Slave Ship Study Guide

Slave Ship by Amiri Baraka

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Introduction

Amiri Baraka's play *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* was first produced at the Spirit House theater in Newark, New Jersey, in 1967, and first published in 1969, by Jihad, the publishing house founded by Baraka himself. The play has been noted for its successful embodiment of the politics of black nationalism, the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement, and the principals of "revolutionary theater" put forth by Baraka through his founding of the Black Repertory Theater in Harlem in 1965.

Slave Ship is a one-act play that takes place during distinct historical experiences in African-American history: aboard a slave ship during the Middle Passage from Africa to America, during a plantation-era uprising, and in the era of the civil rights movement. Baraka's play utilizes the representation of African-American history as a means of forging a communal African-American identity through the preservation of African cultural roots. The use of music throughout the play is central to this theme of African-American cultural identity and communal solidarity. Critics have noted the use of music in conjunction with audience participation in a communal dance to create a ritualistic drama through which theater is intended to inspire political action.

Author Biography

Floyd Gaffney, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, has compared Amiri Baraka (also known as LeRoi Jones or Imamu Amiri Baraka) to W. E. B. Dubois and Richard Wright as "one of the twentieth century's most prolific and persistent social and moral critics of black experience in America." Baraka's political and literary career can be divided into three separate phases: a Beat Movement poet in the 1950s, a black nationalist poet, dramatist, essayist, and music historian in the 1960s, and a Marxist/Socialist writer and activist in the 1970s.

Baraka was born Everett Leroy Jones, on October 7, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey, into an educated, middle-class African-American family. His father, Coyette LeRoy Jones, was a postal worker, and his mother, Anna Lois Russ Jones, was a social worker. He graduated from Barringer High School in 1951, spent a year at Rutgers University, and then transferred to Howard University, in Washington, D.C., which he attended from 1952 to 1954. Baraka, however, quit school to join the U.S. Air Force, where he spent three years stationed in Puerto Rico as a weatherman and gunner, from 1954 to 1957. He was dishonorably discharged. Baraka once stated in an interview that, while his experiences at a predominantly black university taught him about the "Negro sickness," by which he referred to the prevailing effort to assimilate into white culture, his experiences in the armed forces taught him the "white sickness" of racism. In 1957, Baraka moved to the Lower East Side in New York City, where he became engaged with writers and intellectuals of the (mostly white) bohemian Beat Movement, such as Allen Ginsberg, who were concentrated in the East Village of Manhattan. Baraka worked at various small, alternative publishing and magazine businesses, as well as at a bookstore, and attended courses in Comparative Literature at Colombia University. It was during this time that Baraka met Hettie Roberta Cohen, a white Jewish woman, whom he married in 1958, and with whom he had two children. His first collection of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, was published in 1961, by Totem Press, a publishing company which he had founded in 1959.

In 1960, Baraka was invited to Cuba, along with other African-American writers, to celebrate the anniversary of Fidel Castro's 1953 Marxist Revolution. Exposure to many politically committed writers in Cuba had a profound affect on Baraka's political, and therefore literary, orientation. Whereas Baraka's Beat poetry had been generally apolitical, his writing became consciously politicized as he adopted a black nationalist political stance. Baraka's social history of blues and jazz music, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1964), continues to be regarded as a seminal work of historical and musicological scholarship. In 1964, Baraka won notoriety and critical acclaim for his highly political play, *Dutchman*. His growing identification with black nationalism, which characterizes the second phase of his literary/political career, led to his divorce from his white wife and his move to Harlem shortly after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965. There, he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater in 1965, married a black woman, Sylvia Robinson, in 1966, and, in 1968, converted to Islam and changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka, which means "blessed spiritual leader"; his wife accordingly changed her name to Amina Baraka. In 1974, Baraka began the third major phase of his

literary and political career when he declared himself a Marxist-Leninist, rejecting black nationalism, and dropping the religious title of "Imamu" from his name. His own account of his life is recorded in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (1984).

Baraka continued to be a presence in American mass culture when, in 1991, he protested the portrayal of Malcolm X in Spike's Lee's film, X, and when he appeared as a homeless poet in the movie *Bulworth* in 1998. Baraka retired from the State University of New York at Stonybrook and became Professor Emeritus in 1999, on his sixty-fifth birthday.

Plot Summary

Baraka's one-act play opens in darkness. A variety of sounds and smells are emitted to the audience in order to represent the "atmosfeeling" of life in the hold of a slave ship. The sounds include that of the sea, and the boat rocking, as well as the sounds of the suffering of the enslaved Africans, and the sounds of the white slave traders. The smells are meant to create an atmosphere of "life processes going on anyway," and include "urine" and "excrement." A light comes up on two white sailors chatting idly about the "riches" to be had from the slave trade in America, above the "drone of terror" from the hold below them. While the stage is still in almost complete darkness, the sounds of the enslaved Africans on the ship continue, and begin to include the sounds of humming, and chanting, as well as the voices of the suffering Africans, calling out to their gods. The sailors above them laugh and point at the suffering Africans. From the ship's hold, one man cries out that a woman has killed her baby and herself. The sounds of another African woman being assaulted and raped by a white sailor are heard. The sounds of an African man struggling with the white man in defense of the raped African woman are also heard. Throughout, the sounds of African women humming can be heard almost continuously.

The second section of the play takes place on a Southern plantation in America. A character referred to as "The Old Tom," is described as "a shuffling 'Negro.'" He dances and shuffles in a show of self-deprecation, speaking subserviently to "massa," as the two White Men, dressed as plantation owners, continue laughing. A group of enslaved African Americans plan a revolt in discussion with the Preacher, as the Old Tom looks on. The Old Tom then reports the planned revolt to the white slave masters in exchange for a couple of pork chops. The revolt is staged in darkness, the struggle indicated only by sounds.

In the third section, a Preacher in a business suit, referred to as the New Tom, gives a speech, intended to placate the white men, advocating integration. A man approaches the Preacher and lays the bloody corpse of a baby at his feet. As the Preacher continues his speech, which turns into jabbering nonsense, he attempts to kick the corpse behind him. The voice of the White Man is heard pleading for his life as he is killed in revolt. The African-American characters, as a group, begin to dance to modern jazz music. The stage directions indicate that the cast is to invite members of the audience to dance, creating a "party" atmosphere. Amidst this festive, ritualized dancing, which indicates a celebration of successful revolt, the head of the Preacher is thrown into the center of the dancers. The stage then goes black.

Summary

The play opens in darkness, and the audience sits in dark silence for a long time. Then, the room gradually fills with the sounds and odors of a slave ship. There are the smell of unwashed bodies and excrement, the crack of a whip, and the moans and screams of terrified people. African drums play in the background, punctuated by screaming. There is a great and terrifying sense of bodies crammed into a tight space, the cargo hold of a ship. The drumming and screaming continues until the ship's bell tolls, and the slave ship sets sail. Voices permeate the darkness to indicate the ship is sailing. The crew, laughing, wants to go to America to sell the cargo.

The action flashes back to the ship's hold. Dim light reveals women screaming, and children crying. A mother comforts her child, Moshake, and asks Orisha to save them. A man scolds her and tells her to conserve her energy. Another man begins to pray. Drums beat, and the cast rattles their chains and begins to moan and sing. Eventually, they scream. The drums and moans build tension until a mother searches for her child, Ifanami. The drums soften, and the cast begins to hum "in the slow misery of slavery."

The lights flash on to reveal grinning white sailors. The white men laugh and point at the misery they have created in capturing the people and chaining them in a ship's cargo hold. The drums grow louder, and then the women begin to moan again, in darkness. The entire cast of slaves begins screaming and praying again. A man calls the white sailors devils and beasts. Meanwhile, a woman strangles herself with her chains. The people around her pray. Her husband weeps. People struggle to breathe in the cramped space. As this action is happening, the woman is still searching for Ifanami. A man attacks her while she searches, but is fought off by another man. The two men fight, and lights come on again to reveal the white sailors laughing at the scuffle.

After the fight, the stage returns to darkness again. The drums continue, the cast moans and repeats their prayers and screams. The laughter can be heard over all the other sounds. A man screams that he will break his chains, while another woman discovers a dead mother and child.

In an abrupt shift of action, lights suddenly flash to show Tom, a slave shuffling along. He is a caricature of a man, raggedy and scratching himself. He begins to prostrate to his master. Lights flash, as he dances and bows. The scene now appears to be taking place in America, off the ship and into the fields. After Tom shuffles past, the darkness returns with the cast humming and moaning. Drums beat yet again, but are again drowned out by laughter. The ghost of a mother still searches for Moshake, weeping. The cast moans, and then banjo music brings the action to a plantation.

Soft lights ease on to reveal slaves banding together, planning a mutiny. Tom reports this plan to his master and is rewarded with a pork chop. The lights dim to screaming and gun shots, as the owners quell the revolt by shooting the slaves. Through sounds, the audience observes a great melee. There are sounds of white voices degrading the slaves, black voices condemning their oppressors. The cast returns to their screaming

and moaning. Lights flash to reveal Tom eating his pork chop, terrified of what he sees. Happy with their success in stopping the revolt, the white men give Tom an additional pork chop.

A sudden shift of light and sound occurs. On stage, the ghosts continue to search for their children, the white and black men continue to fight, and the screams and moans of the cast rise, as people are killed on stage. The cacophony of sounds raises tension and begins to fade away. The women begin to hum a spiritual.

In another abrupt shift, lights flash to a church. The preacher is Tom, trying to convince the white men to reach a peaceful agreement with the enemy. The ghosts, screams and drums return. The preacher stutters while asking for integration and equality. As this is going on, another black man carries in the body of a burned baby from a black church bombing. Tom nudges the body away with his foot and continues to plead.

Suddenly, saxophone music punctuates the drumming and moaning, as if something drastic has happened. The lights go down, and the sounds of the slave ship return, mixed with new humming and the saxophone. The cast sings a new song, joining together and singing of rising up to overcome their troubles.

The lights come on reveal Tom, still yammering to the white man. The cast approaches him, and he panics. The sounds continue, as the lights grow brighter, and Tom grows terrified. The cast is dancing across the stage in unison and converges on Tom to kill him.

After the black people have killed the submissive Tom, the white voice begins to worry and begs the cast not to kill him. He offers them anything they want. Lights fade to the sounds of the slave ship again. Dim light reveals the cast still dancing and singing their revolutionary song. Someone throws the head of Tom onto the floor, and the play ends with the cast all energetically dancing.

Analysis

Jones uses all the senses to demonstrate the horror of captivity, and the terrible circumstances African slaves encountered upon being transported to the United States. Director notes take up as much space in this play as the actual dialogue, as the author dictates exactly how each moment should feel, sound, smell and appear.

Darkness is a huge symbol for despair throughout the work. The play opens in pitch black to allow the audience to fully realize the terrifying environment of a slave ship. Throughout the play, characters only come into light during moments of climaxing action. The rest of the action takes place in dim light or complete darkness, to show the slaves' inability to control their surroundings. Darkness symbolizes the misery of captivity, the terrifying moments of not understanding, of being tortured and violated.

Time is very fluid through the play. The action zooms from the ship to captivity, to more modern times and back again. This shows how universal the struggle was for slaves.

Each moment in their struggle in America has been essentially the same. Jones uses time, separated by bouts of drums and moans, to show this. The sounds of the ship are repeated constantly throughout the action to drive home the feelings of the environment.

The character of Tom is a caricature of an elderly black man, as whites would have perceived him, in the 1800s and early 1900s. His actions and characteristics are described as those of a monkey, which is how many white people perceived the slaves that they captured. This caricature proves how very limited whites were in their understanding of the people they enslaved and later refused to offer civil rights. He is a personification of black people accepting this prejudice, and Jones makes use of the stereotype to prove how the captivity and degradation actually felt.

The play ends as it begins, in the belly of a slave ship, showing that the struggle of African Americans to gain equality has not ended. In the climactic moment where the cast comes together to "rise up" and kills Tom/Preacher, they symbolically end their people's association with these stereotypes. When the lights slowly fade in at the end of the play, the cast is amid the drums and moans of the old slave ship. However, this time, they dance.

Jones ends his work with an image of celebration to show that, while the struggle is far from over, the African American people have now joined together and are taking strides toward equality. They no longer accept the white interpretation of them (symbolized by the murder of Tom) and will rise up as one.

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Characters

1st Man

The speaker identified as 1st Man is described as "Prayer—husband of Dademi." He is heard onstage as one of the Africans imprisoned in the hold of the slave ship. He can be heard praying to an African god through his misery.

1st Woman

The speaker identified as 1st Woman is described as "Prayer." She is heard onstage as one of the Africans imprisoned in the slave ship. She is heard praying to an African god in her misery.

2nd Man

The speaker identified as 2nd Man is described as "Curser." He is heard onstage as one of the Africans imprisoned in the hold of the slave ship. He curses the disembodied voices of the White Men for their abuse of the Africans.

2nd Woman

The speaker identified as 2nd Woman is described as "Screamer—attacked." She is one of the Africans imprisoned in the hold of the slave ship. Her voice is heard onstage as the woman who is raped by one of the white sailors on the slave ship.

3rd Man

The speaker identified as the 3rd Man is described as "Struggler." He is heard onstage as one of the Africans imprisoned in the slave ship. He attempts to fend off the white man who rapes one of the African women.

3rd Woman

The speaker identified as 3rd Woman is described as "with child." She is one of the Africans imprisoned in the hold of the slave ship. Her voice can be heard onstage as the other enslaved Africans note that she has killed her baby and herself while on the ship. Later in the play, during the plantation scene and the revolt scene, her voice can be heard, as the stage directions indicate, "whispering after death."

New Tom

The character identified as New Tom is the preacher who attempts to talk in a dignified fashion to the white man and preaches assimilation to his fellow African Americans. In the final moments of the play, the severed head of the preacher is thrown amidst the dancing and "party" atmosphere in celebration of the revolt. Some critics have pointed out that this character seems to represent the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., known for his advocacy of the harmonious integration of whites and blacks in America. Baraka's black nationalist sentiments, as expressed through this play, are critical of the integrationist approach represented by Martin Luther King.

Old Tom Slave

The character identified as Old Tom Slave appears in the segment of the play that is set on a plantation. He represents the enslaved African Americans who kowtowed to white authority in acts of self-degradation for the purpose of gaining favor. The Old Tom Slave betrays his fellow African Americans when he reports to the white plantation owners that a revolt is being planned. He betrays his African-American community in exchange for a couple of pork chops which are thrown to him by the White Men.

White Men

The White Men are presented sometimes as disembodied voices, but at other points are actually seen onstage. In the first part of the play, they appear in sailor uniforms, and represent the white sailors on the slave ship. In the next part of the play, the stage directions indicate that these same white actors are now seen with hats that indicate that they are plantation owners.

Themes

Black Nationalism

Slave Ship was first produced during Baraka's literary and political phase of black nationalist sentiment. The play expresses a black nationalist perspective through the interlocking thematic concerns of African-American history, African-American community, and African-American identity. A strong sense of African-American communal identity is expressed through the play's representation of the seminal experience of African Americans—the "Middle Passage" to America via "slave ships," enforced accommodation to the oppressive conditions of slavery, whether through "Uncle Tomism" or attempted revolt, and contemporary struggles for racial equality. The play emphasizes the power of African-American community, as the African and African-American characters maintain their communal solidarity despite the efforts of white oppressors to disperse community and disband families. This strong sense of African-American community is expressed in the play through the persistence of African cultural roots throughout the history of oppression. The survival of African culture throughout African-American history is most strongly expressed in the play through the use of music: from the Yoruba songs of the enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage to the contemporary jazz music that accompanies the final ritual revolt and celebration. Baraka's stage directions also indicate the expression of contemporary African-American identity through the survival of African culture when he coins a phrase in instructing the actors to lead the audience in a "Boogalooyoruba" dance. Baraka's advocacy of African-American identity through black nationalism is represented by his dramatic celebration of African-American communal solidarity via the persistence of African historical roots as expressed by contemporary African-American culture.

Racial Oppression

Baraka's one-act play, subtitled "a history pageant," presents a series of "historical tableaux" representing the conditions of slavery in the history of African Americans: the transportation of enslaved Africans on "slave ships" across the "Middle Passage" to America, the conditions of slavery on the Southern plantation, and the continuing struggle for racial equality. The white characters in the play include the disembodied voices of white slave traders on the slave ship, who laugh at the horrible conditions of the Africans they have captured and rape an African woman. Harry Elam Jr. comments on the effectiveness of the staging of the White Voices in expressing the conditions of racial oppression: "This offstage White Voice, an invisible but extremely tangible symbol of the powerful psychological and sociological effects of white oppression, hovers above the play, inhibiting black interaction. Implicitly and explicitly, the representation of the White Voice critiques and comments on the power of representation. Although not physically present, the White Voice is powerfully represented." Elam has also observed that "the oppressive socioeconomic conditions of black American life inform and were informed by the symbolism" of the play. He goes on to explain that the play's

representation of history is designed to emphasize the continuation of racial oppression beyond the official emancipation of slaves: "The play's action compressed the horrors of the Middle Passage and the degradations of centuries under white racist hegemony into succinct stage moments. *Slave Ship's* representational account of black history flowed from slavery to civil rights, omitting any record of emancipation. This deliberate omission emphasized that oppressive conditions for blacks have been continuous."

Assimilation

Baraka's play, which embodies the cultural and political values of black nationalism, is vehemently anti-assimilationist. The harshest criticism within the play is reserved for the African Americans who represent "Uncle Tomism"—dancing and singing for the benefit of the white master in an act of self-degradation and denial of their African-American communal identity. Tejumola Olaniyan points out that, in keeping with the values of black nationalism, "the 'Toms,' who veered away from the group, lose both ways: they are not only treated with contempt and condescension by the oppressors they ally with, but they are also the first to be consumed by the people's wrath. The play is unsparing in their condemnation." In fact, the African-American preacher advocating integration is beheaded in the play's finale revolt and ritual. Several critics have pointed out that the preacher may have been intended to represent Martin Luther King, Jr., the highly influential civil rights activist whom some African Americans considered to be a pawn of white America in his advocacy of integration.

Style

Audience Participation and Ritual

One of the innovative elements of Baraka's play is the encouragement of audience participation. During the final sequence, actors step down from the stage and invite audience members to participate in a celebratory dance. Floyd Gaffney describes the overall effect of this final sequence and it thematic implications: "The final moments of the drama bring members of the cast together in a communion of singing 'When We Gonna Rise' and dancing 'a new-old dance, Boogalooyoruba line.' The celebration moves beyond the footlights into the theater, involving black spectators in this gesture of unified consciousness. The severed head of the preacher is thrown onto the dance floor, abruptly reminding audience members that the struggle continues in the community, the nation, and, ultimately, in the world. Critics have observed the ritualistic element of the play, as it culminates in this final dance involving the audience. As Tejumola Olaniyan notes, "It is not a 'play' as such but, more appropriately, a presentational, gigantic ritual, a pageant." Harry J. Elam Jr. praises the theatrical production of *Slave Ship* as an "effective strategy" of what he calls "ritualistic protest theater."

Sounds and Smells

Nilgun Anadolu-Okur describes the colorful use of sound, as well as the unusual use of actual smells, to dramatize central themes of the play: "To reenact the horrors of enslavement, drums, rattles, tambourines, ship bells and horns, gun shots and whip cracks, the sound of the waves, the smell of the open sea, incense, urine, and excrement are utilized, adding more weight to the realistic imagery." Gaffney describes the significance of sound to thematic concerns throughout the play, explaining that "The ritual of sound provides cohesion through which the slaves appeal to and abandon their African deities. Humming and singing of spirituals occur as the pageant shifts to slavery in America.... The contemporary phase of the ritual juxtaposes the voice of the integrationist preacher against that of the nationalist fighter, which is metaphorically extended into the 'new voice of freedom' heard through the wailing of a saxophone." Kimberly W. Benston observes that, "The experience of the play... is less one of watching than of listening."

Plot

Benston discusses the absence of a traditional plot line from Baraka's play as an aesthetic choice intended to more powerfully express his central thematic concerns. Benston notes that, "*Slave Ship* has no definite plot," and that "There is very little use of discursive speech and almost no dialogue," but that "Every theatrical device is directed toward creating an 'atmosphere of feeling,' one appropriate to a slave ship, the

attendant horrors of the Middle Passage, and the grim consequences that comprise the history of the Afro-American experience." Thus, Benston explains that "With the abandonment of traditional plot, Baraka moves us along these historical and mystical paths by a series of tableaux and symbolic actions."

Set Design,

Harry J. Elam Jr. discusses the significance of the set design of one particular production of *Slave Ship* to its central thematic concerns. Elam notes that Gilbert Moses, the set designer, "attempted to transform the performance space into a slave ship—a critical, historical site of black degradation and collective social memory." Elam goes on to say that "As a historical site of unconscionable racial violence, the slave ship potently communicated to its spectators an African-American heritage of struggle and survival."

Historical Context

African-American Literary Movements

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

African-American Theater

Baraka's play is an important work in the history of African-American dramatic literary production. Dramatic works by African-American writers in the nineteenth century include *King Shotaway* (1823), by William Henry Brown, the first known play by an African-American writer; *The Escape: or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), by William Wells Brown, the first play by an African-American writer to be published; and *Rachel* (1916), by Anglina W. Grimke, the first successful stage play by an African-American writer. Dramatic works and stage productions by African Americans in the twentieth century were influenced by important literary movements, such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. The development of Black Theater in the first half of the twentieth century was inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, and included the establishment of theaters devoted to black productions in major cities throughout the United States. The most prominent black theaters by mid-century were the American Negro Theater and the Negro Playwrights' Company. In the post-World War II era, 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 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 Beat Movement

During the 1950s, Baraka became associated with the literary and cultural aesthetics of the Beat Movement. Writers of the Beat Movement were concentrated in San Francisco and Greenwich Village, New York City, and included, most prominently, Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), best known for his poem *Howl* (1956), and Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), best known for his novel *On the Road* (1957). Beat Movement aesthetics were apolitical, but were associated with such cultural practices as jazz music, drugs, sexual experimentation, and Zen Buddhism. Beat poets advocated a free-flowing, loosely structured use of language, sometimes borrowing from the rhythms of jazz music. Other important writers to emerge from the Beat Movement include William Burroughs and Gary Snyder.

Critical Overview

Baraka has been a leading figure in the development of African-American literature and thought during the twentieth century. Kimberly W. Benston states that Baraka "is one of the most intriguing, controversial, and enigmatic figures in modern letters." Benston goes on to say that "Baraka entered the American consciousness not merely as a writer but as an event, a symbolic figure somehow combining the craft and insights of Euro-American radicalism with the rebellious energies of young Afro-America." William J. Harris describes the extensive influence of Baraka on American literature: "Acting as an energetic artist-critic-spokesman, Baraka almost single-handedly changed both the nature and the form of post-World War II Afro-American literature. In addition to being a prime influence on other poets and dramatists of his time, Baraka has also created an original body of work that belongs in the forefront of innovative avant-garde writing, regardless of ethnic background. As a contemporary American artist Baraka must be ranked with the likes of John Coltrane, Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon." Harris goes on to describe the extent of Baraka's continuing influence on African-American artistic production throughout the 1990s, stating that "In essence, Baraka and the Black Arts Movement have had a profound and lasting philosophical and aesthetic impact on all post-integrationist black art; they have turned black art from other-directed to ethnically centered. Thus the contemporary Afro-American artist writes out of his or her own culture and, moreover, is self-consciously an Afro-American."

Baraka's influence on African-American theater has been extensive. Nilgun Anadolu-Okur notes that "At the height of the Black Arts movement Baraka was considered both the theoretician and the practitioner of a new outlook in theater, with his radical propositions engendered in the Revolutionary Theater." In addition to founding the Black Repertory Theater in Harlem in 1965, Baraka has written influential essays on the aesthetic values of black theater, as well as numerous stage plays, most notably, in 1964, the highly celebrated *Dutchman*. Benston says of Baraka's influence on theater:

From the ground-breaking manifesto 'The Revolutionary Theatre' (1964) to his post-nationalist notes on The Motion of History, Baraka has insisted on a theatre that energetically seeks new forms, new intensity, and new language to present and be a part of our constantly changing culture.

Baraka's own dramatic works have embodied these values, as Benston observes that, "no single body of plays is more resolutely exploratory than Baraka's."

Critics point to the political implications of Baraka's dramatic productions, particularly *Slave Ship*, as embodied in the aesthetic values of what Baraka called "revolutionary theater." Anadolu-Okur comments that Baraka's "ultimate concern has always been with the political functions of drama," observing that Baraka's drama "was targeted to educate the masses and his people to reclaim their historical consciousness, aesthetic and philosophical assets that spring from the center of Africanness. Renewal of the self and the employment of the new self to acquire a better means of existence became

Baraka's fundamental message in his plays." Benston asserts that in the production of *Slave Ship*, "the objectives of the 'revolutionary theater' are fully realized." Tejumola Olaniyan, noting that *Slave Ship* is "perhaps the most discussed of Baraka's plays" of his black nationalist period, observes the ways in which it stands out from his previous plays up to this point: "It is thematically the most reflective, a deep introspective exploration of the origins of the present struggles for black self-fashioning.... Thus far more than we could say of the other plays, the audience assumed is largely black, and this assumption is woven into the very fabric of the play."

Baraka subtitled *Slave Ship* "A Historical Pageant," and critics have commented on the political implications of Baraka's representation of African-American history. Olaniyan observes that, "The brief successive 'scenes' are like pages in a history book of a people under an imposed, dehumanizing condition." Baraka uses historical reference as a means of defining a contemporary African-American communal identity based on the survival of African cultural roots. Anadolu-Okur notes that the play "is historical in content, but it uses history metaphorically; in other words a historical dateline is used as a symbol for the present, and enslavement is a current event." In discussing a specific stage production of *Slave Ship*, Harry J. Elam Jr. observes that, "As a historical site of unconscionable racial violence, the slave ship potently communicated to its spectators an African-American heritage of struggle and survival." Benston notes that, "At every stage of his evocation of Afro-American history, Baraka insists upon the survival of aboriginal African communalism in the black slave population." This representation of history ultimately asserts the values of a black nationalist identity. Discussing the final action of the play, in which audience members are invited to participate in a communal dance on stage with the actors, Benston asserts that through the play's "final rite... the entire assembled black community dons the mask of its ancient spirit and comes to full life as a potent, physical manifestation of the forgotten, but historically nourished, national power. In *Slave Ship*, the black nation promptly transforms itself into history, for the imitation of suffering has conferred on it a collective past and assigned it a triumphant future." Elam comments on the political implications of the play's ending with audience participation, stating that "Baraka intends for this final moment of *Slave Ship* to induce the spectators' participation and compel their activism." Elam concludes "*Slave Ship*, in its finale, jolts the audience back into the uncertain 1960s reality, in which victory over white oppression has yet to be achieved."

Critics further praise *Slave Ship* for its use of music as a means of asserting the values of the Black Arts Movement, which celebrate communal African-American identity through African-American cultural practices. According to Benston, "*Slave Ship* is the most successful dramatic work to emerge from the Black Arts Movement precisely because it 'reclaims' and utilizes the musical base of the Afro-American genius. Baraka galvanizes a communal response to his vision by calling upon collective creation and participation in the play's musical life." Benston goes on to state that "The genius of Baraka's play lies in the manner in which the complex black music aesthetic is given precise theatrical embodiment."

Critics discuss the emphasis in *Slave Ship* on theatrical techniques other than standard narrative and dialogue. Benston notes "Whereas Baraka's earlier plays were

characterized by long, illuminating orations, in *Slave Ship* he emphasizes in every way concrete aspects of pain, the heavy reality of chains, the screams and smells of degradation. There is horror but there is also life, and we feel it all." Elam comments on the impact of these elements of the play: "Because the plot and character delineation of *Slave Ship* were so sparse, the other elements of the production increased in significance. The performance of *Slave Ship* emphasized gestures and symbols over the spoken word. Spectacle, music, sounds, and smells all combined to bring audience and performers together in an atmosphere of intense feeling."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in .lm studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the use of innovative dramatic style in Baraka's play.

Over thirty years after its initial production and publication, Baraka's one-act play *Slave Ship: A Historical Pageant* continues to strike the reader with its variety of experimental stylistic and technical elements as a dramatic work. Experimental dramatic technique in this play includes a rich texture of overlapping sounds, as well as smells (a highly unusual element of dramatic productions), and audience participation. As *Slave Ship* is neither plot-driven nor character-oriented, nor dialogue-centered, much of the written play consists of stage directions; the stylistic elements of Baraka's written stage directions are extremely expressive and sound, at times, like poetry. In addition, Baraka makes use in his stage directions of nonverbal phonetic indications of musical sounds, as well as made-up words, and expressive phrases that indicate the "atmosfeeling" of a particular scene, rather than concrete directions indicating action.

In the stage directions for the play's opening sequence, Baraka introduces several of these experimental stylistic elements and dramatic techniques. Most notably, Baraka provides stage directions indicating the emission of a variety of odors discernible to the audience:

Whole theater in darkness. Dark. For a long time. Occasional sound, like ship groaning, squeaking, rocking. Sea smells. In the dark. Keep people in the dark, and gradually odors of the sea, and sounds of the ship, creep up. Burn incense, but make a significant, almost stifling, smell come up. Urine. Excrement. Death. Life processes going on anyway. Eating. These smells and cries, the slash and tear of the lash, in a total atmosfeeling, gotten some way.

In these stage directions, Baraka indicates the emission of the smells of the sea, incense, urine, and excrement. While most of these smells are intended to invoke the realistic conditions of Africans in the hold of a slave ship, the smell of incense adds an expressive element into the mix. Clearly, Baraka does not mean to imply that the inside of a slave ship ever smelled of incense. Rather, the incense seems intended to invoke an element of ritual, which can be associated with the Africans who hold on to their traditional cultural and spiritual practices, despite the oppressive conditions of the slave ship. (Although it may not be historically accurate that African cultures utilized incense in ritual, the effect on a contemporary American audience could certainly evoke associations with non-Western religious practice.) The sound equivalent of the incense is the expressive sounds of African drumming overlapping the realistic sounds within the slave ship. Thus, Baraka uses odors both to represent realistic conditions of a slave ship, and to invoke expressionistic associations with traditional African culture and spirituality. The implication is that traditional African culture survived the Middle Passage

within the hearts and minds and spirits of the enslaved Africans, even if specific cultural practices did not literally survive the passage to America.

Baraka also uses expressionistic stage directions to indicate the use of smells and sounds onstage when he includes in his list of concrete sounds and smells, "Death." Clearly, the producer of the stage play is here asked by the playwright to represent abstract concepts like "death" through the concrete use of sounds and smells directed at the theater spectator. To express the abstract qualities that the stage directions are designed to impress upon a theater audience, Baraka in fact makes up an entirely new word: "atmosfeeling." He ends these opening stage directions, both concrete and expressive, by indicating that these theatrical effects are intended to add up to "a total atmosfeeling." Furthermore, Baraka's stage directions make it clear that he leaves up to the producer of the stage play the exact, concrete means by which this effect, and these abstract associations, are to be conveyed to the audience, for he concludes that this "atmosfeeling" is to be "gotten some way."

Throughout the play, Baraka uses expressive, poetically articulated stage directions to indicate the abstract "atmosfeeling" to be conveyed at various points. Baraka constructs phrases that read like poetry in that they privilege the expression of feeling, atmosphere, or abstract concepts over clear or concrete description. For instance, in the first sequence, which takes place in the slave ship, Baraka describes the sounds emitting from the darkness as "the long stream of different wills, articulated as screams, grunts, cries, etc." "The long stream of different wills" is clearly a poetic image that does not describe a concrete sound or image, but has abstract implications. The "long stream" seems to refer in part to the vast number of Africans brought across the "Middle Passage" over a period of several centuries of slave trade. The mention of "different wills" suggests the ways in which the enslaved Africans and African Americans continued to exert their own individuality and will, despite the extremely oppressive conditions under which they were forced to live. In another stage direction indicating the sounds of the slave ship, Baraka uses the poetic phrase "the moans of pushed-together agony." Baraka also uses expressive, poetic phrasing to describe the expressions on the faces of the white sailors on the slave ship, who appear "grinning their vices."

Baraka's stage directions for the musical sounds that permeate the play are also often poetic, expressive, and abstract. In a sequence shortly after the sounds of the slave revolt, Baraka's stage directions call for the sound of drums, "drums of .re and blood, briefly loud and smashing against the dark." Baraka also makes use of nonverbal phonetic letter combinations to indicate the sounds of drumming as well as of human voices. During the plantation sequence, the stage directions first indicate the sounds of African drumming through primarily descriptive language that indicates both the concrete sounds and the cultural associations meant to be invoked by these sounds: "drums of ancient African warriors come up... hero-warriors.... Black dancing in the dark, with bells, as if free, dancing wild old dances." Baraka goes on, however, to reproduce the actual drumming sounds through the rhythmic phrasing of phonetically spelled sounds: "Bam Boom Bam Booma Bimbam boomama boom beem bam." Such phonetic sound descriptions are indicated later when Baraka describes the sounds of the slave revolt, which include: "AIEEEEEEEEEIEIEIEEEE." Baraka combines phonetically

indicated sounds with poetic description in his stage directions for the sounds of "humming" which permeate much of the play:

(humming starts . . . hmmmmm, hmmm, like old black women humming for three centuries in the slow misery of slavery . . . hmmmmmmmm, hmmmmmmmmmm)

And later, but still on the slave ship:

(. . . Soft drums, and the constant, almost maddening, humming . . . hmmmmmmmmmmmm . . . like mad old nigger ladies humming forever in deathly patience . . . hmmmmmmm hmmmmmmmmm hmmmmmmmmm.)

Baraka makes further use of poetic language in the dialogue of the "New Tom," the modern day black Preacher calling for integration. Several critics have observed that this "New Tom" Preacher, wearing the garb of a business suit, is meant to represent the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., an extremely influential figure in the civil rights movement who advocated integration and harmonious relations between black and white. Baraka, a black nationalist when he wrote this play, is rather blatantly comparing Martin Luther King to the "Old Tom" who dances and shuffles in an act of self-deprecation in hopes of gaining favor with the white man. Critics have also pointed out the similarities in the Preacher's advocacy of "non-violence" and "integration" to the well-known rhetoric of Martin Luther King's civil rights writings, speeches, and political actions. But Baraka's critique of the racial politics represented by Martin Luther King is further developed through the Preacher's speech to the white man. The Preacher is described as "jabbering senselessly to the white man," but his "senseless" jabber, in the skillful hands of Baraka's poetic sensibilities, is crafted to express Baraka's strong anti-integrationist feelings at the time he wrote this play.

Preacher—Yasss, we understand... the problem. And, personally, I think some agreement can be reached. We will be non-violent... to the last... because we understand the dignity of pruty mcbonk and the greasy ghost. Of course diddy rip to bink, of vout juice. And penguins would do the same. I have a trauma. That the gold sewers wont integrate. Present fink. I have an enema... a trauma, on the coaster with your wife bird-crap.

And, after the bloody corpse of the dead baby has been laid at his feet:

Preacher—Uhhherrr... as I was sayin'... Mas'un... Mister Tastyslop... We kneegrows are ready to integrate... the blippy rump of stomach bat has corrinked a lip to push the thimble. Yass. Yass. Yass...

Baraka here introduces a plethora of made up nonsense "words," and phrases, such as, "diddy rip to bink, of vout juice," and "the blippy rump of stomach bat has corrinked a lip to push the thimble." But, in the midst of this "nonsense" Baraka has crafted poetic phrases that may be interpreted, like poetry, through their associations, rather than their (lack of) literal sense. There are several elements of this "senseless jabber" that do make sense in the historical context of Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. In place of "I have a dream," Baraka's "New Tom" Preacher states that, "I have

a trauma," and, later, "I have an enema... a trauma..." Exchanging "trauma" and "enema" for "dream," Baraka transforms King's idealistic message of hope in regard to the future of racial relations in the United States into a very different message. The scatological associations of "I have an enema" imply a very harsh criticism of King's dream—one that many who consider King to be a great figure in American history would certainly find offensive: that King's "dream," from Baraka's perspective at the time the play was written, was unrealistic. The substitution of "trauma" for "dream" changes the focus of the speech from that of hope for the future, to that of the expression of the "traumatic" suffering caused by centuries of slavery—that slavery was a national "trauma" that cannot so easily be overcome. The Preacher's statement, "I have a trauma. That the gold sewers wont integrate," further develops this critique in a sentence that at first seems like nonsense, but that can be interpreted, like poetry, through the associations evoked by the words. Throughout the play, the white man has been associated with "s—t"in the slave ship, the Africans call the white slave traders "s—t eaters"—and, by association, with "sewers." The white men are also associated with wealth, as acquired through the slave trade, when one of the sailors on the slave ship says that "riches be ours." The "gold sewers," then, refer to the white oppressors who have amassed the wealth symbolized by "gold" from the exploitation of African-Americans. Thus, while Martin Luther King's "dream" is of integration between black and white, Baraka's message is that this "dream" is, symbolically full of s—t, because the white oppressors, who benefit financially from a racist society, "won't integrate."

Thus, Baraka's innovative play *Slave Ship* is noteworthy for its expressive, poetic stage directions and experimental staging, designed above all to create an "atmosfeeling" of racial relations in America in accordance with Baraka's black nationalist sentiments at the time the play was written.

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

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Elam discusses the depiction of slave ship as a presentation of "the survival of African culture."

In the performance of *Slave Ship* playwright Baraka and director Gilbert Moses also sought to connect the cultural past with their immediate social struggle. They created images and action that infused the present historical moment with symbols of African cultural heritage. Through sparse dialogue, music, sound, and movement, *Slave Ship* chronicles African-American history from Africa through the middle passage to the civil rights and black power struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. The symbolism in Moses's production of *Slave Ship* emphasized the survival of African culture, spirituality, and communalism in African-American experience. Yoruba dialect was spoken during the first twenty minutes of the play, while the beating of African drums remained constant throughout. As the action moved from the roots of black civilization in Africa through slavery to the 1960s, the characters continued to chant and speak phrases in Yoruba and pray to African deities. This visual portrayal of African cultural retention informed the spectators that, despite the pressures from white America to conform, African traditions continued to survive in African-American culture and experience.

Because the plot and character delineation of *Slave Ship* were so sparse, the other elements of the production increased in significance. The performance of *Slave Ship* emphasized gestures and symbols over the spoken word. Spectacle, music, sounds, and smells all combined to bring audience and performers together in an atmosphere of intense feeling. Created by jazz musician Archie Shepp and director Gil Moses, the music covered the historical spectrum of black music, from African drums to jazz to rhythm and blues. This music suffused the entire production, intensifying the emotional impact of onstage moments. Critic John Lahr in the *Village Voice* called the production "genuine musical theater." Kimberly Benston asserted that the music in *Slave Ship* "is thus the strength, memory, power, triumph affirmation&dashthe entire historical and mythical process of Afro-American being." As suggested by both Lahr's and Benston's comments, the music acted as much more than background. The conjunction of historical and contemporary African and African-American musical styles symbolized and reaffirmed the African presence in the African-American cultural continuum.

As in *Quinta Temporada*, the action of *Slave Ship* was not real but, rather, symbolic re-presenting, re-producing meanings for its audience. Paul Carter Harrison noted, in his response to the performance of *Slave Ship*, that the director "Moses was able to heighten our sensitivity to the context of oppression without duplicating the experience in a static representation of reality, as in a natural life photograph; instead he relied upon our response to inform the spirit of outrage." Rather than realism, Moses employed powerful stage symbols. Turner writes that ritual symbols act as "instigators and products of temporal sociocultural processes." Correspondingly, the oppressive socioeconomic conditions of black American life inform and were informed by the symbolism of *Slave Ship*. The play's action compressed the horrors of the middle passage and the degradations of centuries under white racist hegemony into succinct

stage moments. *Slave Ship's* representational account of black history .owed from slavery to civil rights, omitting any record of emancipation. This deliberate omission emphasized that oppressive conditions for blacks have been continuous.

Baraka and Moses also used action and images within *Slave Ship* to challenge and transform conventional social and cultural meanings. Like *The Prayer Meeting, Slave Ship* contested the legitimacy of and the black spectators' faith in traditional black religion. Baraka visually associated the civil rights ministry, the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., with betrayal and complicity, by having the Uncle Tom house slave of the early slavery scenes and the assimilationist black preacher in later scenes portrayed by the same performer. When the preacher first appeared, the stage directions read: "Now lights .ash on, and preacher in modern business suit stands with hat in his hand. He is the same Tom as before." Audiences close to and familiar with the achievements of the immensely popular Dr. King could potentially have found such an association troubling. Still, the signs and symbols connected with the black preacher in *Slave Ship* transformed the meanings embodied in the image of the black preacher-as-civil rights crusader. The depiction of the black preacher in *Slave Ship* worked to, as Jean and John Comaroff suggest, "make new meanings, new ways of knowing," out of established images.

The transformation of the Uncle Tom slave into the black preacher called into question the preacher's credibility within the black liberation struggle. As a result, the representation of the preacher in *Slave Ship* reads not as a symbol of black pride and authority but, rather, as a caricature in the minstrel tradition, a stereotype of accommodation. According to the stage directions, "He [the preacher] tries to be, in fact, assumes he is, dignified, trying to hold his shoulders straight, but only succeeds in giving his body an odd slant like a diseased coal chute". With the guidance of these stage directions as well as the language that Baraka creates for this character, the performer who played the preacher presented him as a demeaning and deferential "Steppin Fetchit"-like character. The play remakes the nonviolent preacher as an accommodating obstacle to the black liberation cause.

With newly awakened political consciousness and militancy, the other black characters onstage rise en masse and murder the black preacher. The execution of the preacher visually dramatized the need of the gathered black spectators to eliminate from their own consciousness any tendency to accommodate oppression. Significantly, the black masses execute the preacher in the same stage area previously used as a slave auction block. Their violent actions transform the space and exorcise the negative vestiges of slavery. The transformations of space and of the complacent black masses into militant activists symbolized for the audience that oppressive circumstances could be overcome, "transformed," through collective revolutionary action.

The killing of the black preacher is followed by the symbolic execution of an offstage "White Voice." This offstage White Voice, an invisible but extremely tangible symbol of the powerful psychological and sociological effects of white oppression, hovers above the play, inhibiting black interaction. Implicitly and explicitly, the representation of the White Voice critiques and comments on the power of representation. Although not

physically present, the White Voice is powerfully represented. At one point the White Voice announces to the onstage black masses: "I'm God. You can't kill white Jesus God. I got long blond blow hair. I don't even wear a wig. You love the way I look. You want to look like me!" These words underline racist representations and assumptions that have conditioned the treatment of blacks by whites and have also constrained blacks' self-image. By controlling the representational apparatus, the dominant culture has perpetuated its values and superiority. As a result, some blacks have internalized their inferiority and accepted and coveted everything white, including, according to *Slave Ship*, the concept of a white, blue-eyed, blond-haired "Jesus" god. The play charges the oppressive United States, capitalist system with the perpetuation of a spiritually bankrupt Christian ethos that promotes and legitimizes racism.

The black masses literally destroy and disempower the White Voice, symbolically deconstructing its representational authority. Subdued by the oncoming black onslaught, the White Voice changes from confident disdain to fearful pleading and finally to screams of horror. Simultaneously, other black cast members remove an effigy of Uncle Sam with a cross around his neck—a grotesque representation of the connection between the Christian ethic and U.S. capitalism—from the upstage wall and smash it. By controlling the representational apparatus of *Slave Ship*, Baraka empowers the black masses and black cultural representations. Through the execution of the White Voice the visible and invisible hegemony of the dominant culture and cultural representations is symbolically expunged.

Slave Ship explicitly invites the black spectators to become participants in this symbolic overthrow of the White Voice. Chanting "When we gonna rise. Rise, rise, rise cut the ties, Black man rise", they cross out into the audience, shaking hands with the black audience members, challenging and encouraging black audience members to stand, to join with them in the chant and in their attack on the White Voice. This antistructural interpolation is at once inside and outside the action of the play. It is both creative and destructive as it allows for the improvisational flexibility of the performers and destroys the conventional boundaries between stage and spectators. Through this antistructural trope *Slave Ship* moves toward Benston's notion of methexis, the ritualistic and communal helping out. The participatory and symbolic action—the chanting and shaking of hands—encouraged audience members to commune, to help out.

The finale of *Slave Ship*, like the ending of *Quinta Temporada*, is antistructural. It attempts to induce further audience participation and to compel its audience to act. After the onstage black masses kill the White Voice in *Slave Ship*, they invite black spectators up onto the stage to dance with the performers to the jazz music of Archie Shepp. This action reinforces the celebratory and communal bond between spectators and performers. Together actors and audience become participants in a collective ritual, a "tribal" ceremony of spiritual and social significance. Just when the party reaches some loose improvisation, Baraka calls for the head of the Uncle Tom preacher to be thrown into the center of the dance floor. This symbolic, antistructural act transformed the atmosphere of the theatrical event. The shocking introduction of the preacher's head abruptly shifts the mood of the action. In a manner similar to Antonin Artaud and his Theater of Cruelty, Baraka bombards his audience with violent, cruel images. Rather

than purging spectators of the propensity to act—the expected response to violent images that Artaud articulated in *Theater and Its Double*—Baraka intends for this final moment of *Slave Ship* to induce the spectators' participation and compel their activism. Baraka reminds the audience through this powerful image of the unfulfilled legacy of the civil rights movement.

Source: Harry J. Elam, Jr., "Rehearsing the Revolution Onstage," in *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*, University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 86-87, 93.

Critical Essay #3

*Olaniyan explores the themes of*Slave Ship, *through the "origins of the present struggles for black self-fashioning."*

Slave Ship (1967), perhaps the most discussed of Baraka's plays of this period, has a signi.cantly different orientation. It is thematically the most re.ective, a deep introspective exploration of the origins of the present struggles for black self-fashioning, a genealogy of, to paraphrase Chinua Achebe, how, where, and when the rain began to beat us. Thus far more than we could say of the other plays, the audience assumed is largely black, and this assumption is woven into the very fabric of the play. It is not a "play" as such but, more appropriately, a presentational, gigantic ritual, a pageant. It has no defined plot. Dialogue or discursive language is spare and very sparse. The series of scenes or tableaux are juxtaposed with drumming, singing, dancing, laughing, screaming, wailing, miming, and various theatrical devices: sounds of the sea, chains, and whips, smells, dramatic light shifts, and so on— atmosphere ceases to be a mere backdrop for the action but a character in its own right:

Whole theater in darkness.... Occasional sound, like groaning, squeaking, rocking. Sea smells. Burn incense... make a significant, almost stifling smell come up. Pee. S—t. Death. Life processes... Eating. Those smells and cries, the slash and tear of the lash, in a total atmosfeeling, African drums like the worship of some Orisha. Obatala. Mbwanga rattles of the priests.... Rocking of the slave ship... sounds... of people, dropped down in the darkness, frightened, angry, mashed together in common terror.

This "historical pageant," as the playwright calls it, attempts to show its African-American audience their origin and the direction to be taken in the present. It dramatizes the ordeal of Africans from the time of capture as slaves, through the horrors of the Middle Passage, to slavery in the New World, and finally to liberation.

The contradictions arising from the historical black-white encounter still define the moving force of the action but, unlike the calculatingly crafted rhetorical and confrontational bombast of the earlier plays, *Slave Ship* simply shows the negative effects of the encounter on the victims and proceeds with its more urgent task of celebrating their courage and community, especially as these traits resist total disintegration through alien invasion to betrayal of kin. A critic, Stefan Brecht, also notes this crucial turn in Baraka and contemplates its implication:

This play is devoted to showing the evil done (& suffered), not the evil doer. On the contrary: it neglects him. It focuses on the good, though on its destruction.... This play's principles being profoundly humanitarian, if the course of action it suggests carries the day, the outlook, even for us, i.e., for the survivors among us, is hopeful.

The play's identified task is made poignant by a series of oppositions that seem to be its basic principle of composition: the screams and wails of agony of the slaves versus the satisfied, voluminous laughter of the slavemasters: "We head West!... (Long laughter)

Black gold in the West. We got our full cargo"; courageous women killing themselves and their children in order to escape the ignominy of slavery versus the white slavemasters looking on and laughing in blissful contentment; the slaves' degrading condition versus their intact humanity and fellow feeling; drums of ancient African warriors versus images of detestable "yassa massa" sellouts; rebellion versus betrayal; and so on.

These oppositions, generously bathed in affective music and evocative oppressive atmosphere, tug insistently on the audience's emotional chord. The brief successive "scenes" are like pages in a history book of a people under an imposed, dehumanizing condition. This condition is not static but evinces a clear, unmistakable—though many times lost and recaptured—progression, from origin to elimination. The protagonist in this movement is the people, as a collective: the characters are not only anonymous but non-individualized, and their effectiveness is shown to be most potent only in that unity. A united African-American community, we remember, is central to nationalist thought. The renegades, the "Toms," who veered away from the group, lose both ways: they are not only treated with contempt and condescension by the oppressors they ally with, but they are also the first to be consumed by their people's wrath. The play is unsparing in their condemnation:

(...speaking in the pseudo-intelligent patter he uses for the boss. He tries to be, in fact, assumes he is, dignified, trying to hold his shoulders straight, but only succeeds in giving his body an odd slant like a diseased coal chute)

PREACHER: Yass, understand... the problem. And, personally, I think some agreement can be reached. We will be nonviolenk... to the last....

(Scream... moans... drums... mournful deathtone.... The preacher looks, head turned just slightly, as if embarrassed, trying still to talk to the white man. Then, one of the black men, out of the darkness, comes and sits before the Tom, a wrapped-up bloody corpse of a dead burned baby as if they had just taken the body from a blown-up church, sets the corpse in front of the preacher. Preacher stops. Looks up at "person" he's Tomming before, then, with his foot, tries to push baby's body behind him, grinning, and jeffing, all the time, showing teeth, and being "dignified")

Central to the play then is an exploration of the dynamics of collective self-construction inscribed in the African-American experience.

At the beginning, the slaves are Africans held captive and carted away from their land. Their wailings and invocations are replete with references to spaces that had been intimate parts of their lives, that had defined and given them an identity: Shango, Obatala, Ifanami, and so on. With whips, chains, and time, *captives* are broken to submission as slaves, and there is a concomitant loss of a self-directed sense of self: "Now the same voices, as if transported in time to the slave farms, call names, English slave names" and metaphysical spaces like Luke, John, Jesus. But the slaves deny the planters' hegemony any completeness. A subversive "New-sound saxophone" by the slaves begins a new tune, drawing on aboriginal memory to forge a self-reflexive, hybrid

identity: "sounds of slave ship, saxophone and drums," and "a new-old dance, Boogalooyoruba line...." The resistant character of the new subjectivity is testified to by the fact that what the new music and dance articulate are "sounds of people picking up. Like dead people rising." The play's final call is for the destruction of all enemies, black or white, and the eradication of the existing condition of oppression.

Source: Tejumola Olaniyan, "LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka: The Motion of History," in *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama,* Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 82-84.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Brown argues that the strength of the play lies in the "audio-visual impact of its materials."

Slave Ship, (1967), "a historical pageant," is one of Baraka's more successful experiments in ritual drama. The plot is minimal. It consists of images, dances, and pantomime together with sporadic dialogue; all is designed to dramatize the physical and psychic experiences of slavery from the holds of the slave ships to contemporary American society. The play's real strength lies in the audiovisual impact of its materials. Much of the action takes place in darkness or half-light. This suggests the hold of a slave ship, and the relative lack of lighting accentuates the variety of sounds upon which Baraka builds his themes and his dramatic effect—African drums, humming of the slaves, cries of children and their mothers, shouts of slave drivers, and cracking sounds of the slaver master's whip.

The succession of audiovisual forms is integral to the pattern of ritual upon which Baraka bases his historical pageant. The sights and sounds of the slave ship remain throughout, but they alternate from time to time with other forms which depict successive stages of black American history—the plantation of the slaveholder, the nonviolent civil rights movement, and the black nationalist movement. History itself becomes a succession of rituals, particularly the ritual of suffering which gives way after repeated cycles to the new rituals of racial assertion and cultural awakening. The music which dominates the play is integral to the ritualistic pageantry of history. At first the main sounds are those of the African drum, accentuating the fresh African memories of the new slaves. Then as the plot moves toward the contemporary period the sounds of the African drum are gradually integrated with the musical forms that evolved in black American history since slavery. And this musical progression culminates in the blues and jazz idioms both as forms of protest and as the celebration of black nationalism. By a similar token the humming of the slaves in the holds of the slave ships gradually gives way to the sounds of protest and eventual triumph.

But throughout all of this the audience is always in touch with the persistent sounds and sights of the slave ship itself, for this is the setting that remains for the duration of the play, and the subsequent historical epochs are actually superimposed upon it in sequence. The historical pageant is, therefore, both progressive in direction (moving from slavery to the black nationalism of the 1970s) and circular (reinforcing a sense of the moral and social continuities of the society: the slavery of the past exerts a powerful influence on the circumstances of the present). Moreover, the persistence of the slave ship images has the effect of defining history itself as movements (progressive and cyclical) through time. Similarly the ritualistic forms of the play (dance, chant, and pantomime) are each a microcosm of the historical process: each synthesizes the materials inherited from a previous generation with the experiences of the contemporary period. And by extension this kind of synthesis characterizes the play as a whole. As a pageant that combines past and present experiences, traditional forms and new materials, it reenacts the historical process as Baraka defines it.

Source: Lloyd W. Brown, "Drama," in *Amiri Baraka*, Twayne Publishers, 1980, pp. 161-62.

Topics for Further Study

Baraka was very influential in the development of the Black Arts Movement, especially in drama, through his founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater and his many dramatic works. Learn more about recent developments in the area of African-American dramatic production. Who are the important African-American playwrights today, and what are their most important plays? What are the titles of some of the important works by these writers? What theaters throughout the U.S. are devoted to producing works by African-American writers? To what extent are the principles of the Black Arts Movement still practiced today? What developments have occurred in the literary aesthetics and political orientation of African-American dramatists?

Baraka's play *Slave Ship* is unique and innovative in part due to its unusual stage directions and characterization. Perform a scene from the play with a group of students. What kinds of choices do you make in your interpretation of the stage directions? In what ways does performing a scene illuminate the meaning and impact of the play?

During the 1950s, Baraka was associated with the writers of the Beat Movement, a primarily white, bohemian, literary orientation most commonly associated with the poet Allen Ginsberg (especially for his poem *Howl*) and the novelist Jack Kerouac (especially for his novel *On the Road*). Learn more about the Beat Movement, the writers associated with it, and the works they produced. What aesthetic principles did they put forth? What were the social or political implications of the literary aesthetics of the Beat Movement?

During an important phase of his literary and political career, Baraka was dedicated to the political philosophy of black nationalism and the religion of Islam. Learn more about black nationalism, and its association with Islam. What is the history of black nationalism? What are some of the fundamental political values held by black nationalists? Who are some of the important figures in the black nationalist movement? What is your own opinion of black nationalism as a political philosophy and movement?

The third phase of Baraka's literary and political career was characterized by his orientation to a Marxist-Socialist political philosophy. Learn more about Karl Marx and Marxist political theory. What are the fundamental social and political values put forth by Marxism? What is your own opinion of Marxism as a political philosophy?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: The Harlem Renaissance is the celebrated African-American literary movement that inspires many great African-American writers to an unprecedented literary output.

1950s: The Beat Movement in poetry is primarily made up of white writers, but is influenced by the African-American musical tradition of jazz, and is influential to such celebrated African-American writers such as Amiri Baraka.

1960s: The Black Arts Movement, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism, promotes an artistic aesthetic based in African-American culture.

1823: *King Shotaway*, by James Brown, is the first known play written by an African American.

1858: *The Escape: Or, a Leap for Freedom*, by William Wells Brown, is the first *published* play by an African-American writer.

1916: *Rachel*, by Angelina W. Grimke, is the first successful stage play by an African-American writer.

1959: *A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry, is the most prominent and widely celebrated play by an African-American writer.

1965: The Black Repertory Theatre, established by Amiri Baraka for the production of African-American dramatic works, initiates the Black Arts Movement in drama.

1977: *For colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf*, by Ntozake Shange, is a successful, experimental play, inspired by the Black Arts Movement, and written by a black feminist writer.

1985: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, by August Wilson, is the most celebrated play by an African-American writer.

1518-1845: The Middle Passage refers to the route across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa to the Americas—a journey that takes from three weeks to three months and that brings millions of enslaved Africans to be sold into bondage. There are a recorded fifty-five mutinies among the slaves against the slave traders during the Middle Passage.

1861-1865: The American Civil War results in the complete abolition of slavery in the United States.

1964: An extensive Civil Rights Act is passed by Congress, declaring various forms of racial discrimination illegal.

What Do I Read Next?

Dutchman (1964) is Baraka's award-winning, critically acclaimed, first professional dramatic production, about racial conflict as expressed by a white woman toward a black man on a subway train.

Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note . . . (1961) is Baraka's first volume of poetry, published by Totem Press, which Baraka founded in 1959. It reflects the literary aesthetics of his Beat Movement phase.

Blues People: Negro Music in White America (1963) is Baraka's highly regarded social history of blues and jazz music in the U.S. and in African-American culture.

The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader (1991), edited by William J. Harris, is a collection of important works and excerpts from all three phases of Baraka's career.

Transbluency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961-1995) (1996) is a recent collection of important poems from throughout Baraka's career.

The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka (1984; reprinted in 1997) is Baraka's autobiography, written during a prison sentence for his activity during a political protest.

Image of the Tiger: Essays by Amiri Baraka (1993), edited by Thornton Dial, is a collection of important essays from throughout Baraka's career.

Further Study

Anadolu-Okur, Nilgun, *Contemporary African-American Theater: Afrocentricity in the Works of Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, and Charles Fuller*, Garland Publishing, 1997.

This text is an analysis of the impact of three important African-American playwrights in the historical context of Black Theater movements.

Baraka, Amiri, ed., *Confirmation: An Anthology of African-American Women*, Morrow, 1983.... This book is seen as a collection of important writings by African-American women.

—, *Eulogies*, Marsilio Publishers, 1996.

This work is a collection of eulogies given by Baraka for the funerals of many famous African-American writers, musicians, and intellectuals, including Malcolm X, John Coltrane, James Baldwin, Miles Davis, and Toni Cade Bambara.

Baraka, Amiri, and Larry Neal, eds., *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, Morrow, 1968.

Baraka is a contributor as well as editor of this landmark anthology in African-American literary history.

Elam, Harry J., Jr., *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka*, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Elam's book provides an interesting comparative analysis of the political impact of dramatic productions by Amiri Baraka and Luis Valdez.

Olaniyan, Tejumola, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama*, Oxford University Press, 1995.

Olaniyan's book is a discussion of dramatic performances as political acts of forging "cultural identity" through artistic production.

Reilly, Charlie, ed., *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, University of Mississippi Press, 1994.

This work is a collection of previously published interviews with Baraka by various writers.

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Benston, Kimberly W., ed., "Introduction" to *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1978, pp. 1, 14.

—, "Vision and Form in Slave Ship," in *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Kimberly W. Benston, Prentice-Hall, 1978, pp. 174-176, 178-81.

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Floyd, Gaffney, "Amiri Baraka," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 38, edited by Thadius M. Davis, Gale, 1985, pp. 6, 18.

Harris, William J., ed., in collaboration with Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991, p. xvii.

Olaniyan, Tejumola, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance*, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 82-84.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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