Methodists, occupying the other half of the church, back Jim and the Methodist minister defending *him*. The argument and counterargument are funny, as are the insults traded by Baptists and Methodists. And that is about the size of it.

This sweet but skimpy material had to be mightily stretched for the stage, and the stretch marks show. Instead of fighting over a dead turkey, Jim the singer-guitarist and Dave the dancer (best of friends who perform together) now fight over a live chick, Daisy, the prettiest girl in town, back from the North and working for whites whose stuck-up ways she's learned. This contest, too, has its entertaining aspects and a surprise ending, and is embedded in much racy talk, often heightened into perky song by Taj Mahal to both Hughes' s and his own lyrics.

There is a nice blend of canniness and naïveté in the Lincoln Center production that Michael Schultz has staged into something as crisp as a white shirt fresh from the laundry. The 29 well-deployed actors acquit themselves, for the most part, pungently, with only Kenny Neal (Jim), AkosuaBusia (Daisy), and Paul S. Eckstein (Marshal Lum Boger) not quite up to the rest. But Neal is handsome and a handy guitar-strummer, Miss Busia a remarkable beauty, and Eckstein miscast. There are catchy bits of dance staged by Dianne McIntyre, and scenery (Edward Burbridge), costumes (Lewis Brown), and lighting (Allen Lee Hughes) that are as frolicsome as they are functional.

I know that nothing is less thrilling than a list of names; but nothing would be more unjust than not mentioning at least a few personal favorites among so many nifty

performers: Clebert Ford, Fanni Green, Donald Griffin, Leonard Jackson, Ebony Jo-Ann, Theresa Merritt, Reggie Montgomery, Eric Ware, Vanessa Williams, and Samuel E. Wright.

It was worth waiting 60 years for so accomplished a production to reach the stage. Far from patronizing blacks (as more whites than blacks seem to feel it does), *Mule Bone* is honestly alive and kicking; regrettable as their quarrel was, it is nice to know that what Hughes and Hurston fought over was not a turkey but a phoenix. And such salty dialogue as "Before you ... went up North, I could kiss you every day... just as regular as pig tracks" is worth the slight effort our ears must make to adjust to an unaccustomed sound.

But what of the fear and indignation my companion and I observed among some white spectators, a couple of whom we overheard being politely and judiciously corrected by a black audience member? There are several things to bear in mind here. First, that this play (like the production) was created, from top to bottom, by black talent, and whatever ribbing there is is done tartly but affectionately. Next, we are dealing with a 1930 retelling of still-earlier folk material; would a white community, under the same conditions, emerge smelling any sweeter? Think of Erskine Caldwell or John Steinbeck, of George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind *(Of Thee I Sing,* 1931).

Finally, and above all, the ultimate proof of maturity and sophistication in an individual, a group, a society is the gift of laughing at oneself. What is it that makes Gogol's *The Inspector General* the masterpiece it is if not laughter at Russia, all of Russia? Laughing self-criticism, even if the laughter is sharp and sardonic□perhaps especially then□is the greatest proof of coming of age that two black writers in 1930 could proffer: a sovereign demonstration of artistic (and therefore profoundly human) ripeness.

Source: John Simon, "The Learned Laddies or the Imagery Invalid" *in New York,* Vol. 24, no. 8, February 25,1991, pp. 119-20.

Critical Essay #4

While finding Hurston and Hughes's text to be somewhat outdated and "politically incorrect," Kanfer praises the production values of this 1991 presentation of Mule Bone, *concluding that the overall effect makes for significant theatre*.

Mule Bone, at the Ethel Barry more Theater, is politically incorrect. Its protagonists refer to themselves as Negroes, say things like "Chile, if you listen at folkses talk, they'll have you in de graveyard or in Chatahooche," and when its village folk are depressed or excited they burst into song.

Nevertheless, it is the season's most rewarding exhumation. Although this "Comedy of Negro Life" was awarded a major grant from the Fund for New American Plays, the work is in fact 60 years old. Its authors, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, had a falling out in 1930, and it has taken this long for scholars to pick up the pieces. Never mind. Scrupulous direction and an irrepressible cast have finally given *Mule Bone* the production it deserves.

Hughes and Hurston intended to "act out the folk tales, with the abrupt angularity and naïveté of he primitive 'bama Nigger." Accordingly their play, based on Hurston's short story, is as elemental as a recipe for collard greens. A guitarist, Jim (Kenny Neal), and a dancer, Dave (Eric Ware), fight over a beautiful young woman (Akosua Busia). In the course of combat, Dave gets bopped upside the head with a mule bone. In Act Two Jim is put on trial before a gaggle of sunny Baptists and upright Methodists. The kangaroo court orders him out of town.

If narrative were all, *Mule Bone* would deserve to be exiled as well. The pleasures, though, are not in the text; they come from Taj Mahal's lilting score, and from a spirited and sensitive ensemble. Director Michael Schultz never allows a scintilla of condescension; the work seems to have been deliberately preserved in an ice floe so that it could be melted some fine night at the Barrymore. At a time of strangulated budgets, 29 actors are featured in this production, and every one of them embodies William Blake's dictum that energy is eternal delight. There are small parts but no undersized performances: Theresa Merritt was a powerful Ma Rainey years ago, and as a townswoman she becomes the lyrical, throaty Ma all over again; Sonny Jim Gaines, who has written better plays than this for the New Lafayette, here is content to animate the role of a local loudmouth; the hilarious "lawyers" for the prosecution and defense, Arthur French and Leonard Jackson, are abetted by some gifted veterans of the Negro Ensemble Company. If one 10,000-candlepower grin seems eerily familiar, but older than you remembered, look again. That face in the crowd is James Earl Jones' father, Robert.

Source: Stefan Kanfer, "Looking Backward" in the *New Leader,* Vol. LXXIV, no. 3, February 11-25,1991, pp. 22-23.

Topics for Further Study

Research the religious differences between Baptists and Methodists. Consider if the differences outweigh the similarities between these different branches of Protestantism.

Discuss whether you think that *Mule Bone* is perpetuating stereotypes about southern blacks. Why or why not?

Look at some early black sheet music. What do the lyrics tell the listeners about rural black life in the South in the first half of the twentieth century?

A modern reader might wonder at the legitimacy of the trial Clarke holds for Jim. Research early town life in the rural South. Is Jim's trial representative of how small black communities might deal out justice?

Joe Clarke thinks he has control in this town, and yet, at the play's conclusion a banished Jim can return to town in defiance of Clarke's orders. Who really maintains control? You might consider the role that church elders play or what women contribute to such action.

Compare and Contrast

1931: U. S. unemployment tops 8 million.

Today: Unemployment is very low, but while many employers claim they cannot fill jobs, many of the positions are for low paying menial jobs. As in the past, many of these jobs are filled with immigrants and minorities.

1931: Detroit lays off another 100,000 workers, reducing employment at auto plants by 225,000 workers in two years.

Today: Employment in automotive manufacturing has undergone many changes in the past seventy years. Production lines have become more mechanized and there have been periodic layoffs due to fluctuating demand, but the American infatuation with the automobile has meant an increasing demand for cars and led to relatively steady jobs in the automotive sector.

1931: The U. S. wheat crop breaks all records, driving down prices. Many farmers are forced off their land and banks foreclose on mortgages, thus adding to the poverty and food shortages of the Great Depression.

Today: There are fewer farmers than at any time before. Large commercial farming operations have made it difficult for most small farmers to compete. Many have chosen to sell their farms and move to cities.

What Do I Read Next?

Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road,* is an autobiography published in 1942. In this work, Hurston offers her views on the role of black artists.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) is Hurston's best-known work. In this book, Hurston's main characters are white, rather than the black inhabitants of her previous work.

Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927) is a collection of Langston Hughes's poetry. The central subject is Harlem's lower class. Hughes also includes several ballads.

The Ways of White Folks (1934) is a collection of short stories that Hughes wrote after he noted similarities between his writing and that of D. H. Lawrence.

Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is an autobiography that tells of the author's life as a slave in North Carolina and of her escape and struggle for freedom.

In *Race, Writing, and Difference* (1985), Henry Louis Gates compiles a number of essays that discuss the role of race in literature.

Further Study

Hughes, Langston, and Zora Neale Hurston. *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life,* edited by George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Harper, 1991.

This book contains the full text of the play, and it also contains a selection of articles that deal with the controversy regarding its writing and the legal issues that resulted.

Kellner, Bruce, editor. *The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Dictionary,* Greenwood, 1984.

This text provides a brief literary biography of artists who wrote during the same period as Hurston and Hughes.

Pryse, Marjorie, and Hortense J. Spillers, editors. *Conjuring, Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition,* Indiana University Press, 1985.

This collection of essays attempts to place Hurston within a context of other American black women writers and demonstrates her influence on the women writers who followed.

Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes, 1902-1941,* Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, 1986.

Rampersad relates Hughes's relationship with Hurston.

Watson, Carol McAlpine. *Prologue: The Novels of Black American Women, 1891-1965,* Greenwood, 1985.

Watson compares Hurston to other writers and believes that she was unique among black women writers.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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