The River Niger Study Guide

The River Niger by Joseph A. Walker

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Introduction

The River Niger, a loosely autobiographical play by Joseph A. Walker, was first performed by the Negro Ensemble Company in New York City in 1972. The play was first published in 1973, and was adapted to the screen by Walker in the 1976 production starring Cicely Tyson and James Earl Jones.

The River Niger is about Jeff Williams, a young African-American man returning home to his family in Harlem after several years in the Air Force. His mother, Mattie; father, John; and grandmother eagerly await his arrival. Ann Vanderguild, a nurse from South Africa who met Jeff at a hospital in Canada, unexpectedly arrives at the Williams' house with her suitcases, intending to convince Jeff to marry her. When Jeff finally arrives, he is greeted by his childhood friend Mo and Mo's men, a small group of revolutionaries who try to bully Jeff into joining their organization. But Jeff does not agree with their politics and is set on becoming a lawyer. Jeff, however, severely disappoints his father when he informs the family that he has flunked out of the Air Force and never liked it in the first place. Jeff's father, John, is so enraged by this that he leaves home and doesn't return until a week later, having gone on a drinking "bender." After Jeff reluctantly agrees to help Mo and his organization, they all find themselves in the Williams' house, surrounded by police who have discovered a violent plot planned by the young revolutionaries. Jeff's father sacrifices his life to save Jeff from being implicated in the crime.

The River Niger focuses on themes common to much of Walker's work: the struggles of black men in a racist society; the camaraderie between black men; the role of men in the black family; and efforts among African Americans to achieve greater equality.

Author Biography

Joseph A. Walker made a name for himself in the 1970s with his dramatic stage plays highlighting the struggles of African-American men in a white-dominated, racist society. Walker was born on February 23, 1935, in Washington, D.C., to Joseph (a house painter) and Florine Walker. In 1956, Walker graduated from Howard University, where he majored in philosophy and minored in drama. From 1956 to 1960, Walker was in the United States Air Force, reaching the rank of first lieutenant before being discharged.

While in the Air Force, the experience of being teased by a white fellow Air Force member for writing poetry inspired Walker to quit the armed forces and devote himself to the craft of writing. In the one-paragraph "Joe Walker's Autobiography," which prefaces *The River Niger*, Walker explains, "I started to become a professional philosopher, whatever that means, changed my mind on account of I got what you may stuffily call an artistic temperament and I like to do my thinking through plays and things."

In 1963, Walker earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Catholic University. He then turned to teaching, first in a Washington, D.C., high school and later at City College of New York. His first marriage, to Barbara Brown, ended in divorce in 1965, and was followed by his marriage to Dorothy A. Dinroe in 1970. From 1970 to 1971, Walker was playwright-in-residence at Yale University. He returned to Howard University, where he became a full professor of drama.

Walker's first play, *The Harangues*, was staged by the Negro Ensemble Company in 1970, and was followed by *Ododo* in 1971. Walker's most critically acclaimed work, *The River Niger* (1972), garnered numerous distinguished drama awards, including an Obie Award, an Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award, the Dramatist Guild's Elizabeth Hull-Kate Award, First Annual Audelco Award, John Gassner Award from Outer Circle, Drama Desk Award, and the Black Rose Award. Walker also wrote the screenplay adaptation of *The River Niger*, which was produced by Cine Arts in 1976, starring Cicely Tyson and James Earl Jones.

Walker has appeared as an actor in stage productions of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Once in a Lifetime;* in the movies *April Fools* (1969), and *Bananas* (1971); and in an award-winning episode of the popular TV show *N.Y.P.D.*

Walker was also the co-founder and artistic director of the dance-music theater repertory company The Demi-Gods.

Plot Summary

Act 1

In act 1 of *The River Niger*, John and Mattie Williams prepare for the return home of their son Jeff, who has spent several years in the Air Force. As the play opens, Jeff's grandmother Wilhemina Brown, Mattie's mother, sneaks a drink from her hiding place in the kitchen. John and his friend Dr. Dudley Stanton share a drink and banter; their banter includes both crude insults and obvious expressions of loving camaraderie. Ann Vanderguild arrives at the Williams' house. She is a nurse in her twenties, from South Africa, who cared for Jeff in a hospital in Canada and has arrived without invitation or warning, hoping to get Jeff to marry her. Everyone perceives this right away, but the men are impressed by her physical attractiveness, and John reads aloud a poem he has written. When Jeff's mother and grandmother return home from shopping, Mattie is quickly won over by Ann's sincerity and charm, but Grandma immediately and openly disapproves of her.

John and Dudley leave for the Apple, the local bar. Ann explains to Mattie that her father has been in prison in South Africa for the past nine years because her two brothers had been carrying out antigovernment activities; her father took the blame so that her brothers could flee the country.

Ann and Mattie begin preparing dinner. Chips, a childhood friend of Jeff's, shows up at the door looking for Jeff. Chips is sexually aggressive toward Ann. That night, as Ann is sleeping in the living room, Mo and his friends—Chips, Skeeter, Al, and Mo's girlfriend Gail—members of a local revolutionary group, barge in looking for Jeff. They attempt to intimidate Ann, until John and Dudley arrive home from the bar, drunk, and John threatens them with a gun. After they leave, John and Dudley share another drink in the kitchen, while Jeff sneaks in and awakens Ann, who is sleeping in the living room. The two have sex, then Jeff sneaks up to his bedroom.

Act 2

In act 2, the next morning, John pauses in the middle of mopping the kitchen floor to write a poem which begins, "I am the River Niger." Dudley arrives, and the two men leave for the local bar. Mattie explains to Ann that John wanted to become a lawyer, but had to quit school to support various members of Mattie's family who had migrated from the South to Harlem. Mattie tells Ann that she allows John to drink because she feels responsible for his disappointments in life.

After Mattie and Grandma leave to go shopping, Mo, Gail, Skeeter, Al, and Chips show up and begin harassing Ann. Al follows Ann upstairs and attempts to rape her at gunpoint. Jeff, who has been in his bedroom, attacks Al, takes the gun away from him, and comes downstairs holding it to Al's head. Mo and his men try to bully Jeff into

joining their organization, but Jeff does not agree with their politics and tells them he plans to become a lawyer. Mo, Gail, and Mo's men leave. Mattie and Grandma return from shopping and Jeff announces his arrival home. He tells them that he wants to marry Ann. John and Dudley arrive home drunk, and John insists that Jeff put on his military uniform. Jeff tells them that he has flunked out of the Air Force, and that he never liked it. John is so enraged that he walks out.

Act 3

In act 3, the following Friday evening, Mattie, Grandma, Jeff, Ann, and Dudley all sit at the dinner table. John has been gone for almost a week. Dudley informs them all that Mattie has cancer and is going to need radium treatment. Mo and Gail show up, and Mo tells Jeff and Ann that there is a "stool pigeon" in his organization and asks Jeff to help find out who it is. Jeff and Ann both agree to help. At this point, John arrives home, obviously having been on a week-long drinking "bender," with a gash on his head from being beaten up by Mo's men. John reads aloud his poem "*The River Niger*," which he has written for Mattie. Mo unexpectedly arrives with Skeeter, who has been injured during their botched attempt at a violent political action. Gail, Chips, and Al also arrive. The voice of Lieutenant Staples is heard announcing that the police have surrounded the house. Jeff figures out that Al is the one who betrayed them, by informing the police of the location of their attempted action. Al and John simultaneously shoot each other—Al dies immediately, while John is fatally wounded. As he is dying, John tells them to blame the entire incident on him, so that Jeff will not be implicated in the illegal activities of the organization. John then dies in Mattie's arms.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The River Niger is Joseph A. Walker's play about a black family living in the 1970's, in Harlem, in New York City. The plot line reveals the themes of the struggles and the pre-determined roles of black men in America.

As the play opens, it is 4:30 on a February afternoon in a brownstone in Harlem. As the lights go up on a set revealing a large living room and kitchen, an old woman, Grandma Wilhemina Brown, pours coffee into a big mug. After adding some cream and sugar, Grandma looks around furtively. Realizing that she is alone, she retrieves a bottle of whisky from a kitchen cabinet and pours a healthy amount into her coffee mug.

A sound coming from the outside startles Grandma. She returns the bottle to its hiding place and hurries back upstairs. John Williams, a man in his mid-50s, enters his home through the kitchen door. John is a painter by trade and wears clothes that are heavily crusted with paint. It is obvious by John's demeanor that he is slightly intoxicated. His disappointment at counting the contents of his wallet prompts him to take a bottle of whisky from his coat pocket and take a long swallow.

John places the bottle into a hiding place behind the refrigerator and retrieves a piece of paper that had fallen out of his coat pocket. Sitting at the table, John reads the beginnings of a poem he has written, "I am the River Niger - hear my waters. I wriggle and stream and run. I am totally flexible - Damn!"

John crumples the paper, returns it to his pocket, and exits for a few moments to return with a cedar jewelry box, which he lovingly positions on the kitchen counter. A knock at the door announces the arrival of Dr. Dudley Stanton, a Jamaican medical doctor of John's age and his good friend.

Although the two men are dramatically different in profession and appearance, it is clear that there is a strong bond between them. Dudley has just returned from a fishing expedition in Mexico, and John chides him for not extending an invitation to him. Dudley has brought a bottle of vodka, which John does not like. John, once again, chides his friend for not bringing scotch, which is John's liquor of choice.

Dudley has closed his office early today. John has also left his job early in anticipation of the return of his son, Jeff. Tomorrow, he arrives after four years in the Air Force. John is concerned that Jeff will be changed after his time in the military and that he will think less of his father. Dudley reminds John that Jeff's true achievement is surviving and getting out of Harlem.

John wishes that he had an outlet for his pugilistic tendencies and regrets not serving in the military. Dudley reminds John that black people in Harlem have their own battleground every day. Dudley chooses not to fight and wishes people would let nature

take its course. As a physician, Dudley treats minor illnesses. The patients who are seriously ill are referred to another doctor for treatment. To Dudley's way of thinking, death is part of the natural cycle of life and should not be interrupted. Dudley and his wife never had any children, because he did not want to bring any more people into a world where there is so much poverty and hatred. John chastises Dudley for being a thinker and not acting on his beliefs, when there is so much need for change in the black community.

John abruptly changes the subject and asks Dudley to loan him a hundred and ninety dollars. Dudley guesses correctly that John has spent all his money at the local bar, called the "Apple." Dudley pulls a small notebook from his pocket to show that John already owes Dudley $340, but John persists with his request for the new loan.

The two men are interrupted by a knock at the door. John, thinking that it is his wife, Mattie, presses Dudley for the money. Finally, it occurs to the two men that Mattie would not be knocking at her own front door. John opens the door to find a young black woman, who introduces herself as Ann Vanderguild.

Ann is a friend of Jeff's and has arrived early in anticipation of Jeff's homecoming tomorrow. John retrieves Ann's multiple suitcases from the cab, and Ann asks if she may spend the night in their home. Ann reveals that she is a nurse and had met Jeff in Canada, where he was briefly hospitalized.

As Ann gets acquainted with John and Dudley, the two men surmise that Ann has marital intentions toward Jeff. Dudley encourages John to read a poem to Ann, so that she may see what type of man her possible future father-in-law is. John hesitates but soon pulls a scrap of paper from his pocket and begins to read. The reading awes Ann, and Dudley is amazed to find that the paper is blank. John created the poetry on the spot.

The group is interrupted by the arrival of Mattie, her arms loaded with groceries. Ann rises to help Mattie and introduces herself as Jeff's good friend. Grandma comments on Mattie's fatigue, and Mattie reveals that she nearly fainted on the subway. Dudley offers to give Mattie a check-up tomorrow, but she declines.

John and Dudley decide to go out for a few drinks to let Mattie, Grandma and Ann get better acquainted. Mattie realizes that Grandma is intoxicated, once again, and sends the old woman to her room to rest.

As the two women get acquainted, Ann reveals that she is originally from South Africa, where her father is serving his ninth year of imprisonment for printing anti-government materials. In actuality, it had been Ann's brothers who committed the crime, but their father offered himself up in their place to take the punishment. It has been revealed that Ann's father is innocent of the crime, but the government keeps him incarcerated, because his sons have escaped to England. The father is serving as an example to thwart similar activities.

Mattie leaves the room to change clothes. A knock at the door announces the arrival of a young man, named Chips, who is a childhood friend of Jeff's. Chips' hostile demeanor and sexual aggression both frighten and infuriate Ann. Chips is determined to wait for Jeff, whom he claims is returning home tonight, not tomorrow. He finally leaves, vowing to return later.

Mattie re-enters the room, and Ann tells her that Chips had been there. Mattie tells Ann not to deal with Chips or any of his friends without calling for someone to help her. Mattie tells Ann that Jeff had been a gang leader when he was in school, and Mattie does not want Jeff to get involved with the gang again.

Mattie offers to let Ann sleep in Jeff's bed, but Ann opts to sleep on the living room couch. In the middle of the night, Chips and his gang members, Mo, Skeeter, Al and Gail, who have come looking for Jeff, awaken Ann. The group is rude and offensive. John and Dudley, returning home from the bar, rescue Ann.

After the gang members leave, John, Dudley, Ann and Grandma share a drink. Soon after, Ann returns to the couch, and the others leave for their respective beds. As soon as Ann is asleep, Jeff enters the living room, rolls a marijuana cigarette, and wakes Ann. Jeff and Ann share the cigarette and end up making love on the couch, in spite of Ann's promise to Mattie that she would refrain from intimate relations with Jeff during this visit.

Act 1 Analysis

The setting for the play is a brownstone townhouse in Harlem, in New York City. The author defines the location and time of day, but the year is left open, indicating that the story is applicable to people of any time period. The play's geographic location, Harlem, is associated with being the home of poor African Americans living in New York City. This provides demographic information about the play's characters, as well as their physical location.

The author establishes the two strong, male characters, John and Dudley, as opposites who are extremely close friends. The theme of black male friendships and strong black male figures is important, because of the crisis in the black community with a lack of responsible, male role models. The author makes the point that the stereotypes of weak and irresponsible black men are not always true.

John is a frustrated poet, whose education was interrupted by family responsibilities, leading to his dead-end career and eventual drinking problem. Dudley has a successful career as a physician, but he values John's friendship, in spite of his own cynicism that the plight of black people in America can ever improve. The author uses irony to cast the two men in a way that John does not have much of a future, yet still writes his poetry; and Dudley has more advantages, but is filled with pessimism for life in general.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

It is the following morning, and John pauses during mopping the kitchen floor to read his poem, "The River Niger," which he finds to his satisfaction. Dudley enters the house, and John asks if he wants to go to the Apple bar with him. Dudley tells John that Mattie had come into his office this morning and tests indicate some abnormalities in her remaining breast. He has her scheduled for some biopsies at Harlem hospital.

Mattie does not want John to know about her condition, but Dudley thinks it best to warn John ahead of time, so that he can prepare. John and Dudley leave for the bar, and Mattie discusses her family with Ann, who thinks that alcohol abuse is a big problem with them. Mattie loves John dearly for what he gave up to take care of her family, and Grandma is 83-years-old, so Mattie sees no point in controlling their alcohol consumption.

Mattie tells Ann that John had attended college for two years with plans of going on to law school, when Mattie's two sisters arrived in New York from South Carolina. The sisters' inability to provide for themselves in addition to their poor marriage choices left Mattie and John to care for all of them. John was forced to drop out of school and work three jobs to support the entire household.

John poured all his frustrated ambitions into Jeff and Mattie's sisters went on to better lives and never show any gratitude for what she and John did for them. Mattie appreciates Ann's noble platitudes about receiving her true rewards in heaven, but Mattie's only reward will be the happiness of her good and loyal husband.

Grandma comes downstairs and is not happy to see Ann, whom she thinks is going to try to trap Jeff into marriage. Jeff reminds Grandma of her beloved husband and feels that no woman will ever be good enough for her grandson.

Mattie and Grandma have plans to go shopping for Jeff's welcome home party and leave Ann at home alone. Mattie, who is unaware that Jeff had come home last night, has asked Ann to tidy up Jeff's bedroom. She tried going in there before, but the door was locked. Mattie produces a key to the room and gives it to Ann.

After Mattie and Grandma leave the house, Jeff emerges from his bedroom. Ann tells him that she wants to move into a hotel, because she is uncomfortable around Grandma. Jeff tries to sway Ann to stay and suggests that they make love, but they are interrupted by a knock at the door. Ann sees that Skeeter and Al are at the door, and Jeff tells her to let them in. He will join her in a minute.

Skeeter and Al want to talk to Jeff about re-joining their gang. As the two of them talk, it becomes clear that Skeeter is in need of a drug fix, but Al is withholding it. The two men

fight, until finally, Al gives in. Skeeter snorts the cocaine, and immediately begins to calm down.

Soon, Chips, Mo, and Gail, Mo's girlfriend, arrive at the house. They discuss the murder of another gang member a month ago and their plan to determine who killed him. Chips antagonizes Ann like he did last night. He tries to force her upstairs at gunpoint, when Jeff intervenes and threatens to kill Chips if he ever tries that again.

Mo tries to convince Jeff to be a part of the gang again, but Jeff is no longer interested, preferring instead to continue on to law school. Mo derides Jeff's vision of fighting for Black rights through the legal system. The conversation escalates into a violent confrontation between Jeff and Mo, and Jeff throws all of them out of the house.

A few minutes later, Gail returns to the house and asks Jeff to speak to Mo again, this time as a friend to a friend, not a gang member to an ex-gang member. Mo is struggling with his role as a Black activist now that active demonstrations have ceased. The battle on the streets is all that Mo has ever known, and Jeff's world is foreign to him. However, Jeff agrees to speak to Mo at a later time. Gail leaves, relieved that the two friends will at least be able to talk again.

Mattie and Grandma return home thrilled to see that Jeff has arrived. Jeff shares the news that he has asked Ann to marry him. Mattie is very happy, while Grandma takes no pains to hide her displeasure. Mattie would like the young couple to wait until Jeff has graduated law school before they marry, but Jeff is anxious to make Ann his wife and cannot agree to wait.

Soon after, John and Dudley return from the Apple, and John is very pleased to see that Jeff is finally home after his military service. John is perplexed that Jeff is not wearing his uniform and asks him to put it on. Jeff resists many requests from John to see him in his uniform and finally reveals to his father that he has failed navigator training in the Air Force and was discharged a month ago.

Jeff tells Mattie that she can give his uniform to the Salvation Army, because he has no further use for it. Jeff tells his father that he has bigger plans than the Air Force would allow; and that there are different battlefields for different people. John cannot understand this disgrace and leaves the house in anger.

Act 2 Analysis

One of the literary techniques used by the author is music played on a bass to accent the play's action at important moments. Almost a character in itself, the music comes and goes and adds its opinion by supplying a mood for the drama. For example, the bass plays under Jeff's monologue to his parents to explain the epiphany he experienced during his final night flight in training school when he says, "So I ain't proving nothing to nobody - white, black, blue, or polka dot - to nobody! Not even to you, Daddy Johnny... Mamma, you give that thing - that uniform thing to the Salvation Army or to the Good Will or whatever 'cause it will never have the good fortune to get on my

back again." Dudley claps for Jeff's speech, and the bass fades out, as if it had been a guest, whose departure time has come.

The author also uses the dialogue of residents of Harlem to add authenticity to the characters. All the men use sexually suggestive and obscene language, especially the gang members. Even the physician, Dudley Stanton, uses phrases and terms that are offensive to women.

As the bridge between two worlds, Jeff serves as a link to his father's past and the hope for tomorrow. Yet, his language is still coarse at times when he feels threatened. For example, when Mo and the boys create problems in the house, Jeff tells him, "And if you try any shit on my folks, your ass is mine, nigger. Or have you forgotten what a mean, evil, black bastard I can be, how you could whip everybody in the neighborhood and how I could whip the piss out of you, how I got more determination in my little toenail than you got in your whole soul nigger!"

The theme of perseverance in spite of overwhelming disappointment is a major one in this play with John serving as the protagonist, whose dreams and wishes have been sacrificed for others. When John's dreams of continuing on to law school are dashed by his assuming responsibility for Mattie's family, he changes his entire life for love of his wife.

All John's remaining energy is funneled into Jeff through whom he will hopefully realize some of his own dreams. Jeff's discharge from the Air Force is more than a temporary embarrassment. It is the destruction of a lifetime of hopes for credibility and purpose, and the final blow to the downtrodden John.

Throughout the play, the author consistently plays up the value of good Black men, like John, as he is seen through the eyes of Mattie, Jeff and Dudley. The author wants to make the point that good, decent, loyal Black men do exist and care for their families in spite of impossible circumstances. These men, like John, create the foundation from which healthy Black families will grow and improve the plight of all Black people.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

The play continues almost a week later on a Friday night. Mattie, Grandma, Jeff, Ann and Dudley sit in Mattie's living room, wondering where John could be. No one has seen or heard from John since he left the house in anger when hearing the news that Jeff had left the Air Force.

Dudley cautions the group not to overact, because John is probably staying in a hotel writing poetry and not in any danger. Grandma does not take Dudley's cue and tells the story of her husband's death during a hunting trip. This upsets Mattie on several levels.

Dudley interrupts Grandma to tell the group about Mattie's serious health issues. Mattie is hesitant to reveal the news about her cancer, but Dudley thinks that the family has a right to know. Dudley also reveals that he had told John about Mattie's illness. Mattie is upset, because she did not want to worry her husband. Dudley feels that being prepared is better for everyone in a situation like this and does not apologize for updating John and the family.

Mattie is to be hospitalized for a biopsy and will require radium treatments, a fact which visibly upsets Jeff. However, Mattie has come to terms with death. Right now, Mattie's only concern is finding John and making sure that he is safe.

The group is interrupted by a knock at the door, and Mo and Gail enter the house with an urgent request to talk to Jeff. Jeff, Ann, Mo and Gail go to the kitchen to talk privately, and Mo asks for Jeff's help in determining a stool pigeon in the gang. Mo thinks the snitch is Chips, Skeeter or Al and wants to identify the person as soon as possible.

Jeff cannot commit because of the turmoil in his family at the moment. Ann wants to know what is involved, and Gail tells her that Mo has two phones bugged from which the stool pigeon will make a call tonight. They need Jeff to man one of the phones.

Ann volunteers to help, out of respect for her brothers and father, who have been betrayed in South Africa. She does not want Mo to be betrayed on any level. Mo appreciates Ann's offer but thinks that a woman would draw unnecessary attention. So, Jeff finally agrees to help but does not want any details of the scheme, so that he cannot be implicated later.

Mo and Gail leave, and Jeff and Ann return to the family discussion in the living room. At the same time, John stumbles into the kitchen door, and Jeff and Ann rise to help him. It is clear from John's appearance that he has been drinking for a week and is not steady on his feet. Mattie embraces her husband, but Dudley pushes her out of the way to examine John.

John battled some personal demons in the past week and apologizes to Mattie for scaring her. He makes amends with Jeff and tells him that he is proud that Jeff has found his direction in life. John reveals that he spent the past week in a room over a store owned by a woman, named Dulcey, so that he could spend some time thinking and writing poetry.

Unfortunately, John's good intentions sank into a drunken binge resulting in delirium tremors and hallucinations. Finally, tonight, John felt that he could find his way back home. John is also aware that it is Friday, and Dudley had promised to give him a report on Mattie today. Dudley informs John of Mattie's condition, and John goes berserk, screaming for everyone to leave the house.

After exhausting himself by running around in a rage, John collapses to the floor and challenges God for bringing more sorrow into his life. Mattie tries to calm John, but he is inconsolable in his fury. John is destroyed, because he wanted to provide a better life for Mattie. He couldn't, because he spent so much time and money caring for her family. Mattie consoles him by saying that she does not need anything more in life than him. She considers herself to be a very lucky woman.

Soon, Dudley gives Mattie some pain medication so that she can sleep, and John reads the poem he has finally finished for Mattie entitled, "The River Niger." As John begins to read, Jeff, Ann and Gail enter the back door of the house, fresh from their mission for Mo. Mattie is pleased with the poem, but the medication has made her very drowsy. She leaves to go to bed.

John and Dudley watch TV while Jeff, Ann and Gail move into the kitchen to discuss their evening. Gail heard nothing incriminating on her bugged phone, but Jeff heard an unfamiliar voice say only "Plan B." Suddenly, Mo and Skeeter are knocking on the back door and enter the house in a frenzy, because the police are chasing them.

The group gathers around Skeeter, who has been shot. Dudley and Ann tend to Skeeter's wounds. Jeff is furious that the men have returned to his house, but Mo thought it was the best idea, because Dudley would be able to help, and the men would not have to go to the hospital.

Mo admits to the group that he fired some shots at the police after Skeeter was hit, and knows that at least one of the policemen was hit. Al and Chips arrive at the house followed soon by police car sirens and flashing lights surrounding the building. The voice of a policeman blares out that the inhabitants of the house have five minutes to emerge or the house will be stormed.

John gathers the guns from the men, so that there will be no evidence to link them to the shooting. At the same time, Chips reveals that he saw Al whisper something to one of the cops during the fracas proving that Al is the gang's stool pigeon. Al tries to deny it, but the facts point to his guilt.

Jeff reveals that he had killed one of the rival gang members, named Buckley, a month ago and shows his Air Force dismissal papers to prove that the timing is possible. Al

swears vengeance on Jeff for Buckley's death and raises his gun. John calls out Al's name, which makes Al turn around in John's direction. Al and John exchange gunshots. Al falls to the floor dead, and John is mortally wounded.

John tells Jeff to hide all the guns in the drain in the basement, with the exception of the ones he and Al are still holding. Dudley tries to treat John's wound, but John tells his old friend to let the police into the house in five minutes. Mattie has been roused from sleep by the commotion and comes downstairs to find John gravely wounded.

Dudley opens the front door, waves a white handkerchief, and tells the police to send for an ambulance. Jeff is furious that Mo has brought this grief into their house and attacks him. John tells Jeff to calm down and wipe the handle of the gun he holds, so that Mo's prints are no longer visible. John then grips the gun handle firmly several times, so his prints are the only ones on the weapon.

Mattie tries to embrace John, but he holds her at bay. He needs to tell Jeff and the gang members what story they will need to tell the police about tonight's incidents. John tells the men to tell the authorities that he was the gang leader and the one with Skeeter at the time of the police shooting. The story continues that John made it back to the house and that he and Al had a shootout, when John found out that Al was the one who betrayed the gang.

Mattie is finally able to get to John, and they both know he is dying. John tells Mattie that he is sorry to cheat her by dying first, and that she should not suffer long with the cancer and join him when she can.

Dudley promises John that he will have John's poems published, and John tells him that the real poetry is the sweet sweetness that he feels at this moment. John dies, and Mattie takes control of the room. She tells the young men to tell the police exactly what John had told them to, because she will not let John's death be for naught.

Act 3 Analysis

The author continues the theme of the role of the good Black man within the family environment. In spite of his alcoholism, which Mattie understands as necessary to relieve his pain in life, John is the figure of the self-sacrificing noble man. He gives his life for his son's sake at the end of the play. Ann's father has served a similar role by going to prison so that his sons may live free. At a time in America when Black men suffered negative stereotyping of irresponsible and violent behavior, the author wants to drive home the point that noble men exist, despite socio-economic restrictions.

The play gets its title from John's poem entitled, "The River Niger." In the poem John says, "I am the River Niger, Transplanted to Harlem from the Harlem River Drive. Hear me, my children - hear my waters! I sleep in your veins. I see no-- Hear no-- Speak no evil. But I know, and I know that you know. I flow to the ends of your spirit."

The poem is the universal story of African Americans, whose heritage of sorrow continues in pain and inequality still today. However, the author offers hope with the shepherding of the race by men, like John and Dudley, whose nobility will keep the river flowing.

Characters

Al

Al is one of "Mo's men," a black revolutionary organization. He is described as a "closet homosexual, capable, determined, very young." In the end of the play, Al turns out to be the informer who has betrayed his fellow revolutionaries. In a scuffle that ensues, Al and John simultaneously shoot one another, and they both die.

Grandma Wilhemina Brown

Grandma Wilhemina Brown is Mattie's mother, Jeff's grandmother. She is described as "a stately, fair-skinned black woman in her middle eighties" and "very alive." Grandma is drunk just about all the time, from the liquor bottles she hides in the kitchen. She often sings or hums "Rock of Ages" and other hymns. She also frequently mentions her deceased husband, whom she idealizes as a model man. Grandma immediately disapproves of Ann, whom she perceives to be roping Jeff into marriage.

Chips

Chips, in his early twenties, is one of "Mo's Men," a local revolutionary organization. He is described as "a tall, rangy young man," a "sexually perverted young fool" who "has an air of 'I'm a bad nigger' about him." Chips is sexually aggressive towards Ann. When Jeff later catches Chips attempting to rape Ann at gunpoint, he wrestles Chips's gun out of his hands and threatens him with it.

Gail

Gail, twenty-one, is described as "sincere and very much in love with Mo." Gail pleads with Jeff to help straighten Mo out, as she feels his revolutionary organization has gotten out of hand. Jeff reluctantly promises her that he will.

Mo

Mo, twenty-four, is described as "athleticlooking." He is the head of a small group of black revolutionaries and is further described as a "young black leader of underlying beauty and integrity."

Skeeter

Skeeter is one of "Mo's Men," a black revolutionary organization. He is described as "basically good, but hung on dope."

Dr. Dudley Stanton

Dr. Dudley Stanton, in his late fifties, is a very close friend of John, with whom he shares sarcastic banter as well as heart-felt mutual love. Dudley informs John that his wife, Mattie, has been diagnosed with cancer, and will need radium treatment. Dudley is also John's drinking buddy, and often accompanies him to the local bar. He is described as "cynical, classic Jamaican, lover of poetry," and he speaks in "a thick and beautiful Jamaican accent." The content of Dudley's speech, however, is extremely crude. Dudley's thematic significance in the play is threefold: He is an example of the deep, loving camaraderie between men; a representative of the successful black middle class; and a cynic in regard to both the racial oppression of African Americans and to any efforts at political action.

Ann Vanderguild

Ann Vanderguild, twenty-two, a nurse, is described as a "strong black South African girl, lover of quality." She is also "very attractive" and "sparkles on top of a deep brooding inner core." Ann's father has been in prison in South Africa for nine years, because he chose to take the blame for the anti-government activities of his two sons.

Ann, who fell in love with Jeff while caring for him at a hospital in Canada, unexpectedly shows up at the Williams' house the day before Jeff returns home. Everyone immediately perceives that she has arrived without Jeff's knowledge to get him to marry her. Grandma remains disdainful of her, but Mattie, Jeff's mother, is almost immediately won over and accepts her love of Jeff. Jeff proposes to Ann, and the two talk of marrying within the week.

Jeff Williams

Jeff Williams, twenty-five, is the son of Mattie and John. He is described as "thoughtful, wild, a credit to his father." There is also "a heavy seriousness about him, frosted over with the wildness he has inherited from his father." In addition, "His presence is strong and commanding." Jeff's childhood friend Mo, now the leader of a local revolutionary organization, and Mo's men attempt to bully Jeff into joining their organization. Jeff, however, does not agree with their politics and plans to become a lawyer.

John Williams

John Williams, in his fifties, is Jeff's father. He is described as "an alive poet," and his poem "*The River Niger*" is an important element of the play. John is a housepainter, as well as an alcoholic. He sneaks drinks, borrows money from his friend Dud ley to pay the rent, and frequently takes off for the local bar, the Apple, when he is supposed to be at home. Mattie, his wife, is indulgent of his weaknesses because, she explains, he wanted to become a lawyer but had to quit school to support a number of Mattie's relatives who migrated to Harlem from the South. At the end of the play, John heroically takes responsibility for the illegal activities of the young black revolutionaries and is shot to death. Like Ann's father, who took the blame and went to prison for her brothers' illegal revolutionary activities, John sacrifices his life to save his son.

Mattie Williams

Mattie Williams, in her fifties, is Jeff's mother, John's wife, and Grandma's daughter. She is described as "an embittered but happy woman." Although she does not learn this until late in the play, Mattie is dying of cancer. Mattie adores both her son and her husband, and completely accepts them as they are. She secretly condones her husband's drinking, because she feels that his ambitions of becoming a lawyer were dashed by the need to support her extended family.

Themes

African-American Identity Politics

Throughout the play, Walker explores a variety of approaches to black struggles for racial equality. Several of the different political philosophies and organizations active among African Americans during the early 1970s are mentioned, discussed, and debated by various characters. Mo, Al, Chips, and Skeeter have chosen to fight racism through belonging to a "revolutionary" organization resembling the Black Panthers. Their approach is to attempt to commit a violent act in the name of revolution. The early black nationalist and separatist leader Marcus Garvey is mentioned, as well as Muslim black nationalist leader Malcolm X.

Jeff chooses to struggle against racism within the law, by planning to become a lawyer. John's wish for his son is that Jeff will succeed in the "United States of America Air Force"—that is, in the white, mainstream world. John himself, however, is unsure of where to direct his energies in the struggle for racial equality; he calls himself a "fighter" but doesn't know where the "battle-field" is. Dudley, on the other hand, remains cynical about any prospect of either successfully assimilating into white America or effectively fighting racism. He refers to Jeff's position in the Air Force as that of "a powerless nub in a silly military grist mill" and has no faith in the power of black community, describing it as "Just a bunch of black crabs in a barrel, lying to each other, always lying and pulling each other back down."

Poetry

Poetry is an important theme of Walker's play. Although he is a housepainter by trade and a hopeless alcoholic, John is also a poet. Early in the play, John describes himself as a warrior without a battle-field, unsure of how to go about fighting for racial equality. In the end of act 2, he comes closer to defining his "battlefield" in asserting that his racial pride is expressed through his poetry. He tells Dudley, "I'm a poet, ya hear me, a poet! When this country—when this world, learns the meaning of poetry—" John then turns to his son, explaining to him, "Don't you see, Jeff, poetry is what the revolution's all about—never lose sight of the true purpose of the revolution, all revolutions—to restore poetry to the godhead!" John goes on to assert,

Poetry is religion, the alpha and the omega, the cement of the universe. The supereye under which every other eye is scrutinized, and it stretches from one to infinity, from bulls—t to the beatific, the rocking horse of the human spirit—God himself. God himself is pure distilled poetry.

For John, poetry is both a spiritual and a political force. He concludes that, "Ain't none of us gonna be free until poetry rides a mercury-smooth silver stallion."

John, however, fails to appreciate that Jeff has left the military precisely because he values poetry —being teased by a fellow serviceman for writing a poem was the incident which caused him to reassess his values and choose to pursue his own will rather than that of his father or of white society.

The importance of poetry to Walker's concerns with African-American identity and racial equality is indicated by the fact that the title of the play is borrowed from the title of the poem John writes, a poem which celebrates African-American history, culture, and identity.

The Role of Women in the African-American Family

Walker's play is concerned with the role of women in the African-American family, particularly in terms of how they treat their men. All the women in the play—Grandma, Mattie, Ann, and Gail—are presented in a positive light because they are completely loving, supportive, and non-judgmental toward their men. Grandma seems to be a role model in her absolute idealization of her deceased husband, asserting, "my man was a king." Mattie is also presented as a model wife in terms of her acceptance and devotion to her husband and her praise of black men in general. Referring to John, she tells Ann, "A good man is a treasure." Mattie comments, "White folks proclaim that our men are no good and we go 'round like fools trying to prove them wrong," and asks, "If our men are no good, then why are all these little white girls trying to gobble 'em up faster than they can pee straight?"

Although John is an alcoholic, Mattie feels it is her fault; he gave up his educational ambitions in order to support her extended family. The younger women, Ann and Gail, are equally supportive of their men.

Style

Music

The only musical accompaniment specified in the play is that of a bass. Interestingly, the Bass Player is listed as one of the characters, although not actually part of the story or seen on stage. The Bass Player, who "provides musical poetry for the play," is described as "highly skillful at creating a mood." The bass line fades in and out to create a particular mood at key points in the play, often associated with specific characters. Grandma's solo trips into the kitchen to sneak alcohol from her various hiding places are often accompanied by a bass line, sometimes as a backup to her frequent singing of hymns. A bass line also accompanies John when he is reading his poetry aloud, either to himself or others, sometimes specifically with a "jazz theme." A bass line often accompanies Ann during key moments of the play. When she first enters the Williams' home, "a bass line of beautiful melancholy comes in." Here, the musical accompaniment is meant to provide a sense of Ann's inner character and mood. Later, as she tells Mattie the tragic story of her father's nine years' imprisonment in South Africa, the "bass melancholy" enters again. When Jeff and Ann kiss at the close of act 1, the bass line "plays under" to accentuate the romantic mood of the two lovers reunited.

Poetry

Poetry is an important theme in the play, and John's poem "*The River Niger*" is clearly a key element of the story, as it lends the play its title. In act 1, John has only begun the poem, which he reads to himself from a scrap of paper in his pocket. Later, John reads a different, completed poem aloud to Ann and Dudley. In the beginning of act 2, John continues to work on "*The River Niger*," which he reads aloud to himself. Finally, in act 3, after John returns home from a week-long drinking spree, he reads the completed poem, which he has written to Mattie, aloud to an audience that includes the whole family as well as Dudley and Jeff's friends. The poem, which begins, "I am the River Niger—hear my waters!" evokes images of the African roots of African-American people and culture. It suggests that these cultural origins were transported to America with the slave trade, "to the cloudy Mississippi / Over keels of incomprehensible woe" and continue to flow in African-American culture, "Transplanted to Harlem / From the Harlem River Drive." The poem ends with a plea for African Americans not to "deny" their cultural roots: "I am the River Niger! Don't deny me!"

Setting

The play is set in Harlem, New York City, on "February 1, the Present: 4:30 p.m." In specifying the exact time and day of the year, but designating the year as "the Present," Walker makes the setting specific, yet relevant to the contemporary reader or theater spectator regardless of the year in which the play is actually read or a production

attended. The setting is more specifically designated as a "brownstone on 133rd between Lenox and Seventh." The setting in a specific neighborhood of New York City is important because Harlem has long been associated with the African-American community. Harlem became occupied primarily by African Americans beginning in the early twentieth century, although, by the end of the twentieth century this demographic was no longer accurate. The setting on 133rd Street between Lenox and Seventh Avenue is further significant in that, according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, landlords in the area first began renting primarily to African Americans along Lenox Avenue, and, by World War I, "the chief artery of black Harlem is 125th Street, popularly called the 'main stem.'" In other words, Walker has set the Williams family brownstone in a neighborhood that has long been in the heart of black Harlem. This setting is significant to Walker's thematic focus on African-American identity as rooted in African-American history.

Historical Context

African-American Literary Movements

Twentieth-century African-American literature has been characterized by two important movements: the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. The Harlem Renaissance, also referred to as the New Negro Movement, designates a period during the 1920s in which African-American literature flourished among a group of writers concentrated in Harlem, New York City. The Black Arts Movement, also referred to as the Black Aesthetic Movement, which flourished during the 1960s and '70s, embodied values derived from black nationalism, promoting politically and socially significant works, often written in Black English vernacular. Important writers of the Black Arts Movement include Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison.

African-American Theater

The development of African-American theater in the first half of the twentieth century was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance and included the establishment of theaters devoted to black productions in major cities throughout the United States. In the post-World War II era, black theater became more overtly political and more specifically focused on celebrating African-American culture. One of the most prominent works to emerge from this period was the 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. The Black Arts Movement, which emerged in the 1960s, led to the establishment in 1965 of the Black Repertory Theater in Harlem, initiated by Amiri Baraka. Baraka's award-winning 1964 play *Dutchman* is among the most celebrated dramatic works of this period. Ntozake Shange's 1977 *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* used an experimental dramatic format to address issues facing African-American women. In the 1980s, August Wilson emerged as one of the most important African-American playwrights with his play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985), set in Chicago in the 1920s, about a blues singer and her band.

The Niger River

The title of Walker's play is taken from the poem "*The River Niger*," written and read aloud by the character John Williams. The Niger River runs through West Africa and is the third-longest river on the continent (after the Nile and the Congo). Until the abolishment of the British slave trade in 1807, the Niger River Basin was regularly used in the slave trade for transporting captured Africans. (After the slave trade was abolished, slave merchants changed their trade to that of palm oil, which was likewise shipped through the Niger River Basin.)

In John's poem, the River Niger represents the ancestral roots of African Americans in Africa, as well as the river's historical use in the slave trade, as expressed in the lines: "I

came to the cloudy Mississippi / Over keels of incomprehensible woe." Reference to the River Niger in the poem also asserts the continuation of the "spirit" of African heritage; the poem begins, "I am the River Niger— hear my waters!" and includes the lines, "I sleep in your veins," and "I flow to the ends of your spirit."

The Black Panthers

Although the Black Panthers are never named in Walker's play, the small, local band of revolutionaries led by Mo is clearly meant to refer to the Black Panther Party and other such organizations. Originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the Black Panther Party was organized in 1966 in Berkeley, California, by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Their primary focus was to arm African Americans and patrol the streets of black neighborhoods to protect the African-American community from police brutality. Their signature "uniform" was a black beret. (In act 3 of Walker's play, John tells Mo that being a revolutionary "takes more 'n wearing a goddamn beret." At its height, membership in the party was over 2,000. Although many more African Americans clearly sympathized with the Panthers' politics, others were critical of their violent approach to battling racism. The police in major cities of California, Illinois, and New York were suspected of inciting unnecessarily violent conflicts with members of the Panther Party. By the early 1980s, the Black Panther Party had essentially disbanded.

Marcus Garvey

In act 3, John Williams mentions "the great Marcus Garvey." As Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was an early organizer in trying to empower African Americans, reference to him is significant to the play's theme of African-American struggles for racial equality. Garvey was born in Jamaica, where he and several friends founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914 to advocate the establishment of a black-governed nation in Africa. (Most African countries before World War II were still colonies of European empires.) Although not a successful leader in Jamaica, Garvey became highly influential in the United States after his move to Harlem in 1916. Within several years, Garvey, who was dubbed the "black Moses," had a following of some two million African Americans, and had established a newspaper, *Negro World*. Garvey used the term "new Negro" to advocate racial pride and a separatist philosophy. In 1920, he organized and led a parade through Harlem with a turnout of 50,000. Garvey, however, was criticized by other African-American leaders, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, for his advocacy of extreme racial separatism.

Critical Overview

The River Niger is Walker's most widely recognized and most critically acclaimed work, garnering a host of awards, including the Obie Award in 1971, the Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award in 1973, the Elizabeth Hull-Kate Award from the Dramatists Guild, the First Annual Audelco Award, the John Gassner Award from Outer Circle, the Drama Desk Award, and the Black Rose. It was first performed by the Negro Ensemble Company at the St. Mark's Playhouse in New York City in 1972, and in 1973 opened at the Brooks Atkinson Theater in New York City. It was first published in book form by Hill and Wang in 1973. *The River Niger* was also adapted to the screen by Walker and produced as a film of the same title by Cine Artists in 1976, starring Cicely Tyson and James Earl Jones.

Grace Cooper, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, praises *The River Niger*—Walker's fourth play to be produced—as an advancement in his writing. She asserts that it "shows his full growth as a playwright" in that, "[w]hile it expresses many of the same strong feelings of the earlier plays, *The River Niger* is more subtle, therefore allowing him to make his points acceptable to a larger audience."

Critics often mention the autobiographical element of Walker's play. In particular, the incident in which Jeff is teased by a fellow serviceman for writing poetry represents a similar incident in Walker's life that inspired him to quit the military and devote himself to writing. Cooper notes, "The play has been widely recognized as a realistic depiction of black life," adding, "The realism of the play is derived in part from Walker's reliance on his own experiences and on family members as models for many of the characters."

Cooper also points out the use of a diverse range of characters within the African-American community, stating, "The characters come from a variety of black cultural backgrounds, reflecting a cross-cultural interchange that whites often do not note." Cooper goes on to observe the skill with which Walker uses language to create a variety of characters: "Walker manipulates language in all its nuances to create the proper tone for each character." Writing in 1985, Cooper concludes that, "Walker continues to be a vital force in black theater" and that he "will remain a force to consider wherever black theater in America is discussed."

Stanley Kauffmann, however, writing in *The New Republic* in 1973, is highly critical of the play: "I haven't in a long time seen a realistic play so clumsily built, so naively motivated, so arbitrarily whipped to climaxes, and so ridiculously concluded . . ." He sums up the play's weaknesses by describing it as

laden with this erratic language, this dramaturgy so clumsily clever that it's not primitive but bad, torturously serpentine in its progress, devoid of any sense of emphasis as to which scenes should be long or short

Kauffmann does allow that, "the play nevertheless has a certain insistent life." He also reserves praise for the play's "veracity," and "truth of affection." He explains that this

veracity has a different significance for white and black audiences: "For a white viewer, this veracity is informational —a peek behind closed doors. For black viewers, as I have seen twice with black audiences, there is warm recognition. Clearly, *The River Niger* is doing for many black people what hundreds of realistic plays have done for whites for a century: quite apart from its quality, the play certifies the audience's existence. This is not arbitrarily a negligible function, particularly for American blacks, who have so long been deprived of accurate theatrical vicars." Furthermore, the play's "truth of affection" is expressed by the ways in which "people care for one another in this play in different alliances and affinities." Kauffmann concludes, "Walker writes at his best when he's dealing with these feelings."

In an overview of Walker's work in *Contemporary Authors*, his predominant theme of black masculinity is described: "The focus of most of his works is on the psyche of black American males. Cut off from their ancestral home and exploited by whites, these disoriented men are portrayed as lacking a sense of identity, purpose, and self-worth." In light of this thematic focus, "Walker's plays are still relevant because of their compelling depictions of those black males stagnated by feelings of impotence, frustration, and hopelessness." However, Walker is criticized for his poorly developed white and female characters: "Walker's portraits of black women and whites rarely escape the limitations of stereotypes. Black women seldom have any personal goals, but instead function as either supporters or 'castrators' of their men. White women serve as sexual playmates and status symbols for their black lovers. White men exploit blacks and destroy those who pose a threat to their way of life. . . . some critics feel these characters weaken the credibility of Walker's plays."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses references to cultural and historical figures in Walker's play.

The dialogue in Joseph A. Walker's play *The River Niger* makes reference to a wide array of historical and cultural figures, both real and fictional. These references include the Shakespearean character Shylock, the African folktale figure Brer Rabbit, the blues great Lightnin' Hopkins, the comic book superhero Superman, the biblical King Solomon, Hollywood movie star Gary Cooper, and the notorious French writer the Marquis de Sade. A brief explanation of who each of these figures is, and the significance of each one to the meaning of Walker's play, will enhance the reader's appreciation of this dramatic work.

In act 1, John Williams and Dr. Dudley return to the Williams's house, drunk from an evening spent at the local bar. As is characteristic of their friendship, the two banter rather ruthlessly. When Dudley asks John for a drink "for the road," he replies, "One for the road! Why didn't you buy one for the road before we hit the road? Shylock stingy bastard." This comment refers to the character Shylock from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock is a Jewish lender who insists on extracting "a pound of flesh" from a man who has not repaid his loan on time. "Shylock" has thus come into common usage to refer to a greedy, stingy creditor who uses extortion to collect his debts.

Shylock has become a controversial character among literary scholars, because, on one hand, he represents a common anti-Semitic stereotype of Jewish people as ruthlessly stingy and greedy, especially in matters of money-lending. Others, however, interpret Shylock as a spokesperson against society's unfair mistreatment of Jews; this interpretation is based on his famous speech to this effect, which begins, "Hath not a Jew eyes?"

In Walker's play, John calls Dudley "Shylock" to indicate that he was stingy in not buying his own last drink while still at the bar. Throughout their banter, John has referred to Dudley as a "Jew." It is not clear if his character may in fact be part Jewish; rather, it seems that John is referring to Dudley, a successful African-American doctor, as a "Jew" to insult him. To further the comparison to Shylock, Dudley has recently lent a large sum of money to John to pay his rent. John is thus implying that for Dudley to request a drink from him is equivalent to Shylock demanding "a pound of flesh" from the man to whom he has lent money.

Walker's repeated use of phrases such as "Godd—n black Jew doctor" in John's dialogue, and the reference to Shylock, seem to be anti-Semitic in their implications.

In the beginning of act 2, John stops mopping the kitchen floor to sit down and work on the poem he is writing. Dudley, his friend and drinking buddy, stops by, and John tells him he's "just in time" to take off for the local bar. John says jokingly, "Do you know that, I—me—Lightnin' John Williams— more powerful than a speeding locomotive—do you realize that I have mopped this entire house by myself?" This line includes references to two figures in American cultural history. The first is the great blues musician Lightnin' Hopkins. John is comparing himself to a great African-American blues artist because he has just been working on his own artistic creation—a poem—and is feeling proud of what he's written so far. At the same time, John is being silly by comparing the work of a great musician to the accomplishment of having mopped the floor of a house. Likewise, his use of the phrase "more powerful than a speeding locomotive" refers to the introductory lines of a Superman comic book story. Again, John is describing the accomplishment of his domestic chores, traditionally considered to be women's work, with a legendary image of pure, unchecked, masculine strength and power. This indirect reference is significant to a central theme of Walker's play, which is about African-American men feeling disempowered and emasculated by racial and economic oppression. By referring jokingly to the powers of Superman, John is expressing his feelings of comparative powerlessness and emasculation.

In the beginning of act 2, John plans to sneak out of the house without his wife's knowing in order to escape his housecleaning responsibilities and go out drinking with his friend Dudley. Dudley chides him for "always sneaking around like Brer Rabbit" instead of acting like an "African warrior" and asserting himself with his wife.

Brer Rabbit is a figure from African folktales which were transported to African American and then American culture with the slave trade. Brer Rabbit appears in a cycle of tales which fall into the culturally widespread category of the "trickster" figure. The "trickster" is a character, often an animal, who is able to beat out more powerful opponents through his cleverness; Brer Rabbit, for instance, outsmarts characters such as Brer Bear, Brer Fox, and Brer Wolf.

Brer Rabbit became well-known throughout American culture with the publication of "Uncle Remus" stories by the white writer Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908) in the book *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880). Harris collected tales of Brer Rabbit from the oral culture of African-American plantation slaves and published them as a series of stories told by his fictional character Uncle Remus, an elderly African-American slave.

In Walker's play, Dudley's mention of Brer Rabbit is first of all a reference to the survival of African cultural roots from the days of slavery to contemporary African-American culture. Second, Dudley is suggesting that John is like Brer Rabbit, using cleverness to outsmart his wife, who is more powerful than he. Dudley contrasts such a trickster figure with the image of an "African warrior," thus making clear to John the extent to which he is disempowered and emasculated in his own home and family. One of Walker's primary concerns in this play is African-American men feeling disempowered and emasculated by white American society, as well as by the women in their own homes.

In act 2, two of the members of Mo's revolutionary organization, Skeeter and Al, argue to the point where they find themselves holding each other at gunpoint. The stage notes indicate that, "In furious desperation, Skeeter suddenly reaches inside his coat, but Al is too quick. At about the same time, they both produce their revolvers." As they face each other, Al says to Skeeter, "Don't make the mistake of thinking a sissy can't play that Gary Cooper s—t if he want to." This line refers to the extremely popular classic Hollywood movie star Gary Cooper (1901-1961), who played the leading man in many films throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, often as the hero in Westerns. He is perhaps most famous for his Academy Award-winning role in the Western *High Noon* (1952), which ends with one of the most famous shoot-out scenes in movie history.

In Walker's play, Al is referring to the ability of Cooper's Western characters to be fast-on-the-draw, as he manages to outdraw Skeeter. Furthermore, Al refers to himself as a "sissy," because he is a homosexual; in referring to Gary Cooper, Al is indicating that, although homosexuals are stereotyped as un-masculine, or "sissies," he himself can be compared to an icon of American masculinity and heroism.

In act 2, during a confrontation with Mo and his fellow "revolutionary" men, Jeff angrily refers to Chips as "Marquis de Sade." The notorious Marquis de Sade (1740-1814) was a French writer and eccentric from whose name the term "sadism" was derived. Throughout his life, de Sade was repeatedly arrested and imprisoned for kidnapping prostitutes and subjecting them to sexual tortures. During the 1780s, de Sade wrote and published several novels describing such sexual transgressions, the most well-known of which are *Justine* and *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*. Although officially banned in France, de Sade's writings became popular among artists and intellectuals during the nineteenth century, and today he is considered by some to have made a significant contribution to French literature.

In Walker's play, Jeff refers to Al as the "Marquis de Sade," because Al has just threatened to rape Ann at gunpoint and has repeatedly boasted of having had sex with a corpse. Unlike the cultural references discussed above, this one is not clearly associated with central themes of the play. However, since Al turns out to be the villain who betrays his fellow "revolutionaries" to the police, this reference works to establish him as a moral degenerate lacking in human compassion.

In act 2, Mattie explains to Ann the extent to which her husband John, although now an alcoholic, was once extremely smart and studious. She tells Ann that his fellow college students "used to call him Solomon," and that "some of his bummified wino friends still call him that. . . . Solomon!" Mattie is referring to King Solomon, who is legendarily the greatest king of ancient Israel.

Almost all historical knowledge of King Solomon and his reign is derived from biblical sources. Among Solomon's most noteworthy accomplishments was the great Temple of Jerusalem. In addition, Solomon is legendary for his wisdom and for his poetry as recorded in the biblical "Song of Solomon."

In Walker's play, the association of John Williams with Solomon is due both to his wisdom and to his skills and accomplishments as a poet. John is a talented poet whose greatest accomplishment is his poem "*The River Niger*," which he recites to his wife shortly before his death.

Throughout the play, John's decline as a man is indicated by various actions, characterizations, and comments. His association with the astoundingly accomplished King Solomon suggests that John's potential as a poet and wise, learned man was never realized due to oppressive conditions of racism and poverty.

Walker's play includes a rich variety of references to cultural and historical figures, each of which adds depth and dimension to central themes of African-American cultural identity, black masculinity, and the effects of racism and poverty on the African-American family.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Author Anthony Barthelemy discusses the political nature of The River Niger *regarding its representations of women and men and their interracial and intersexual struggles.*

Perhaps no single work by a black American playwright has reached so vast an audience as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. A success on Broadway in 1959, the play enjoys frequent revivals by professional and amateur theater groups alike. It remains in print twenty-five years later, and the 1960 movie version appears regularly on our televisions. Unknown to this immense audience is the fact that *A Raisin in the Sun* responds to an earlier play by black playwright Theodore Ward and constitutes the middle third of a larger literary debate—a debate that began in 1938 when Ward's play *Big White Fog* opened in Chicago under the auspices of the Federal Theater Project. Playwright Joseph Walker contributed the final third in 1973 when he wrote his Obie winning play *The River Niger*. As the first of the three, Ward's play is innocent of any attempts "to correct" or to displace a precursor text. *Big White Fog* quite simply dramatizes the story of a longsuffering black family from Chicago's Southside during the ten years between 1922 and 1932. Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun* seeks to correct Ward's representation of black women and to place black political aspirations firmly within the traditional American bourgeois context by countering the revolutionary Marxist politics of *Big White Fog*. Although *The River Niger* equivocally endorses/ condemns sixties militancy, Walker really sets for himself a conservative, traditionally male political and social agenda. Stated quite simply, *The River Niger* valorizes male dominance and female submission. Together the three plays provide an interesting study of the influence black playwrights have on each other and reveal the power that dramatic representation possesses. The plays also demonstrate the influence of a playwright's personal political agenda in shaping character and theme.

The feminist revision of *Big White Fog* by Hansberry served as a catalyst to playwright Joseph Walker who in his play *The River Niger* challenges and faults Hansberry's representation of black men and women. In his play, Walker places before us another image of black men and women, one that is as politically charged as Hansberry's. Like her, he identifies his agenda in the play's dedication: "This play is dedicated to my mother and father and to highly underrated black daddies everywhere." The question that the dedication raises is this: Will Walker in rehabilitating "highly underrated black daddies" adopt an antifeminist agenda? However, before we turn to the play to seek the answer to this question, it would be useful to look at Walker's personal reminiscences of his father and mother. As Hansberry's recollections of her mother inform her portrayal of women in A Raisin in the Sun, so too do Walker's. In a page-long sentence entitled "Joe Walker's Autobiography" that appears just after the dedication page in the text of the play, Walker writes:

. . . [daddy] was a bad-loud-talking dude of five feet eight inches tall, whom I once saw beat up a man six foot five because he insulted my seven-year-old dignity by beating the daylights out of me on account of I and my buddies were on a hate-little-girls campaign, throwing bottle tops at the cutest little brown oak girl . . . whom I don't think I

really hated in retrospect because of her almond-shaped eyes—anyway, my pop was some dude . . . my ma, man, was a scornful bittersweet lovable crazy lady who was not quite as sweet as Mattie in *The River Niger* but who was pretty goddamn sweet and giving anyway.

Of course, Walker's play is not wholly autobiographical; however, he publicly acknowledges a correspondence between his mother and Mattie, the principal female character, and no doubt intends for there to be an equally strong correspondence between his father and the play's hero, John Williams.

Personal correspondence notwithstanding, *The River Niger* presents to us a family that obviously and purposely resembles the ones—or one—that we have seen in the two previous plays. There are three generations in the same household, the oldest person being a widow. There is a couple with children. The family struggles to survive financially. There is the question of Africa, and in this play a Jamaican cynic, a sort of anti-Garvey. And, of course, the play's denouement results from American racism and the efforts of this black family to resist and overcome this pervasive fact of life. A closer look at the family and the action of the play will reveal its important and self-conscious dissimilarities to *A Raisin in the Sun.*

The River Niger opens with the Brooks/Lena analogue, Wilhemina Brown, creeping into the kitchen to sneak herself a drink. After pouring herself a cup of coffee, she "stealthily" locates her hidden bottle of Bourbon from which she pours into her coffee "an extremely generous portion." This comic scene indicates the kind of treatment the elderly black woman will receive in the play and, of course, instructs us how to view her. But everything about her is not humorous. Like Brooks in *Big White Fog*, Wilhemina, "a fair skinned black woman," takes pride in her light complexion and never hesitates to boast of her bigotry. Although she describes her late husband as "black as a night what ain't got no Moon," she happily disparages others who are black. To her daughter Mattie and sonin-law John, whom the playwright describes as "brown," Wilhemina brags of her children: "And ain't none of 'em black either. . . . Mattie's the only black child I ever spawned—my first and last, thank Jesus."

Wilhemina continues to drink and meddle and pontificate throughout the play, and she is the source of much comedy. However, Walker does allow her to redeem herself; she achieves this redemption as she acknowledges that she has played an important role in hampering and ultimately ruining her son-in-law's chances for success. Warning her grandson of the dangers of an early marriage, she confesses: "Look at your father. He wanted to be a lawyer, didn't he? Then I jumped on his back, then those two no good daughters of mine, then their two empty-headed husbands—then you. The load was so heavy till he couldn't move no more. He just had to stand there, holding it up." Conventionally in the drama, self-knowledge no matter how harsh, if honest, is never unwelcomed nor condemned. Yet when Wilhemina indulges in self-evaluation, the results go beyond individual follies and insensitivity. She warns Jeff because she believes that her behavior is typical of female behavior; she cautions her grandson against marriage and women. In the larger political debate on the image of black women Wilhemina's self-assessment produces even worse fruit; women become the

real and present danger. Men must be cautious. The conventions of drama only increase the ambiguity of Wilhemina's selfrevelation/self-deprecation.

Perhaps ambiguity describes best the nature of Walker's representation of female characters. As the play's hero proclaims: "So we're contradictions —so what else is new?" The principal female character, Mattie, described as "an embittered but happy woman" in the list of characters, is one such contradiction. Mattie always knows her place as a woman. In the midst of a heated family debate, her husband declares: "I'm the head of this house." She quickly responds, "Ain't nobody disputing that." Like her mother, Mattie too understands her part in ruining her husband's chances for success. In a history of her married life given to her son's soonto-be fiancée, Ann Vanderguild, Mattie tells of all the burdens she placed on John's back and of his failed potential. Finally she says: "I got nobody to blame but myself." Mattie's sense of self is defined by her relationship to John and her unshakable belief that she, his loving black wife, with the help of her mother and sisters and their selfish husbands, turned John into a failure and an alcoholic. Because of this she is willing to accept anything that John does, including his playfully obscene and derisive behavior. But Mattie counts all of this as a part of her "treasure" and offers a panegyric to John and presumably to the rest of the "highly underrated black daddies" in the world:

A good man is a treasure. White folks proclaim that our men are no good and we go 'round like fools trying to prove them wrong. And I fell right into the same old trap myself. That's why I can't get angry with that man no more. Oh, I pretend to be, but I'm not. Johnny ran a powerful race with a jockey on his back who weighed a ton. So now he's tired. Do you hear me? Tired—and he's put himself out to pasture —with his fifth a day, and I say good for Johnny. I knew he was a smart man. Good for Johnny. If our men are no good, then why are all these little white girls trying to gobble 'em up faster than they can pee straight?

While one assumes that the referent of "them" in the sentence "White folks proclaim that our men are no good . . ." is "White folks," it could also be "our men." Consequently the meaning of this sentence is somewhat ambiguous. Whom are black women trying to prove wrong, white folks or their men? While it is clear that "white folks" are wrong, black women are fools because they do not ignore the mendacity of whites; instead they give heed to it. Note that the praise of black men seems to require self-deprecation from black women. Racism alone does not destroy black men according to Mattie and the play; racism aided by black women proves to be the real culprit.

Mattie's devotion to her husband receives its final test at the play's conclusion, a conclusion that is in many ways a reprise of the last scene of *Big White Fog*. Through a series of blunders, a group of black militants arrive seeking refuge at the Williams' house. John, who has searched for a battle-field on which he could fight for his people, finally finds one, but he receives a mortal wound in an exchange of gunfire with a police informant whom he kills. Dying, John contrives a plot in which he will be thought guilty of an earlier shooting. After John dies, Mattie, so unlike Ella, takes control of the situation, proclaiming: "Shut up! And tell it like Johnny told you. He ain't gonna die for nothing, 'cause you ain't gonna let him! Jeff—open the door, son! Tell 'em to come on in here!

And you better not f—k up!" These are the last words of the play, and they are Mattie's. She, not her adult son, assumes control at her husband's death. Interestingly enough the play's end focuses attention on its own ambiguous treatment of black women. Mattie's strength is real and also a real asset at this time. For her to be less than strong would mock her husband's sacrifice. Yet the fact that she, rather than her son, assumes control promotes female dominance and matriarchy. Surely Walker intends us to view Mattie's powerful and unwavering response as good, but the situation that he sets up valorizes female strength. However, neither her son nor her husband, were he able, would object to this situation.

The ideological justification for Mattie's ascendancy can be found at least in part in the comments of Ann Vanderguild, the third female principal. Immediately after Ann arrives on the scene, she requests assistance in finding a job as a nurse from Dudley, the Jamaican doctor. He replies: "Oh, these strong black women!" "I'm only strong," Ann responds, "if my man needs me to be, sir." John enters the discussion with the proud observation: "You hear that, Dudley, a warrior's woman! A fighter. . . ." Clearly the play endorses this concept of womanhood, and Ann lives by her motto. She allows Jeff to protect her and to make decisions for her. Never does she exert her will. When she asks to participate in the plot to discover the police informant, Jeff adamantly refuses to grant her permission; he agrees only after another man assures him that it will be safe: "It's safe, Jeff, I swear. You know I wouldn't have my woman doing anything that would put her in a trick. No jeopardy, man, I promise." The "fighting lady Ann," like Mattie, knows when to make meat loaf and when to fight; decisions, however, are always made within the boundaries established by the head of the household.

It is impossible to ignore in the characterization of Ann a certain amount of correction of Beneatha. First and foremost, Ann is a nurse, a traditionally female profession, and nurses, we all know, take their orders from (male) doctors. Nursing actually serves as an interesting metaphor for the role of women espoused by *The River Niger*. Women should be strong, but that strength should be circumscribed by male dominance. Beneatha accepts the authority of no one. Only when her brother demonstrates pride and dignity does she respect him as a man, but she never surrenders her ambition or assertiveness. Also, both Beneatha and Ann are central to their plays' discussion of black America's relationship to Africa. Beneatha longs to know her African past. From her African suitor she receives a proposal of marriage and an invitation to return to Africa to practice medicine. Beneatha is offered a future in Africa, a romantic, cultural and professional future: "Three hundred years later the African Prince rose up out of the seas and swept the maiden back across the middle passage over which her ancestors had come. . ." (*A Raisin in the Sun*). Ann, on the other hand, has come from South Africa; she comes to North America to escape the oppression in Africa. Her brothers have also had to flee South Africa for political reasons. Her father remains in jail nine years later because he, in a move that foreshadows John's, sacrifices himself for his sons' freedom and safety. There is neither romance nor a future in the Africa of *The River Niger*. The romance is in America and most significantly in the African-American male. The paradigm of *A Raisin in the Sun* is totally reversed in *The River Niger*. African-American men are the desired, the free and, as we shall later see, the new African.

What do we learn in *The River Niger* of this African-American man? The play's hero is a "badloud-talking dude," the long-suffering John, the alcoholic poet who seeks a battlefield and finally dies for his people. He had the promise of a great future but because of American racism and four black women, he fails and puts himself out to pasture with a fifth a day. But all of this notwithstanding, he loves his wife Mattie, his mother-inlaw Wilhemina, and his son Jeff. When he returns from a binge, having been gone six days, he explains to his wife: "I wanted to write a love poem— to you, Mattie. Words are like precious jewels, did you know that? But I couldn't find any jewels precious enough to match you, Mattie." John's profession of love supposedly compensates for his disappearance and absence at a moment of great personal crisis for Mattie who earlier learns that she has inoperable breast cancer. But the play, like Mattie, truly loves John and indulges his every act.

While on his binge John writes a poem that he offers to Mattie as a token of his love. The poem, "*The River Niger*," as John admits, "ain't a love poem." It is, however, a panegyric to black manhood, and in it, the poet translates himself into Africa, transplanted to America, but Africa nonetheless.

I am the River Niger!
I came to the cloudy Mississippi
Over heels of incomprehensible woe.
I ran 'way to the Henry Hudson
Under the sails of ragged hope.
I am the River Niger,
Transplanted to Harlem
From the Harlem River Drive.

In this redaction of Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," John claims for himself and his black compatriots the heroic past as well as an exclusive right to the African future. The trope that he employs incorporates and transcends the African past. Black American men, as Ann recognizes, possess the power to engender a pan-African world:

Holds hands, my children, and I will flow to the ends of the earth
And the whole world will hear my waters.
I am the River Niger! Don't deny me!
Do you hear me? Don't deny me

Africa's glorious future will come when Africa in its manifestation as the American male is no longer denied.

But as ambiguity defines the nature of female representation, so does it define male representation. John's disappearance (desertion?) at Mattie's moment of crisis clearly raises questions about his reliability. He may be tormented by Mattie's illness and impending death, but his response is not unproblematic. Similarly, John's death at the end of the play prompts questions; foremost among these is this: Is his death really meaningful? Does it achieve anything for blacks? John earlier tells Dudley that he seeks

a battlefield on which to fight for his race. But John dies in a battle which produces a Pyrrhic victory at best and which wins only symbolic results. In fact, John falls victim to incompetent black revolutionaries as much as he does to white racism. After these revolutionaries fail to locate the police informant and to complete successfully a guerrilla action they arrive at the Williams' home in desperate need of assistance from competent black men. Finally the informant is discovered to be "the closet homosexual" Al. John attempts to subdue Al, but Al fires and mortally wounds John. In the meantime, the police close in. In the end, John and Al are dead; the revolutionaries have accomplished nothing meaningful, and some impotent, entirely useless and, ironically, wasteful macho bravado has been displayed. John's death wins nothing. John believes that he will die for the cause he holds to be worth his life: "I found it, Dudley—I found it . . . my battlefield—my battlefield, man! I was a b—h too. . . ." Like so many other battle-fields, this one too bears a waste of men. Painfully absent from this is any unequivocal, authorial comment on the waste of John's death. John himself proclaims it to be poetry and dies boasting of his prowess.

As in the earlier two plays the son learns something valuable from the father; machismo is the virtue John passes to his son Jeff. Walter Lee's son Travis learns from his father and grandmother a lesson in pride and dignity. Victor's son Les who converts his father to Marxist revolutionary politics also learns to be proud of his black heritage from his Garveyite father. Of course, Jeff learns things in addition to machismo from his father; foremost among these is a real sense of race pride. Like his father he seeks a battlefield, but Jeff intends to become a lawyer and to fight in the courts. He distrusts the revolution that the incompetent militants seek and presages the play's conclusion when he says: "The revolution ain't nothing but talk, talk, talk, and I ain't gonna waste my life on talk." He will marry the "fighting lady Ann" and presumably enjoy the status of *pater familias*. Jeff offers to assist his former gang in finding the informant, but wants no part of their urban guerrilla tactics. He wants to be his own man, free of the claustrophobic restrictions placed on him by others who have less than his best interest at heart. For *The River Niger*, Jeff is the future. He is black American manhood at its finest, self-assured, self-possessed. He is the heir of the River Niger.

As is often the case, in *The River Niger* machismo is accompanied by its near-cousin, misogyny; of course, the antifeminist agenda of the play does facilitate its descent into misogyny. We have noted earlier that there is some ambiguity in the representation of female characters, but that ambiguity is resolved when one considers the accumulated language of the play. Hostility, sometimes aggressive, sometimes subtle, characterizes the language of males about females in this play. One obviously must consider the play's idiom, a kind of streetwise, bad dude style; but coupled with the ideological goal of the play, this language cannot be dismissed as unintentionally hostile or as harmless. Examples abound, but none better than the clearly pornographic words of Dr. Dudley Stanton. Dudley, who earlier jokes of how his mother supported him through college and medical school by prostitution, tells of his medical examinations of women: "I distribute sugar pills and run my fingers up the itchy vaginas of sex-starved old b—s. Women who're dried up, past menopause—but groping for life. They pretend to be unmoved, but I feel their wrigglings on my fingers. I see 'em swoon with ecstasy the deeper I probe." Although there is nothing else quite as excessive as this, the play finds ample

opportunity to identify women as "b—s" and "superb—s." Were this language restricted to a few individuals, it would be easier to see it as language that partakes in characterization and mimesis. But the language is used uncritically and in fact is a constituent part of the male behavior that the play valorizes. When John dedicates "*The River Niger*" to his "superb—h," the play's pervasive hostility towards women, whether it is active or passive, becomes impossible to deny or overlook.

Although the misogyny articulated in *The River Niger* does have its unique roots in black American culture, this misogyny is no worse than that which permeates Western culture. What differentiates the manifestations of misogyny in black culture from its manifestations in the majority culture are the permutations that result from racism. The systematic sexual abuse that black women suffered in America during slavery and well into the twentieth century is widely documented. To consider this abuse to be only the libidinous excesses and license of white men is to misunderstand the political nature of that abuse. Black women had no real political control over their bodies, and their husbands, brothers, fathers and lovers were raped of their power to protect their women from the unsolicited sexual aggression of white males. Indeed, white males used their sexual power over black women as an emblem of the political power that as white men they held over black men. "Sexually as well as in every other way," Winthrop Jordan writes in *White Over Black:* "Negroes were utterly subordinated. White men extended their dominion over their Negroes to the bed, where the sex act itself served as ritualistic re-enactment of the daily pattern of social dominance." In effect, the bodies of black women became the battlefield on and over which men, black and white, fought to establish actual and symbolic political dominance and to demonstrate masculine prowess. Truly black men had more than wounded machismo at stake here: the lives and safety of their female relatives and friends were in real danger. Yet the passive role thrust upon black women by this struggle in a very real way served to minimize their individuality and humanity and to objectify them as possessions and symbols. Also because the victimization of black women was intended to humiliate, to emasculate black men, female oppression paradoxically became a version of male oppression and consequently could be construed to be less significant than male oppression. The oppression of black women by white men when viewed only in its racist context, allows for the continuation of that oppression by black men. Nor should we forget that there was an obvious political reason for black men to establish their dominance over black women. Of course, black men would neither desire nor establish a system of oppression against their mothers, sisters, wives and lovers as ruthless and brutal as the one white men instituted against black women, but because the oppression of black women by white men was so politically charged and in part aimed directly at black men, the relationship between black men and black women necessarily reflects these facts. Additionally there exists the belief that the black mother in preparing her son to survive in a racist America "must intuitively cut off and blunt [her son's] masculine assertiveness and aggression lest these put the boy's life in danger." Accordingly, Grier and Cobbs hypothesize in *Black Rage:* ". . . black men develop considerable hostility toward black women as the inhibiting instruments of an oppressive system. The woman has more power, more accessibility into the system, and therefore she is more feared, while at the same time envied. And it is her lot in life to suppress masculine assertiveness in her sons." Grier's and Cobbs' failure to distinguish here between female lovers and mothers

should not go unnoticed. The assertion made here is that all black women partake in this emasculating activity and that all black men respond with a general hostility toward women. Calvin C. Hernton in his book *Sex and Racism in America* offers yet other and somewhat contradictory reasons for alleged male hostility towards females: ". . . there arose in me an incipient resentment . . . towards all black women—because I could not help but compare them with white women, and in all phases of public life it was the Negro female who bowed her head and tucked her tail between her legs like a little black puppy." The important common denominator here is racism, but its release becomes misogyny. Whether or not we agree with Grier's and Cobbs' assessment or Hernton's is irrelevant. These ideas, expressed as they are, go a long way to explain how racism informs sexism in black America. And it is from this that *The River Niger* takes shape. No matter what Hansberry's intentions, to those who subscribe to this image of black women, Lena, Ruth and Beneatha all seem to participate in that emasculating tradition identified by Grier and Cobbs.

Related to the problem of misogyny and machismo in *The River Niger* is the question of sexual identity. Who among the characters is trustworthy and a true heir of the River Niger? The women who know their role in a male dominant society become the play's "superb—s." Men who demand and exercise male prerogative over women and win for themselves hierarchical power over their male colleagues are the play's real revolutionaries. Its counterrevolutionaries are those who do not align themselves with this paradigm, most notably Al, the "closet homosexual," police informant. However, Al's sexuality is really over-determined in this play. His sexual passivity—and the play makes it clear that he is passive—symbolizes his separation from real black manhood and hence real blackness. Al does not understand his blackness: he denies Africa and the play's definition of manhood. By not being true to his manhood, Al cannot be true to his blackness. Perversely, he defends the majority culture that oppresses black people, that dams the River Niger. Al proves to be untrustworthy and the "real men," Jeff, John and Dudley, must ferret the Als out and destroy them.

It is, finally, the intraracial intersexual struggle that seems to consume *The River Niger*. At the end of *Big White Fog*, the Marxists are moving the Masons' furniture back into the house. The hoped for revolution—were it to come—would protect the dispossessed. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the furniture is being moved out and the dispossessed move to take possession of their dream deferred. At the end of *The River Niger* there is no movement. Everything including the furniture remains in place; the movables are fixed. John dies not for a cause but to demonstrate a point: black men, black fathers are heroic and heroically macho. The play calls on black women to learn this lesson before it is too late, before they are bereft of their men. Yet the real irony of this conclusion is its unintended feminist correction of *Big White Fog*; Mattie does exactly what Ella ought to do. But Mattie is left to protect the past, to insure that John's sacrifice does not turn into an egregious waste. Nothing else stands to be won. We move nowhere, out of nothing, towards nothing.

Source: Anthony Barthelemy, "Mother, Sister, Wife: A Dramatic Perspective," in *Southern Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Summer 1985, pp. 770-89.

Critical Essay #3

Author Chester Fontenot examines the dichotomy between mythic and linear conceptions of history, focusing on how Walker's The River Niger *seeks to resolve this conflict.*

There are a number of ways one might approach setting criteria for evaluating Afro-American drama. We might say, for instance, that a significant number of these plays employ reversals of the American minstrel tradition, and thus move from tragedy into satire and farce (i.e., Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*). Or we could say that some plays use the mysticism of Black folk tradition as a basis for building their character types (i.e., Jean Toomer's *Balo* and Adrienne Kennedy's *The Owl Answers*). We may argue that Black music (spirituals, blues, jazz) provides the key, so to speak, which enables us to decode a large number of Afro-American plays. And, finally, we could trace the development of Afro-American drama thematically by ascertaining the point(s) where the playwrights seem to be concerned with freedom, social protest, theatre for a Black audience, and so on.

Though each of these approaches is valid in itself, in this essay I want to discuss another way of criticizing Afro-American popular drama. In many of these plays, there is a tension between the linear and the mythic conceptions of history. These two conceptions are diametrically opposed views, for the linear consciousness advocates the annihilation of the Black historical past, while the mythic consciousness threatens to keep the past alive through the social conditions of the present. The former attempts to substitute for the Black historical past a version of progress which, by its very nature, implies that the conditions Black people have had to live under are vestiges of a bygone age of disharmony. According to this theory, Black people are no longer slaves, but have been integrated as full participants in society. The extent to which Black people have not become full participants in American society indicates their unwillingness to accept the routes the larger society has created for them. Within the linear conception of history, the events which produced and continue to sustain the psychological enslavement of Black people are a set of discontinuous events linked together chronologically. But these events have no real connection to one another except that they happen along a particular part of the historical cycle. These events have no real connection to the present social conditions of Black people in the sense that Black people's present social predicament is simply the result of their lack of ability to take advantage of opportunities. The linear historical consciousness negates the past in favor of a distorted version of the present and an obscure vision of some distant future.

In contrast to the linear historical conception, the mythic view of history insists on the constant recreation of the Black historical past through the actions of white Americans against Black people. Within the mythic consciousness, slavery is not a vestige of a bygone age of disharmony but is alive in the segregation of Black people in the ghettos, in the lack of employment for Black youths, and in the aborted dreams of Black people in general and Black men in particular. This vantage point implies that there is no such thing as a distant past and obscure future, but that there is only a radical present which

is constantly recreated through the suffrage of Black people. The mythic view threatens to destroy the linear conception, since the former is better able to substantiate its claims to truth than the latter. All one has to do to support the mythic view is to point toward the present conditions of Black people. To substantiate the linear conception, one must formulate a set of abstractions which gather strength from philosophical musings, and not from historical reality or from present social conditions. The oppression of Black people tends to create a mythic consciousness wherein "progress" is not seen as something achieved through the humanistic grace of Anglo-Americans, but is rather the product of sacrifice by Black Americans. Progress, in this sense, is not organic but is an imposed system on linear history. This is viewed within the mythic consciousness as not really progress, but as appeasement.

Since Black people, for the most part, live within the mythic consciousness, they are constantly put at odds with the linear system in their attempts to cope with American society. This conflict is presented in Afro-American popular drama not as vague abstractions of massive struggles of light and dark forces, of good and evil powers, but as real tensions between characters who represent either side of the dichotomy. The tension is seldom resolved, since it would take an herculean effort to synthesize moral turpitude with pragmatic choices to bring the conflict to an end. Instead, Afro-American playwrights seem to provide the reader with an analysis of the problem and to suggest different strategies by which to resolve it. Two plays which illustrate this thesis are Joseph Walker's *River Niger* and Lonne Elder's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*; these show the tension between myth and history.

The River Niger centers on the struggle of John Williams, a fifty-year old Black man who is characterized as an "alive poet." John is a poet both in the sense that he writes poems and in that he sees the Black experience not as something which is fixed and dictated by history, but as a massive unshaped potential which must be given form by human experience. John's struggle is against the role of manhood which has been created and sustained by American culture. Manhood in this specific context refers to John's ability or lack of ability to reach his goal, which was originally to be a lawyer, and to provide material goods for his family. John can realize neither potential, and thus is trapped within a conception of humanity from which he cannot escape. This continual battle creates a mythic consciousness for John in that each time he confronts his wife, Mattie, and her mother, his inability to realize his aborted goal is kept alive. The constant confrontation between his past and present leads John to frustration, and, finally, to alcohol. In his prison house, so to speak, John attempts to realize his dream through his son, Jeff, by convincing him to become a lieutenant in the Air Force. The tension between John's past and Jeff's present produces the plot in *The River Niger*.

The play begins with John struggling to write a poem he has been working on for some time. As the opening scene gets underway, John reads aloud three lines of his poem:

I am the River Niger—hear my waters.
I wriggle and stream and run.
I am totally flexible—

The tone of this poem suggests that John's plight in writing is the same as that of Black people who are struggling against oppression. Just as John is having difficulty moving the poem from passive to active voice, Black people experience hardships moving their experience from historically determined events to constitutive actions. John as poet is symbolic of the struggle of Black people in general and of Black men in particular—the fight against linear history as an enslaving force. In fact, linear history espouses the notion that Black men are worthless, shiftless, lazy, and so on. John's wife, Mattie, discusses this idea that Black men are no good. "A good man is a treasure," Mattie says. "White folk proclaim that our men are no good and we go 'round like fools trying to prove them wrong. . .If our men are no good, why are all these little white girls trying to gobble 'em up faster than they can pee straight?"

We find that John is fighting against this conception of Black men through poetry. For poetry is not something removed from reality, "art for art's sake." It is "what the revolution's all about—never lose sight of the true purpose of the revolutions, all revolutions—to restore poetry to the godhead!" John believes that Black poetry is experiential; he comments that the Empire State Building was built from over three hundred years of Black poetry. All accomplishments by Black people form the core of Black poetry. It is within this poetic philosophy that John wants to find his battlefield. But John's battle-field is not such that it will enable him to win himself a piece of the American dream. It is the kind of battlefield which will allow him to regain his dignity and to make a positive impact on humanity from his own cultural base. John's search for this battlefield engages the tension between the linear and the mythic conceptions; the former advocates no need for a battlefield since a measurable amount of progress has occurred in America, while the latter insists on the constant need for a battlefield, since social conditions have changed little since slavery for Black people.

The other characters in this play intensify this struggle. Mattie, an embittered Black woman, is referred to by her mother as "the only Black child I ever spawned—my first and last, thank Jesus." Mattie—locked within this foreshadowing statement —turns the burden of her heritage inward toward herself and John; she blames herself for his psychological castration. John wanted to go to law school, but Mattie let her relatives impose so heavily on their relationship that John was forced to give up his career goal and work odd jobs to support the family. Her guilt over John's turning to alcohol, combined with her own mastectomy, lead Mattie to self-destructiveness. She assumes the position of a martyr in her defense of the alcoholism of both John and her mother.

Much of Mattie's plight has been created for her by her mother, who is a very color conscious woman. Mattie's mother stands at the midpoint of the tension between John and Mattie, since she has been directly responsible for the abortion of John's career and for Mattie's failure to find fulfillment in womanhood. Joseph Walker conveys the tension symbolically through the grandmother's actions. On the one hand, she claims to be a Christian, while on the other hand, she hides whiskey in the house and sneaks a drink whenever the family is not around. She embodies both the problem of one struggling against the linear conception of history through the memory of her husband, whom she describes as a proud Black man, and the urge to accept the linear conception through her emphasis on color and proper social decorum.

The forces represented by Mattie and her mother threaten to return John to the Black historical past— to hopelessness and psychological slavery. In an effort to free himself, John turns to fulfilling his dreams through his son, Jeff. He wants Jeff to make an accomplishment which will serve as proof that Black men in particular can fulfill the role of manhood. Since the armed forces offer one of the clearest available avenues toward manhood, John pressures Jeff into enlisting in military school. As the plot begins to shape, we see the entire family anxiously awaiting Jeff's return from the Air Force as a commissioned lieutenant.

In John's struggle to have Jeff fulfill his hopes, he doesn't see that Jeff rejects his intervention in his life. The son views his father's attempts to push him to a goal as an imposition of progress on his version of history, which is mythic. Jeff does not think moving into the world dominated by White people is an accomplishment; he thinks it is "selling out." He would rather work from within the Black community to effect social change. But in his rejection of his father's route to manhood, Jeff finds that the Black community has its own pitfalls, in the form of gangs masquerading as revolutionary organizations.

The conflict between Jeff and his father is caused by different views regarding accomplishments. John sees Jeff's commission, not as an act of loyalty to his country, but as an accomplishment, as "another fist jammed through the wall." John wants to be able to participate in American society fully, for he regards such a participation as his birthright. He doesn't want American society torn down completely; he only wants it modified. Jeff, on the other hand, wants to annihilate linear history by totally destroying American civilization. An accomplishment which helps to perpetuate the American mythos is tantamount to nothing for Jeff.

But Jeff's view of history is altered drastically when he confronts the street gang of which he was once a member, which has now been transformed into a self-styled revolutionary group. The leader of the gang, Mo, has put together a band of street-level Blacks composed of his girl friend, a homosexual (Al), a dope addict (Skeeter), and a sexual degenerate (Chips), whom Mo calls Famaldehyde Dick for raping an embalmed corpse. Those Mo has recruited are bound together by their sordid past, which does not provide the necessary bond for trust and devotion for one another needed for true revolutionary activity. The leader of the gang feels, like Fanon, that the call for revolution will cleanse the street level Blacks he has enlisted in his group. Yet, in his idyllic philosophy, Mo realizes that he needs leadership to complement him; therefore he attempts to enlist Jeff.

Jeff, however, initially rejects Mo's incessant demands that he become a member of the group, in the same way as he rejected his father's attempts to push him into the Air Force. He also finds that he must confront his grandmother, who pressures him to marry a "decent girl" and not the one to whom Jeff is presently engaged. In his selection of a viable path toward manhood, Jeff unintentionally paves the way for his father to find the battlefield for which he has been searching all his life. Finally, Jeff decides to join Mo's group on his own terms, not knowing that Mo's organization is being held responsible for the death of a local politician. Al, one of Mo's gang members, is also an undercover

policeman; he informs the authorities of the group's intentions and brings about their downfall. At the end of the play, the police surround John's house. Al, the informer, pulls a gun on the gang and demands that they reveal the killer of the politician. John enters through the kitchen, hears the commotion, and shoots it out with Al. Al is killed instantly, while John is seriously injured. Here, John is given the chance to attain his final goal. He achieves manhood by taking the blame for the entire group and by insisting that they tell the police that he alone was responsible for the gang's activities. John finds his battlefield in death and breaks the cycle of linear history.

John's poem is completed as he moves from passivity to constitutive action. The forces which have threatened to destroy his mythic consciousness are held at bay, while John carves a realistic path for himself. John's death, then, is not tragic in the sense of his being ousted from society in order to return the moral world intact to the reader. The world is better in that he has been a part of it. His death is a conscious choice, a moral strategy. In a statement near the end of the play, John realizes what poetry actually is. He says while dying that he doesn't care about the poems he has been trying to write all of his life, but that "this is poetry, man—what I feel right down here and now." John finds that he has created his own path to realization of manhood, even though, for him, finding his own way means to contradict everything for which he has struggled all along. Yet the path he chooses acknowledges the mythic sense of history and thus annihilates the linear conception.

Ceremonies in Dark Old Men presents his conflict in a different way. The shadow of the deceased mother in this play looms as the manifestation of the linear consciousness. Mr. Parker's daughter, Adele, constantly reminds her father and two brothers of their failure to achieve manhood through employment. Adele, the sole supporter of the family, keeps her mother's memory alive by confronting the family with the reason for Mrs. Parker's untimely demise. In one scene Adele challenges her father's devotion to her mother: "What about Mama? She died working for you! Did you ever stop to think about that! In fact, did you ever love her? No!!." The conflict between Adele and the castrated men produces the mythic consciousness in the play.

Adele, as the breadwinner in the family, is likewise the source of moral authority. For it is she who attempts to place limits on the illegal actions her father and brothers wish to undertake. But placing these restrictions does not resolve the source of conflict between moral turpitude and pragmatic action. Even though her father might try to keep Adele happy because she pays the rent, he still feels that his dreams have been aborted and are unreachable through the route dictated to him by history— getting a job. To Mr. Parker, a job is simply a way of aborting his dreams. In the opening scene of the play, his longtime friend, Mr. Jenkins, questions the validity of Mr. Parker's masquerading as a barber when he could "count the heads of hair you done cut in this shop on one hand." Mr. Parker replies, "This shop is gon' work yet; I know it can. Just give me one more year and you'll see. . .Going out to get a job ain't gon' solve nothing—all its gon' do is create a lot of bad feelings with everybody. I can't work! I don't know how to!"

The irony in this statement is not that Mr. Parker really doesn't know how to work, but that the kind of work he is accustomed to doing is obsolete. He was a minstrel man who

has been outdated by the lack of historical consciousness of the new Black generation. He is part of a distinct age of slavery and oppression. For Mr. Parker to acknowledge this fact is tantamount to him accepting the linear view of history, which advocates the annihilation of the Black historical past. Adele intensifies this struggle by her incessant demands that her father and brothers get a job.

When faced with this dilemma, Mr. Parker, his two sons, Theopolis and Bobby, and his best friend, Mr. Jenkins, choose an alternate route to fulfillment of manhood; they accept an offer from "Blue Haven," a Black gangster, to turn the barbershop into a front for manufacturing and selling bootleg liquor. But in doing this, Mr. Parker throws into chaos the moral world Adele has sought to keep intact. Bobby puts his talents at thievery to work for Blue Haven; Mr. Parker embezzles money from the enterprise to reclaim his lost youth; and Theopolis is left to do all the work.

Blue Haven symbolizes a path through which Black men can gain access to manhood, the ability to determine one's destiny. Such an ability has been stifled by segregating Blacks, by confining them to ghettos, and by prohibiting them from entering the labor force. Blue Haven—regardless of his moral code—represents an achievement for Black men, an achievement which, in its very essence, attests to the inhumanity Black people have experienced in America. Blue Haven is able to conceal his immoral actions from Mr. Parker, Theopolis, Bobby, and Mr. Jenkins, because of the attractiveness of the route he offers them. If they participate in Blue Haven's organization, they can regain the dignity they have lost in their confinement in the ghetto. After all, they have not sought jobs actively, not because there is little chance of them finding a suitable one, but because they do not wish to work for white people. To work for white people is tantamount to acknowledging the linear historical consciousness and to participating in the destruction of the mythic conception. Blue Haven's offer acknowledges the Black historical past and provides them with a route to fulfilling their role as men without "selling out," so to speak.

Just as John Williams must die in *The River Niger* to unify the cosmos which has been thrown into chaos in his search for a battlefield, Mr. Parker's youngest son, Bobby, must die in order for the family to be shocked into reality. Bobby's death while participating in a robbery attempt for Blue Haven's gang returns Mr. Parker and the rest of the family to the moral world where they see that Blue Haven's offer was not a viable choice, but only the appearance of one. Blue Haven has simply inverted the world, overturned societal values, not for the good of Black people as a whole, but for his own selfish purposes. The route Mr. Parker and his son, Theopolis, must find to manhood cannot be defined in opposition to that dictated by history. It must be firmly grounded in the Black historical past and must contain a viable vision of the future.

Ceremonies in Dark Old Men attempts to resolve the tension between the linear and mythic conceptions, but falls short. At the end of the play, the family decides to stand on moral grounds and to reject Blue Haven's enterprise in their barber shop. They make a decision to throw the equipment Blue Haven has placed in the barber shop into the river and to confront him when he comes to collect his money. The strength the family acquires in the death of Bobby might lead one to think that they will triumph, as a family,

over the efforts of Blue Haven to keep them in the business of making bootleg liquor. But this resolution is somewhat superficial. Blue Haven's character is drawn in such a way that his presence dominates the play. The tone of the play shifts when Blue Haven enters the scene—the entire moral world is overturned when he makes his offer to the family. A character with this type of appeal cannot be dispensed with in such a perfunctory manner. When the play ends, there is still the feeling that Blue Haven is going to come back to the barber shop to collect his money, only to find that the family has rejected his business and has destroyed his equipment. The family must still confront the gangster with more than moral philosophical rantings. All that is finally resolved in the play is that Blue Haven represents a facade, not the resolution to the conflict between the linear and mythic conceptions of history.

The problem that is presented in these two plays is common to a large number of Afro-American plays which are aimed at large audiences. These plays attempt to present the problem DuBois speaks of in *Souls of Black Folk*. Black people live within what DuBois called "the veil," that is, the realization that one is neither a part of American society nor a member of a distinct ethnic group which is tied to linear history. In other words, Black people experience a double-consciousness which manifests itself in the tension between the linear and mythic conceptions. In developing criteria to evaluate these plays, one must realize that drama, unlike other literary genres, is often construed as a direct manifestation of reality and not as something remote and suspended from historical reality. Afro-American playwrights have been required to make their plays directly responsive to the needs of oppressed peoples, and they have done so by presenting the conflict in the consciousness of Black people. This can serve as a basis for developing parameters within which one can operate when discussing the subject. And it can hopefully provide the dramaturgical enterprise with the perspective with which it can categorize Afro-American popular drama.

Source: Chester J. Fontenot, "Mythic Patterns In *River Niger* and *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*," in *Melus*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 1980, pp. 41-49.

Adaptations

The River Niger was adapted by Walker as a film with the same title. It was produced by Cine Arts in 1976 and starred Cicely Tyson and James Earl Jones.

Topics for Further Study

In the play, the character of Ann Vanderguild is from South Africa, and her father is in prison for political activities carried out by her brothers. Learn about the history of racial relations in South Africa in the twentieth century and beyond. In what ways have racial relations in South Africa changed since this play was written?

African-American political leader Malcolm X is mentioned in the play. Learn more about his political philosophy and activities. In what ways did he influence racial politics in America in the twentieth century? What do *you* think of his political philosophy and activities?

Walker's play was written and takes place during the era of the Civil Rights Movement. Learn more about the history of the Civil Rights Movement. What important events took place? What significant changes in American race relations resulted from the efforts of members of the Civil Rights Movement?

Walker's play was first produced during the period of the Black Arts Movement. Learn more about the Black Arts Movement. Who were some of the influential people in formulating and defining the movement? What were the political and aesthetic values set forth by the movement? What important works emerged from the Black Arts Movement?

Compare and Contrast

1825: Explorer Hugh Clapperton attempts to determine the course of the Niger River.

1830: The British government commissions Richard and John Lander, English explorers of West Africa, to complete Clapperton's exploration of the river. The brother's explorations determined the Niger River flowed into the Atlantic Ocean, dispelling the previous belief that the Niger was a tributary of the Nile River.

2000: The river Niger provides irrigation for agriculture and serves as a major means of transportation to the cities and villages it transgresses. Many visitors can travel the Niger River on large river boats, which takes them down the river and over half the country in one week's time. Tourists can also take more leisurely tours on the river by using a traditional pirogue (small canoe) or a pinasse (motor boat).

1950s: Malcolm X becomes the primary spokesman for the Nation of Islam. The Nation's message, preaching self-help and personal responsibility, is particularly popular in Harlem, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Detroit. Malcolm's anti-white man speeches and calls for a separate country for blacks inspires Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to form The Black Panthers.

1960s: Malcolm X breaks with the Nation of Islam, denouncing Elijah Muhammad as a fake. He no longer preaches a message of hatred and separatism. Malcolm X establishes Muslim Mosque, Inc., Elijah Muhammad appoints Minister Louis Farrakhan to Temple No. 7 in New York City. In 1964, Malcolm X is assassinated while delivering a speech to his followers.

1970s-2000: Under the spiritual leadership of Minister Louis Farrakhan, The Nation of Islam gains new respect and more members, extending to mosques and study groups in over eighty cities in America. Farrakhan is active in lecturing throughout many countries, drawing crowds of 60,000, preaching the Nation's messages and promoting the issues of freedom, equality, and unity.

1920: During the 1920s, many popular and critically successful African-American artists live in Harlem and produce important works during their time there. Some of the artists living in Harlem at this time include Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith. This time period becomes known as the Harlem Renaissance.

1970s: Although Harlem retains a predominantly African-American population and many artists continue to settle in this village of New York, it has lost much of its former glory. Harlem gains a reputation for being an area high in crime and poverty.

2000: Much has been done to improve Harlem's reputation, and tourists to New York are encouraged to visit Harlem and see many of its historic sites and attractions, including Riverbank State Park, the Apollo Theater, Sugar Hill, which is the area where

Count Basie and Sugar Ray Robinson lived, and the Schomberg Center, which was the home of the Harlem literary renaissance.

What Do I Read Next?

Black Drama Anthology (1972), edited by Woodie King and Ron Milner. This anthology is a collection of plays by African-American writers, including *Ododo* (1970) by Joseph A. Walker.

The Best Plays of 1967-1968 (1968), edited by Otis L. Guernsey. This collection includes *The Believers*, a play by Joseph A. Walker and Josephine Jackson.

The Slave Ship (1964), by Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones. Baraka's play is an early experimental play about racial oppression in America, written by a leading writer in the Black Arts Movement. The play takes place during three periods of African-American history.

Black Drama in America: An Anthology (1994), edited and with an introduction by Darwin T. Turner. This collection of plays by African-American authors includes Langston Hughes, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and August Wilson.

They Had a Dream: The Civil Rights Struggle, from Frederick Douglass to Marcus Garvey to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X (1993), by Jules Archer. This text provides a history of some of the most influential figures in the struggle for racial equality in America.

The Amen Corner, by James Baldwin (1968). *The Amen Corner* is the first play by the leading African-American writer James Baldwin. Baldwin's play focuses on the theme of the struggles of black men in the African-American family.

Further Study

Branch, William B., ed., *Black Thunder: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Drama*, Mentor Books.

This collection of plays by contemporary African-American writers includes Amiri Baraka and August Wilson.

Sewell, Tony, *Garvey's Children: The Legacy of Marcus Garvey*, Africa World Press, 1990.

Sewell's text provides an historical survey of the influence of Marcus Garvey on civil rights leaders.

Shange, Ntozake, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf: A Choreopoem*, Macmillan, 1997.

Shange's experimental play focuses on the struggles of African-American women against racism and sexism.

Wilson, August, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, New American Library, 1985.

Black Bottom is a critically acclaimed play by the leading African-American dramatist of the 1980s. Wilson's play concerns a female blues singer and the members of her band.

X, Malcolm, as told to Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Random House, 1975.

This famous biography of the black nationalist leader Malcolm X provides a compelling description of Malcom X's life and the varied paths it took.

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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 unnamedfor 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).

BOOKRAGS

- 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

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