The Rez Sisters Study Guide

The Rez Sisters by Tomson Highway

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Introduction

When *The Rez Sisters* was first performed in 1986, Canadian and American audiences took note of this new and offbeat play by Native North American playwright Tomson Highway. A Cree Native of Manitoba, Canada, Highway wanted to make life on the reservation (or 'the rez') seem "cool" and "show and celebrate what funky folk Canada's Indian people really are." His goals were met with this play, which received high praise (winning the Dora Mavor Award for best new play in Toronto's 1986-87 theater season and being named a runner-up for the Floyd F. Chalmers Award for the outstanding Canadian play of 1986). *The Rez Sisters* also proved to be a commercial success, playing to sold-out audiences during a cross-Canada tour from October to February of 1988. Audiences found Highway's portrait of seven "rez sisters" to be, as William Peel called them in *Canadian Theatre Review*, "a striking cast of characters who reveal both blemishes and beauty" and who "possess, on the whole, great human dignity."

The play spans a summer in 1986, when seven women (all related by birth or marriage) decide to travel to Toronto to participate in "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD." Each woman offers the audience a different attitude toward life on the reservation as well as their individual dreams of escaping it. From Pelajia Patchnose, who hopes to win enough money to bring paved roads to "Wasy" (their reservation), to Emily Dictionary, an ex-biker whose rough-and-ready outlook creates some fticfcon m the group, these characters display the natural desire to rise above their surroundings and create a better world for their children and each other.

The Rez Sisters was lauded for its realistic portrayal of these distinct personalities. On a larger scale, Highway was hailed for creating a work that made Native North American life accessible as well as entertaining to a wide audience.

Author Biography

A "rez" man himself, Tomson Highway has transformed the spiritual and cultural lessons of his youth into drama. He was born in Manitoba, Canada, on his father's trap-line ("in a tent, like all his brothers and sisters") on December 6, 1951 (some sources cite 1952). He spoke only Cree until the age of six, when he was sent to study at a Roman Catholic boarding school. He stayed there until he was 15, visiting his family only two months each summer. After finishing grade nine, Highway was sent to high school in Winnipeg, where he lived with various white foster parents. He graduated in 1970.

Since he was a "musical prodigy" in high school, Highway next spent two years at the University of Manitoba studying piano a pursuit that he continued the following year, studying to be a concert pianist in London. After this year abroad, Highway returned to Canada, where he continued his studies at the University of Manitoba and the University of Western Ontario (from where he graduated with a Bachelors of Music Honors in 1975). However, he stayed an extra year to complete the English courses required for a Bachelors of Arts degree; during this time, he met and worked with James Reaney, one of Canada's more respected playwrights and poets.

With his studies completed, Highway followed his humanitarian impulses and began seven years' work with The Native Peoples' Resource Center in London, Ontario, and The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centers in Toronto. It was during this time that he traveled extensively through the reservations of Canada, meeting and observing scores of Native people in streets, bars, prisons, and friendship centers. Upon turning thirty, Highway began his career as a playwright, presenting his work to Native audiences on reservations and in urban community centers. With the 1986 premiere of *The Rez Sisters*, Highway's artistic career began to blossom.

Speaking of his inspiration in creating *The Rez Sisters's* female protagonists, Highway remarked to the Toronto *Globe and Mail's* Ray Conlogue, "I am sensitive to women because of the matrilineal principle of our [Cree] culture, which has gone on for thousands of years. Women have such an ability to express themselves emotionally. And as a writer, you've got to express emotion." This "expression of emotion" found in *The Rez Sisters* proved impressive: the play received numerous honors and played to sold-out audiences across Canada. After its success, Highway wrote a collection of monologues, *Aria* and his "flip-side" to *The Rez Sisters, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), which features seven Indian men. Like its counterpart, Dry Lips won numerous awards, including four Dora Mavor Moore Awards. Highway served as the artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, Inc., Toronto's only professional Native theater company, until 1992. He also cowrote *The Sage, the Dancer, and the Fool*, with Rene Highway and Bill Merasty in 1989.

Plot Summary

Act One

The Rez Sisters opens on a late August day on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve (or as its residents refer to it, "Wasy") on Manitoulin Island, Ontario. Pelajia Patchnose is found nailing shingles to her roof, with the assistance of her sister, Philomena Moosetail. Pelajia's first line, "Philomena. I want to go to Toronto," reveals her desire to escape what she sees as her dull life in "plain, dusty, boring old Wasy." "Everyone here's crazy," she complains. "No jobs. Nothing to do but drink and screw each other's wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush" who is also known as "The Trickster," a mythological spirit that observes (and sometimes enters into) the action of the play. After complaining more about the fact that there are no paved roads in Wasy, Philomena lifts her sister's spirits with her wit (and by falling off the roof). Annie Cook, their half-sister, arrives and the three talk of their beloved hobby: bingo. Eager to run to the post office, where a parcel awaits her, Annie leaves and the two remaining sisters talk of how the bingo games in Wasy "are getting smaller and smaller all the time."

The scene changes to Marie-Adele Starblanket's house (down the hill from Pelajia's), where she is throwing stones at Nanabush, disguised as a seagull. When Nanabush tells her "As-tum [Come]," she replies, "I can't fly away. I have no wings. Yet." Her conversation is interrupted when her sister-in-law, Veronique St. Pierre, enters with her mentally disabled adopted daughter, Zhaboonigan Peterson. Veronique and Marie-Adele discuss a used car purchased by an acquaintance before moving onto a more serious topic: Marie-Adele's cancer. Veronique questions Marie-Adele about who will take care of her fourteen children after she "goes to the hospital"; Marie-Adele replies that her husband, Eugene, will carry this load. The topic shifts to the real motive of Veronique's visit, to tell Marie-Adele that she heard a rumor that "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD" is coming to Toronto and to ask Marie-Adele if she wants to play. Annie arrives, learns of the upcoming bingo game, and all four of them walk together to the post office. On the way, Marie-Adele, Annie, and Veronique pause to tell the audience about their hopes for the upcoming game: Marie-Adele wants to buy an island where she can live with her family, Annie hopes to buy a complete country-music record library, and Veronique imagines herself cooking for everyone over a brand-new stove.

Arriving at the post office (which doubles as a general store), the women meet Emily Dictionary (Annie's sister and half-sister of all the others). Described as "one tough lady," Emily is an ex-biker who lived in California for years but has returned to Wasy. Instigated by only a few remarks, the women all begin a massive, free-for-all war of insults in which their suspicions and jealousies of each other are revealed to the audience. While the women bicker, Zhaboonigan wanders outside and talks to Nanabush, telling him of a time when she was sexually abused by two white boys. After the women stop fighting, Annie opens her parcel and finds a Patsy Cline record (a gift from her daughter) and the confirmation of the rumor regarding "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD," which will take place in Toronto on September 8. Marie-Adele reads a

letter from a hospital in Toronto, confirming her appointment for tests on September 10. The women decide to travel to Toronto, play bingo, take Marie-Adele to undergo her tests, and then return. But when they ask their local Band Council for a loan (which would enable them to rent a car), their request is refused.

Act Two

In order to think of ways to raise enough money for their trip, the seven women hold a meeting in Pelajia's basement. They decide to use Eugene's van, but they also realize that they will need a total of $1,400 in order to pay for food and expenses. To raise this money, the women undertake a variety of odd jobs, presented to the audience in a long and humorous pantomime sequence. Finally, the money is raised and the women enter the van that, they hope, will take them to the $500,000 bingo jackpot.

En route to Toronto, the women have various conversations while others sleep; from these conversations, the audience learns about their respective pasts, hopes, and fears. Philomena, for example, explains that September 8 holds a special significance for her, since it is the birthday of her child that she had to give up as soon as it was born. Annie tells of her boyfriend Fritz, a Jewish country singer whom she hopes will marry her. Suddenly, a tire blows out and must be replaced. As the women change the tire, Marie-Adele wanders off and is attacked by Nanabush in the form of a nighthawk. Understanding that this is an omen of her death, Marie-Adele begs him for mercy: "Oh no! Me? Not yet. Give me time. Please."

Once the tire is changed, they resume their trip and conversations. Marie-Adele tells of Eugene's distress over her condition, which Pelajia explains with, "There's only so much Eugene can understand ... He's only human." Emily then reveals why she returned to Wasy: her lover, a member of her all-female biker gang, was killed on a San Francisco highway. The tension in the van is almost unbearable, until Emily acknowledges her gratefulness to the others. Relieved, she gives a "high-five " to Zhaboonigan and the stage transforms onto the site of the long-awaited bingo game.

The Bingo Master who is also Nanabush, this time in a new disguise greets the women and the audience, who actually play a warm-up game of bingo with the cast. However, once the actual big-money game begins, the women express their distress at their lack of fortune. Finally, they rush the grandstand and destroy the bingo machine while "out of this chaos emerges the calm, silent image of Marie-Adele waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master," The Bmgo Master suddenly changes into the nighthawk and carries Marie-Adele to the spirit world, signifying her death.

The action then returns to Wasy, where the six women sing the Ojibway funeral song over MarieAdele's grave and then talk at the store. As a kind of renewal in the face of Marie-Adele's death, Emily announces that she is pregnant with "Big Joey's" (alocal man's) child. Veronique assumes the role of mother to Mare-Adele's children and is seen cooking for them on the departed sister's stove. The play's final scene occurs at the same place it began: Pelajia's roof, where she is still nailing shingles and joking with

Philomena (who did win enough money to buy a new toilet). As Pelajia considers all of the changes for which she will work on the reserve, Nanabush dances to the beat of her hammer, unseen by her but appearing "merrily and triumphantly" to the audience.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Pelajia hammers shingles onto the roof of her house on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve. She shouts down to her sister Philomena that she wants to go to Toronto and then says that even though she wants to leave she likes it on her roof. She lists all the things she can see, says that if she were Superwoman she could see more, and then finishes by saying she's still just Pelajia and wants to go to Toronto.

Philomena, dressed in tight sexy clothes that are completely wrong for working outside, climbs up, hands Pelajia a shingle, and talks about being happy to stay and play bingo on the weekends, with the idea that one day with her winnings she'll be able to buy a beautiful new toilet. Pelajia comments that bingo doesn't matter, that all the old ways are gone, and that spirits like Nanabush and Windigo never come around anymore. As Pelajia continues to complain Philomena comments that the sun is going to drive her crazy, starts to climb down the ladder, and then falls, tearing her skirt.

Pelajia talks about the boredom of life on the reserve and how her husband and sons have to leave to get work. Philomena climbs back up, complaining the whole time about having to work. When she sees Philomena's torn skirt, Pelajia makes a crude remark about how she looks like she's just come from Big Joey's and refers to a woman named Gazelle Nataways, who is always there having sex. Pelajia then talks about her hopes for winning the grand prize in a bingo in a local town, and how when she wins she's going to give the money to the chief to build real roads instead of the dirt roads they've got now. As she talks Philomena complains about being hurt, saying, "there's something rattling around inside her."

Pelajia sees Annie, their half sister, hurrying down the road towards them. A moment later Annie comes in, all excited and asking whether it's true Gazelle Nataways won the big prize at bingo. Pelajia complains that Annie promised to meet her there but never showed up. After telling Pelajia that she went to listen to her favorite bar band Fritz the Katz, Annie asks whether it's true that Gazelle Nataways is going to use her winnings to go to Toronto with Big Joey. Philomena wonders if a woman named Emily Dictionary wants to know, and Pelajia wonders whether Gazelle is going to go away and leave all her kids. Annie changes the subject, saying she's going to pick up her sister Marie-Adele and go to the post office to pick up a parcel from her daughter who ... "who lives with this white guy in Sudbury," the other women finish her sentence. Annie then talks about how she's going to start going to bingos in other towns in the hopes of winning bigger prizes so she can move to Sudbury, be with her daughter, and go shopping in record stores. Philomena agrees that the bingos on the reserve are getting boring and the prizes aren't big enough. Together the three women hatch a semi-serious plan to march on the band offices and demand more exciting bingos and bigger prizes.

Annie goes out, saying that she needs to hurry up to meet Marie-Adele so they can get to the post office and collect their mail. Pelajia sees that Philomena has become upset, and then shows her her hammer, which she says she paid for with her winnings from bingo. Philomena tells a story about a woman named Bingo Betty, whom she describes as being able to play and win bingo like nobody else, saying that to this day Bingo Betty's spirit haunts the bingo hall. Pelajia comments that Bingo Betty should have gone to Toronto.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The word "rez" in the title is short for "reservation", which is a term used to describe areas set aside for communities of Native North Americans. The name of the reservation in this play, Wasaychigan Hill, incorporates an Ojibway word, which translates as "window." This is symbolically important because all the women in this play are looking out a metaphorical window towards a better life.

Pelajia's opening speech describing all the things she can see, and dreams of seeing, from the top of her roof is the first use of this metaphor. This is an example of how throughout the scene, and indeed the play, all the women reveal their dreams of life beyond the reserve, beyond the window. Annie, for example, dreams of being able to increase her record collection and spending more time with her daughter. Philomena dreams of a new toilet. The simplicity of these dreams, and of the dreams of the other women revealed later, functions on two levels. It illustrates the level of unhappiness of life on the reserve by showing how even simple things like toilets and records can make a big difference, and also illustrates how dreams don't have to be huge and earth shattering in order to make life more happy.

There are other images at work in this scene that reinforce the idea that the women are all looking past the reserve for a better life. Foremost among these is Pelajia's image of better roads, which symbolizes how the women, and perhaps people on the reserve in general, are searching for better ways to leave life on the reserve behind. A reference to the intensity of that search can be found in Philomena's comment that something is rattling around inside her. On a literal level she's referring to how she's been shaken up after falling from the ladder, but it's easy to infer that she, like the other women, has something empty inside her, a longing that needs to be fulfilled. The most important image of life beyond the reserve, however, is bingo, which represents the only way that these women believe will actually making their dreams come true. As the action of the play unfolds we see how intently the women pursue the chance to win at bingo, and therefore win at life. By the end of the play, however, we also see the kind of happiness they should have been pursuing instead. An image illustrating that happiness can be found in life just as it is, can be seen in Pelajia's hammer, which is a symbol of everyday working life and the possibilities for fulfillment that can be found there. The image recurs throughout the play, but shows up most importantly in the final scene, in which Pelajia goes back to her day-to-day life perhaps not happy, but content.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Scene 2 is set in the yard of Annie Cook's sister, Marie-Adele. She throws stones at a seagull, which is actually Nanabush in disguise. She urges the seagull to fly away, the seagull calls out to her to come with him, but she says she can't fly and shouts at him again to go.

Veronique and her adopted daughter Zhaboonigan come by. Veronique goes into a long story about how angry she is at a woman named Fire Minklater because her husband bought her a secondhand car and because Fire will now be able to go to bigger bingos more often. Veronique asks Marie-Adele how she and her fourteen children are doing, and Marie-Adele says they're fine. Veronique asks who will take care of them when Marie-Adele goes into the hospital. Marie Adele tells her and then says hello to Zhaboonigan, whom we see is developmentally slow. She and Marie-Adele talk playfully about picking blueberries and how Marie-Adele is going away, although not far. Zhaboonigan accidentally unties Marie-Adele's shoelaces, and Marie-Adele tells her she has to tie them back up because when she bends over, she gets too tired. Zhaboonigan tries to tie the shoelaces but can't, and becomes angry with herself. Marie-Adele calms her down by taking her over to the pigs and getting her to list all their names.

Veronique complains about the reserve, how she thinks people laugh at her because she doesn't have any children of her own, and how they laugh at Zhaboonigan because she's different. She talks about how she was the only one who cared enough to adopt Zhaboonigan when her parents were killed and then complains about how her stove doesn't work, saying she can't get it fixed because her husband drinks all their money away. She then talks about passing Big Joey's shack, where a half-dressed Gazelle Nataways shouted at her that the biggest bingo in the world was coming to Toronto. Marie-Adele tries repeatedly to find out when this bingo is happening, but Veronique continues to gossip, this time about how Gazelle Nataways leaves her children on their own to go have sex with Big Joey.

Veronique finishes by saying that she's going to take Marie-Adele into Toronto with her, and they're going to play in the biggest bingo in the world. They try to figure out a way to find out when the bingo is happening and how to get to Toronto. Marie-Adele suggests going to Big Joey's and asking Gazelle directly. Veronique sends Zhaboonigan away and then tells Marie-Adele in confidence that a steady stream of women has been seen going in and out of Big Joey's, including Marie-Adele's sister Emily Dictionary. Marie-Adele tells her to mind her own business.

Annie appears. Veronique eyes her angrily while Zhaboonigan runs up, says hello, asks Marie-Adele how her cancer is and then runs off again. Annie urges Marie-Adele to hurry up so they can get to the post office to collect the mail, and Veronique suggests that the mail might contain some information about the biggest bingo in the world. Annie

gets excited and wants to know all about this bingo. As Veronique calls Zhaboonigan to come with them, Annie gets more and more excited.

There is a sudden lighting change. Annie, Veronique, and Marie-Adele appear in individual lights and reveal what they would do if they won the biggest bingo in the world. As they speak, Nanabush imitates them mockingly. Annie talks about being able to expand her record collection, about following Fritz the Katz from bar to bar and listening to every show, and about spending time with her daughter. Marie-Adele talks about how she'd buy an island where she, her husband and all her children could live. Veronique talks about buying a big beautiful stove, cooking for all the people on the reserve including Gazelle Nataways' abandoned children, and going to France to study cooking. As they talk Zhaboonigan runs around them, giggling and counting in the way she counted the pigs.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Throughout this scene we develop more understanding of what life on the reserve is like through the references to alcoholism, poor living conditions, and sexual promiscuity. As the story continues to unfold that understanding continues to deepen, particularly when Emily Dictionary appears in the next scene. As a result we also develop an understanding of why the women are so desperate to escape, a desperation is illustrated by Veronique's anger at Fire Minklater, who's now able to leave the reserve in a way she can't.

The most important element of this scene is the introduction of Nanabush, a manifestation of the character that Pelajia described earlier as having left the reserve. In Native folklore, Nanabush was one name for a nature spirit that played tricks on unsuspecting humans to show them their foolishness, the wisdom inherent in nature, and the constant and sometimes unexpected nature of change. The spirit was also referred to as Trickster, or in animal imagery as Coyote, among other names and manifestations. His primary function in this play, in his various disguises, is to mock the women's dreams to the point where they realize how foolish they ultimately are and that their lives are just fine as is.

Another function of Nanabush in this play is to foreshadow Marie-Adele's death, which we learn through the guileless tactlessness of Zhaboonigan is the result of cancer. Marie-Adele's illness gives her dreams and desires an urgency that the dreams of the other women don't. Her eventual death also reinforces both the idea that the dreams of the other women are ultimately foolish and that whatever dreams a person might have and whether they're accomplished or not, death will happen just the same. This ties in with the play's thematic point that life should be enjoyed for what it is, since death comes all too soon and a life spent dreaming is a life wasted.

Still another function of Nanabush is to take us in and out of linear and non-linear styles of dramatic storytelling. As an example, in this scene Nanabush uses his "trickster magic," for lack of a better phrase, to take us further into the minds and dreams of the

three women as they dream their dreams of winning the biggest bingo in the world. The description of Nanabush imitating them indicates again that he is there primarily to lead them to discover the foolishness of their dreams. This aspect of his character appears throughout the play, most notably in the second act when he appears as the Bingo Caller, and then guides Marie-Adele into death.

Act 1, Scene 3, Part 1

Act 1, Scene 3, Part 1 Summary

Veronique, Marie-Adele, Annie, and Zhaboonigan arrive at the store. There they meet Emily Dictionary, a tough woman with a black eye, which she says was the result of a "tussle," but refuses to say with whom. Annie tells Emily that she wasn't able to find out from Philomena or Pelajia whether Gazelle is going to Toronto with Big Joey, so Emily asks the gossipy Veronique. Their subsequent argument reveals that Veronique saw Emily come out of Big Joey's, and Emily knows she saw. As Emily teasingly calls Zhaboonigan a pagan, Veronique tells her to not make fun of Zhaboonigan's name, saying that Emily shouldn't make jokes about the names of other people when she herself has such a strange one. Emily attacks Veronique and the two of them fight as the other women try to intervene.

Pelajia arrives in the middle of the fight and tries to calm everybody down. Emily dares her to fight, Pelajia threatens her with her hammer, Annie tells her to put it down, and Philomena runs through, desperate to use the store's toilet. Annie, Veronique, Pelajia, and Emily continue to argue, shouting at and challenging each other. Philomena throws open the bathroom door, revealing herself to be sitting on the toilet. She shouts that Emily should respect Veronique because she's an elder, and then tells everybody to shut up so she "can shit in peace." She closes the bathroom door. The argument continues, Philomena runs out of the toilet, and all the women shout at each other simultaneously. Finally Zhaboonigan runs out of the store in terror. The other women freeze in place, and Zhaboonigan talks with Nanabush, who is still in the form of a seagull.

Zhaboonigan tells Nanabush she recognizes him, and tells how she knows he was there when she was raped by two white boys. As Nanabush writhes in agony, Zhaboonigan comments that her name means needle, a "going through thing." She remembers the names of the boys that raped her, and then tells Nanabush he's a nice white birdie.

Back in the store, the argument suddenly resumes with Marie-Adele accusing Veronique of adopting Zhaboonigan so she could get the disability check. The other women gang up on Veronique and she calls them bastards. Marie-Adele grabs her and is about to punch her, but a sudden attack of pain drops her to her knees. Pelajia rushes to help her, but Marie-Adele shouts at her to leave her alone.

Annie goes into the back of the store as Veronique reveals that she knows that it was Big Joey that gave Emily the black eye. Emily has an angry speech about how she learned to fight after living with an abusive man named Henry, how she got even better in a women's biker gang in San Francisco, and how she came back for a visit and got hooked up with Big Joey to the point where she couldn't leave. She also says that she was with Big Joey when Gazelle Nataways came in drunk, and that Big Joey was

aiming for Gazelle but hit her instead, which is where she got the black eye. She brandishes her fist, saying that she knocked Big Joey out with only one punch. Veronique goes looking for Zhaboonigan. Emily concludes by revealing that her last name is actually a bastardization of her real name, Dadzinanare, which was Henry's last name.

Act 1, Scene 3, Part 1 Analysis

Along with the character of Emily Dictionary, this scene introduces a defining element of life on the reserve and the individual lives of these women: physical violence, which is itself defined by the violent emotions of despair and anger. Emily personifies both the physical and emotional aspects of violence, with her story of how she learned to fight clearly illustrating the relationship between powerful emotions like anger and despair and their physical expression. Because we see this relationship so clearly in her, we see how the powerful emotions in the other women lead them to violence as well. They all have powerful hopes for an improved life, hopes that lead in Veronique's case to gossipy verbal violence, in Marie-Adele's to the violence of cancer turned in on herself, and in the case of the others violent defenses of their dreams.

In the middle of the physical and verbal brawl in the store, Zhaboonigan's story of being raped stands out structurally, emotionally, and thematically. Structurally it's important because it's completely different from anything that's gone before, given that it's the first time a character in the play communicates directly with Nanabush. This illustrates the ancient native tradition that those who experienced the world differently, such as the mentally slow or the two spirited (homo/bisexual) had a greater connection to the spirit world and were able to communicate with it more directly.

At the same time, the speech stands emotionally partly because of the matter of fact way in which Zhaboonigan delivers it. This is an effective contrast to the emotionally volatile speeches of the other women, but more importantly makes clear that Zhaboonigan has dealt with her trauma differently from the way that the other women deal with theirs, by withdrawing from the world instead of venting anger and frustration within, rather than onto others.

Thematically the speech is important because Zhaboonigan's revelation that Nanabush was present at the rape illustrates the way that Nanabush's Trickster impulses can manifest in both positive and negative ways, while Nanabush's reaction, described as writhing in agony, illustrates the tortured consequences of being on the receiving end of violence on any level. This illuminates the pain experienced by Zhaboonigan as well as by the other women in the same way as Marie-Adele's crumpling in pain.

Act 1, Scene 3, Part 2

Act 1, Scene 3, Part 2 Summary

Annie runs out of the back room with the mail, reveals that her package contains a new record, and gives Marie-Adele her letter. Annie says that there was a letter in the package from her daughter, telling her about the biggest bingo in the world, saying that the prize is five hundred thousand dollars, and that it's on September 8th. There is a moment of silence, and then all the women except Marie-Adele simultaneously scream in an explosion of excitement. They chatter about all the things they'd do if they won the money, and Emily says that she'd beat up Gazelle Nataways and then take Zhaboonigan down to San Francisco with her.

Marie-Adele announces quietly that the date for her surgery in Toronto is September 10th. She says, first to Nanabush and then to the other women that she wants to go. Emily asks how they're all going to get to Toronto, teasing Veronique first about the possibility of riding with Fire Minklater and then about the kind of stove she's going to buy. Annie reminds Emily that if she leaves the rez she'll lose Big Joey for good. Emily reminds Annie that she doesn't speak French and wouldn't be able to speak to the guy that her daughter is living with in Sudbury and then teases Philomena about how she's so full of shit she'd need five toilets. Just as Philomena's going for Emily's throat, Pelajia bangs on a table with her hammer, gets everybody's attention, and tells the others that they can get the money if they go to the Chief and promise to use some of the winnings to pay for new roads. She says that she'll tell the Chief that as a result of the roads there will be more jobs, that people will live more peacefully together, and that Nanabush will come back as a result. She then says if that doesn't work she'll hit the Chief with her hammer, attack the accountant and they can take the money themselves.

Pelajia then leads the women in a defiant march to the band office with Nanabush dancing along behind them. Percussion simulates the Chief's nosy conversation. Pelajia realizes he's saying no and raises her hammer while Emily gives the Chief the finger and Nanabush shrugs at us as if to say, "don't ask me."

Act 1, Scene 3, Part 2 Analysis

Another aspect of violence is revealed in this section of the scene, in which we see the violence of the women's hopes for a better life. The depth and desperation of their hope is revealed through their reaction to Annie's letter, an explosion of pure joy dampened by Emily, who in this situation represents the way in which the violence and despair of reserve life continues to have influence even in the face of hope. Her continued attacks on the dreams of the other women are the clearest manifestation of this, while the way that the women quickly go back to their arguments illustrates the way that despair and violence are hard to resist.

Finally, some common sense kicks in, and the value of an honest perspective on real life is represented by Pelajia's hammer and the way she bangs it on her desk for attention. The noise is essentially a call for the women to face reality, while her subsequent speech is the climax of this act, the high point of genuine emotion as it illuminates the true, genuine hopes behind the dreams of all the women, free of desperation but full of determination. The use of the hammer is ironic, however, because even though by the end of the scene the women have indeed acknowledged their big picture longing for a better life, they're still caught up in the little picture belief that that life will be obtained by pursuing the false goal of going to the biggest bingo in the world.

On the fringes of all this is Nanabush, manifesting the aspect of Trickster that sits back and watches all the messes that human beings can get themselves into with or without his help. Sometimes he gets involved, sometimes he doesn't. He gets more directly involved in the second act, but for now, like the rest of us, he's just enjoying the ride.

Act 2, Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4

Act 2, Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4 Summary

Scene 1: The women gather in Pelajia's basement to make plans for going to the biggest bingo in the world. Pelajia hands her hammer to Emily, saying that she can use it to run the meeting because she's so good at ordering people around. Emily bangs it frequently as the women argue passionately over how they're going to get to Toronto, who's going to drive, where they're going to stay, what they're going to eat, and how they're going to pay for groceries. As they talk, Nanabush teases Zhaboonigan, who at one point interrupts the action by shouting when she falls off her stool. The women realize they have to come up with fourteen hundred dollars, and immediately start fundraising.

Scene 2: Scene 2 is actually a montage of scenes in which we see the women's increasingly desperate efforts at raising money and Nanabush's playful efforts at screwing things up for them. Marie-Adele takes in washing, Pelajia does an endless series of household repairs, Emily collects beer bottles, Zhaboonigan picks and sells blueberries, Veronique bakes pies for a bake sale, Annie puts together a garage sale, and Philomena babysits. Finally, Emily bangs the hammer once more, and the women stop.

Scene 3: As the women clear the stage of the props used in the previous scene, Pelajia itemizes how much they made and reveals the total, twelve hundred dollars.

Scene 4: At a raucous bar, Emily and Annie sing a song that Emily wrote in memory of Rose, one of her "rez sisters" from San Francisco. As they finish they reveal that they made over three hundred dollars, more than enough to get them to Toronto to the biggest bingo in the world.

Act 2, Scenes 1, 2, 3, and 4 Analysis

The term "montage" refers to short, pointed moments of dramatic action juxtaposed for one of two reasons, either to suggest the passage of time and/or to make a dramatic or thematic point. In this case, the montage in Scene 2 serves both purposes, blending with Scene 1 in particular to dramatize the women's determination to get to Toronto. Specifically, the passionate nature of the argument in Scene 1 blends with the frenzy of Scene 2 to show just how desperately important it is that they follow through on this chance to change their lives. The action of Scene 4 reinforces the point and also foreshadows the revelation of the true nature of the relationship between Emily and Rose.

The presence of Nanabush serves several functions, as Nanabush or Trickster spirits often do. The first is to again blend linear and non-linear storylines, the more linear and dialogue oriented first scene with the more symbolic and image oriented montage

sequence, the action of which is described in significant detail. Nanabush serves this function with increased frequency throughout the second half of the play.

A second function of Nanabush is to just make things more difficult, as indicated by the way he interrupts Scene 1 by teasing Zhaboonigan. A third function is to point out the foolishness of what's going on in these women's lives by mocking them. He reinforces the point throughout the play, making it most clearly without being mocking when Marie-Adele's dies at the play's dramatic and thematic climax.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

In a van driven by Annie Cook on the way to Toronto, Veronique dozes as the other women chat amongst themselves. Marie-Adele tells Annie to slow down, and then wonders if she thinks about ever getting married again. This leads them to discuss Eugene, who chose Marie-Adele over Annie nineteen years ago. Marie-Adele is concerned that once she's dead, Annie will move back in with Eugene, she'll start drinking again, and Eugene and Marie-Adele's kids will be taken away. She promises if that happens to come back and haunt Annie for the rest of her life. Annie becomes angry and swears that she has no interest in Eugene. Her anger gets the better of her and the van swerves, causing Emily to wake up and swear at her.

In the back seat Philomena reminds Pelajia that the day of the bingo, September 8th, is the day their mother died. Zhaboonigan interrupts briefly to talk about how she likes birds, and Philomena starts to wonder about her, but then becomes distracted by reminiscences about Toronto. She talks about how she had a good job and a good boss, but messed it all up by having an affair with him and being discovered by his wife. She talks about the child she bore as a result of the affair, how she gave it up for adoption, and how if she wins she's going to hire a lawyer to see if the child can be found. Pelajia says she hopes Philomena wins.

At the front of the van Emily and Annie are laughing and singing together, talking about fun times going bar hopping. Annie talks about the good times she has with Fritz the Katz, singing and dancing to his music and having fun with him in bed. They make raunchy comments about the size of his penis, and about how much nicer it is to have sex with white men. Emily asks whether Annie is thinking about not coming back to the rez, and Annie doesn't answer. Instead she asks whether there are a lot of white people that go to Emily's favorite bar in Toronto, and begins to get excited when Emily promises to handle the men the way she learned to in San Francisco, saying that maybe they'll find a party to go to. As a result of her excitement Annie speeds up, and a tire goes flat.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

The tension and resentment that has fueled most of the relationships between the women to this point disappear for a while in this scene. Instead, we catch glimpses of the vulnerabilities that fuel these women's dreams and fears. The relationship between mother and child is an important element here, as illustrated by Marie-Adele's concern for her children and Philomena's memories of both her mother and her adopted child. Other vulnerabilities emerge later in the scenes that follow, making the metaphoric point that the road to a new beginning can be a time of healthy reflection on the past. At the same time, the conversation between Annie and Emily foreshadows what happens to Annie at the end of the play when we see what her feelings for Fritz has led her to, while

Zhaboonigan's comments about liking birds reinforce the previously discussed idea that she has an understanding and awareness of Nanabush that the other women don't share.

Act 2, Scene 6

Act 2, Scene 6 Summary

Scene 6: Veronique suddenly wakes up, shouting "BINGO!" The women pile out of the van and argue about how to change the tire. As the others lift the car up to slide the jack under it, Zhaboonigan wanders off to go to the bathroom and Marie-Adele goes with her.

Nanabush appears, this time in a costume that represents a raven or nighthawk. He attacks Marie-Adele, who becomes increasingly hysterical as she tries to fight him off. Zhaboonigan tries to help her, and soon the other women are drawn from the van to Marie-Adele. They chase Nanabush away, finish changing the tire, and help Marie Adele back into the van, saying that Emily should drive since nobody trusts Annie Cook.

Scene 7: Back in the van, the intimate conversations continue. Marie-Adele confesses to Pelajia how even when she's angry it's hard to resist Eugene's advances, and then reveals that they can't have intercourse because it hurts too much. Pelajia tells of a couple she knew in which one person was dying and the other was so angry about it they barely spoke. She then reassures Marie-Adele that Eugene loves her, but adds there's only so much he can understand. This leads Emily to tell a story of her time in San Francisco with the motorcycle gang called The Rez Sisters. She tells how Rose was always angry about being an Indian and how Indians were treated, how she and Emily argued about it on the road one day, and how Rose died when she deliberately ran headlong into a semi-trailer. Emily talks about feeling Rose's spattered blood on her neck, and not cleaning it off until they got to a hotel that night. She confesses that she and Rose were lovers, and that Rose's death is the reason she will never go back to San Francisco.

Marie-Adele falls asleep and Zhaboonigan begins to tease Emily, eventually poking her in the stomach. Emily becomes angry, but then apologizes by promising to take Zhaboonigan with her to San Francisco sometime. Emily then teaches Zhaboonigan to say "fuck," and tells her to stick close to her when they get to Toronto.

Act 2, Scene 6 Analysis

The appearance of Nanabush in this scene again functions on multiple levels. Firstly it foreshadows Marie-Adele's death. Secondly, because Marie-Adele seems to have an idea that Nanabush is there as an omen it illustrates the way that the dying, in the same way as the mentally slow like Zhaboonigan, have a different awareness of the spirit world. Thirdly, it illustrates the way that Nanabush's metaphoric representation of change can also manifest as a representation of death, which is after all the most significant change a human soul can undergo.

The conversations in the van are essentially a continuation of the conversations that started before the flat tire, and at this point we become aware of the deep well of pain and anger that lies beneath Emily Dictionary's violence and hostility. Her comments about Rose's anger and resentment combine with our understanding of the way in which Native Americans live, gleaned from earlier comments, to suggest that that anger is in fact at the core of the desperation in all the women and in native society as a whole. The biker gang in San Francisco, which seems to have existed because of its women members' anger and frustration, has the same name as the play, which we assume refers to the characters whose stories we're watching. This reinforces the idea that the characters are just as angry and frustrated, in their own way, as their more violent San Franciscan sisters. Meanwhile, the grudging playfulness and protectiveness that Zhaboonigan wakens in Emily combines with Emily's comments about her feelings for Rose and the glimpses of intimacy we see from the other women to suggest that genuine emotional connection might be one way to counter the effects of all the anger with love.

Act 2, Scene 7

Act 2, Scene 7 Summary

Nanabush appears in a rhinestone studded top hat and tails, shouting the patter of the Bingo Caller at the biggest bingo in the world. He talks excitedly about the size of the prize, and then starts a warm-up game in which the audience participates using the bingo cards in their programs. The women play also. Once bingo is called, the winning audience member is given a twenty dollar prize, and then Nanabush announces the big game for the five hundred thousand dollar prize.

As Nanabush calls numbers the women play their cards, with Philomena playing more than the rest of them put together. At the same time Zhaboonigan rhythmically bangs a crucifix on her table. More and more numbers are called, the women become more and more frustrated, until finally they lose control, fling their cards into the air, rush the bingo machine, rip it from the floor, and run out with it saying that it's broken, the game is rigged, etc.

Marie-Adele has been left behind, and is seen dancing with Nanabush. He suddenly reveals himself to be the raven/nighthawk from the encounter on the highway. He whispers "Bingo" into her ear, and she speaks in Ojibway, saying she's ready to go. The scene and lights shift around them as they dance, the other women return, we leave the bingo hall, and then Nanabush gently leads Marie-Adele away. Zhaboonigan runs after her, hoping to bring her back, but Emily restrains her.

Back on the rez, Pelajia says a kind of eulogy over Marie-Adele's grave, speaking about how her death has served as an indication to her that life should be lived as it is, that people have to make the most of what they've got right now. She promises to give it a real good try and then says goodbye until it's her turn ... hers and her hammer's.

Act 2, Scene 7 Analysis

Scene 7 contains the climax of the play, which actually happens in two stages. The first is the bingo game, in which the increasingly desperate expectations of the women explode into a violent act of rebellion. Zhaboonigan pounding the table with the Crucifix represents the way that bingo has become a kind of religion with these women, a source of hope that the church once symbolized. At the same time, Nanabush's appearance as the Bingo Caller represents the way that bingo has just the kind of random, unpredictable, chance-defined energy that defines Nanabush/Trickster figures.

This aspect of Nanabush continues into his encounter with Marie-Adele, in the second stage of the play's climax. On one level this moment represents the randomness of death, how it can occur where and when it's least expected. On another level, it makes the thematic point that the frustration of losing at bingo, of not having earthly dreams fulfilled, pales in comparison to losing life. This point is actually made in Pelajia's eulogy,

which leads us into the life affirming sensibility of the play's last few scenes, which actually begin with Emily's gentle restraint of Zhaboonigan as she tries to run after Marie-Adele.

As it was previously, Nanabush's appearance and shifting between roles is another way in which his presence is used to transfer the action between linear and non-linear means of storytelling.

Act 2, Scenes 8, 9, and 10

Act 2, Scenes 8, 9, and 10 Summary

Scene 8: In Emily's store, Emily teaches Zhaboonigan how to stock shelves by matching the labels on cans. Just as Zhaboonigan is giving an embarrassed Emily a hug, Annie comes in. Something has changed in her; she seems more subdued. She asks Emily whether she'll come to the bar with her that night, and Emily says she's got to take care of Zhaboonigan. For a moment they joke about Philomena having won six hundred dollars and buying a new toilet and then Emily asks Annie whether she's been drinking, and Annie doesn't answer. Emily tells her she's a fool for spending so much time with Fritz, but Annie says she loves him. Emily says she'll meet Annie later, and Annie goes out. After Zhaboonigan teases her a little, Emily confesses that she's pregnant with Big Joey's baby, and that Gazelle Nataways is going to have a fit.

Scene 9: Annie visits Veronique, who tells her happily that she's been doing all the cooking for Eugene and Marie-Adele's children. She talks about how excited she is to be working on a good stove, and refers to a roast of beef that's cooking in the oven at that very moment. She assumes that Annie has come to see Eugene and tells her he's not home, but Annie says she's come to see Marie-Adele's son Simon to borrow a record so she can practice singing to it. Veronique tells her that there's enough trouble on the reserve without bringing out "shady white characters," and says that if Annie keeps behaving this way she'll shame all her sisters. Annie swears at her, and Veronique tells her that Simon isn't home. Annie goes out.

Scene 10: Pelajia is back on her roof shingling. She calls down to Philomena for more shingles and then as she's waiting complains about the dusty roads and how if she was chief she'd get the roads paved. Philomena comes up onto the roof with shingles and a fancy pillow shaped like a heart that she rests on. As Pelajia works she again talks about how great life would be if she were chief, with paved roads and Nanabush returning. Annie then appears, drunkenly says Philomena's name wrong, and then asks to borrow her record player. Pelajia and Philomena tease Annie about her singing and then Philomena agrees to loan her the record player but only for one night. Annie asks if they want to go to bingo with her on the weekend. Both Pelajia and Philomena say they want to go, and Philomena asks Annie to make sure she doesn't get left behind.

When she's gone, Philomena asks Pelajia whether she still dreams about leaving the rez. Pelajia talks about spending more time with her son Tom in Toronto, but Philomena interrupts with memories of how beautiful Tom's bathroom is and then into a long speech about the comfort of her toilet. When she's finished she sits quietly for a moment and then realizes that Pelajia is looking at her with contempt. Philomena climbs carefully down off the roof, taking her pillow with her. Once she's gone Pelajia comments on the view from the roof, and goes back to hammering. Just as lights are fading to black, Nanabush appears on the roof, and dances to the rhythm of Pelajia's hammer.

Act 2, Scenes 8, 9, and 10 Analysis

The last three scenes illustrate the ways that the rez sisters are moving on with their lives after coming back from the biggest bingo in the world. As such, they also illustrate the different ways that the Nanabush/Trickster energy of change and transformation can manifest. On the positive end of things, Emily and Zhaboonigan, are becoming like a mother and daughter, each offering something that the other needs; Emily gives Zhaboonigan strength and protection while Zhaboonigan brings playfulness and joy back into Emily's life. At the same time, there are still hints in Emily that violence will always be there, and in Zhaboonigan that life will always be a little difficult because she's different.

Veronique is also moving forward, cooking on the kind of stove she's always dreamed of and providing for other people's children. She's still got a streak of gossipy nastiness in her, and there's clearly a part of her that wants to be seen as a good and charitable soul, but we see more clearly than ever that her heart's in the right place. These three women illustrate the play's theme, that happiness doesn't depend on achieving a far away dream like winning the biggest bingo in the world, but life can be happy, joyful, and fulfilled right where one lives.

In the middle of the thematic spectrum is Annie Cook, who has achieved her dream of being with Fritz even without having won the biggest bingo in the world, but has started on the road downhill nevertheless. This illustrates the way that dreams can sometimes go sour, and lead to disappointment. On the happy ever after end of that spectrum is Philomena, who has achieved her dream of owning a beautiful new toilet and who couldn't be happier. Finally there's Pelajia, who's doing her best to live according to the vow she made Marie-Adele to enjoy life for what it is, but she still can't help, every once in a while, looking wistfully at life beyond her rooftop.

The final appearance of Nanabush, dancing to the beat of Pelajia's symbolic hammer of reality, suggests that she of all the women is living in the truest and most honest way, that she's doing the best that she can to be grounded in reality, but every once in a while falls under the spell of her dreams. Nanabush's dance, therefore, suggests that no matter what, no matter how resolved we think our life is and no matter how content we are, there is always the possibility that somehow, somewhere, the mischievous spirit of Trickster-inspired change will always show up to shake things up a little.

Bibliography

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Characters

Annie Cook

The 36 year-old sister of Marie-Adele and half-sister of Pelajia and Philomena, Annie hopes to be a country singer and someday marry her boyfriend, Fritz, who is a Jewish country musician. She delights in gossiping about the activities of "Big Joey," a local man who sleeps with a variety of women. Her daughter, Ellen, lives in a neighboring town with her boyfriend and writes her to tell her about the upcoming bingo game in Toronto.

Emily Dictionary

Recently returned to the Wasy reservation, Emily is the 32 year-old sister of Annie (and half-sister of Pelajia and Philomena). Described as "one tough lady," Emily's coarse language and rough exterior are the results of an abusive ten-year marriage and the death, years later, of a female lover in San Francisco. Her rough exterior gradually gives way as her relationship with her traveling companions deepens. At the play's end she reveals that she is pregnant and that Big Joey is the father.

Philomena Moosetail

Philomena is Pelajia's 49 year-old sister and the voice of practicality among the seven women. She is lighthearted and often cracks jokes. She hopes to win enough money to buy a toilet that is "big and white and very wide." Late in the play, she reveals that she once had to give up her child.

Nanabush

The traditional "Trickster" that features prominently in Cree and other Native American and North American culture, Nanabush is, according to Highway, "as pivotal and important a figure in the Native world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology." Described as "essentially a comic, clownish sort of character," Nanabush "teaches us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth." In the play, Nanabush appears disguised as a seagull, a nighthawk, and the Bingo Master. It is he who takes Marie-Adele to the spirit world when she dies at the bingo game.
("Nanabush" is the Ojibway name for the Trickster.)

Pelajia Patchnose

The natural leader of "the rez sisters," the 53-year-old Pelajia Patchnose dreams of a life away from the reservation the women refer to as Wasy. After her return from the

bingo game, she decides (as Dennis W. Johnston describes in *Canadian Literature*), to use her leadership talents "to genuinely improve conditions on the reserve rather than just to complain about them."

Zhaboonigan (zah-boon-i-gan) Peterson

Zhaboonigan is the 24 year-old mentally disabled adopted daughter of Veronique. Her parents died in a "horrible car crash" twenty-two years ago and Veronique has raised the girl since then. Only she and Mane-Adele can see Nanabush when he appears; in one instance, she tells the Trickster of a time that she was sexually abused by two white boys.

Veronique St. Pierre

The 45 year-old sister-in-law to the other women, Veronique complains about her alcoholic husband when not caring for Zhaboonigan Peterson, her adopted daughter, who has mental deficiencies. After Marie-Adele's death, Veronique moves into the Starblanket home to care for the fourteen children and cook for them on Marie-Adele's stove, an example (like her adopting Zhaboonigan) of her sweet nature and concern for others' well-being.

Marie-Adele Starblanket

Suffering silently from cancer, the 39 year-old Marie-Adele is the "mother figure" of the play. She lives with her husband, Eugene, and her fourteen children, for whom she hopes to win enough money to buy an island paradise where they can live "real nice and comfy." She dies during the bingo game in Toronto, where her spirit is symbolically transported to the spirit world.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

In *The Ret Sisters*, seven women travel from their Indian reserve to Toronto in order to participate in "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD." Each woman has her own dreams of what winning the bingo jackpot will bring them. Annie hopes for enough money to "buy every single one of Patsy Cline's records" and "go to all the taverns and night clubs in Toronto and listen to the live music." Philomena hopes for a new toilet that is "big and wide and very white." Marie-Adele wishes for "the most beautiful incredible goddamn island in the whole goddamn world." Veronique desires "the biggest stove on the reserve." Finally, Pelajia wants to build "a nice paved road" in front of her house, since their "old chief" has done nothing to help her realize this dream. Each woman's dreams of wealth are linked to their desires to make life at Wasy more bearable or, in the case of Marie-Adele, escape "the rez" entirely.

However, when the women arrive m Toronto, luck does not favor them. Despite the fact that Philomena plays with twenty-seven cards, she only wins $600 and the others return empty-handed after charging the bingo machine in their fury. (Marie-Adele does not return at all, dying during the bingo game.) Rather than complain about their hard luck, however, the "rez sisters" realize that these dreams cannot be realized by chance alone and that they need to focus on the changes that they can accomplish themselves. Speaking at the funeral of Marie-Adele, Pelajia states:

Well, sister, guess you finally hit the big jackpot. Best bingo game we've ever been to in our lives, huh? You know, life's like that, I figure When all is said and done Kinda' silly, mnit, this business of living? But what choice do we have1? When some fool of a being goes and puts us Indians plunk down in the middle of this old earth, dishes out this lot we got right now But, I figure we gotta make the most of it while we're here. You certainly did. And I sure as hell am giving it one good try. For you For me. For all of us. Promise Really.

The remaining women learn to work in order to improve their lives on "the rez": Veronique takes care of Marie-Adele's children, Annie vows to practice her singing in order to become a star, and Pelajia accepts her position on her roof, hammering away for a better tomorrow. As Philomena tells Pelajia early in the play,' This place is too much in your blood. You can't get rid of it. And it can't get rid of you." The literal and metaphorical journey depicted in *The Rez Sisters* reflects the women coming to understand the importance of these words. Perhaps the clearest sign that the sisters are moving in the right direction is the final appearance of Nanabush as Pelajia works on her roof; he "dances to the beat of the hammer, merrily and triumphantly."

Friendship

In her essay on *The Rez Sisters*, in *Books in Canada*, Carol Bolt remarks that, when seeing the play, audiences feel as if they "have been a part of an extraordinary, exuberant, life-affirming family." This reaction is due to Highway's creation of characters that reflect the value of friendship and a close community. The fact that all of the women are either sisters, half-sisters, or sisters-in-law suggests that they have known each other for a long time; throughout the play they behave in a comfortable, familiar manner, joking and gossiping with each other. Even those women who profess dislike for each other (such as Annie and Veronique) still *talk* to each other, realizing the fact that severing any ties between them would be worse than being annoyed by each other's idiosyncracies.

When a war of words erupts between the women, they throw the worst insults they can imagine at each other: Philomenacalls Annie a "slime"; Emily calls Annie a "slippery little slut"; Veronique tells Annie she is a "sick pervert"; Pelajia calls Marie-Adele "a spoiled brat"; Marie-Adele tells Veronique that she is like "some kind of insect, sticking insect claws into everybody's business"; and Annie mocks Pelajia for thinking that she is "Queen of the Indians." However, despite these bitter retorts, a day later they are all working together, trying to raise enough money for their trip to Toronto. And during their drive, the women confess their secret fears and try to provide each other emotional comfort. Despite their gossip and tendency to quarrel, Highway's characters share an unspoken realization that they need each other for stability and support.

Supernatural

Observing the action of the play is Nanabush, the "trickster" that plays a large role in many Native mythologies and cultures. "We have a mythology that is thousands and thousands of years old," Highway explained to Hartmut Lutz in *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors*. Highway described the trickster to the *Globe and Mail's* Conlogue as "central to our system of spiritual belief. It's a connection to this great energy, or God, which most people only perceive in moments of extreme crisis. Or when they are close to death, and can see into the spirit world." In *The Rez Sisters*, only Marie-Adele and Zhaboonigan can recognize Nanabush in his various disguises, suggesting that the former is "close to death" and that the latter, despite her mental handicap, is more perceptive and open to the spirit world than the other women. On her way to Toronto, Marie-Adele is confronted by Nanabush, who warns her of her upcoming death; however, her ascension into the spirit world (in the arms of the Bingo Master) proves to be a breathtaking journey. By placing Nanabush onstage for most of the play, Highway suggests that the Trickster may be fading from modern Native's memories but is in fact still very much a part of their everyday lives.

Style

Setting

When Pelajia Patchnose, at the opening of the play, tells her sister that she wants to leave Wasy and "go to Toronto," Philomena replies, "But you were born here," as if this is reason enough for her to stay. As the play progresses, however, the audience learns that this is reason enough; one of the play's chief issues is that home is where the heart is; how a group of people learn to respect their homeland and stand up to the challenges that make their lives' difficult rather than run off to a different place. "This place is too much inside your blood," Philomena tells Pelajia. "You can't get rid of it. And it can't get rid of you." The sisters frequently lapse into Cree, such as when Pelajia says," Aw-ni-gi-naw-ee-dick [Oh, go on]" to Philomena or when Marie-Adele and Nanabush conduct an entire conversation in the same language.

Creating the play to occur in a specific place with its own language and identity reflects one of Highway's chief artistic concerns: "I believe that a sense of place applies to everybody," he said in an interview with Robert Enright in *Border Crossings*. "Where you come from, where your roots are all that is extremely strong. I don't think that anybody is able to get rid of it." Unlike other plays with indeterminate settings, *The Rez Sisters* emphasizes Wasy to show that the setting is as important and as central to the play as the characters.

Characterization

One of the chief appeals of *The Rez Sisters* is its array of colorful characters the manner in which Highway presents his "sisters" is worth noting. Each of the women presents a different point of view about life on the rez. Pelajia, for example, thinks of a world elsewhere, where her "old man" would not have to "go the hundred miles to Espanola just to get a job." Philomena is more down-to-earth and practical, as suggested by her desire for a nice new toilet (and her casual opening of the bathroom door to yell at the other women while she is sitting on an old one). Annie is the town gossip, prying into the affairs of others. Emily is a contrast to her friends because she is tougher and more cynical, at first appearance less concerned with the others' welfare. Marie-Adele is tender and faces her impending death with great dignity. Veronique frets over her own childlessness but still cares for her adopted daughter, Zhaboonigan: a mentally disabled young woman whose honesty and joy springs forth to relieve the play's most tense situations, Denis W. Johnston has written in *Canadian Literature* that the play's complexity "lies not in its plot, but in a sophisticated pattern of character revelation and development." By offering his audience such a wide variety of characters and attitudes, Highway is able to more fully explore life "on the rez" and the dreams of those who live there.

Symbolism

The foremost symbol used in the play (the one that opens and closes the story) is Palajia's hammer, which is first seen when she is attaching shingles to her roof. Unhappy with her life at Wasy, the hammer symbolizes the toil and labor that Pelajia associates with the rez. She also uses the tool to threaten the other women, in which case it becomes a symbol of her aggression and her role as a leader to the women. At their meeting in Pelajia's basement, Emily uses the hammer as a gavel, bringing order to their chaotic plans. Finally, as Johnston has remarked, Pelajia is using it at the end of the play, again on her roof, but with an important difference: now "her hammer has become a badge of purpose rather than just a physical tool." Tracing the way that Pelajia uses her hammer is like tracing the ways in which her character changes; it serves as a symbol of her growth and accepting responsibility to transform and improve her corner of Wasy. With it, she will rebuild her life and the lives of her "rez sisters."

Historical Context

Describing the initial reaction to *The Rez Sisters*, Highway remarked to *Canadian Literature's* Johnston, "I'm sure some people went to [the play] expecting crying and moaning and plenty of misery, reflecting everything they've heard about or witnessed on reserves. They must have been surprised. All that humor and optimism, plus the positive values taught by Indian mythology." These values are found in the attitudes of the women towards both Wasy and each other, and the best way to explore the cultural context of *The Rez Sisters* is to consider what its author has said about the role of spirituality and mythology in Cree and other Native cultures. 1986 saw the disaster at the Soviet Union's Chernobyl nuclear power plant (which is estimated to cause anywhere from 6,500 to 45,000 future deaths by cancer caused by radiation); as if commenting on this tragedy, during his tenure as artistic director for the Native Earth Performing Arts, Inc., Highway once stated, "At a time in our history, as a community of human beings, when the world is about to get literally destroyed, and all life forms have a very good chance of being completely obliterated at a crucial time like this, Native people have a major statement to make about the profound change that has to come about in order for the disaster to be averted." The statement to which Highway refers here is, of course, the play itself, which offers viewers a look at the spirituality of seven women and how this spirituality plays a role in their daily lives.

In several interviews, Highway has talked at length about the Trickster (who appears in *The Rez Sisters* as Nanabush), his role in Native culture and the effect of Christianity on Native beliefs. The Trickster "occupies a central role for us," Highway told Conlogue in the *Globe and Mail,* "just as Christ does for [Christians]. But there are three important differences. Trickster has a sense of humor. He was never crucified. And he is neither male nor female," (The Trickster's sense of humor is found in *The Rez Sisters*, for example, when he transforms into the showy and bombastic Bingo Master.) "The way of Nanabush is the way of joy and laughter," Highway said in *Maclean's*, "Contrast that with Christianity the way of pain and tears." Highway sees one of his artistic goals as reacquainting Native people with their own mythologies, which, as he stated in *Contemporary Challenges*, were "almost destroyed or... obliterated by the onslaught of missionaries." Describing the reaction to his second play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway told Ennght in *Border Crossings* that he was "shocked to discover that main-stream audiences knew more about the size of Elizabeth Taylor's breasts ... than they did about their own systems of gods and goddesses."

This is not to say that only Native audiences can learn from Highway's depiction of Native spirituality; on the contrary, Highway has studied many mythologies from around the world and seeks to educate non-Native audiences about the way and teachings of Nanabush: "We're not a highly intel-lectualized or highly technologized society," he told Enright, "but we haven't sacrificed our spiritual centre."

While only two of his "rez sisters" can recognize Nanabush, this does not imply that the others have lost touch with their spiritual heritage: other characters speak of legendary figures, such as Windigo, a giant and Bingo Betty, a local ghost who haunts "the rez,"

"hovering in the air above the bingo tables, playing bingo like its never been played before." However, Highway is not implying that one culture is superior to another or more inherently "right"; rather, as he told Bemrose in *Maclean's*, he feels that, "If we could combine the best of both cultures [Native and Western] we could create something really beautiful: a society that isn't structured to pollute or hoard bombs." An interesting historical footnote to this comment is that, in 1986, a stalemate occurred in the nuclear disarmament talks between President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Party Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, illustrating just how important "hoarding bombs" is to much of the world.

Critical Overview

The Rez Sisters was first performed at the National Canadian Centre of Toronto on November 26,1986. Critical response to the play was overwhelmingly positive. In a 1987 edition of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Daniel David Moses stated, "The majority of Native people, forced to inhabit ignored, economically disadvantaged areas called reserves, are not encouraged to regard their own lives as important. The accomplishment of *The Rez Sisters* is that it focuses on a variety of such undervalued lives and brings them up to size." Thomas King, who published an excerpt from the play in his anthology *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*, applauded Highway for his portrayal of the "rez" community and his ability to present a community as "the intricate webs of kinship that radiate from a native sense of family."

Highway has also received acclaim for his positive and optimistic look at his characters, as well as the way that he presents the inner lives of these women to the audience, Carol Bolt, writing in *Books in Canada* called the play a "freewheeling, unforgettable journey in terrific company, the Rez sisters, all of them full of energy and honesty and dreams and life." Writing in a 1990 edition of the *Canadian Theatre Review*, William Peel echoed Bolt by saying that Highway "has carved out a number of memorable portraits" and that his "achievement lies not only in the characters he has created, but in his masterful orchestration of the action through which these characters are revealed." Indeed, his skill at characterization has won Highway his greatest acclaim: in *Canadian Literature*, Denis W. Johnston stateds, "A reading of some of the women's individual stories a character's 'through-line' in theatrical terminology will help to demonstrate how the strength of the play depends on cyclical character journeys rather than on the plot line."

Praise has also been sung for Highway's ability to emphasize the culture of his Native characters in a manner that is accessible to non-Native audiences. John Bemrose, writing in *Maclean's* called Highway a playwright "who has learned to straddle two worlds with more grace than most people manage in one." The Toronto *Globe and Mail's* Conlogue praised Highway's art on similar grounds, stating that "Highway embodies the customary contradictions of living in two worlds at once, native and white, but he embodies them with a special intensity because, simply put, he is outrageously talented," Johnston remarked that although the play is one that is concerned with Native women, it is also a play with a universal message "about people and their dreams and their fears. That these people happen to be Native women, reflecting some problems of their particular place in contemporary society, asserts one feature only of the play's appeal."

When *The Rez Sisters* was brought to the New York Theater Workshop in New York City, it received a negative review in the influential *New York Times*. As critic David Richards wrote: "All of the play's shortcomings, and none of [Highway's] assets, are readily apparent ... [Highway] plots scenes clumsily and states points baldly. When the dialogue is supposed to be ribald, it rarely rises above the level of adolescent bathroom

humor." However, Richards's review mainly finds fault with the production rather than the play: "the drama, which has won numerous awards in Canada, has to be more surprising than this ramshackle staging would suggest." He further stated that "Mr. Highways' strongest gift, an ability to capture flamboyant personalities with their defenses down, remains largely unexploited" because "few of the [actresses] show any signs of theatrical sophistication. Raw gusto, more than anything else, distinguishes their collective endeavors."

Despite such negativity, Highway's ability to offer a glimpse of Native life without alienating non-Native audiences is one of the reasons why the play was nominated for and awarded the Dora Mavor Moore Award for best new play of the 1986-87 Canadian theater season. (The play was also chosen as a runner-up for the Floyd S. Chalmers Award for outstanding Canadian play of 1986). In addition to these prizes, *The Rez Sisters* was selected {in 1988) as one of only two productions to represent Canada at the Edinburgh Festival.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Moron is an educator with significant experience in the instruction of drama and literature. His essay on Highway's play explores the themes of character, womanhood, and community that lead the sisters to appreciate one another and their reserve.

Terence, the popular playwright of ancient Rome, once wrote that "Fortune favors the bold." While this may be true in some cases, none of the bold women in Highway's *The Rez Sisters* seem particularly "favored" by Fortune or anything else for that matter. Pelajia, for example, opens the play by voicing her desire to leave: "I want to go to Toronto." Veronique complains of her drunken husband. Emily was beaten by her husband for ten years, then left only to experience death in a new relationship. Annie lost her sweetheart to her own sister, Marie-Adele, who is now stricken with cancer. And Philomena, who seems the most jovial of the group, secretly wonders about the child she was forced to give up twenty-eight years before. All of the women hope that, by winning the bingo jackpot, they will be able to realize their dreams and improve their lives. What Highway suggests, however, is that real change cannot be found by the luck of a bingo machine (or more succinctly, money); rather, it must come from within the women themselves. As the women journey from Wasy to Toronto, they embark on a spiritual and emotional journey as well, returning with a fresh attitude, ready to affect real change.

The play begins with a depiction of the women's lives at "plain, dusty, boring ... old Wasy," the "rez" where most of the action takes place. Pelajia is hammering shingles on her roof and complaining that Wasy needs paved roads "so that people will stop fighting and screwing around and Nanabush [the Trickster] will come back to us because he'll have paved roads to dance on." She continues to describe Wasy as a place where everyone is "crazy" because there are "no jobs" and "nothing to do but drink and screw each other's wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush." Gossip is a favorite pastime on the rez, as seen when Annie enters and begins asking if anyone heard that "Gazelle Nataways plans to spend her bingo money to go to Toronto with Big Joey." Their love of gossip seems to benefit them, however, when they learn that, in Toronto, "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD" will be played for a $500,000 jackpot. Their reactions to this news displays their feelings of claustrophobia living in Wasy: Marie-Adele, for example, hopes to use her future winnings to buy an island "with pine trees and maple trees and big stones and little stonelets" where she can live "real nice and comfy" with her husband and her fourteen children. Similarly, Annie plans on discovering life off of the rez, in Toronto, where she can feel sophisticated and "drink beer quietly not noisy and crazy like here." As pointed out by David Richards of the *New York Times*, the women's desperation to escape is evidenced by the repetitive phrase they each use, "When I win," rather than, "If I win." The Delaware playwright Daniel David Moses has written that these women (and many real women like them) were never "encouraged to regard their own lives as important," and the opening scene of the play reveals this fact.

Highway's emphasis on the characters of Native women suggests that he is exploring the ways in which their drive for success differs from that of their male counterparts. In the *Globe and Mail*, Highway said that he is "sensitive to women because of the matrilineal principle in [Cree] culture, which has gone on for thousands of years." When examined from a distance, one can see that these women fit the roles of various "types": Annie is the local busybody; Emily is the masculine biker; Philomena is the rez's comic relief; Marie-Adele is the mother figure; Veronique is the bitter gossip; and Zhaboonigan, Veromque's mentally disabled adopted daughter, is an outsider that is loved but cared for out of a sense of pity and duty. In offering these various character types, Highway creates a model of a community, where all sorts of women need to accept each other if their lives are ever to improve. There are no men in *The Rez Sisters*, although several are discussed by the women. The picture that the women's dialogue paints of the rezmen suggests that they will be of little help in healing the rez: Veronique's husband, Pierre St. Pierre, never provides his family with any money because he "drinks it up"; Big Joey is a womanizer who spends his days with other men's wives; Wasy's Band Leader has been making empty promises about community improvements (such as the new road Pelajia wants) for years, yet he never fulfills these promises; Henry Dadzinanare, Emily's ex-husband, beat her "every second night for ten long ass-fuckin' years." Highway's use of an all-female cast (except for Nanabush, who, due to his nature, can be played by either a male or female actor) serves to remind the audience that, although the play looks at universal human issues (such as death and love), he is offering a woman's perspective on these issues a perspective that the audience sees change as the play proceeds.

One of the ways that Highway illustrates the changes in the sisters' attitudes is his depiction of the van ride to Toronto. At one point in this literal and figurative journey, Marie-Adele wanders off while the others fix a flat tire. She is greeted by Nanabush, this time in the guise of a nighthawk, who approaches and then attacks her as an omen of her impending death. Her frantic cries reveal her complete and total fear:

"What do you want? My children1' Eugene? No" Oh no! Me? Not yet. Not yet. Give me time Please. Don't Please don't Awus [go away]! Get away from me! Eugene! Awus1 You fucking bird1 Awus! Awus! Awus I Awus! Awus1"

Following this, she has "a total hysterical breakdown1 '; later in the van, she tells Pelajia, "een-pay-seek-see-yan [I'm scared to death]." To comfort her, Emily and Pelajia must face death almost as squarely as Marie-Adele herself, causing them to grow stronger as individuals and sisters. As Bolt remarked on this scene in *Books in Canada,* "We have seen the sisters raging at each other in a remarkable sequence, a riot of every conceivable insult," but now they are "gentlest with each other" because "their journey has taken them simply and directly to the heart of the matter." Their conversation with Marie-Adele causes Emily to consider the presence of death in her own life and understand how it has affected her: when her lover committed suicide in San Francisco, Emily "drove on. Straight into daylight. Never looked back." Now, however, in the safe haven of the van, Emily can be honest with herself and others and find the comfort she would never solicit but desperately needs.

The appearance of Nanabush in the previously described scene is a reminder to the audience that the women's spirituality is another of Highway's artistic concerns. "Nanabush" is the Ojibway name for the Trickster, a central figure in Native mythology. Throughout *The Rez Sisters,* Nanabush observes the action, seen only by Marie-Adele and Zhaboonigan (because their suffering has brought them closer to the spirit world). At first, Marie-Adele toys with Nanabush (in the guise of a seagull), who asks her to "fly away" with him. Her response, "I can't fly away. I have no wings. Yet," reveals her desire to escape but also her failure to fully understand the reason for Nanabush's visit: he has come to guide her to her death, a fact that Marie-Adele is not yet ready to accept. When he appears to Zhaboonigan, she describes to him a time when she was sexually molested:' "They ask me if I want ride in car.... Took me far away. Ever nice ride, Dizzy. They took all my clothes off me. Put something up inside me here," Zhaboonigan, in a sense, can be seen as a symbolic character, representing the "rape" of Native pride and culture by white civilization and society; as if reflecting this idea, Nanabush "goes through agonizing contortions" while listening to her story. "The missionaries think they've killed off the Trickster," Highway told Conlogue in the *Globe and Mail*, "but we don't think so. To my mind, the Trickster has been passed under the table for two hundred years." Part of Highway's purpose in writing *The Rez Sisters* is to reawaken his audience's awareness of Nanabush and bring him out from "under the table."

The climax of the play, the actual bingo game, features a theatrical device that links the viewers even more closely with the characters, breaking down the wall between the audience and the actors: viewers play a "warm-up" bingo game (using cards supplied in their programs). The "theatrical daring" of this device has been praised by Moses in *Canadian Fiction*, who explained, "We literally play along, experiencing for ourselves the Rez Sisters' passion." The purpose of this device, however, is also to lure the audience into *thinking* like the sisters, to intensify their hope that Annie's B-14 (the number she needs to complete her bingo card) will be called. Of course, it never is, and the sisters, exploding in frustration, storm the bingo machine as if to protest what they see as the unfair hand of fortune.

While this occurs, Marie-Adele is escorted away from the melee by the Bingo Master, who "waltzes romantically" with her, says, "Bingo" in her ear, and then transforms into the mghthawk: Nanabush in dark feathers. In his essay in *Canadian Literature*, Johnston remarked that Marie-Adele "comes to accept her own death in the same way that she accepted life, gently and with love." Her death here is the central event of the play: before the numbers are called, Highway has the actresses arranged at a long bingo table, featuring Veronique's "good luck" crucifix and lit "so that it looks like 'The Last Supper.'" This is a Christian image, to be sure, but one that many non-Native viewers are able to understand. Like Christ, Marie-Adele accepts her death with grace: "beautiful soft... darkwings ... come and get me ... wings here ... take me." The connection here is clear: as Christ died to create great changes m his followers' minds and hearts, the death of Mane-Adele will do the same for her "disciples" atWasy.

The final scenes of the play illustrate these effects in a number of ways. Veronique has moved into Marie-Adele's house to care for her children; now she has a home with everything that Pierre St. Pierre's drunkenness has withheld from her. Her previous

"small-mindedness," commented Johnston, "was a symptom not of having too little love to bestow, but rather of having too few people on whom to bestow it." Anme has decided to practice and pursue her dream of a country-music career. Emily reveals to everyone that she is pregnant with Big Joey's baby, as if fate has compensated for the loss of Marie-Adele; while Emily is unimaginable as a mother when she first enters the play, she is now a little softer and the implication here is that motherhood will allow her to express more openly the love and compassion that was reawakened during the sisters' journey. The most notable transformation is Pelajia's, who stands at Marie-Adele's grave and realizes that complaining will not help anyone: "Kinda* silly, innit, this business of living? But. What choice do we have?" To put her new perspective into action, Pelajia climbs atop her roof again and begins hammering at her shingles, but this time in a different state of mind: when asked by Philomenaif she still wants to leave Wasy and go to Toronto, she replies, "Well ... oh ... sometimes. I'm not so sure I would get along with him if I were to live down there. I mean my son Tom." Her acceptance of herself and the rez is growing stronger, and, as if to bless her conversion, Nanabush makes a final appearance on her roof, dancing "merrily and triumphantly" to the beat of her hammer. The "good fortune" that the Rez Sisters so desperately hoped for was, in fact, to *lose* "THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WOR1D." Losing at bingo (and, more importantly, losing Marie-Adele) has forced them to reevaluate their lives and take the responsibility of change upon themselves.

Source: Daniel Moran, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this positive review, Bolt recounts the action 0/The Rez Sisters.

Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* takes us from the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island to the World's Biggest Bingo in Toronto. It's a free-wheeling, unforgettable journey in terrific company, the Rez sisters, all of them full of energy and honesty and dreams and life.

There is Pelajia Patchnose, who wants paved roads "so people will stop fighting and screwing around and Nanabush will come back to us because he'll have paved roads to dance on." There's Annie Cook, who wants to go to Toronto to go to all the record stores, listen to all the live bands "and drink beer quietly, not noisy and crazy like here." There's PhilomenaMoosebait, who wants only a toilet "big and wide and very white." And there's Marie-Adele Starblanket who has cancer and who counts her 14 children on the posts of her white picket fence: "Simon, Andrew, Matthew, Janie, Nicky, Ricky, Ben, Mark, Ron, Don, John, Tom, Pete, and Rosemarie." Marie-Adele longs for an island, "the most beautiful, incredible island in the whole goddamn world" for her 12 Starblanket boys and two Starblanket girls. In all, there are seven vital, remarkable women; and we also meet Nanabush, the trickster, disguised as a seagull, a disturbing spirit whom only Marie-Adele and the mentally disabled girl, Zhaboonigan Peterson, can see.

ZHABOONIGAN- Don't fly away. Don't go. I saw you before. There, there. It was a. Screwdriver They put a screwdriver inside me. Here. Remember Ever lots of blood. The two white boys Left me in the bush. Alone. It was cold . . Ever nice white bird you...

Wasaychigan Hill is "plain, dusty, boring ... old Wasy" where the "old man has to go the hundred miles to Espanola just to get a job" and the "boys ... Gone to Toronto. Only place educated Indian boys can find decent jobs these days." It is also a world full of poetry and spirits, "where on certain nights at the bingo ... you can see Bingo Betty's ghost, like a mist, hovering in the air over the bingo tables, playing bingo like it's never been played before," and where Nanabush courts Marie-Adele, dancing with her, begging her to fly away with him.

Marie-Adele tells him she has no wings "... Yet." Besides, she is going to Toronto. For tests. And to play the biggest Bingo in the world with her five sisters.

It is when the women start out for Toronto, driving through the night, that the story becomes most haunting. While the others stop to change a tire blown out on the pitch-dark midnight highway, Marie-Adele meets the Night Hawk, the dark side of Nanabush. He reminds her that she's dying and she's terrified. She talks about her husband, Eugene:

I could be really mad, just raging man just wanna tear his eyes out with my nails when he walks in the door and my whole body goes "k-k-k-k" ...

She talks about "the curve of his back, his breath on my neck, Adele, *ki-sa-gee-ee~tin oo-ma*, making love, always in Indian, only. When we still could. I can't even have him inside me anymore. It's still growing there. The cancer."

"Pelajia," she explains in Cree, " *Een-pay-seek-see-yan.* Pelajia, I'm scared to death."

The six women continue together toward Toronto as Pelajia tries to comfort Marie-Adele.

You know, one time, I knew this couple where one of them was dying and the other one was angry at her for dying And she was mad because he was gonna be there when she wasn't and she had so much left to do.

We have seen the sisters raging at each other in a remarkable sequence, a riot of every conceivable insult. Now, when they're gentlest with each other, when their journey has taken them simply and directly to the heart of the matter, the stage erupts again. Nanabush, in disguise as the Bingo Master, lets everyone in the audience play one warm-up game on the bingo cards included with each program.

Whoever wins this warm-up game, it isn't the Rez sisters. Then the biggest bingo in the world is called, for the big pot they all want, ("A HALF MILLION smackeroos! If you play the game right"). They do everything they can to win. Philomena plays 27 cards. But when they realize it isn't going to work, they storm the stage, complaining that the game is unfair. It's a wonderful moment of theatre, as the Bingo Master changes to the Night Hawk and waltzes away with Marie-Adele.

The Rez sisters return to the reserve without Marie-Adele. Although the play's final sequence seems empty without her, perhaps we are feeling the same loss the characters feel. After all, for two hours we have been part of an extraordinary, exuberant, life-affirming family.

Source: Carol Bolt, "No Wings Yet" in *Books in Canada*, Vol. 18, no. 2, March, 1989, p. 26.

Critical Essay #3

I*n this article, Taylor gives an overview of the Native North American theatre from which Tomson Highway's* The Rez Sisters *emerged.*

Each summer, members of the Native Theatre School the only one of its kind in Canada-develop a new production at their farm in Heathcote, Ont., and then take it on the road. Audiences on Indian reserves enjoy the plays, whether they deal with urban teenagers or movie stereotypes of Indians, says school director Cathy Cayuga: "They laugh aloud they understand the absurdities." But when her troupe performs for white audiences, they are often greeted with confusion. Added Cayuga: "People are terribly self-conscious afraid to laugh." Few Canadian plays successfully cross the boundary between native and white experience. Those that have, such as *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, have been written or coauthored by whites. Until Manitoba-born Cree playwright Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, which opened last week at the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa, the imaginative landscape claimed by Canada's dedicated band of native theatre professionals has been unmapped territory for the rest of the country.

The Rez Sisters premiered at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto a year ago, was runner-up for a Floyd S. Chalmers Award for outstanding Canadian Play in 1986 and won a Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best New Play 1986/87. The play follows seven women who leave their reserve or "rez" in native slang on Manitoulin Island, Ont., to visit the world's biggest bingo game in Toronto. Their banter, sometimes tough, sometimes wryly humorous, reflects the staccato rhythms of the playwright's native Cree tongue. Highway attributes his drama's success to its director, Larry Lewis, and to its actors. But the play, which will soon tour dirough-out Western Canada, also marks a turning point in native arts generally. Said Highway: "We're entering a second wave. Exactly 25 years ago Norval Morriseau's first solo exhibition of paintings started a revolution by sharing the sacred stories beyond our communities. Now we are extending that, taking the oral traditions into theatre and three dimensions."

Highway is artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, Inc., one of the country's 12 full-and part-time native performing groups. Some are based in cities, such as Vancouver's six-year-old Spirit Song Native Indian Theatre Company, which runs ambitious training programs in theatre arts and mounts at least one new production a year. Others are reserve-based companies, such as the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre on Manitoulin Island. The group's name "storytellers" in Ojibwa reflects its focus on translating legends for the enjoyment of both reserve audiences and summer tourists.

Blake Debassige, president of De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig, distinguishes between the contemporary dramas produced by urban-companies and what his group does, which he calls "the romantic tradition an extension of telling stories round the campfire." Because those traditions were suppressed for centuries by white missionaries, some native activists say that the act of resurrecting legends is just as revolutionary as creating gritty new works. Once, native theatre took highly sophisticated forms: when

Capt. James Cook arrived on Canada's west coast in 1778, he found Nootka Indians using masks, props, trapdoors, lighting and smoke effects in their religious dramas. But between 1884 and 1951 performing many theatrical celebrations was punishable under the Criminal Code.

Changes to the code marked the beginning of a renaissance. So did reports of growth in indigenous peoples* theatre in the Caribbean, Scandinavia and the South Pacific. In 1980 and again in 1982 delegates from those cultures converged in Ontario for the Indigenous Peoples' Theatre Celebrations, creating an international support network that still persists. Native Theatre School director Cayuga has studied community theatre in Jamaica, and the school tour last year included two Carib Indians and a Lapp, or Sami, from Sweden.

Despite the success of *The Rez Sisters*, it is at the community level that native theatre will continue to flourish. That is because its primary goal is not to entertain a mass audience but to make connections with indigenous cultures torn apart by social change. Even *The Rez Sisters* performs a healing role. The play's only male character is Nanabush in Ojibwa legend, the trickster who is also something of a Christ figure, an intermediary between humanity and the world of the spirit. Said Highway: "When the white man came to this continent, Nanabush passed out under the table of The Silver Dollar [a bar in Toronto]. Our responsibility as native artists is to sober him up."

Source: Drew Taylor, "Legends on the Stage" in *Maclean's*, Vol. 100, no. 42, October 19,1987, p. 69.

Topics for Further Study

Research the appearance of the Trickster in Native American and Native Canadian cultures and compare his depiction in various myths to his appearance in *The Rez Sisters*.

Research how many Native Americans and Canadians were forced to live on reserves (reservations). Find accounts of life on these reserves. Compare and contrast these accounts with the depiction of Wasy in *The Rez Sisters,*

Research the effects of Christianity and missionaries on Native American and Native Canadian life. Describe the degree to which you think these effects have caused many Native people to lose touch with their spirituality.

Research they ways death is depicted in various cultures. Compare and contrast these depictions with the Cree perception of death that is presented in *The Rez Sisters*.

What Do I Read Next?

Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing, Highway's 1989 "sequel" to *The Rez Sisters*. The opposite view *of Rez, Dry Lips* focuses on seven men who play hockey (instead of bingo), a female Nanabush, and the dark tragedy that overshadows their lives.

The Sage, the Dancer, and the Fool is a 1989 Highway play, written in collaboration with Rene Highway and Bill Merasty. In it, the playwrights feature Native oral traditions through the use of minimal sets.

Barry Lopez's text *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with His Daughter: Coyote Builds North America*, (published by Andrews & McMeel, 1978) is a collection of stories about the Trickster figure in native cultures. The title refers to "Coyote," an animal form that Nanabush assumes in many legends.

They Came Here First: The Epic of the American Indian, by D'arcy McNickle. Considered to be the first anthropolgist to chronicle Native literature, Cree novelist, biographer, and ethnohistorian McNickle's book is a comprehensive look at the cultural development of Native races.

Many of American poet Emily Dickinson's *Collected Poems* feature people who encounter death in some form; a comparison of the way that death is portrayed here and in *The Rez Sisters* could prove interesting.

Further Study

Bemrose, John "Highway of Hope," in *Maclean's*, Vol 102, no. 19, May 8,1989, p. 62.

Although he mainly focuses on Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Bemrose does offer some valuable quotations from Highway on the differences between the Cree language and English.

Conlogue, Ray. "Mixing Spirits, Bingo, and Genius," in the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, November 21, 1987, p. C5 Conlogue explains how *The Rez Sisters* reflects Highway's concerns as a Native and as an artist, touching upon such topics as the Trickster, racism and the "matrilineal principle" in Native literature.

Enright, Robert. "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway," in *Border Crossings*, Vol 1, No. 4, December, 1992, pp. 22-27.

This is a long and thorough interview in which Enright and Highway discuss the playwright's childhood, study of folklore, and the effects of Christianity on Native spmtual life.

Johnston, Denis W. "Lines and Circles: The 'Rez' Plays of Tomson Highway," in *Canadian Literature*, Nos. 124-25, Spring-Summer, 1990, pp. 254-64

This is a very perceptive and valuable essay in which Johnston discusses the stylistic and thematic similarities and differences between *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Bach play is analyzed in great detail.

King, Thomas, editor. *All My Relations- An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*, McClelland and Stewart, 1990.

An excellent anthology of Native fiction. King was the first to publish Highway's work m a major anthology, and his introduction offers some perspectives on the playwright's work.

Lutz, Hartmut. "An Interview with Tomson Highway," in *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors,* Fifth House Publishers, 1991.

In this interview, Highway discusses the role of mythology in Native life.

Peel, William. Review of *The Rez Sisters* in *Canadian Theatre Review*, No. 65, Winter, 1990, pp 62-64

Peel explores the narrative structure of *The Rez Sisters* and explains how Highway creates his "memorable portraits" throughout the play.

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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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