The Purple Flower Study Guide

The Purple Flower by Marita Bonner

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The Purple Flower, by , an AfricanAmerican writer of the Harlem Renaissance, is a short, one-act play first published In *Crisis* magazine m 1928 and is, as noted by Joyce Flynn In *Frye Street and Environs: The Collected Works of Marita Bonner,* "generally regarded as Bonner's masterpiece.." Although it was never performed in her lifetime, Bonner was awarded first prize for *The Purple Flower* m the 1927 *Crisis* magazine literary awards

The Purple Flower is an allegory for racial relations In the United States, although It could be applied to the conditions of oppressed people anywhere In the world, at any point in history. The play includes two sets of characters. First there are the Us's, who represent African Americans Then there are the White Devils, who live on the hill, located "Somewhere," atop of which grows the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest. The Us's live In the valley and spend their time trying to reach the hill, a goal that the White Devils do everything In their power to keep them from attaining. The stage is divided into two levels, separated by a thin board that Bonner calls the "thin-skin-of-civilization."

The Us's occupy the upper level, which holds the dialogue and main action. The lower level is occupied by the White Devils, who have no dialogue but dance around and mimic the action on the upper level. The individual characters among the Us's represent a variety of attitudes of the oppressed, concerning the best way to go about raising their socioeconomic status.

In the play's resolution, an Old Man, calling himself a Servant of God, mixes, in an iron pot, a conjuring potion made up of dust, books, gold, and human blood. He then sends the bravest Young Us, named Finest Blood, off to confront the White Devils with the power of music, faith, and the readiness to sacrifice his own blood. The Old Man thus combines the contributions of many different members of the community to give birth to a New Man equipped to fight the White Devils for equality.

Author Biography

Manta Bonner was born on June 16, 1899, in Boston, Massachusetts. Her mother, Mary Anne Bonner (maiden name Noel), was a homemaker, and her father, Joseph Andrew Bonner, was a machinist. She had three siblings: Bemice, Joseph, and Andrew (who wed in childhood). Bonner attended Brookline High School and enrolled in Radcliffe College in 1918, where she majored in English and comparative literature. Because African-American students were not allowed to reside on campus, Bonner lived at home during her years at Radcliffe. She began teaching at Cambridge High School while still in college and continued to teach after graduating in 1922. Bonner taught English at Bluefield Colored Institute in Bluefield, Virginia, from 1922 to 1924, and at Armstrong High School m Washington, D.C., from 1925 to 1930.

Bonner's Writing career began in 1925 With the publication of her short story "The Hands-A Story" in *Opportunity* magazine. Her essay "On Being Young-a Woman-and Colored" was published in *Crisis* magazine later that year. She continued to publish numerous short stories, essays, plays, and reviews in *Opportunity* and *Crisis* through 1941. While in Washington, D.C., Bonner became associated WIth African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance (a term used to describe a period of flowering of African-American literature during the 1920s) and was a member of the *"S"* Street Salon, a gathering of African-American writers m the home of poet Georgia Douglas Johnson.

Although Bonner was married to William Almy Occomy in 1930, Critics generally continued to refer to her by her maiden rather than her married name. The couple moved to Chicago, where they raised three children, William Almy, Jr., Warwick Gale Noel, and Marita Joyce. Bonner's last published story, "One True Love," appeared in *Crisis* magazine in 1941 In the 1940s, Bonner devoted more time to child rearing and became increasingly involved in the religion of Christian Science. She eventually went back to teaching English at Phillips High School in Chicago from 1950 to 1963. Bonner died of injuries from a fire in her apartment on December 6, 1971.

Plot Summary

Beginning

As the play opens, the White Devils live on the hill, atop of which grows the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest. The Us's have worked to build all of the roads and houses on the hill but are forced to live in the valley, where they" spend their time trying to devise means of getting up the hill " Meanwhile, the White Devils "try every trick, known and unknown," to prevent the Us's from reaching the hill.

The action begins in the evening, as the Us's rest beside a brook, "with their backs toward Nowhere and their faces toward Somewhere." The White Devils can be heard singing from the hillside, "You stay where you are! / We don't want you up here!" The Us's discuss their prospects of ever reaching the hill to see the purple flower. Another Us claims that he is not concerned with the White Devils and that he will go up the hill when he is ready to; then he falls asleep. An Old Lady despairs that she will never get to the hill to see the flower, even though she has worked hard all her life to "get Somewhere" by washing clothes for the White Devils. A Young Us comments that all she's gotten for her labors is "a slap in the face." The Old Lady responds that the . 'Leader" told them that they could succeed by showing the White Devils that they know how to work hard, but, she comments, if two hundred years of the hard work of slavery haven't shown them, nothing will. Another Young Us says that working for the White Devils gets the Us's nowhere. The Old Lady retorts that "something's got to be done though!"

Middle

A family of four Us's-An Old Man (also called Average), An Old Woman, A Young Us (also called Finest Blood), and the Young Girl (also called Sweet)-walkup and join the group. The Old Lady turns to the Older Man saying that the Us's are never going to make it up the hill. Average responds that they will as soon as they get "the right leaders." The Middle-Aged Woman responds that the problem is not getting the right leaders but that infighting among the Us's prevents the leaders from accomplishing anything. The Old Lady mentions that the Us's are going to have a meeting to discuss what to do to make it up the hill. Average complains that talking accomplishes nothing. but his daughter and son. Sweet and Finest Blood. volunteer to talk at the meeting.

An Old Us approaches the group, beating on a drum. The other Us's roused by the sound of the drumming, stand up; some of them begin to dance. By this time it is night, but the purple flower can still be seen at the top of the hill. An Old Man with a long beard stands up and urges the others to work hard to reach the hill. Several Young Us's retort that they have been told all their lives to work hard, but that has gotten them Nowhere. A Young Man, carrying a bundle of books, comes forward and tosses his books to the ground, saying that the books are no good. that they don't say anything about how

Black Us can overcome the White Devils, because the books are all written by White Devils, Yet Another Old Man calls out to God to "tell us how to get Somewhere!" A Young Man and A Young Us argue that calling to God does not do any good.

Suddenly. Sweet comes running out of the bushes and tells the others that a White Devil was hiding there and pinched her when she walked by. Finest Blood, her brother, immediately picks up a rock with the intention of going after the White Devil, but Cornerstone, his mother, warns that the White Devils will kill him if he does so. Average, his father. adds that he is better off staying where he is, because he at least has food and shelter. A Newcomer approaches, carrying two heavy bags of gold. which he drops to the ground. He explains that all of his money does him no good because the White Devils will not allow him to buy anything or to get somewhere with it.

End

An Old Lady tells the others that she had a dream of a White Devil cut into six pieces. An Old Man, hearing this, responds, "Thank God! It' s time then"' The Old Man asks for an old iron pot. He then begins conjuring, first by calling upon all of the Old Us's and the ancestors of the Us's, The voices of ten million Us's can be heard, singing, "Yes Lord!- We hear you!" The Old Man asks for a handful of dust, which An Old Woman throws into the pot. The Old Man then asks for books. The Young Man who threw them down puts the books into the pot. The Old Man asks for gold, which The Man of the Gold Bags puts into the pot. Finally, the Old Man asks for blood, "Blood from the eyes, the ears, the whole body!"

At this, the other Us's remain silent. Suddenly, Finest Blood steps forward to offer his blood. Cornerstone protests, offering her own instead, but the Old Man tells her that she is needed by the other Us's. The Old Man explains that he is doing what God has told him to do, that he is God's Servant. He says that if he does as he is told, mixing the dust, books, gold, and blood. "God will shape a new man." Finest Blood again offers his own blood, because "the New Man must be born." The Old Man explains to Finest Blood how to approach the White Devils and talk to them, to tell them that blood has been taken and blood must be given. Finest Blood goes off into the night to carry out his task of fighting the White Devils, while the other Us's and the White Devils listen. The final stage directions read: "Let the curtain close leaving all the Us's, the White Devils, Nowhere, Somewhere, listening, listening. Is it time?"

Characters

Another Us

Another Us, later indicated as Young Man and The Grass Chewer, lies on his back chewing a piece of grass. He tells the others that he is not concerned with the White Devils, stating that "when I get ready to go up that hill-I'm going!" But he promptly rolls over and goes to sleep, indicating Ius apathetic attitude toward the Idea of putting any effort into fighting for racial equality.

Another Young Us

Like the first Young Us, Another Young Us argues WIth the Old Lady that working hard does not accomplish anything in terms of improving the socioeconomic status of the Us's.

Average

Average argues that what's needed to improve the status of the Us's is "the right leaders." He is critical of the idea of holding a meeting to talk about what can be done, asserting that talking gets them nowhere. Average also expresses hopelessness about the Us's ever making It up the hill. Average represents an average attitude of complacency about the status of the Us's. He tells the other Us's that they "better stay safe and sound" where they are, because at least they have food and shelter. The average person, this character indicates, would rather accept what he has than take the risk of fighting for greater equality.

Cornerstone

Cornerstone argues that the problem is not a lack of good leaders to strive for greater equality but the lack of unity among Us's, which makes the leaders' work ineffective. She points out that holding a meeting is important because talking is better than not talking. When her son Finest Blood volunteers to sacrifice his blood to the conjurer, Cornerstone volunteers to sacrifice her own blood instead but is persuaded not to. The Old Man eventually convinces her that it is Important for Finest Blood to confront the White Devils. Cornerstone represents the cornerstone of her community, supporting others in their efforts to work toward equality for the Us's and yet remaining protective of her son and daughter.

First Young Us

Young Us, later referred to as First Young Us, argues with the Old Lady that there's no point in working hard all one's hie if it "doesn't get you anywhere." He compares a life of labor to "boring around in the same hole like a worm," which only results in "making the hole bigger to stay in." A Young Us represents the viewpoint that simply laboring away at the type of menial job available to the African Americans will not accomplish anything in terms of improving the socioeconomic status of the race. The Young Us later argues with the Old Us that he should not spend so much time talking to God to ask for His help but should give God a chance to talk to him. The Young Us is later full of skepticism when the Old Man trIes conjuring to help the Us's.

The Grass Chewer

See Another Us

The Man of the Gold Bags

See The Newcomer

The Middle-Aged Woman

See Cornerstone

The Newcomer

The Newcomer, described as "a square-set middle-aged Us," walks up to the group of Us's carrying a heavy bag of gold, which he drops to the ground. He explains that, even though he has money, it doesn't get him anywhere, because the White Devils refuse to sell him any land or property on the hill. His character represents the effects of racial prejudice that prevents even financially successful African Americans from buying homes or other property in desirable locations.

An Old Lady

The Old Lady laments that she will never live to see the purple flower. She insists that "something's got to be done" about the White Devils, but she is convinced that "we ain't never going to make that hill "The Old Lady represents an attitude of defeatism, because she has spent her whole life working like a slave for whIte people and has lost hope of ever attaining racial equality.

An Old Man

The Old Man arrives beating a drum, which gets the attention of all of the Us's. After an Old Woman states that she has had a dream of a White Devil chopped in pieces, he says that "it's time " The Old Man asks for an iron pot, which he uses for conjuring. First the calls upon all of the Old Us's and all of the ancestors of the Us's. Then he asks for a handful of dust to put in the pot. He then adds the bundle of books and the bag of gold. Finally the Old Man requests red blood for his mixture. He explains to the others that he is doing what God has told him to do for God to "shape a new man." The Old Man advises Finest Blood on the best way to confront the White Devils.

Sundry White Devils

The Sundry White Devils occupy the lower level of the stage, which is divided from the upper level by a thin board. They have no dialogue but silently mimic the main action, which takes place on the upper level. They are described as "artful little things with soft wide eyes such as you would expect to find in an angel" They have "soft hair that flops around theIr horns" and "their horns glow red all the time-now with blood-now with eternal fire-now with deceit-now with unholy desire." They "have bones tied carefully across their tails to make them seem less like tails and more like mere decorations." The White Devils are "artful little things full of artful movements and artful tricks." They dance about, "sometimes as if they were men" and "sometimes as if they were snakes." The White Devils live on the hill and "try every trick, known or unknown, to keep the Us's from getting to the hill." The White Devils represent, at an allegorical level, white people who oppress others. That they live on the hill represents their socioeconomic privilege over African Americans, a privilege that they "try every trick" to keep for themselves. They are described as "artful" to imply that racism is imposed upon people of color through Various forms of trickery and deceit. The White Devils sometimes behave like men "with dignity" and sometimes like snakes, indicating that white people sometimes behave humanely toward African Americans but at other times behave evilly, indicated by their association with snakes, a traditional symbol of evil.

Young Girl-Sweet

Young Girl-Sweet is described as "a medinin light brown girl, beautiful as a browned peach" Sweet is sexually harassed by a White Devil, who hides in the bushes and pinches her when she walks by. This incident is an allegorical reference to the history of rape and sexual abuse of African-American women, particularly in slavery, by white men such as slave masters.

Young Man

Young Man makes his way to the center of the crowd of Us's and throws down a bundle of books he has been carrying, claiming that they are "no good!" He explains that "there

isn't anything in one of these books that tells Black Us how to get around White Devils," because, he explains, the White Devils wrote the books. This Young Man represents the efforts of African Americans to improve their socioeconomic status through education. The implication here is that education is ineffective because the educational system is dominated by white people and simply reinforces white dominance over African Americans.

The Young Man-Finest Blood

The Young Man-Finest Blood is described as "a slender, tall, bronzy brown youth who walks with his head high." As he walks, "he touches the ground with his feet as if it were a velvet rug and not sun baked, jagged rocks." After his sister, Sweet, reports that she has been pinched by a White Devil hiding in the bushes, Finest Blood immediately picks up a rock and starts after the White Devil, but the others discourage him from exacting a violent revenge. Later, when the Old Man says that he needs "red blood" for his conjuring potion, Finest Blood immediately volunteers his own blood As the play ends, Finest Blood goes off to confront the White Devils according to the Old Man's advice. The closing hues of the play are those of Finest Blood, heard from offstage, "his voice lifted, young, sweet, brave and strong." Finest Blood represents the "New Man" who possesses all of the finest qualities needed to effectively fight for racial equality.

Themes

Slavery

Although the Us's in tins play are not slaves, their socioeconomic situation represents that of the legacy of slavery in the lives of African Americans. An introductory explanation of the play states that the Us's "tilled the valley, they cultivated It and made It as beautiful as it is. They built roads and houses even for the White Devils." This description represents the fact that the prosperity of the United States was built in part by the labor of African American slaves and, after emancipation, by low-wage labor. This slavery and hard labor takes its toll on the Us's An Old Us, who joins the group, explains that he is blind from "brooding for the White Devils in the heat of the noon-day sun. . ." And yet, the White Devils "let them build the houses and then they were knocked back down into the valley." Just before Finest Blood sets off to confront the White Devils, the Old Man refers to the work of slavery at the expense of the slaves, commenting that "they built half their land on our bones. They ripened the crops of cotton, watering them with our blood." Finest Blood's mission, by the end of the play, is to seek retribution for the loss of blood that the Us's have suffered from hundreds of years of slavery.

Leadership and The New Man

The question of leadership is an important theme of the play's concern with social action. The Us's spend their time debating various ways of trying to make It up the hill Average suggests that they could succeed if they had the right leaders, but Cornerstone argues that the problem is not a lack of leaders, It's that the infighting among the Us's prevents the leaders from accomplishing anything. The Old Man with the drum emerges as one of the leaders of the community of Us's, bringing together the traditional culture of the Old Us's and the new ideas of the educated and financially successful Us's. By doing so, Old Man inspires a Young Us, Finest Blood, to step forth as a new leader in the struggle of the Us's with the White Devils Thus, old and young work together to reach the hill as the Wisdom of the Old Man helps to direct the young leader, who will emerge as the New Man.

Religion

The Us's discuss the role of religion in their efforts to achieve equality. Yet Another Old Man throws his head back and calls up into the air, "Lord! Why don't you come by here and tell us how to get Somewhere?" An Old Us claims that "he is all powerful! He will move in his own time!" But a Young Us argues that there is no use talking to God. When the Old Man begins his conjuring, he tells the other Us's that he is a servant of God and is doing what God told him to do He explains that if he does what God told him to do, then God will create a new man. The Old Man advises Finest Blood to tell the White Devils that he is an instrument of God, asserting that "this is God's decree "You take

blood-you give blood.'" Bonner thus indicates the importance of religion in the struggle of African Americans for equality.

White Privilege

The White Devils living on the lull WIth the purple flower clearly represent those people who enjoy the privileges of being white in a white dommated society Although they have enslaved the Us's and employed them in hard labor to work their land and build their houses and roads, they do everything in their power to keep the Us's from reaching the hill and enjoying the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest. The stage directions explain that the White Devils are "artful" creatures, full of tricks, which expresses the idea that white people are sly and skillful in their efforts at keeping African Americans from achieving equality.

Style

Allegory

The Purple Flower is an allegorical play. An allegory is a story in which the characters, settings, and action are meant to be interpreted as representative of a social or political situation Allegories frequently provide a moral or lesson about this situation. Thus, Bonner's play is an allegory for-race relations in the United States, in which the Us's represent African Americans, and the White Devils represent white Americans, The hill with the purple flower symbolizes the realm of the privileged, while the valley symbolizes the realm of the underpriVI1eged or oppressed. The characters are allegorical figures that represent a variety of attitudes toward these race relations, and their discussion of how to reach the hill symbolizes various debates among African Americans as to how they should go about trying to achieve equality.

Setting: Time and Place

The Purple Flower is set in an allegorical time and place that represents the historical position of African Americans in the United States, The place is described in the stage directions as: "Might be here, there or anywhere--or even nowhere." This description indicates that the inequality that characterizes the status of the Us's in relation to the White Devils exists anywhere and everywhere m the world, although it is particularly concerned with black-white racial inequality in the United States. The setting is an open plain, with a hill in the distance, representing Somewhere, atop which the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest grows It is bounded on the other side by Nowhere. In allegorical terms, the Us's want more than anything to get "Somewhere" in life, while their historical legacy as African Americans is one ill which racial oppression has allowed them to get "Nowhere" in life. The valley in which the Us's reside represents the low socioeconomic status of African Americans in the United States, while the hill represents the high socioeconomic status of white Americans; although the Us's (or African Americans) have slaved to build the homes and roads of the White Devils, the White Devils are determined to keep them from living on the hill or seeing the purple flower.

The time of the play's action is described as "The Middle-of-things-as-They-are. Which means the End-of-Things for some of the characters and Beginning-of-Things for others)" The "middle-of-things-as-they-are" describes current racial relations The end of the play may be the "end-of-things" as they are for both the Us's and the White Devils, if the action taken by Finest Blood results in the birth of the "New Man." In other words, it may be the end of the status-quo of unequal racial relations, which would be the beginning-of-things for African Americans if they are able to achieve racial equality.

Characterization

There are two types of characters in *The Purple Flower,* both of which are meant to be understood in allegorical terms. The Us's, referred to at one point as Black Us, represent African Americans, while the White Devils represent white people who oppress African Americans. Among the White Devils, there are no individual characters and there is no dialogue. This suggests in an allegorical sense that, from the perspective of the oppressed race, the dominant whites represent a mass power block. Among the Us's, who carry the main action and all of the dialogue in this play, distinctions between characters are made by type rather than by individual names; characters are referred to as A Young Us, An Old Us, Another Young Us, An Old Woman, etc. Allegorically, each Us represents a particular attitude or belief about the status of African Americans and how to go about improving their Socioeconomic status. Distinctions are made between Young and Old Us's to indicate a generation gap in thinking about race relations. Interestingly, the Us's are described ill the production notes as not necessarily of African descent. "They can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the center of a poppy." This suggests that the Us's represent not Just African Americans but oppressed peoples from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Historical Context

African-American Literary Movements of the Twentieth Century

Twentieth Century African-American literature has been characterized by two important literary movements: the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. The Harlem Renaissance, also referred to as the New Negro Movement, designates a period during the 1920s ill which African-American literature flourished among a group of writers concentrated in Harlem, New York. Important writers and works of the Harlem Renaissance include: James Weldon Johnson, who wrote the novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912); Claude McKay, who wrote the best-selling novel *Home to Harlem* (1928); Langston Hughes, who wrote the poetry collection *The Weary Blues* (1926); and Wallace Thurman, who wrote the novel *The Blacker the Berry* (1929). This period of incredible literary output diminished when the Great Depression of the 1930s affected the financial status of many African-American writers.

Although she never lived in New York, Bonner is associated with the Harlem Renaissance through her involvement in the "S" Street Salon, a gathering of Writers in Washington, D.C., who met regularly at the home of poet Georgia Douglas Johnson. Bonner's portraits of the three major urban centers in which she lived, Boston, Washington, D.C , and Chicago, address similar themes to those works set in Harlem. While in Washington, D.C., Bonner was also affiliated with the Krigwa Players, an African-American organization of dramatists. The majority of Bonner's plays, short stories, and essays were published in two African-American magazines associated with the Harlem Renaissance. *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* (called simply *The Crisis)* was a monthly publication founded in 1910 by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and originally edited by W. E. B. DuBois. During the 1920s, *The Crisis* published the works of many young African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Jean Toomer. *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life,* a publication of the National Urban League, was also an important promoter of Harlem Renaissance writers.

In the 1960s and 70s, The Black Arts Movement, also referred to as the Black Aesthetic Movement, emerged, embodying values derived from black nationalism and promoting politically and socially significant works, often Written in Black English vernacular. Important writers and works of the Black Arts Movement include Imamu Amici Baraka (also known as LeRoi Jones), Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and Tom Morrison

African-American Theater

The development of African-American theater in the first half of the twentieth century was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance and included the establishment of theaters

devoted to black productions in major cities throughout the United States. The most prominent Black theaters by mid-century were the American Negro Theater and the Negro Playwrights' Company. In the post-World War II era, African American theater became more overtly political and more specifically focused on celebrating African American culture. One of the most prominent works to emerge from tills period was the 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun,* by Lorraine Hansberry.

The Black Arts Movement led to the establishment in 1965 of the Repertory Theater in Harlem, initiated by Amin Baraka. Baraka's award-winning 1964 play, *The Dutchman,* is among the most celebrated dramatic works of this period. Ntozake Shange's 1977 play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf,* used an experimental dramatic format to address issues facing African-American women In the 1980s, August Wilson emerged as an important African American playwright with ills *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985), set in Chicago in the 1920s, about a blues singer and her band.

Critical Overview

The Purple Flower, which first appeared in *Crisis* magazine in January 1928, is the second of three plays published by Bonner. The first, *The Pot Maker,* appeared in *Opportunity* magazine in 1927, and the third, *Exit-An Illusion,* was published in *The Crisis* in 1929. Bonner received first prize in the 1927 *Crisis* Contest Awards for *The Purple Flower,* as well as for *Exit* Joyce Flynn comments in *Frye Street and Environs* that Bonner's dramas are all "morality plays," which "continue her exploration of the black American as Everyman/Everywoman."

Flynn refers to *The Purple Flower* as "Bonner's allegory of the black quest for freedom and happiness in post-Emancipation North America." She goes on to state, *"The Purple Flower* deals, on one level, with black aspiration and the relevance of the myth of the American melting pot. On another level, the drama seems to assume the inevitability of violent racial revolution in America."

Carol Allen, in *Black Women Intellectuals,* describes Bonner's contribution to the Harlem Renaissance literary movement through her participation in the "S" Street Salon and the Krigwa Players, both of which met in Washington, D.C.:

Bonner's contribution to these groups can not be stressed enough as she and others like her fueled the Harlem-based cultural revival with their intense discussion, critique, and public performance (readings, plays, and lectures) We may even envision places like the Salon as modern stops on the Underground Railroad, leading toward an unencumbered expression of the diversity in black culture.

Allen further notes, "When Bonner left Washington in 1930 for Chicago, she transplanted some of the Salon's collective appreciation for black art."

Critics often focus on Bonner's portrayals of urban life in Chicago during the Depression years of the 1930s. Allen notes, "Her texts focus on how urbanization, segregation, and gender expectations Impact the development of black subjects, especially women." Flynn describes the Chicago of Bonner's short stories as "a fallen world both in terms of race relations and the doomed aspirations of the city's black immigrants from the South." Allen, on the other hand, argues, "[w]hile Bonner highlights the city's danger, she also targets the resistance and pleasure created from and within urban neighborhoods by struggling black migrants and immigrants of all hues." Allen concludes, "Bonner exposed the city's oppressive side, but also found strength in the new cultural exchanges that urban neighborhoods fostered"; she "exposes the debilitating facets" of the city, "while celebrating pockets of resistance."

Flynn refers to Bonner as "one of the most versatile early twentieth-century black writers." Bonner's achievements were recognized when she won an award from *Crisis* magazine in 1925 for her essay "On Being Young-a Woman-and Colored" and the *Opportunity* magazine literary prize for fiction for her story "Tin Can" in 1933. Her works are collected in *Frye Street and Environs* (1987), edited by Joyce Flynn and Joyce

Occomy Stricklin (Bonner's daughter). *The Purple Flower* is also published in the collection *Black Theater U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans,* 1847-1974 (1974; reprinted in 1996). More recent discussion of Bonner's work includes *Black Women Intellectuals: Strategies of Nation, Family, and Neighborhood in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Marita Bonner* (1998), by Allen. Flynn sums up

Bonner's literary influence through writing that "has kept alive an entire world-the stories and feelings of the black universe coining to consciousness in northern cities in the decades that separated the world wars." Flynn concludes that "for that act of imaginative deliverance, further generations will be grateful"

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American Cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the significance of music and religion to social action in Bonner's play.

Carol Allen, in her book *Black Women Intellectuals,* observes that Bonner's fiction and plays, while exhibiting the hardships of African Americans and other oppressed people in America's urban centers, also celebrate the value of culture in the struggle for equality. She notes that through "cultural practices such as storytelling, sermons, music, and dance, Bonner envisions a powerful new 'village' springing from the construction of old and new world practices and beliefs." In *The Purple Flower,* music is strongly associated with religion, and both are deemed vital to the struggle of African Americans for racial equality. Further, music and religion are derived from both "old and new world practices and beliefs," combining elements of traditional African culture with the "new world" culture of African Americans.

The Purple Flower opens as the Us's in the valley hear the song of the White Devils "borne faintly to your ears from the hillside," as the sound of their singing "rolls full across the valley."

You stay where you are !
We don't want you up here!
If you come you'll be on par
with all we hold dear.
So stay-stay-stay-
Yes stay where you are !

Bonner is anything but subtle here. The song clearly articulates the racist view held by the privileged White Devils, who wish to be sure that the Us's stay where they are, in their subordinate, underprivileged position in society. However, the fact that the White Devils communicate this message through singing a song is significant to the musical motif that runs throughout the play. As the Us's work toward an effective strategy in their fight for racial equality, their own music serves as a counterpoint to the oppressive music of the White Devils.

The potential for music to empower community first becomes apparent with the arrival of the Old Man, whose approach is indicated by a drumbeat heard in the distance. The Old Man walks up to the other Us's, "beating the drum with strong, vigorous jabs that make the whole valley echo and re-echo with rhythm." The effect of the drumbeat upon the community of Us's is immediate: "All the Us stand up and shake off their sleep." upon hearing it. As the Old Man approaches, "The Us all congregate at the center front." Meanwhile", inspired by the drumbeat, "Some of the Us's begin to dance in time to the music." Thus, before the Old Man has even spoken, the sound of his drumming has roused the Us's. who have been lying around relaxing and arguing amongst

themselves, to rise to their feet and gather together as a group. Further, some are even motivated to begin dancing to the beat of the drum. The Old Man's drumming, therefore, has a galvanizing effect on the community of Us's, which eventually leads to the formulation of a new strategy in their fight for equality with the White Devils. The significance of the Old Man's drumming is that African-American cultural practices, such as music and dance, can be a powerful force in the struggle for racial equality with the potential to rouse the members of the community from their complacency, bring them together as a group, and inspire them to take action.

The drumming of the Old Man is also significant because it is associated with traditional African culture. As Joyce Flynn notes in her book *Frye Street aild Environs,* "Bonner's inclusion of drum music seems a deliberate Africanism." Bonner here implies that the African-American community, represented in this play by the Us's, have something to gain by looking back to their African cultural heritage for guidance in the fight for equality. The Old Man further introduces elements of African cultural heritage into the community through his practice of conjuring. Conjuring is associated with traditional African religious practices that, in the Americas, have developed into the practice of voodoo. Voodoo has developed from a combination of traditional African religions brought to the Americas by slaves and the beliefs of the Catholic Church brought to Haiti by French colonists. The Old Man in Bonner's play, through the practice of conjuring, thus draws from an amalgam of African and African-American traditions to empower the community of Us's. The Old Man begins his conjuring by calling upon all of the Old Us' s, past and present. This suggests a form of ancestor worship also associated with African culture. The Old Man calls out, "Old Us! Do you hear me. Old Us that are here do you hear me?" and continues, "Old Us! Old Us!

Old Us that are gone, Old Us that are dust do you hear me!"

Even as he begins conjuring, however, the Old Man speaks in terms of a Christian God. When he calls upon the ancestors of the Us's, "Somewhere you think. you hear-as if mouthed by ten million mouths through rocks and dusk-'Yes-Lord! We hear you! We hear you!'" The Old Man explains to the other Us's that he is a servant of God.

Further, the Old Man's call for blood as a necessary element of the conjuring brew he mixes in the old pot is explained in terms of the Bible. Asked why he must have blood, The Old Man replies, "When God asked a faithful servant once to do sacrifice, even His only child, where did God put the real meat for sacrifice when the servant had the knife upon the son's throat?" At this point, the act of conjuring, a practice associated with African religions, begins to resemble a Christian sermon. And, indeed, the Old Us's respond, as a chorus, with lines from a Christian spiritual: "In the bushes, Lord! In the bushes, Lord! Jehovah put the ram in the bushes!"

The Old Man thus combines the African-derived belief in voodoo with the Christian faith held by many African Americans music and religion are integrally related throughout *The Purple Flower,* with drumming associated with the African-influenced spiritual practice of conjuring and spirituals associated with Christianity. Bonner thereby calls for community organization and social actions as formulated through both traditional African

and modern African-American belief systems, expressed through both African and African-American musical styles.

When the Old Man advises Finest Blood on how to approach the White Devils, ills instructions are based on the power of music and faith, as well as the willingness to sacrifice blood in a violent struggle. Somewhat oddly, a third musical-religious element is added to the voodoo-drumming and Christianity-spirituals motifs when the Old Man refers to the god Pan of Greek mythology. As the Old Man prepares Finest Blood to confront the White Devils, Finest Blood first grabs a rock, ready to attack them. But the Old Man explains that Finest Blood should come to the White Devils first with gifts, such as "the pipes of Pan that every US is born with." Pan, a fertility god in Greek mythology, is characterized by ills lustful nature and is associated with the music of his pipes. He is commonly represented in visual art with the ears, horns, and legs of a goat and the head, arms, and torso of a man. The Old Man thus advises Finest Blood to begin speaking to the White Devils through music. He tells Finest Blood to play on the pipes, to soothe the White Devil and "lure him-make him yearn for the pipe." He explains that "even a White Devil wil1 soften to music. He'll come out, even if he only comes to try to get the pipe from you." Interestingly, however, the Old Man suggests that it is a Christian God who plays the pipes of Pan, a pre-Christian, pagan god, through the instrument of a man. He advises Finest Blood to say to the White Devil:

"White Devil, God is using me for his instrument. You think that it1S I who play on this pipe! But it is not I who play. It is not I, it is God who plays through me-to you".
Via music, Finest Blood functions as an instrument through which God speaks to the White Devils. In the final lines of the play, Finest Blood can be heard, calling out, "White Devil! God speaks to you through me!-Hear Him!-"

The motif of music in *The Purple Flower* speaks to the power of African-American tradition and culture as a Crucial element in the ongoing fight for racial equality. Through his combined practice of voodoo conjuring and Christian sermon, the Old Man draws from both traditional African and new world African-American culture and belief systems, symbolized by both African and American musical traditions. The play's resolution provides a recipe for social action on the part of African Americans, which includes a combination of education, hard work, financial success, Christian faith, and African-American cultural traditions with the willingness to sacrifice in the struggle for equality.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical! Essay on *The Purple Flower,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Berg and Taylor examine what they consider to be the most challenging aspect of The Purple Flower: *"Its paradoxical suggestion that race is both an illusion and a primary determinant of social identities.* "

Setting The stage is divided horizontally into two sections, upper and lower, by a thin board The main action takes place on the upper stage The light is never quite clear on the lower stage, but it is bright enough for you to perceive that sometimes the action that takes place on the upper stage is duplicated on the lower. Sometimes the actors on the upper stage get too vociferous-too violent-and they crack through the boards and they he twisted and curled in mounds. There are any number of mounds there, all twisted and broken You look at them and you are not quite sure whether you see something or nothing; but you see by a curve that there might lie a human body. There is thrust out a white hand-a yellow one-one brown-a black. The Skin-of-Civilization must be very thin A thought can drop you through it.

This excerpt from the stage directions for Marita Bonner's experimental drama *The Purple Flower* provides some clues as to why the play, which won the 1927 *Crisis* prize for "Literary Art and Expression," was never produced. Bonner's description of characters, as ambiguous and intriguing as her set description, indicates two sets of players: Sundry White Devils, whose "horns glow red all the time," and Us's, who may be "white as the White Devils" or "brown as the earth" but should "look as if they were something or nothing". The challenge of realizing such directions on stage is certainly one reason that *The Purple Flower-unlike* Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Plumes.* which won the *Opportunity* prize for drama in the same year-remained unperformed during Bonner's lifetime. Perhaps the more important reason is the play's revolutionary message, particularly the final warning the "Us's" issue to the "White Devils": "You have taken blood You must give blood. . . there can be no other way" Because *The Purple Flower's* form and message are more in keeping with the revolutionary black theater of the 1960s and '70s than with the "folk" or "propaganda" plays typical of the Harlem Renaissance, the play has only recently been acknowledged as a singular contribution to African American theater.

Since its 1974 reprinting in James V. Hatch and Ted Shine's *Black Theater U.S.A.* and its subsequent inclusion in Kathy A. Perkins's *Black Female Playwrights* (1989), *The Purple Flower* has been described variously as allegorical, surrealistic, expressionistic, or simply abstract, but Critics have concurred that the play was most likely meant to be read rather than performed. Yet our experience directing a staged reading of *The Purple Flower* in the context of an undergraduate literature course suggests that Bonner's play is best understood by considering the problems it poses for would-be performers, for the interpretive questions raised by the play text become, in rehearsal and performance, an opportunity to reflect critically on how racial difference is constructed and maintained. What is most striking and most challenging about Bonner's play from a performance perspective is not its prediction of racial revolution, but its paradoxical suggestion that

race is both an illusion *and* a primary determinant of social identities in the United States.

Confronting this paradox in performance raises practical questions (such as how to cast the play) as well as philosophical and political questions-about racial Identity, social conflict, and the relative primacy of race and class oppression-that are not immediately apparent in the text of the play. These issues are often difficult to discuss candidly in predominantly white classroom settings, where white students and students of color can be equally reluctant to pursue such "charged" topics. Yet our African American and white students' collaboration in preparing to perform *The Purple Flower* demonstrates the play's ability to bring to consciousness, and bring into dialogue, competing assumptions about race. By reporting our students' process of enacting the play-a process that highlighted the provocative ambiguities of Bonner' s text-we hope to attract wider attention to *The Purple Flower,* whose unusual form and indeterminate message give it historical significance as well as current potential to foster interracial discussions in the classroom or theater.

In what follows we consider how Bonner's play differs from those of her contemporaries, looking in particular at moments of the play that undercut essential zed and dualistic concepts of race; discuss our students' attempts to negotiate the play's meaning through performance, and reflect on the implications of studying and performing black plays in predominantly white settings.

Critical Essay #3

Clearly, *The Purple Flower* conforms to neither of the two dominant philosophies guiding African American theater in the 1920s. While the revolutionary message of *The Purple Flower* is in keeping with the goals of propaganda plays endorsed by W. E. B. Du Bois, its emphatic non-realism violates DuBois's dictum that "plays of a *real* Negro theater" must "reveal Negro life as it is". *The Purple Flower's* surrealism distinguishes it as well from the "folk" (or "inner-life") plays promoted by Alain Locke and Montgomery. Gregory at Howard University. For while Locke and Gregory disagreed with DuBois's famous injunction that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be," they shared his approval of formal realism, arguing that "the only avenue of genuine achievement in American drama for the Negro lies in the development of the rich veins of folk-tradition of the past and in the portrayal of the authentic life of the Negro masses of today" .

In spite of their disagreements about the specific function of black drama, all three likely concurred with James Weldon Johnson's statement of the larger problem facing black writers of the period. In "The Dilemma of the Negro Author" (1928) Johnson argued that

. . . the Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about-the problem of the double audience it is more than a double audience, it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite points of view his audience is always both white America and black America The Negro author can try the experiment of putting black America in the orchestra chairs, so to speak, and keeping white America in the gallery, but he is likely at any moment to find his audience shifting places on him, and sometimes without notice.

Johnson's use of a theatrical metaphor indicates the particular applicability of his argument to the black dramatist His somewhat contradictory recommendation that a black Writer negotiate the dilemma of a dual audience by "standing on his racial foundation" yet rising "above race, and reach[ing] out to the universal" may shed light on the seeming inconsistencies of *The Purple Flower,* which draws on black folk types, rendered allegorically as "Average" and "Cornerstone," while attempting to Illumine "universal" struggles for power, represented by a purple flower, described (without obvious racial referents) as the Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest. Bonner's apparent attempts to generalize her themes-evident in her indication of the time as "The Middle-of-Things-as-They-are" (which means the End-of- Things for some of the characters and the Beginning-of-Things for others) and the place as "here, there or anywhere-or even nowhere"-militate against a solely racial reading.

Indeed, unlike the majority of plays by her black female contemporaries-which have in common a naturalistic, domestic setting; an interest in psychological realism (as opposed to the stereotypes of the minstrel tradition); and implicit or explicit identification of the race of each character-The *Purple Flower* offers a deliberately nonrealistic setting; undeveloped character types, and, most significant for our staged reading, a

multiplicity of racial markers (from "well-browned" to "bronzy brown" to "browned peach"), indicating gradations of skin tone between "black" and "white."

These divergences from the practice of her contemporaries are all in service of Bonner's more overtly political theater, most obvious in her presentation of an extended" Argument," which reads as follows:

The White Devils live on the side of the hill Somewhere On top of the hill grows the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest This flower' s as tall as a pine and stands alone on top of the hill The Us's live in the valley that lies between Nowhere and Somewhere and spend their time trying to devise means of getting up the hill The white Devils live all over the sides of the hill and try every trick, known and unknown, to keep the Us's from getting to the hill For if the Us's get up the hill, the Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest will shed some of its *perfume and then there they will be Somewhere with the White Devils.*

This argument clearly outlines the play's themes of power, exclusion, and conflict, and the action follows tills outline, with various Us's recalling faded efforts to "get up the hill" and resolving to try a new, more violent tactic involving the sacrifice of a White Devil.

Yet while the plot is straightforward, the identity of the Us's remains ambiguous. On the one hand, the Us's seem to share an historically specific experience of slavery' When one of the Us's recalls "two hundred years of slavery", he presumably refers to the enslavement of African Americans. On the other hand, the play identifies four possible routes to the Purple Flower-Work, Books, God, and Money-that seem to apply more generally to the quest for the American Dream. Likewise, while the climax of the play calls for a young Us named Finest Blood to extract blood from a White Devil apparently a call to violence-the initial stage directions make it difficult to read the predicted violence as a clash solely between blacks and whites. The human "mounds" that Bonner places on the lower stage as examples of those who have failed to gain a place on the hill are made up, after all, of white, yellow, brown, and black figures.

Certainly all of these colors could refer to the various pigmentations of skin defined as black within the racial order of the United States, but it seems more likely, given Bonner's ironic references to the "Thin-Skin-of-Civilization," that she intended to point out the arbitrariness of race itself, for example, the irrational association of skin color with civilization or the lack thereof Given the play's self-conscious highlighting of variations of skin color as well as its suggestion that characters of all colors can fall through the "Skin-of-Civilization," *The Purple Flower* could be interpreted as an allegory about the confrontation between the Haves and Have Nots, a conflict bolstered (but not completely determined) by race. The play is sufficiently ambiguous, that is, to allow a race- and/or class based interpretation.

Critical Essay #4

Our staged reading occurred within the context of an upper-division literature course on women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Taught by Professor Berg, who is white, the course enrolled fifteen students' five who Identified themselves as African American and ten who identified as white, twelve women and three men; twelve English majors as well as a biology major, an anthropology major, and a continuing education student. Though the course devoted equal time to poetry, fiction, and drama, students were particularly taken by the one-act plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson, Mary Burrill, Shirley Graham, and Manta Bonner. Wanting to share with the campus community their enthusiasm for these plays, as well as their strong conviction that black women writers from this period deserved wider recognition, students decided to host a "celebration" of black women's creativity in the 1920s. Students planned to incorporate poetry and music into the event, but wanted its centerpiece to be a reading of *The Purple Flower,* which they felt was the most radical-and the most relevant-of the plays on the syllabus. Because neither the students nor their literature professor had extensive theatrical experience, Professor Taylor, a white professor of theater and dance, agreed to join the class as a consultant during the several sessions devoted to planning the celebration. It is important to note, however, that the rehearsal process was largely student-driven, with the instructors serving more as facilitators than directors.

Coming to terms with *The Purple Flower's* ambiguities through casting and staging decisions engaged students in what Michael Vanden Heuvel has recently described as the theatrical "enactment or production of knowledge". Arguing that dramatic literature might serve to interrogate "the mythologized assumptions of reading that are traditionally taught in literature courses," Vanden Heuvel notes that, although drama is "written within an aesthetic and semiotic framework that includes theatricality or spectacle," these are the aspects most often suppressed when drama is taught as literature Our own collaboration as professors of literature and of theater/dance, as well as the necessary collaboration of our students in interpreting and enacting the play, allowed us to consider the play both as text and as theater, making possible a self-conscious performance of textual meaning which, as Vanden Heuvel argues, can "transform knowledge in the act of producing it".

While all dramatic literature might be said to produce knowledge in the act of performance, Bonner's play is unique among dramas of the Harlem Renaissance in the extent to which it demands a reader's (and performer's) active collaboration in meaning making. Not surprisingly, during our initial discussions of the play in class, our students varied widely in their interpretations. Yet students' understanding of the play did not polarize along race lines; rather, approximately equal proportions of black and white students initially felt that the play was solely about race or only partly about race. Students who espoused the latter view felt that America's history of racial discrimination left a legacy of economic disparities, but that race no longer determined an individual's power and Privilege. They cited Michael Jackson as an example of a "raceless" success story. Other students argued that Jackson's ever-lightening skin, which they interpreted as evidence of internalized racism, demonstrated how Important race still was, they

cited Rodney King's experience as further evidence of the persistence of deeply rooted racial stereotypes.

These students concluded that, given the persistence of racism, a "race war" was a conceivable, even inevitable, eventuality.

While this conversation began a useful dialogue about the ambiguous relationship between racial membership and social privilege, as well as between self- and social definitions of racial Identity, it should be obvious from the examples cited above that initial discussions of these issues did not venture far from familiar mass-media images. Certainly, the dynamics of racial privilege and oppression were greatly simplified by students' reliance on mass- media images of racial" success" and "discrimination," which allowed students to talk about race in a sort of shorthand and created an Illusion of consensus. Because they could easily assume shared outrage at Rodney King's beating, for example, students could avoid revealing the particularities or the complexities of their own experiences of race. It is also worth noting that the examples students chose to illustrate their Ideas about race were, without exception, black; at this point, neither black nor white students indicated an awareness of whiteness as a racial identity.

But as our discussions of the playas text turned to a consideration of how we would realize the play in performance, and students struggled to find ways of concretizing Bonner's abstractions, they had to make explicit the reasons that they interpreted moments of the playas they did, and this sometimes involved sharing anecdotes and analogies from experiences closer to home. As instructors we were committed to a collaborative process that would encourage negotiated meanings, but more often than not it was impossible to reach consensus. Because student discussions of the relationships among race, entitlement, and power revealed such different experiences and assumptions, they were reluctant to present the play in either of the two ways its critics have interpreted it: as a "morality play" whose characters "resonate as Everyman and Every woman" or as a revolutionary drama advocating "racial confrontation" The question then became how they could maintain the play's ambiguity in performance, making both racially specific and racially non-specific interpretations available to their audience.

Though time and budget constraints ruled out the possibility of doing a fully mounted production of the play, we wanted our performance to include at least some elements of characterization, staged action, and spectacle. To this end, we asked students to agree on practical decisions related to three major questions. (1) How should we cast the play? (2) What are the crucial elements of the setting and how should we indicate them for the audience? And (3) to what extent should we physicalize the characters?

Casting. In considering the first question, students had to decide whether the collectivity implied by Bonner's use of the term *Us's* was a specifically racial identification or could describe any group of people united through oppression and struggle. Practically speaking, should only African American students play Us's and only white students play White Devils ? We asked students to consider the larger implications of casting in terms

of current debates among theater practitioners and theorists, prefacing our class discussion of this issue with a brief presentation on current casting practices as well as philosophical debates regarding traditional and non-traditional casting. We introduced the concepts of "color-blind" casting and race-specific casting in order to engage the question of if, and how, race mattered in the theater. Though our own options were governed to a large extent by the demographics of our group (there were not enough African American students to cover all the "Us" roles, for example), we felt that it was Important for students to consider the Implications of casting decisions.

We wanted, especially, to contextualize the Issue in terms of the historically exploitative tradition of black representation in the theater and in terms of the current debate between exponents of the "race-doesn't-and-shouldn't-matter" and the "race (and gender)-always-matter" schools of thought. Though this presentation was brief and necessarily generalized, students were introduced to the idea that, in the theater, responsibility for artistic decisions is conjoined with responsibility for the political Implications of such decisions The complexities of the contemporary debate about casting, combined with the inherent ambiguities in the script and students' varying interpretations of it, made this the most protracted and murky, yet possibly most fruitful, discussion. Our casting decisions were complicated by the very different forms of participation called for in the parts of the White Devils and the Us's, the White Devils having no lines (and thus depending on movement) and the Us's having reading duties that would limit movement.

Ultimately, rather than "solving" these interrelated problems, students complicated the binary opposition Implied by Bonner's two groups of characters by deciding to render as characters the mounds of people described in Bonner's stage directions, people of unspecified race who, through "too vociferous" and *"too violent"* action, have fallen through the *"Skin-of-Civilization".* Students decided to refer to these characters as "Strivers" and to use them to embody the spoken lines of the Us's, thus enacting Bonner's direction that *"the action that takes place on the upper stage is duplicated on the lower".* The Strivers' improvisatory movement motif eventually became a focal point of our staged read ing and represented a collaboration not only among students, but also between actors and playwright.

In spite of our lengthy discussions of casting-and perhaps because the dilemma appeared irresolvable-students chose their own roles, seemingly guided more by their inclination to read, move, or dance than by ideological considerations. We did point out to students that their decision to leave the casting up to "individual" choice in fact represented a collective decision about the play's meaning, Since the presence of black "White Devils" and white "Us's" on stage would literally and figuratively affect what the audience saw in the play, making a racially specific interpretation less likely. While some students and both instructors felt some trepidation about this choice, which we feared might over-universalize Bonner's message, and thus water down the play's revolutionary import, the decisions did have some advantages. Students who took on a part that allowed them to enact a social positioning other than their own seemed to gain more insights into the play's complexities than those who did not.

Setting. with the issue of casting negotiated, we moved to concrete questions of setting and staging. We decided to represent the hill, realm of the White Devils, by using the balcony of our black box theater, and to place the Us's on the stage floor. Positioned above the heads of the Us's, the White Devils would be engaged exclusively in taunting the Us's by waving bits of purple paper (symbolic of their "plece of the flower") and dancing to an offstage recording of En Vogue's 1992 hit "Never Gonna Get it," whose title and lyrics offered a fitting update of the taunting chant indicated in the play text We employed a scaffold between the two levels to represent the thin "Skin-of-Civilization" and to serve as a ladder of sorts for the "Strivers" alternately to struggle up and fall from. Other aspects of the setting would be conveyed through the use of a narrator who would read Bonner's extensive stage directions.

We devoted a good deal of discussion to how (or if) to represent the purple flower as part of the setting. Like our debate about casting, our discussion about how to concretize the play's central symbol made more visible our different assumptions about the play's meaning. Agreeing that the quest of the Us's for the Purple Flower could be seen as a rough analogue to the pursuit of the American Dream, students disagreed about the validity of this pursuit, depending upon their understanding of what the Dream, and thus the Flower, represented. When they described their visualizations of the Purple Flower, students fell into two camps: those who saw the flower as a metaphor for material goods and the status associated with access to worldly riches, and those who argued that it represented spiritual or communal ideals and harmony.

Suggestions for visual symbols for the flower, then, ranged from a glittering mirror ball (representing materialism) to an empty spotlight (representing the empty hope of attaining freedom while anyone remained oppressed) to a mixed-race baby (representing a utopian future in which race "wouldn't matter" and all would live in harmony). Our attempts to concretize the Purple Flower again highlighted the ambiguity of Bonner's message, with suggestions wavering between racially specific and "universal" interpretations Consensus was (again) not reached; the issue was resolved only through individual student initiative when one student created a large, and fairly literal, purple flower out of craft materials and brought it into the final rehearsal. Suspended over the heads of the actors, it glittered in its own spotlight (our sole use of theatrical lighting).

Staging. Throughout our preparations, classroom debates about the play's meaning were interspersed with movement exercises designed to help students feel, as well as intellectualize, some of the play's conflicts. One such exercise asked a randomly selected majority of students to link hands and form a circle excluding the minority. The minority then had to attempt to sneak or force themselves into the circle. Before switching roles, each group had the opportunity to Voice insights about what the exercise evoked; the students who "made it" into the circle expressed guilt for leaving others outside the circle as well as the sense that their new position "on the inside" was uncomfortably constricting. These deceptively simple exercises allowed us to discuss feelings of solidarity, exclusion, isolation, and anxiety that accompanied different students' Identification with a dominant or subordinate group. In particular, they made more obvious some differences in perception between most of the white students, who

had not thought of themselves as members of a racial group, and most of the black students, who had.

Informed by such exercises and discussions, students divided into three groups to devise physical actions as well as costuming for the staged reading.

The White Devils used excessive amounts of makeup to indicate the superficiality and self-aggrandizement of those closest to the flower; the Us's chose to wear matching costumes of blue Jeans and black t-shirts to represent the collective identity of the Us's, in spite of their varying skin tones; the three white women who elected to take on the role of "Strivers" developed an expressionistic movement theme-involving pushing, pulling, and falling-to physically specific lines read by the Us's. Using each other's bodies alternately as bridges and barriers to ascending the scaffolding, these students attempted to represent both the collectivity of human struggle and the lack of solidarity that leads to literal downfall. Not surprisingly, the Strivers, who were physically the most engaged, reported having the most powerful experience in performance.

Critical Essay #5

In general, student essays reflecting on their experience confirmed Margaret Wilkerson's suggestion that "the theater offers a unique opportunity to step into the space of other individuals and other experiences-with safety". Wilkerson observes that Critics "outside or on the perimeters of [black] cultural experience" often "discuss black theater as if it were unrelated to their own lives". The same could be said of white students (and faculty), who often view race as attaching to others but not to themselves. For white students, participating in an interracial production that demands self-reflection may do more to interrupt this tendency than viewing African American drama "from the outside." *The Purple Flower's* accessibility to white performers-who can play either White Devils or light-skinned Us's-makes it particularly useful in predominantly white institutions, where white directors sometimes hesitate to direct African American plays focused unambiguously on "the black experience," and black and white students can thus be limited to a white repertoire.

For many white students, the experience of enacting a racial identity on stage made it difficult to view either "blackness" or "whiteness" from a remove. One of the most interesting realizations came from a white student whose role as a White Devil gave her insight into what is often unacknowledged in discussions of race: that whiteness depends on blackness, and that white privilege is actively upheld by maintaining race as an insurmountable difference. She noted that, although the White Devils were in a "coveted position in the scheme of things," there was "nothing for [us White Devils] to do that wasn't in direct relationship with the Us's. In other words, I was only employed in showing the Us's what they were not, and what they could not be. Although I felt slightly exalted as a 'white devil' I also felt kept out of things and apart from the main action of the stage." Another white student indicated that playing the part of a White Devil changed her perceptions of Us's and White Devils, causing her to admire the solidarity of the Us's and question the rapaciousness of the White Devils.

It was not until the performance that I noticed the unity among the Us's. . . I felt that the White Devils had no emotional connection [except through] possessing the purple flower I felt that the Us's wouldn't have fought or Jailed each other for the purple flower but that the White Devils would have. I was really surprised how much more I thought about during the actual performance as compared to rehearsing it.

Students who performed a racial Identity other than their own had even stronger responses. An African American student who chose to play the role of a White Devil found her understanding of both Us's and White Devils altered by the experience of performance: "When I saw [the play] performed, I didn't find the Us's as pitiful as I did when I read the play. They seemed to have more courage. . . As for the White Devil part-I liked running around and having freedom, while the Us's just stood there basically and read or withered to the ground it did make me feel kind of superior being up there dancing and teasing" This student calls attention to how her own literal positioning above the action on stage-much like the social positioning of whites over blacks-

contributed to a seductive feeling of superiority Her comments reflect her increased awareness of whiteness as a socially constructed identity.

Both black and white students' responses suggested that our discussions of racial casting, and one ultimate decision to cast across race, made possible what Deborah Thompson has described as not merely "color conscious" but "color consciousness-raising" casting. Thompson argues that the legacy of whites performing black roles-negatively associated with blackface-can potentially be "transformed into a mode of understanding, of trying on other identities, so that body-Identities, particularly racial Identities, become both fictions and truths, both transgressable and respected". While this sort of "trying on" can be a powerful catalyst to rethink assumptions about race, the response of the white, female student who chose to play the role of Finest Blood (the member of the Us's chosen to attack a White Devil) makes clear not only the possibilities but also the limitations of using cross-racial casting as a consciousness-raising technique. This student reports drawing on her own understanding of oppression in order to render her role believable:

I realize that this may sound very corny, but I really tried to make myself into Finest Blood I tried to understand what it would feet like to want that winch other people are withholding from you-thus, I drew on my own experiences as a woman in a patriarchal society in an attempt to allow my frustration and anger to enter into my voice as I spoke my lines it sounds weird, but I really wanted to make it believable. . . I did not want to just read-I wanted to be

Her response demonstrates the power of performance to elicit identification and empathy; her desire to "be" Finest Blood, whom she viewed as black, was certainly a Sincere attempt to take on a different "body-identity." At the same time, her comments underscore the temptation to equate different forms of oppression, thereby glossing over the historical specificity of racial and gender oppression. Certainly we did not intend to give our students the impression that enacting a role-in improvisational exercises or a staged reading could convey the "real" experience of a social position they did not inhabit, for instance, that white students could "be" black in performance. with hindsight, we would take more time exploring with our students the fine line between what Thompson defines as constructive transgression and what could easily become appropriation.

While students generally evaluated their experience favorably, we do not mean to imply that our pedagogical process was either seamless or an unqualified success. As white feminist faculty collaborating as teachers and co-directors of the play, we faced many of the same issues our students did. Not only did the two of us debate the play's meaning-as well as our implication in the race and class conflicts it depicts-but we also struggled with our role as facilitators of the interpretive process. Ellen Donkin suggests the potential pitfalls of white directors working with black play texts, arguing that

the model of director as "interpreter" of the text is full of the kinds of bogus neutralities and veiled authority that feminists have been exposing in literature and literary criticism for the past twenty years. In the instance of a white director working on an African

American play text the real functions of the position of director become even more blatantly exposed as a form of colonialism.

Donkin argues, however, that collaboration can decentralize the interpretive process, providing one way for white directors to "enter the text of an African American play in a position of inquiry (as distinct from the missionary position)". As teachers, rather than directors, we were less interested in offering a particular interpretation of Bonner's play than in providing conditions for cross-racial dialogue and learning Nonetheless, the sort of decentralization Donkin calls for in the theater is equally crucial in predominantly white classroom settings where the authority invested in a white teacher might silence minority voices.

Our experience discussing race in such settings tells us that, while the literature classroom or theater never escapes larger social constructions of race, collaboration on many levels-in this case, among and between faculty, students, and a challenging playwright-can make different understandings of race more visible, if not resolvable Our student performers' attempts to embody the roles of White Devils, Us's, or Strivers engaged them in a process of inquiry requiring empathic identifications with their respective characters as well as critical reflections about race.

While we and our students strived to be self-critical about our assumptions, our interpretive decisions might well be contested outside of the predominantly white setting in which our staged reading was performed Yet what makes *The Purple Flower* particularly useful as a teaching tool and particularly powerful in performance is Bonner's deliberate solicitation of debate, nowhere more evident than in her decision to end the play with a question. The final stage directions (read aloud by the narrator of our staged reading) indicate that Finest Blood's demand for blood echo into a sudden silence, in which:

(All the US listen. All the valley listens. Nowhere listens. All the WHITE DEVILS listen. Somewhere listens. Let the curtain close leaving all the US, the WHITE DEVILS, Nowhere, Somewhere, listening, listening Is it time?)

Although we did not end our performance by asking our audience to respond to this question, soliciting tills form of audience participation as a final form of collaboration would have continued, and further complicated, the dialogue we undertook as a classroom community. Future fully mounted productions of the play would certainly be enhanced by incorporating tills form of participatory theater, which would make each production a "work-in-progress" rather than a finished product. Encouraging such dialogue is especially crucial in the current racial climate, when conflict and mistrust appear to be increasing and public forums for interracial conversations are all too rare to the extent that African Americans and whites still form what James Weldon Johnson called a "divided audience," performing or viewing innovative cross-racial plays like *The Purple Flower* may spur the sort of attentive listening that Bonner urges and theater ideally fosters.

Source: Allison Berg and Merideth Taylor, "Enacting Difference Marita Bonner's *Purple Flower* and the Ambiguities of Race," in *African-American Review,* Vol 32,No 3,Fall 1998, pp. 469-478.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay excerpt, Chick examines how a short story by Bonner- "Nothing New"-anticipated The Purple Flower *in theme and symbolism.*

Bonner's education is firmly grounded in the classics. She attended Radcliffe, Harvard's sister college, from 1918 to 1922 and majored in English and Comparative Literature. Her upper-level English courses included the History of English Literature, the Lives and Characters of English and American Men of Letters, Anglo-Saxon, and Shakespeare.

Beginning in her last year of college, Bonner began teaching high school English and continued to do so until 1963. Thus, she would have had more than a passing familiarity with the poetry and would have likely regarded the lyrics as prime source material for her own original works. After college, she joined Georgia Douglas Johnson's writing group, "The Round Table" or the *"S'* Street Salon," where she met other members of the Talented Tenth, such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, and Jean Toomer.

From 1925 to 1941, Bonner published twenty-four works in the high profile integrationist Journals of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *Crisis,* and the National Urban League, *Opportunity* Her publications included three plays, seventeen short stories, two essays, and two reviews. She won first and second prize in the 1933 literary awards given by *Opportunity* When she married William Almy Occomy in 1930, they moved to Chicago and she took a three-year respite from writing. When she took up the pen again, she devoted her craft solely to short fiction. She quit writing in 1941 and died thirty years later.

The significance of Bonner's writing today is not measured by what other writers she knew or by her literary prizes, but by her legacy for later readers and Writers. She proves to be "a writer ahead of her time" not merely as an "early race-conscious feminist," but for writing about the African American woman's "tertiary Jeopardy" of facing prejudices based on race, sex, *and* class. Bonner's insight is indeed ahead of her time and, as several critics have noted, she should be acknowledged as a "forerunner of such current-day luminaries as Alice Walker, Tom Morrision, Gloria Naylor, Tom Cade Bambara, and Gayl Jones" This perspective, however, also gives Bonner the pessimistic tone that sets her apart from other Harlem Renaissance writers who hoped to show the potential and promise of African Americans through writing "race uplift" material.

While most of her protagonists are black or white, Bonner's stories are not set in a black and white world. Her world is multi-cultural, especially her series of short stories about Frye Street, a neighborhood in Chicago that became her "fictional universe," her "multi-ethnic cosmos." Her concise, tightly crafted plays, stories, and vignettes present a point of view that echoes the naturalism of Stephen Crane's *Maggie. A Girl of the Streets,* identifying with the working classes who barely survive in a bleak, urban environment. Her writing is not, however, limited to such realism, for her voice is also that of a

Modernist, experimental with technique and form, often lapsing into the surrealism and expressionism most evident in *The Purple Flower.*

"Nothing New," a short story published in 1926, marks not only her Initial experimentation with her "key symbol of the local neighborhood" of Frye Street. It also inaugurates her early sketches of her second, though unacknowledged, key symbol' the flower as the symbol of race and gender. In this early story, Bonner uses the flower with its conventional reference to white womanhood, yet she begins exploring the ambiguities of race and gender associated with such an ideal.

The story begins as a fairy tale begins, with "There was, once. .," yet as the story unfolds, it turns into a fairy tale of racism, violence, and injustice in an urban setting. The familiar narrative voice that reminds the reader, "You have been down on Frye Street," acts as a tour guide to this strictly segregated, fictional neighborhood. The protagonist, a black boy named Denny Jackson, beats up a white boy over some flowers that are on the "white kids' side" of a field. Years later, when Denny goes to college, he falls in love with a white woman and must fight a white man over this relationship that again trespasses onto the "white side." Denny kills this rival, Allen Carter, and is executed for the crime. Although Bonner directly points to the conventional use of the flower as symbolic of the ideal white femininity represented by Pauline, Denny's girlfriend, that flower is now surrounded by violence. Further, Bonner's earliest experiment with the symbol is revolutionary in that it also represents a black man who blurs the lines of race and gender, thus boldly challenging the images in the lyrics of those earlier English poets.

ill this initial representation, Bonner offers the most detailed description of the flower. the specific description, "dusky purple milkweeds," is significant, indicating issues of gender and race. The *milkweed* is emblematic of both whiteness and womanhood, pointing to its overt association with Pauline. The flower is "slender, bending to him" as it "beckoned" to Denny. Similarly, Pauline is "[s]lender,.. .moulded. Poised. Head erect on neck, neck uplifted on shoulders, body held neither too stiff or too slack. Poised slenderly molded as an aristocrat." By overtly connecting Pauline with the purple flowers, Bonner begins by conforming to the flower's traditional representation of idealized white womanhood. The white society in the story points to this idealization, for Pauline is the "hypnotized frail flower," according to the newspapers that report on Denny's trial, and "the beautiful and the true," according to the judge and jury. Rather than merely using the conventional symbol as an artistic technique, Bonner appears to be deliberately alluding to the trope of the Renaissance poets and assigning it to the white press and the white judicial system. She establishes the convention of the flower's representation of fragile, pure, white womanhood in order to challenge it: while Pauline is clearly this white ideal described by Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, and the other English lyricists, her appearance suggests the regal, "aristocratic" connotations of purple. She is white, yet she suggests purple. She further subverts the ideal to which she is compared by being in love with a black man. She has openly broken a taboo As another character points out, "Pauline Hammond goes out with that nigger Denny Jackson!" Pauline ultimately falls short of the Ideal, for she is not "pure." Her appearance, and certainly her love affair, imply a racial mixing, an impurity.

Bonner further subverts the symbol of womanhood by removing the flower from its natural hideaways and transplanting it to an urban reality marked by violence. She diverges from other Harlem Renaissance women writers who use nature symbolism, including floral imagery, to represent femininity as "nurturing, life-giving, a haven from strife." As Doris E. Abramson suggests, because of Bonner's classical education, she uses the color purple not only for its connotations of "wealth and power ('In regal purple dressed.' Pope)," but also for its earlier references to "'colored' or 'stained by,' as if by blood" because purple was "esteemed among ancients" and "was closer, in Hebrew and Greek, to the color we call *crimson."* The fight over the purple flowers is conflated with the fight over the white woman. The white boy yells, "You stay off the white kids' side, nigger!" just as Allen yells, "Stay on your own side !" Denny even confuses the two incidents Just before the fight with Allen: "On your own side. On the white kids' side. That old fight-the flower, bending toward him. He'd move the white kid! Move him and get the flower' Move him and get what was his!" By surrounding her floral imagery with violence, Bonner develops a technique that connects to the Harlem Renaissance women poets who used nature as an "objective correlative through which they could articulate their gender oppression as well as that of race, for nature, like them, had been objectified, invaded, and used by men seeking power and wealth."

Ultimately, it is the urge to protect the ideal represented by the symbol that leads to bloodshed. Pauline, a white woman, is closely guarded by the other members of her race, especially the men. Allen tries to kill Denny to make him "[l]et that white woman alone, nigger!" but Denny kills him instead. The white judge and jury recognize Allen as "a man who had sacrificed his life for the beautiful and the true" and order Denny to be executed. In this cycle of violence, Bonner connects to the history of lynching in America, the violence spawned by racial and sexual issues in which white men have the "power to terrorize black men as a potential threat to the virtue of white womanhood."

In "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory,"

Hazel V. Carby paraphrases Ida B. Wells' *Southern Horrors* in which she claims that "white men used their ownership of the body of the white female as a terrain on which to lynch the black male." To demonstrate this historical truth, "Nothing New" reveals a series of attempted lynchings, first by the white boy who tried to keep the flower (representative of the white female) on the "white kids' side" and then by Allen Carter, who tried to protect Pauline's virtue. Finally, the courts follow through with the lynching-called an execution within the legal institution-not only for the death of Allen Carter but also to punish Denny for trespassing on their terrain: Pauline, a white woman, "the beautiful and the true."

There is yet another level of symbolic subversion at which Bonner's flower operates. The milkweeds suggest whiteness, yet they are "dusky purple." Thus, this flower signifies the ambiguity of race: a racial mixture that is both white and black, yet neither purely white nor purely black. Pauline, the obvious referent for the flower, is clearly white, despite her suggestions of purple. Denny, however, is not clearly black. Bonner explores the boundaries of the seemingly apparent "facts" of whiteness, blackness

masculinity, and femininity through Denny, who embodies ambiguities of both race and gender.

Just as the flower is a dark milkweed, Denny is black with white features that were "meant to go with the blondest hair and the bluest eyes. He was not blond, though. He was clean shaven and curly haired and brown as any Polynesian" Indeed, the white women at his art school are "unconsciously" attracted to him despite the fact, which they periodically and conveniently forget, that "[h]e is a nigger " Denny blurs the boundaries of gender as well.

The white boy with whom he fights for the flowers taunts Denny for his "[s]issy" desire of "[P]icking flowers " Also, his father worries that Denny is too pretty, too effeminate, appearing as hIs father "thought no boy should look" He tells Denny, "Why don't you run and wrestle and race with the other boys? You must be a girl. Boys play rough and fight!" However, Denny's mother tries to prevent him from fighting and from conforming to tins definition of aggressive manhood. Ultimately, Denny goes to art school, a place where there "[a]in't nothin' but women paddin' up and down," according to his father, instead of doing "some real man's work." Through Denny, Bonner explores and subverts the seemingly clear-cut distinctions between black and white, masculine and feminine.

II.

The virtual absence of significant scholarly material may be due to critics' failure to contexualize this enigmatic piece within Bonner's opus it marks her return to her flower imagery through a different genre and the removal of this conventional symbol from its focus on gender in order to spotlight issues of race.

Two years after "Nothing New," Bonner returned to tins symbol in what is generally acknowledged as her masterpiece, *The Purple Flower,* published in 1928. It is the drama of the White Devils, who horde the seductive, purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest, and the multi-colored Us's, who cultivated the land and built the houses for the White Devils on beautiful hillside called Somewhere, where the Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest is enshrined. The White Devils forbid the Us's from reaching the flower and even from coming to Somewhere, Singing, "stay-stay-stay-Yes stay where you are!" In the end, the Us's are on the threshold of a bloody revolution while everyone Watts and asks, "Is it time?" The setting is surreal, *"Might be here, there or anywhere--or even nowhere,* " and on the lower level of the stage below the action, *there might be a human body.* "

The Purple Flower is a morality play, a conventional genre of the 14th and 15th centuries in which abstract virtues and vices are personified. Bonner's resulting allegory traces "the black quest for freedom and happiness in post-Emancipation America." Her appropriation of this genre, however, subverts it, for the battle is not to save one's soul, as in traditional morality plays, but to spill blood in order to enable the New Man, a new species to be created through someone's-anyone's-death, in order to defeat the White Devils and reach the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest, this ideal of an abstract land of opportunity.

"Nothing New" clearly anticipates *The Purple Flower,* for there are many similarities in theme and plot, such as the call by the empowered to the disenfranchised to "Stay where you are." The flower in each is placed upon a hillside where, in the short story, not White Devils but "strange" children-the white kids-guard it These children are unfamiliar to Denny as if they were of a different race, such as the Us's and the White Devils. Further, the purple flowers in each "beckon" from the "other side" Finally, the character Average in the play, who proclaims that it is "[b]etter [to] stay safe and sound where he is! At least he got somewhere to eat and somewhere to lay his head", tries to maintain the status quo and make sure that his fellow oppressed Us's hope for "nothing new."

Bonner's writing was widely read. So often did her by-line appear and "so frequently [did she] capture the literary prizes offered by both magazines *[Crisis* and *Opportunity]"* that she was "closely studied by aspiring young writers of her period." In fact, Joyce Flynn claimss that Bonner's two-part story, "Tin Can" contains enough plot similarities to Richard Wright's *Native Son* as to suggest a "shaping influence of Occomy's [Bonner's] urban fiction on Wright, who knew Occomy."

Yet the little scholarly work on Bonner has been focused on this play. Her name is most often found buried in a study of early African American dramatists, thus calling attention solely to this one work and neglecting the rest of her opus. The play defies simple discussion. Scholarly attention to *The Purple Flower* has been short-sighted, for critics either focus solely on the political theme of the play or they fail to offer substantial analysis beyond a paragraph or two For instance, in her introduction to *Nine Plays by Black Women,* Margaret B. Wilkerson claimss that it is an important early play by an African American woman, yet she dismisses it as "race propaganda, "a form that emphasizes a political agenda rather than "art." Other Critics point to its unusual technique. E. Quita Craig suggests that Bonner experimented with European techniques of "Brechtian distancing and symbolism that had been used by only a few white playwrights during the decade," thus departing from "the dominant realism of the period." Nellie McKay similarly points to Bonner's experimentation with expressionism, this trend towards unrealistic, distorted, nightmarish staging' "not a form that gained popularity among black writers during the 1920's." *Natalie Mann* by Jean Toomer stands as au earlier expressionistic work by an African American writer, but McKay says that "It is unlikely that Bonner was aware of *Natalie Mann,* " making her achievements with this technique "even more outstanding"

Bonner's experimentation with technique, however, is not all that separates the play from others of the time. The superlatives attached to discussions of it reveal its uniqueness. For instance, Errol Hill calls it one of the "most unusual plays ever written on the subject of black liberation." Similarly, Wilkerson claims that it is "the most provocative play" of the early twentieth century it does indeed diverge from the expectations of Harlem Renaissance literature.

Clearly, the anger and urgency epitomized by its final call for "Blood!" appear to have no place with the "race uplift" material of *The New Negro,* one manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance. As McKay points out, most writers were "more concerned with the

celebration of the black identity, and wrote optimistically of the future of blacks in America." Thus, by resisting the expectations of the literary period, Bonner's work represents the inevitable rupture in tidy definitions that are imposed upon individuals.

This virtual absence of significant scholarly material may be due to critics' failure to contextualize this enigmatic pIece within Bonner's opus. It marks her return to her flower Imagery through a different genre to explore further meanings of the symbol. Like other women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Angelina Weld Grimke and Georgia Douglas Johnson, Bonner employs similar themes and motifs within several different genres, perhaps because a change of venue would alter the effect or provide further significance of these themes and motifs.

In the play, Bonner's experimentation with the flower is marked by the removal of the conventional symbol from its focus on gender in order to spotlight Issues of race. The flower here is the ideal of ungendered whiteness. This representation is apropos of the abstractness of an expressionistic morality play in which characters have names such as Finest Blood and Average and places are referred to as Somewhere and Nowhere.

Again, as in "Nothing New," the flower represents what is white. The purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest is the symbol of wealth and power and opportunity and freedom that belong solely to the White Devils. In order to reach this ideal, Old Mall initiates a melting pot at God's command, he says, to create a New Man superior to the Us's. As Flynn points out, the purple flower atop the hill of somewhere resonates with Langston Hughes's "the Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in which he "defined the 'racial mountain' . . . as the 'urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold [or melting pot] of American standardization.'" The Us's are overtly plural to include different colors-' *'They can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the center of a poppy"* -as well as both male and female (Bonner's italics). Thus, the creation of a New Man would obliterate the diversity of the Us's in favor of a specific, singular male. To achieve the white ideal, then, heterogeneity is sacrificed for homogeneity. Thus, this immaculate conception with an Old Man as surrogate "mother" with an lion womb represents the submission to what Hughes called the whiteness of American standardization and what Marita Bonner called the purple flower.

Considering the privileged position represented by the flower and the idealization of it by the Us's, the name the White Devils is an apparent oxymoron. It undercuts the ideal and those who allegedly live Life-at-Its-Fullest. Appropriate to this name, the behavior of the White Devils reveals further irony of this ideal. Not only do they horde the purple flower and beat the Us's back from Somewhere, but they "built up half their land on our [the Us's] bones" and "ripened crops of cotton, watering them with our blood."

Further, the White Devils reveal their potential for violence-significantly sexual violence-when one of the White Devils pinches Sweet, a beautiful female Us, from behind the bushes in the dark. This white-on-black White Devil to Sweet) threat of sexual violence is the counterpart to the black-on-white (Denny to Pauline) sexual violence alleged by Allen Carter and the white power structure in "Nothing New." While the latter (Denny's

alleged threat to Pauline) suggests the rape of white women by black men as the impetus for lynchings, the former (a White Devil's threat to Sweet) clearly alludes to the history of slave women who were the sexual victims of their white masters. Finest Blood, described as a *"slender, tall, bronzy brown youth who walks with his head high... [and] touches the ground with his feet as if it were a velvet rug and not sunbaked, jagged rocks"* (sounding much like Denny Jackson), threatens to kill the man who pinched Sweet (Just as Allen Carter threatened Denny to protect Pauline), but he postpones the confrontation until the end with the call for blood in the name of revolution (Bonner's italics). Eventually, as soon as the curtain falls, the pristine flower atop the hill of Somewhere and the whiteness which surrounds it wil1 be stained red-as the archaic definition of purple indicates-by the violence of the Imminent racial revolution Here, Bonner has again placed her flower, symbolic of a white ideal, in the midst of the bloodshed which it motivated.

Source: Nancy Chick, "Manta Bonner's Revolutionary *Purple Flower* Challenging the Symbol of White Womanhood," in *The Langston Hughes Review,* Vol XIII, No I, Fall 1994/Spring 1995, pp 21-27.

Critical Essay #7

In the following essay excerpt, Abramson gives an overview of The Purple Flower *and calls it "a paradigm for later plays" treating racial issues.*

Angelina Weld Grimke, Mary T. Burrill, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Manta O. Bonner were all educated members of the middle class in a country that allowed them an education, hinted at assimilation, and jealously kept them from the prize of full participation in a society dominated by white males. They taught at the famous Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C Grimke taught English and history and in the 1925 yearbook she wrote a poem for the graduating class in which she referred to "quick' Ding youth whose eyes have seen the gleam; /. . .youth between whose tears and laughter stream/ Bright bows of hope." Mary Burrill taught in the same department. Marita Bonner taught at Dunbar briefly and at Armstrong High School in the same city. Also in Washington was the distinguished poet and playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson (her sons attended Dunbar in the twenties). Their plays were written during the teens and twenties of this century.

They are far from interchangeable as women or as writers, but it is interesting to note that they shared a middle-class background that included a classical education. They wrote plays about the Black experience and experimented with language and form. Some wrote in dialect; others did not They wrote serious plays, not for Broadway-which preferred musical revues-but for the "churches and lodges, and halls" recommended by W. E. B Dubois: "If it is a Negro play that will interest us and depict our life, experience and humor, it cannot be sold to the ordinary theatrical producer, but it can be produced in our churches and lodges, and halls.". . .

Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower,* stands above the other plays as an allegorical statement, a paradigm for later plays, a battle cry that is a question-for Bonner asked in 1928 not, will there be a revolution, Black versus white, but "Is it time?" That question hangs in the air like a banner at the end of this revolutionary poem of a play.

Sundry White Devils control the hillside, on top of which grows, "the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest." The US's live in the valley. We are told that the time is "The Middle-of- Things-as-They-are" and that means "the End-of- Things for some of the characters and the Beginning-of- Things for others." The White Devils are "artful dancers on the Thin-Skin-of-Civilization." The US's "can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the center of >a poppy."

The US's have tried all kinds of ways to get to the top of the hill. In the course of the play, those ways are rehearsed in speeches and chants: work, education, religion, the acquisition of money And the White Devils' song rolls out across the valley:

You stay where you are! We don't want
you up here!
If you come you'll be on par

with all we hold dear
So stay-stay-stay
Yes stay where you are!

Bonner's choice ofthe color purple for the coveted flower is an interesting one. She had already used the symbol ofa purple flower two years earlier, in a realistic short story that is a forerunner ofthe play. In that story, "Nothing New", a young black boy named Denny fights with a white boy for possession ofa purple flower.

Down on the ground, Denny and the white boy squirmed and lacked They dug and pounded each other. "You stay off the white kid's side, nigger!"... the flower beckoned and bent its stalk. On the white kid's side. Lovely, dusky, purple.. .He wanted it. He would get it.

He gets the flower, and his dark-skinned playmates sing a song oftriumph. As a young man he continues to fight for what is on "the white kids' side." He will not stay in his place. Ultimately, his love for a white woman leads him into a fatal fight that lands him in a murderer's grave.

By the time Manta Bonner wrote *The Purple Flower,* she had distilled this familiar story of racism in America, had gone beyond realism to surrealism, but she kept the Image ofthe purple flower. Her classical education could have told her that the color purple, esteemed among ancients, not only connoted wealth and power ("In regal *purple* dressed." Pope), it was closer, in Hebrew and Greek, to the color we call *crimson.* The archaic meaning ofpurple is "colored" or "stained by," as if by blood. It is a perfect color for the flower so Jealously guarded and so desperately desired, symbolizing as it does both power and blood.

The message ofthe play is spoken ultimately by an Old Man, who comes to teach the younger US's how to rid themselves ofthe White Devils. He announces that he is God's servant and tells them that God will create a new man, but "Blood has to be let for birth, to give life "

This is not a simple kill-whitey play, as is evident in Old Man's answer to Finest Blood, who has said "And when he comes out, I'in to kill him in the dark before he sees me? That's a White Devil trick."

OLD MAN An Old Us will never tell you to play White Devil's games! No! Do not kill him in the dark Get him out ofthe bushes and say to him "White Devil, God is using me for his instrument it is not I, it is God who plays through me-to you Will you hear what he says? Wil1 you hear? He says it is almost day, White Devil it may be your blood-it may be mine-but blood must be taken during the night to be given at the birth. . . The US toiled to give dust for the body, books to guide the body, gold to clothe the body. Now they need blood for birth so the New Man can live You have taken the blood. You must give blood. Come out! Give it." And then fight him!

Finest Blood leaves to confront the leader of the White Devils The curtain line is: "Blood!" The last stage direction reads: *Let the curtain close leaving all the US, the WHITE DEVILS, Nowhere, Somewhere, listening, listening. Is it time?*

In the statement of the argument of tIns extraordinary play, Marita Bonner wrote:

The White Devils bye all over the Sides ofthe lull and try every trick, known and unknown, to keep the US's from getting to the hill For if the US's get up the lull, the Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest will shed some of its perfume and then and there they will be Somewhere with the WHITE DEVILS The US'S started out by merely asking permission to go up. They tilled the valley, they cultivated it and made it as beautiful as it is. They built roads and houses even for the WHITE DEVILS. They let them build the houses and then they were knocked back down into the valley.

Today we may ask: Has the purple flower faded? Have assaults been made on the hillside by the US's that they can claim a kind of victory? Or does the question of blood still remain a matter of time?

Marita Bonner could have been speaking for her sisters-Angelina Grimke, Mary Burrill, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and others-when she wrote in her celebrated essay, "To Be Young-A Woman-And Colored":

So-being a woman-you can wart. . Still, quiet, with a smile ever so slight, at the eyes, so that life will flow into not by you. . . And then you can, when Time is ripe, swoop to your feet-at your full height-at a single gesture".

They had too small an audience in their own day. They still are too little known in ours. Time is indeed ripe for these wise Black women to be acknowledged, and theIr plays to be read and produced.

Source: Doris Abramson, "Angelina Weld Grimke, Mary T Burrill, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Marita O. Bonner An Analysis of Their Plays," in *Sage,* Vol II, No 1, Spring 1985, pp. 11-12.

Topics for Further Study

Read Bonner's essay "On Being Young-a Woman-and Colored" (1925). What issues and concerns does she raise in this essay? In what ways is the style in which the essay is written effective in conveying these ideas? In what ways does this essay help to illuminate the concerns addressed in *The Purple Flower?*

It has often been remarked that Bonner's plays were not written to be performed but to be read. In fact, none of her three plays was ever performed during her lifetime, although they were published in magazines. Act out a segment from *The Purple Flower.* In what ways does performing the play help you better understand its meaning? What difficulties arise in translating the written word of the play into a performance?

Bonner's short stones, published primarily during the 1930s, represent elements of African American experiences in the urban environment of Chicago during the Depression. Learn more about the experience of African Americans during the Depression.

Bonner's work is associated with the Harlem

Renaissance, the great flowering of African American literature in the 1920s Learn more about the Harlem Renaissance and the writers, musicians, and artists associated with it. Who are the significant figures of the Harlem Renaissance, and what are their most significant works? What social, political, and aesthetic concerns are associated with the Harlem Renaissance?

The Purple Flower has been described as an allegory, which means that the characters, actions, and events of the play are meant to be interpreted symbolically. Bonner used this form to address issues of racial conflict in America. Try to write a short play or scene that functions as an allegory for some particular social or political issue that concerns you. What is the moral of your play or scene? How can you most effectively convey that message in a dramatic form?

Much of Bonner's fiction is set in Chicago in the 1930s. Learn more about the history and culture of the African-American population of Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century.

Compare and Contrast

1910s: *Rachel,* by Angelina W. Grimke, is the first successful stage play by an African-American Writer

1920s: The Harlem Renaissance characterizes a period of flowering of African-American literature and the arts. The Krigwa Players in Washington, D.C., is an association of African-American dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance era

1930s: The Depression, which began with the stock market crash of 1929, results in economic hardship for writers of the Harlem Renaissance, leading to a decline in literary production and the end of the Harlem Renaissance era.

1950s: The most prominent African-American theaters in the United States include the American Negro Theater and the Negro Playwrights' Company. *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), by Lorraine Hansberry, is the most prominent and widely celebrated play by an African-American writer.

1960s and 1970s: The Black Arts Movement, also called the Black Aesthetic Movement, represents the cutting edge of African-American artistic and literary style and philosophy *The Dutchman* (1964), by Amiri Baraka, is an early prominent theatrical production of the Black Arts Movement. Inspired by, and in part an initiator of, the Black Arts Movement, Baraka establishes the Black Repertory Theater in Harlem. *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rambow is enuf* (1977), by Ntozake Shange, is a successful, experimental play, inspired by the Black Arts Movement, addressing issues of concern to African-American women

1980s and 1990s: Numerous black theaters have been established throughout the United States, WIth many mainstream stages also featuring black theatrical productions. A new generation of African-American writers and artists are greatly influenced by the legacy of the Black Arts Movement. *Ma Ramey's Black Bottom* (1984), by August Wilson, is the most celebrated play of the 1980s by an African-American writer.

What Do I Read Next?

The Pot-Maker (A Play to Be Read) (1927), Bonner's second play, was first published in *Opportunity* magazine.

Exit-An Illusion (1929), Bonner's third and final play, was first published in *Crisis* magazine.

The Ideology of Blackness (1971), edited by Raymond Betts, includes the essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," by Langston Hughes, from which Bonner may have derived the symbolic significance of the mountain in *The Purple Flower*

for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf (1975), by Ntozake Shange, is a highly celebrated experimental black feminist play first produced during the era of the Black Arts Movement.

Ma Ramey's Black Bottom (1984), by August Wilson, is a widely celebrated work of African American theater from the period following the Black Arts Movement. The story concerns a blues singer and her band in Chicago

The Twentieth Century and the Harlem Renaissance: A History of Black People in America, 1880-1930 (1990) is a history of African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focusing on such figures as W. E. B. Dubois,

_____

The _____ Harlem Renaissance Stories by Women (1993), edited and with an introduction by Marcy Knopf, is a collection of short stories by women writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Jessie Redmon Fauset, Georgia Douglas Johnon, Dorothy West, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larson, as well as three stories by Marita Bonner.

Women of the Harlem Renaissance (1995), by Cheryl A. Wall, provides criticism and interpretation of the works of key women writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larson.

Harlem's Glory: Black Women Writing, 1900-1950 (1996), edited by Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph, provides biographical and critical information on African-American women writers during the Harlem Renaissance.

Pages from the Harlem Renaissance: A Chronicle of Performance (1996), by Anthony D. Hill, addresses the influence of the Harlem Renaissance on African-American theater and includes discussion of dramatic works as well as critical response to these works.

Further Study

Giovanni, Nikki, ed. *Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate' Looking at the Harlem Renaissance Through Poems,* Holt, 1996.

This poetry collection contains works by Harlem Renaissance writers such as Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka, with discussion of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hatch, Jams V., ed. *Black Theater, U S.A* : *Forty-five Plays by Black Americans,* 1847-1974, Free Press, 1996.

These plays are by African-American writers, including *The Purple Flower,* by Bonner, as well as works by W. E B. Dubois, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ntozake Shange, and Imamu Amiri Baraka.

Hayward Gallery of London, *Rhapsodies in Black Art of the Harlem Renaissance,* University of California Press, 1997.

This is a catalogue with commentary on artworks of the Harlem Renaissance, based on the exhibit "Rhapsodies in Black," organized by the Hayward Gallery in London.

Rodgers, Mane E. *The Harlem Renaissance An Annotated Reference Guide for Student Research,* Libraries Unlimited, 1998.

This reference book includes bibliographies of works on the Harlem Renaissance and African-American art.

Roses, Lorraine Elena, and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph. *The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond. Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers, 1900--1945,* G. K Hall, 1990.

This reference work provides biographical information on and overviews of the works of African American women Writers in the first half of the twentieth century

Spencer, Jon Michael. *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance,* University of Tennessee Press, 1997.

Spencer's text is a critical discussion of the music of the Harlem Renaissance in terms of the cultural and historical context of African-American musical production.

Bibliography

Allen, Carol, *Black Women Intellectuals Strategies of Nation, Family, and Neighborhood in the Works of Pauline Hopkins,*

Jessie Fauset, and Marita Bonner, Garland, 1998, pp 112, 18,78-9

Flynn, Joyce, and Joyce Occomy Stricklin, eds., *Frye Street and Environs The Collected Works of Marita Bonner,* Beacon. 1987, PP XI, XVI, XVIII-XIX, XXV.

BOOKRAGS

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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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