Topdog/Underdog Study Guide

Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks

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Introduction

Like the title suggests, *Topdog/Underdog* (published in 2001) is a play about competition, reversals, and mirror images that reflect the true self. The idea that became *Topdog/Underdog* can be found in one of Parks's earlier plays, *The America Play* (1995), which features a gravedigger named the Foundling Father whose obsession with Abraham Lincoln leads him to find work in a sideshow. Like Link in *Topdog/Underdog*, the Foundling Father applies whiteface, models several different types of fake beards, and sits in a chair awaiting visitors who pay to assassinate "Abraham Lincoln" with a cap gun. Though the Foundling Father and Link hold the same job, any similarities between these two protagonists end there. Regardless, Parks's fascination with history, especially personal history, and the ways in which illusion can reveal identity makes for riveting drama.

Topdog/Underdog tells the story of two brothers, Lincoln and Booth, who, abandoned by first one parent and then the other, have had to depend upon each other for survival since they were teenagers. Now in their thirties, the brothers struggle to make a new life, one that will lead them out of poverty. Lincoln, a master of the con game three-card monte, has abandoned a life of crime for a more respectable job impersonating Abraham Lincoln at an arcade. Booth, on the other hand, earns his living as a petty thief, one who wishes to emulate his older brother's success by learning how to "throw the cards." Throughout the play, the brothers compete against each other, vying for control. At any given moment, one may yield power over the other, only to relinquish it in the next. Hence, *Topdog/Underdog* reveals a topsy-turvy world in which Lincoln and Booth live, a chaotic world that is as dangerous as it is illusory.

Author Biography

Suzan-Lori Parks, the daughter of an Army colonel, was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky, in 1964. As a member of a military family, Parks moved often, first to west Texas and then to Germany, where she settled during her teenage years. While attending German schools, Parks began to write short stories. When she returned to the United States, Parks attended Mount Holyoke College, where she studied creative writing with the novelist James Baldwin. Baldwin was the first to encourage her development as a playwright, for at the time Parks had the habit of acting out the characters' parts when she read her short stories in class. Her first play, *The Sinner's Place*, was produced in 1984 in Amherst, Massachusetts. While at Mount Holyoke, Parks was a member of the Phi Beta Kappa honor society and graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1985. She also studied at the Yale University School of Drama.

After college, Parks traveled to London to write plays and study acting. Her second play, *Betting on the Dust Commander*, was produced in 1987, followed by *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, which won a 1989 Obie Award for Best Off-Broadway play of the year. Parks's fifth play, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), continued to explore the issues of racism and sexism that have been hallmarks of her work from her earliest days as a playwright. These plays, like the others that followed, defy the conventions of the modern theatre as they address social issues like slavery, gender roles, and poverty. Parks won her second Obie for *Venus* (first produced in 1996), a dramatic account of how, in 1810, a Khoi-San woman was brought from South Africa to England to serve as a sideshow attraction. Parks's greatest critical acclaim to date arrived with the production of *Topdog/Underdog*, a play that she began writing in 1999 and that was produced Off Broadway at the Joseph Papp Public theater in 2001 under the direction of George C. Wolfe. The play, the first of Parks's to appear on Broadway, debuted in April 2002 at the Ambassador Theater and, shortly thereafter, won the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for drama, thereby making Parks the first African-American woman to receive that award.

Parks has received numerous awards and honors throughout her career, among them a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, the Whiting Writers' Award, a Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, and the PEN-Laura Pels Award for Excellence in Playwriting. In addition to the aforementioned Obie awards and Pulitzer Prize for drama, Parks has been awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and the prestigious MacArthur Foundation fellowship, also commonly known as the "genius grant."

Since 2000, Parks has directed the Audrey Skirball Kirn's Theater Projects writing program at the California Institute of the Arts. Her first novel, *Getting Mother's Body*, was published in 2003 to favorable reviews. Parks has written two screenplays: *Anemone Me* (1990) and *Girl 6* (1996). The film version of *Girl 6* was directed by Spike Lee. Parks is writing a stage musical about the Harlem Globetrotters entitled *Hoopz*, in addition to adapting Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* for a film to be produced by Oprah Winfrey.

Plot Summary

Scene 1

The play opens on a Thursday evening in a boardinghouse room with Booth practicing his three-card monte routine over a board supported by two milk crates. He practices his patter, imagining that he has won a large sum of money. Lincoln, wearing a frock coat, top hat, and fake beard, sneaks up behind his brother, who whirls and pulls a gun.

Booth tells Lincoln to take off his disguise because he fears Lincoln's getup will scare Grace, with whom Booth has a date the next day. Booth claims that Grace is in love with him, and that no man can love her the way he can. Booth then shows Lincoln a "diamond-esque" ring he plans to give Grace. The ring is stolen, but it is smaller than the one he gave her when they were together two years before; therefore, Booth, by giving his beloved a smaller ring, decreases the chance that she will give the ring back because she cannot remove it once it has been placed upon her finger.

Booth insists that Lincoln remove his costume. He does not understand why his brother does not leave the costume at work, but Link says that he is afraid someone might steal it.

Lincoln then relates a story about how a "little rich kid" asked him for an autograph while riding the bus home for work. Link decides to charge the kid ten dollars for the favor, but the kid only has a twenty-dollar bill. Lincoln, in the guise of Honest Abe, promises to bring the kid his change the next time they meet on the bus, but Lincoln buys a round of drinks at Lucky's instead.

Lincoln questions Booth about his card setup. Booth, wanting to create a new persona for himself, informs Lincoln that he is thinking about changing his name. Lincoln suggests an African name like "Shango," which would be an easy name for everyone to say and would not, in Lincoln's opinion, "obstruct . . . employment possibilities."

Lincoln has brought Chinese food home for dinner, and the brothers begin converting the card setup into a dinner table, which prompts a discussion about their present living arrangement. Lincoln points out the room's shortcomings, such as the absence of a toilet or a sink, but Booth does not see anything wrong with the amenities (or lack thereof).

Lincoln goes to get the food and finds a playing card on the floor. He places the card on the table and asks Booth if he has been playing cards. Booth says he has been playing solitaire rather than admit that he has been practicing his three-card monte routine unsuccessfully.

The brothers argue over who will eat what. Lincoln relents and gives Booth the "skrimps." Curious, Lincoln brings up the subject of solitaire again, and Booth suggests that they play a hand of poker or rummy when they have finished eating. Lincoln

reminds Booth that he will not touch the cards, but Booth insists that it would be "[j]ust for fun." Lincoln remains adamant, but Booth presses the issue, wanting to know whether Lincoln would break his vow if they played for money.

Lincoln says that Booth has no money because he, Lincoln, is the one who brings home the paycheck. Booth claims to have an "inheritance," but Lincoln says that Booth might as well have nothing because he never plans to spend the money he has. Booth responds by saying that Lincoln "blew" his inheritance.

The conversation abates and returns to the subject of food. The brothers compare their fortune cookie messages. Booth finishes eating and begins practicing his three-card monte routine again. His movements remain awkward and clumsy, and Lincoln tries his best to ignore him. Lincoln, however, cannot refrain from making comments about Booth's patter. Finally, Lincoln tells Booth that if he wants to throw the cards properly, he must practice the routine in smaller sections.

Booth suggests that they work as a team, but Lincoln changes the subject by saying he will clean up after the meal. Booth then announces that from then on he wants to be called "3-Card." Booth says that everyone calls him that; according to him, Grace especially likes the name. Lincoln thinks that both the name and his brother are "too much." "Im making a point," Booth says. "Point made, 3-Card. Point made," replies Lincoln.

Booth again raises the idea of the brothers working as a team. He has visions of making easy money, but Lincoln reminds him that there is more to making money at three-card monte than finding a mark. Booth goads Lincoln into accepting his proposition by reminding him that their success would attract women. Lincoln questions Booth's relationship with Grace, which does not seem all that secure. Booth appeals to Lincoln's sense of vanity by reminding him that at one time he was the best three-card dealer in the city. Lincoln, however, states that he does not touch the cards anymore.

Booth tries another tack by calling his brother names and by reminding him of how he, Booth, discovered their mother packing her things to leave. Booth tells Lincoln that their mother asked him to look out for his older brother, which brings the conversation around again to how, in Booth's view, he is trying to create an "economic opportunity" while Lincoln sits around and does nothing. Booth concludes his harangue by shouting, "YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!"

Lincoln apologizes, saying that he would prefer to do "honest work." Booth chides Lincoln about his costume and how he must impersonate "some crackerass white man," but Lincoln says that visitors to the arcade are not misled. "When people know the real deal it aint a hustle," he says.

Booth twists Lincoln's words and says that the card game would be the real deal. Booth implies that Lincoln's working at the arcade transcends his role of The Great Emancipator to embody slavery. Essentially, Booth says that his brother has enslaved

himself to the owners of the arcade, who controls his destiny. Lincoln warns Booth not to push him; his anger is rising.

Booth informs Lincoln that he will have to leave because their living arrangement was intended to be temporary. Lincoln agrees to leave without complaint and then plays a blues tune on the guitar. The song is sad and mournful, its theme one of abandonment and displacement. Booth likes the song, which Lincoln composed while at work.

Lincoln tells Booth about how they got their names. Their father was drunk when he told Lincoln that he named his sons Booth and Lincoln because "It was his idea of a joke."

Scene 2

The scene opens with Booth dressed like he is about to go on an Arctic expedition and checking to see if Lincoln is home. As he undresses, he reveals layers of clothing that he has stolen. He lays one suit on Lincoln's easy chair and another on his own bed. He sets two glasses and a bottle of whiskey on top of the stacked milk crates. Booth sits in a chair pretending to read a magazine when Lincoln walks in.

Lincoln enters the room to the sound of improvised fanfare. Booth knows that today, Friday, is payday, and the brothers, referring to each other as "Ma" and "Pa," begin to celebrate their prosperity. Lincoln pours two glasses of whiskey, and Booth begins counting the money Lincoln has brought home. Lincoln tells him to budget the money because he wants to know how much is available for the week. Booth, indignant that Lincoln has failed to notice the suit he stole for him, says that Lincoln would not notice his ex-wife Cookie if she was in bed. The jibe makes Lincoln wistful, but then his mood brightens when he sees the blue suit lying on the chair.

Booth brags about how he "boosted" the suits and other items of clothing from a department store. "I stole and I stole generously," he tells his brother. "Just cause I aint good as you at cards dont mean I cant do nothing."

Lincoln compliments Booth on his haul and then delivers a speech about how clothes do not make the man. "All day long I wear that getup. But that dont make me who I am," he says. He is reminded of how their father's clothes would hang in the closet, whereupon Booth, resentful about how their father spent more time and money on his mistresses than on his children, tells Lincoln that he took their father's clothes outside and burned them. Lincoln, on the other hand, is preoccupied with his job security and how he would leave the job when the time came. He concludes by sounding a refrain about his true identity: "Fake beard. Top hat. Dont make me into no Lincoln. I was Lincoln on my own before any of that."

After the brothers finish dressing and modeling their clothes for each other, Booth tells Lincoln that he looks like he did when he was with Cookie. Booth also thinks about how his new suit will impress Grace. Lincoln thinks that they should switch ties, and so they do. Both are pleased with the results.

Lincoln asks Booth to do the budget. He calculates how much they will need to pay the utilities, some of which, like the phone, they do not actually use. Booth wants to pay their bill so service will be restored and they can call their lady friends. Booth has it all worked out that having a phone will transform him into a ladies man, but Lincoln, depressed and dejected, does not believe that a woman would ever call him. Booth chastises Lincoln for not having any knowledge or confidence when it comes to women. Booth resumes calculating the budget, allowing money for alcohol and meals.

Lincoln tells Booth that there is talk of cutbacks at the arcade. Since Lincoln has been working there for only eight months, he would most likely be one of the first employees to be let go. "Dont sweat it man, we'll find something else," Booth replies, acknowledging that their fates are entwined together. Lincoln says that he likes his job because he can sit there all day and let his mind "travel." It is what he calls "easy work."

Sometimes Lincoln thinks about women, but most of the time he lets his mind "go quiet" as he composes songs, makes plans, and sits there trying to forget about the past. He invites Booth to come down again, but Booth says that once was enough. He asks if the Best Customer came in today, as he does most days, and Lincoln says, "He shot Honest Abe, yeah." They discuss some of the things the Best Customer whispers into Honest Abe's ear, and Booth concludes that the Best Customer is "one *deep* black brother."

Booth also concludes that Lincoln's job is bizarre. Lincoln says it is a living, but Booth challenges him by saying that he is not really living at all. "Im alive aint I?" Lincoln retorts. He then tells about how Lonny's death made him give up the cards for a secure, less dangerous, job. Lincoln likes his work at the arcade, but he cannot let go of his fear that he might lose his job and be forced to seek employment again. Booth, in an effort to cheer his brother up and perhaps win him over to the idea that they should work together as a team, reminds Lincoln that he was once lucky with the cards, but Lincoln dismisses the notion that anything but skill is involved in throwing the cards.

When Lincoln once again expresses his fear about losing his job, Booth tells him that he has to "jazz up" his act if he wants to attract more customers and keep his job. He gives his brother some pointers on how to make his performance more dramatic. However, when Lincoln asks Booth to help him practice, Booth tells him he does not have time because he must get ready for his date with Grace. Claiming that it is the "biggest night" of his life, Booth asks Lincoln for a small loan.

Lincoln gives Booth a five-dollar bill. Booth, perhaps feeling guilty about abandoning his brother, suggests that they rehearse when he gets back from his date. Lincoln agrees, and Booth leaves.

Alone, Lincoln undresses and hangs his clothes neatly over a chair. Leaving his feet bare, he dons his work uniform, securing the top hat beneath his chin with an elastic band. His outfit is complete except for the white makeup. Lincoln pretends to get shot, falls down, and writhes on the floor. He gets up and is about to practice his moves again

when he decides to pour himself a large glass of whiskey. The scene ends with Lincoln sitting in the easy chair drinking.

Scene 3

The scene opens much later that Friday evening, with Lincoln asleep in the recliner, which has been extended to its full horizontal position. He wakes suddenly, hung-over and wearing his costume. Booth enters, swaggering and slamming the door in an attempt to wake his brother, but Lincoln does not react, so Booth slams the door again. Lincoln wakes up, still bleary-eyed. Booth walks around him, strutting like a rooster, to make sure Lincoln sees him.

Lincoln asks if Booth has hurt himself, but Booth replies that he has had "an evening to remember." Lincoln says that Booth looks like he has hurt himself, but all he can talk about is how Grace wants him back. According to Booth, she has "wiped her hand" over her past so that she can say they have never been apart. She has forgiven him for his mistakes. Lincoln asks about their date, and Booth begins to divulge details of his sexual conquest. He interrupts his story because, he says, he does not want to make his brother jealous. Booth provides more details of the evening's encounter, but even so he feels guilty about making his brother feel bad. Lincoln prompts his brother to tell him more, and Booth obliges, saying that Grace was so sweet his teeth hurt. After more hesitation, Booth reveals intimate details of his sexual relations with Grace, each detail becoming more salacious and vivid.

The conversation revolves around the use of condoms, which Lincoln says he never had to do because he was married. Booth says that Grace will not let him go without one next time; she will be real strict about that. Lincoln, in a gesture of manly bravado, tells Booth that he will find a way to avoid using one. "You put yr foot down and she'll melt," he says.

Lincoln keeps drinking while Booth is in his bedroom, playing with the condoms. From the other side of the screen that divides the room, Booth tells Lincoln how Grace is not like all the other girls he has been with because she attends cosmetology school and has plans for the future. When Booth tells Lincoln about Grace's expertise as a cosmetologist, Lincoln cracks a joke, saying that it is too bad Booth is not a woman. Booth asks him to repeat what he said, but Lincoln changes his tone, saying that Booth could have his hair and nails done for free.

Booth continues to sing Grace's praises. Their breakup two years ago happened because, he says, he had a "little employment difficulty," and she needed time to think. Lincoln observes that that time is over, and Booth agrees.

Lincoln asks what Booth is doing. He may have been trying on a condom, but he says that he is resting because Grace left him exhausted. Lincoln asks Booth if he would like some "med-sin"□a drink of whiskey□but Booth says no. Lincoln tells Booth to help him practice his moves, but Booth asks if they can practice tomorrow. Lincoln remains

persistent, saying that he has been dressed up and waiting for Booth to help him. Lincoln's tone becomes urgent when he confesses his fear of being replaced by a wax dummy.

At first Booth is surprised to hear this, and Lincoln concedes that the idea may be nothing more than talk. He presses Booth again, reminding him that he loaned him five bucks so Booth could entertain Grace properly. Booth replies that he is tired, which prompts Lincoln to respond that Booth did not have sex with Grace earlier that evening; Booth made up that story to save face. Booth says that Lincoln is jealous. Lincoln counters by saying that the only sex Booth has is when he rustles the pages of his girlie magazines. Booth defends himself by saying that he is a passionate man who needs "sexual release." He justifies his frequent masturbation by saying that if he did not he would be out spending money and committing crimes to satisfy his passionate nature. Angry, Booth attacks Lincoln by denigrating his manhood. He tells Lincoln that his wife Cookie left him because he was impotent. Booth extends his role of topdog by saying, "I gave it to Grace good tonight. So goodnight." Lincoln says goodnight.

Lincoln sits in his chair while Booth lies in bed. After awhile, Booth checks on his brother to see if he is asleep, but Lincoln keeps an eye out for him. Lincoln breaks the silence by telling Booth that he does not need him to hustle a game of three-card monte. Booth says that he had planned to do it that way. Lincoln offers to contact his old crew, but Booth insists that he can assemble one of his own. "I don't need yr crew. Buncha has-beens. I can get my own crew," he says. Lincoln ignores Booth, telling him that back in the day he and his crew would pull in seven thousand dollars a week. Booth, however, remains stubborn until Lincoln, appealing to his brother's vanity, paints a verbal picture of Booth taking wads of cash off of tourists at the Mexican border. Booth slowly warms to the idea of Lincoln setting him up as a dealer.

Lincoln reminds Booth that he would have to have a gun for protection, but Booth says he already has one. Lincoln refers to Booth's piece as a "pop gun." He says that Booth would have to have a gun that matched his skill as a hustler, some "upper echelon heat." Booth will not listen to what his brother says because Lincoln has been away from the game for too long, six or seven years. Lincoln says he knows about guns because he works around them every day at the arcade. Booth wants to know what kinds of guns they have at the arcade, but Lincoln reminds him that Booth has been there and seen them before. Lincoln describes the guns as "Shiny deadly metal each with their own deadly personality."

Booth begins to think about what he could steal if he did visit the arcade. Lincoln tries to tell him that it would not be worth the trouble of stealing a gun because they all shoot blanks, to which Booth makes a reference to Lincoln doing the same thing sexually. Booth asks Lincoln if he ever wonders if one of the visitors will come in with a real gun, but Lincoln says he has no enemies, not even his ex-wife Cookie. Booth wonders about the Best Customer, but Lincoln dismisses the thought, saying he "cant be worrying about the actions of miscellaneous strangers."

Booth asks Lincoln if he knows anything about the people who visit the arcade, but Lincoln says he does not see a thing because he is in character, and Honest Abe is supposed to be staring straight ahead, looking at a play. Besides, Lincoln says, the arcade is kept dark "To keep thuh illusion of thuh whole thing," though occasionally he can see an inverted image in the metal casing of the fuse box in front of him. That is where he sees the "assassins." Lincoln then describes how he anticipates each assassin's arrival and how the tourist can know he is alive when the gun's cold metal touches his skin. Lincoln describes how he slumps, closes his eyes, and falls, repeating this routine with each paying customer that comes through the turnstile. He describes the many types of people who want to shoot Honest Abe. At the end of his speech, Lincoln says, "I do my best for them. And now they talking bout replacing me with uh wax dummy."

Booth suggests that Lincoln remind his boss about all the things he can do that a wax dummy cannot. Booth thinks that Lincoln would get his point across if he added more "spicy [s□t]" to his routine. When Lincoln asks him how, Booth tells him that, for one thing, he should scream when he is shot. Booth takes charge, assuming the role of his namesake. Lincoln practices a scream, but Booth thinks he should add some cursing, so Lincoln lets fly with a string of profanity. Lincoln, however, does not think the screaming and cursing will go over too well, so Booth suggests that he try rolling on the floor. After Lincoln tries, Booth says that he should wiggle and scream. Booth then suggests that Lincoln hold his head. "And look at me! I am the assassin! *I am Booth*!!," he says. "Come on man this is life and death! Go all out!"

Lincoln goes all out. Booth says that they should end the rehearsal there because things were beginning to look "too real or something." Lincoln says that the owners of the arcade do not want his performance to look too real because it will scare the customers. That would get him fired for sure. Lincoln accuses Booth of trying to get him fired, but Booth says he was just trying to help. Lincoln says that people are "funny" about how they want history re-enacted. "They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming." Again, he accuses Booth of trying to get him fired. Lincoln says it is not easy for him to play the role, but somehow he makes it look easy. The fact that he and Honest Abe have the same name helped him get hired. "Its a sit down job. With benefits," he says. Lincoln does not want to get fired because then he will not get a good reference.

Booth tells Lincoln that they could "hustle the cards together" if he got fired. Lincoln says he would not remember what to do, it has been so long since he was in the game. Booth reassures him and says goodnight. Lincoln disagrees and says goodnight before stretching out in his recliner. Booth stands over him, waiting for Lincoln to change his mind, but he is already fast asleep. Booth covers Lincoln with a blanket, turns out the lights, and locates one of his girlie magazines under the bed before the lights fade and the scene ends.

Scene 4

The scene opens just before dawn on Saturday. Lincoln awakens and looks around the room. Booth is fast asleep. Lincoln complains about the lack of running water as he stumbles around the room looking for something to use as a urinal. Finally, he finds a plastic cup and uses it, stowing it out of sight once he is finished. Then, he grabs his Lincoln getup and tries to remove it, tearing it. He removes his clothes until he is wearing nothing but his T-shirt and shorts.

Lincoln talks about how he hates falling asleep in his costume. He is worried that he will have to pay for the beard now that he has ripped it. He imagines what the bosses will say when they see the beard, and he visualizes strangling his boss as a form of retribution for being fired. He contemplates the irony of having a sit down job with benefits and being at another's mercy when he once was the best three-card monte dealer anyone had ever seen. He looks back over his career and reminds himself that it is best to quit while you are ahead. But he did not do that. He threw the cards one time too many, and Lonny got shot.

Lincoln consoles himself with the thought that he found a good job once he left the street. He convinces himself that he will find another good job when the arcade finally lets him go. He will not have to return to hustling. "Theres more to Link than that. More to me than some cheap hustle. More to life than cheating some idiot out of his paycheck or his life savings."

Lincoln thinks about Lonny and how the two worked so well together. He remembers how they took a couple for hundreds, even thousands, of dollars. "We took them for everything they had and everything they ever wanted to have," he says. He justifies hustling people who are greedy, but then he remembers what happened to Lonny and why he swore off the cards even though he was good at them.

Lincoln then experiences a moment of realization and picks up a pack of cards, choosing three from the deck. He stands over the three-card monte setup and begins going over his moves, slowly at first but then gathering speed. Unlike Booth's routine, Lincoln's is "deft, dangerous, electric." Lincoln puts himself through the paces, refining his patter. Lincoln speaks in a low voice, but Booth awakens and listens to his brother as he moves two red cards and one spade around and around on the table. Lincoln's confidence builds with each hand he deals until, finally, he beats the mark. Lincoln puts the cards down and moves away from the table. He sits down on the edge of his chair, unable to take his eyes off the cards.

Scene 5

The scene opens on a Wednesday night, with Booth sitting in his new suit. The three-card monte setup is nowhere to be seen. In its place is a table and chairs; the table has been set for a romantic evening for two, including champagne glasses and candles. The

apartment looks much cleaner than it did before; new curtains cover the windows. Booth sits at the table, checking to make sure everything is perfect.

Booth curses because he finds one of his girlie magazines poking out from beneath his bed. He kicks it back under the bed and pulls down the spread to conceal his collection. Nervous, Booth checks the champagne and the food. He tells himself not to worry, that Grace will arrive soon. Still restless, he checks the mattress for springiness and lays two dressing gowns marked "His" and "Hers" across the foot of the bed. He can still see the girlie magazines sticking out from beneath the bed, so he removes his pants and crawls under the bed to stow the magazines away safely.

Lincoln comes in, wearing his frock coat and carrying the rest of his costume in a plastic bag, but Booth, half dressed, mistakenly believes that Grace has arrived. He tries to keep his brother from coming in. Lincoln asks if he is interrupting anything, saying that he can go if Booth is "in thuh middle of it," meaning a sexual encounter with Grace. Booth tells him that the room is "off limits" tonight, but Lincoln insists that he could stay and sit there quietly composing songs just like he did whenever their parents had sex in the two-room apartment they shared with the boys. Booth insists that his brother find someplace else to stay and asks if he intends to spend the night with friends. Booth waits for Lincoln to leave, but Lincoln refuses to go.

Lincoln tells Booth that he lost his job at the arcade. He did everything correctly, but the owners had already purchased a wax dummy to take his place. Lincoln was so stunned by the news that he walked out wearing his costume. He believes that the owners will take him back if he tells them he is willing to take a pay cut, but Booth tells him that he should not. "Yr free. Don't go crawling back. Yr free at last! You can do anything you want." Lincoln, however, quickly understands that Booth wants him to return to hustling.

Booth tries to get Lincoln to go because Grace is expected at any moment, but Lincoln just plops into his easy chair without budging. He says he will leave when Grace arrives. Booth again insists that his brother leave. Lincoln asks what time Grace is coming, and Booth tells him that she is already late, although she could arrive momentarily. Lincoln asks what time she was supposed to be there, and Booth says that she was supposed to arrive at eight o'clock. Lincoln points out that it is after two in the morning□she is very late. Lincoln does not want to embarrass his brother, so he tells him that Booth can cover him with a blanket and pretend that he is alone when Grace arrives. Lincoln's tired and needs to sit down after walking all day, but he will go once Grace gets there.

Booth asks for Lincoln's opinion of the table setting. Lincoln approves. Things look so nice that for a moment he thought that Booth had gone and spent his inheritance. Booth tells him that he boosted the china, silver, and crystal. "Every bit of it." By now Booth is impatient, so Lincoln tells him that Grace will arrive shortly. "Dont sweat it," he says. Booth sits down at the table and tries to relax. "How come I got a hand for boosting and I dont got a hand for throwing cards?" he asks Lincoln.

Lincoln tells Booth to look out the window. He promises to leave when Grace arrives, and Booth says that maybe his brother has "jinxed" the evening already by showing up.

Booth quickly changes his mind, however. "Shes just a little late. You aint jinxed nothing," he says. Booth then sits by the window, watching for Grace on the street. Meanwhile, Lincoln sits in the recliner and sips from a whiskey bottle. He rummages around until he finds a worn photo album, which he peruses.

Looking at a photograph, Lincoln asks Booth if he remembers a house they lived in when Lincoln was eight and Booth was five. Lincoln calls it the "best [f□□ing] house in the world." Booth tells him to stop going down "memory lane" because, if he does not, he will spoil the mood Booth has tried so hard to create. Booth does not want any of his brother's "raggedy collections" to interfere with his romantic plans. Lincoln ignores his brother's wishes and continues to reminisce. Booth tries to dispel Lincoln's notion that the times they spent in that house were idyllic. Ironically, Booth resists the romance of looking back upon his childhood years.

Lincoln reminds Booth of a prank they pulled on their father when he backed his car out of the driveway. The car's tires went flat because the boys had placed a row of nails behind them. Lincoln takes pride in the fact that neither one of them gave themselves away. Booth admires his brother for staying so cool under pressure. After a pause, he asks Lincoln for the time. It is after three in the morning, so Lincoln suggests that Booth call Grace because something might have happened. When Lincoln observes that Booth looks sad, Booth shrugs it off, searching for a word to describe his mood. "Cool," suggests Lincoln. "Yeah. Cool," replies Booth, who comes over and pours himself a big glass of whiskey. He continues looking out the window, this time with a drink in his hand.

Booth asks if Lincoln received any severance pay. Lincoln says he blew a week's pay on nothing in particular. He just felt good spending money like he did when he was hustling and making lots of cash. He was his own man then, and he did not have to worry about being replaced by a wax dummy. "I was thuh [sh□□t] and they was my fools," Lincoln says. "Back in the thuh day."

Lincoln asks Booth why he thinks their parents left them. Booth says he does not think about it that much, but Lincoln thinks that their parents left because they did not like them. "I think there was something out there that they liked more than they liked us and for years they was struggling against moving towards that more liked something," he says. To Lincoln's mind, each parent had something to struggle against. When the family moved from a nasty apartment into a house, the struggle became worse for their parents because they each could not live up to their individual expectations of what domestic life should be.

Booth agrees that the idea of a normal family life was too much for their parents. First their mother left, then, two years later, their father did. "Like thuh whole family mortgage bills going to work thing was just too much," says Booth. "I seen how it cracked them up and I aint going there." Upset by Grace's failure to arrive on time, Booth relates his parents' experience to his own by saying that, regardless of Grace's wishes, he will not wear a "rubber" (condom) the next time they are together.

Lincoln remarks that their mother told him he should not marry. Booth says that she told him the same thing, which leads Lincoln to observe that both of their parents gave them $500 before they "cut out." Booth says that he will do the same thing when he has kids.

Leaving their kids money and cutting out was the one thing Booth says that their parents could agree upon. Lincoln does not understand at first, but then he sees Booth's point when they compare stories about how each of the brothers received $500 from their parents. Lincoln imagines that his parents have begun a new life, one that includes two boys different from them. Both the whiskey bottle and glasses are empty, so Booth pops the cork on the champagne bottle.

Booth tells Lincoln that he did not mind his parents leaving because he knew that he still had his brother to rely on. They were better off on their own than they would have been had they been under the protection of some child welfare agency. "It was you and me against thuh world, Link," Booth says. "It could be like that again."

Lincoln reminds Booth that throwing the cards is not as easy as it looks. The perspective Booth had when he was on the sidelines is much different than that of the customer. Booth demonstrates his understanding of the game by explaining Lonny's role as the stickman. The brothers discuss the various roles each of the crew plays, and Lincoln says that Booth stands a chance of being successful if he learns a few basic moves, which Lincoln is willing to demonstrate. Lincoln tells Booth to set up the cards, and, "in a flash," Booth clears the romantic dinner setting and replaces it with the three-card monte setup.

Lincoln begins by telling Booth that the deuce of spades is the one to watch. Booth prefers to work with the deuce of hearts, but spades are okay. Lincoln reviews the roles the crew members play, and Booth agrees to be the lookout. He is ready, he says, because he is already carrying a gun. Lincoln cannot understand why Booth would always carry a gun, even on a date, but Booth says that you never know when you might need to use it. Lincoln asks for the gun, which Booth hands over. Lincoln says that there is no point in having a lookout if there are not any cops, so Booth says he will be the stickman instead. Lincoln says that Booth does not have the experience to be a stickman, so he can be the sideman.

Lincoln begins the lesson by saying, "First thing you learn is what is. Next thing you learn is what aint. You don't know what is you don't know what aint, you don't know [sh□□t]." Booth understands. Booth gets defensive when he sees Lincoln sizing him up. He cannot understand why Lincoln would want to size up someone who is on his team, but Lincoln explains that everyone, including his crew, is part of the crowd, and the dealer always has to size up the crowd before he begins the hustle.

After sizing up the imaginary crowd, Lincoln decides that he does not want to play. Booth calls him on it, but Lincoln explains that not wanting to play is just part of the dealer's attitude. This is what lures the mark in because the mark thinks that he can beat the dealer. Booth asks if Lincoln is sizing him up again. Lincoln explains that there are two parts to throwing the cards, both of which are "fairly complicated." Lincoln says

that Booth has to work on what he is doing with his mouth and what he is doing with his hands because both count. Lincoln continues to explain how the mark sets himself up to be taken.

Lincoln reminds Booth to look at his eyes, not his hands. He says it is important that Booth not think too much about throwing the cards. Lincoln is trying to get Booth to immerse himself totally in throwing the cards. "Dont think about nothing," Lincoln says. "Just look into my eyes. Focus." Booth responds literally by saying that Lincoln's eyes are red, and he asks if his brother has been crying. Lincoln loses his patience, but he proceeds with the demonstration anyway by having Booth point to the deuce of spades. When Booth asks if he has pointed to the right one, Lincoln tells him to point with confidence. Lincoln flips the card over, and it is indeed the deuce of spades. Lincoln is "slightly crestfallen" because Booth has beaten him.

Booth begins to celebrate. "Make room for 3-Card! Here comes thuh champ!" he cries. Lincoln tells him not to get too excited. He should focus. Lincoln tells Booth to listen when he adds the "second element" of words.

Lincoln goes into a long and convoluted patter that lures the mark in and confuses him. At the end of Lincoln's monologue, he asks Booth to pick again. He does, and once again Booth picks the deuce of spades. Confident, Booth begins to challenge his brother's ability, but Lincoln remains determined to teach his brother a lesson by beating him at cards. Lincoln decides to make Booth back up his words with actions by switching roles and having him be the dealer. Lincoln reminds Booth that a light touch is necessary, but Booth moves the cards around awkwardly. His speech is not too good either. Soon, Lincoln bursts out laughing. Booth puts on his coat and places his gun inside one of the pockets.

Lincoln criticizes Booth's patter. If he does not smooth it out, he will get locked up every time. Lincoln recalls a time when they had $800 on the line and Booth misunderstood Link's signals, causing the mark to win. Lincoln says that everything turned out okay because they won the money back, but, really, a light touch is what Booth needs if he wants to throw the cards successfully. Lincoln tells Booth that he should touch the cards as though he were touching Grace's skin.

Lincoln holds up a watch, and Booth lets out a burst of anger when he sees how late it is and that he has been stood up. Booth immediately thinks that Grace is out with another man, but Lincoln, still willing to give Grace the benefit of a doubt, thinks that maybe something has happened to her. Booth says that the only thing that has happened is that she has made him look like a "chump." "I aint her chump. I aint nobodys chump," he says.

Lincoln offers to go to the payphone on the corner, but Booth cuts him off, saying that, unlike his brother, he is a man of action. "Thuh world puts its foot in yr face and you dont move. . . But Im my own man, Link. I aint you." Booth leaves the room, slamming the door behind him. "You got that right," Lincoln says, picking up the cards, moving them around faster and faster.

Scene 6

The scene opens on a Thursday night. The room appears empty, as though no one is home. Lincoln enters drunk; he leaves the door slightly open. As he does in an earlier scene, he imitates the sound of fanfare as he enters the room. He calls Booth's name and pulls out a large wad of cash once he's sure no one is home. He secures the money with an elastic band and puts it into his pocket. He sits down in his chair and takes the money out again, counting it quickly like he did when he was on the street.

Lincoln begins a monologue in which he celebrates finding himself again. He's just returned from Lucky's, where everyone saw the old Link again. Not only does Lincoln still possess his skill with cards but the women have started coming around again now that he shows flashes of the old success. "Who thuh man?" he asks. "Link. Thats right," he answers. Lincoln is full of drink and bravado, making fun of the tourists he's swindled out of money.

Just then Booth comes out from behind the dressing screen that separates the room. He stands at the door without making a sound. Meanwhile, Lincoln continues talking about his conquest and how he's not a has-been anymore. Booth closes the door, which prompts another spell.

Lincoln asks Booth if he's had another "evening to remember," and Booth says he has, though perhaps he wouldn't have used those words to describe it. Lincoln begins to tell Booth about his own "memorable evening" when Booth announces that he has some news to tell. Lincoln tells him to go first. After some hesitation, Booth says that Grace got down on her knees and asked him to marry her. Lincoln cannot believe it, and neither can Booth. "Amazing Grace!" he says. Booth then offers an explanation for why Grace did not show up the other night. He says he made a mistake by getting the days switched. She was not out with another man; she was at home watching television.

Booth continues his story, saying that Grace wants to get married immediately. She wants to have a baby; she wants to have *his* baby. Seeing the downcast look on Lincoln's face, Booth tells him not to worry: they'll name their baby boy after him.

A short spell ensues, and Booth asks Lincoln what news he has to tell. At first Lincoln does not want to say anything, so Booth asks him if the news about Grace is "good news." Then Booth shifts the topic to the bad news; that is, Grace plans on their living together as man and wife, so Lincoln will have to move. "No sweat," says Lincoln. Booth is apologetic, but he assuages his guilt by saying that it was "a temporary situation anyhow." Lincoln finds a suitcase and begins packing his belongings.

Booth cannot believe that Lincoln would take the bad news so easily, especially after he just lost his job and does not have any friends who will put him up. Furthermore, Booth cannot believe that Lincoln would be willing to leave him that quickly. Lincoln thanks Booth for his generosity. He tells Booth that he will not have a hard time finding another place to live because he already has another job working as a security guard. Lincoln

continues packing his things and picks up the whiskey bottle. Booth tells him to take the "med-sin" with him; he will not need it because he has Grace's love to keep him warm.

Lincoln asks if Booth plans to find a job or let Grace support him. "I got plans," Booth says, though he does not reveal what they are. Lincoln warns Booth that he will lose Grace if he is not able to support himself. She will not like working hard, only to find that he was just lying around doing nothing. Booth responds by saying that Grace accepts him for who he is. Lincoln backs off, saying that he was just offering some advice, though it appears that Booth is doing fine on his own.

A long spell ensues, and Booth says he never understood why their father never took any of his things with him when he left. Lincoln says it was because their father was drunk. Booth cannot understand why their father would leave his clothes, and Lincoln points out that he did worse than that: he left his two sons behind. He tells Booth to stop worrying about the past. "I mean, you aint gonna figure it out by thinking about it. Just call it one of thuh great unsolved mysteries of existence," Lincoln says.

Booth announces that their mother had a man on the side. Lincoln counters by telling Booth that their father had many mistresses, one of whom let Lincoln into her bed once his father was finished having sex.

A short spell ensues, and Lincoln takes his getup out of the closet. He is not sure if he should take it with him. Booth tells Lincoln that he will miss seeing him coming home in costume; he wishes he had a picture of Honest Abe for the album. Lincoln agrees to put on the costume if Booth gets the camera. Why not? They have nothing to lose. Booth searches the apartment and finds the camera while Lincoln applies makeup that more closely resembles war paint than it does whiteface.

Lincoln tells Booth that he did not get fired because he was not any good; he was fired because the owners had to cut back on expenditures. Lincoln reiterates that getting fired had nothing to do with his performance. Booth agrees and tells him to smile for the camera, but Lincoln points out that Honest Abe never smiled. Booth says that Lincoln should smile because he has got a new job and having a "good day." Lincoln protests, but Booth takes his picture anyway.

Lincoln suggests that they take a picture of them together, but Booth declines, saying that he would prefer to save the film for the wedding. Lincoln says that the job at the arcade was not so bad after all; he just "outgrew" it. He tells Booth that he would be glad to put a word in for him when business picks up again, but Booth says that he cannot pretend to be someone else all day. Lincoln says that he was not pretending because he was composing songs and thinking about women, including his ex-wife. Booth then recalls an episode where Cookie went looking for Lincoln but could not find him because he was out drinking at Lucky's. When she came to Booth's apartment and did not find Lincoln there, she seduced Booth because, he says, Lincoln was impotent and could not satisfy such a passionate woman. Booth was so taken with Cookie that he promised to marry her if she would leave Lincoln, but he changed his mind.

Lincoln says that he does not think about his ex-wife anymore. Booth observes that Lincoln does not "go back" because he cannot. "No matter what you do you cant get back to being who you was. Best you can do is just pretend to be yr old self," Booth says. Lincoln thinks that is nonsense, and soon the brothers argue over Booth's plans to earn a living by throwing the cards. Lincoln does not believe Booth can make it; Booth responds by saying that Lincoln is scared. Lincoln tells him to get out of the way: he is leaving. Booth blocks the way. He says Lincoln's scared of him because he picked the deuce of spades twice correctly. Lincoln accepts Booth's challenge by ordering him to set up the cards.

Booth sets up the board and the milk crates. Lincoln throws the cards. After a display of his skill, Lincoln asks Booth to pick the deuce of spades. Booth points to a card, which is the deuce of spades. "Who thuh man?!" asks Booth. Meanwhile, Lincoln looks at the other two cards as though he is unsure what went wrong. Booth continues taunting Lincoln, until he concedes that Booth has beaten him. "You thuh man, man," Lincoln concedes. Booth wants more, however, and he becomes angry when he realizes that Lincoln has been throwing out on the street earlier that day. Lincoln tells Booth that he was going to tell him, but he did not say anything because he still hasn't regained his old form. Booth knows that Lincoln has been putting him on, so he insists that this time Lincoln throw the cards for real.

Booth starts to get down on himself, but Lincoln reminds him that the "essential elements" of the street and the crowd are missing. Booth says that cash would make it real, so he suggests that Lincoln put down some of the money he won earlier that day. A short spell ensues, and Booth taunts Lincoln, asking him if he is afraid of losing to a chump. Lincoln puts his wad of money ($500) down on the table as a bet. Booth looks it over and gives his brother permission to begin the next round.

Booth stops Lincoln before he can get going because he, Booth, does not believe that Lincoln is "going full out." Lincoln says that he was just warming up. Besides, he put his money down, and that makes it real. Booth says that in order for things to be real he has to match the bet. Lincoln does not think Booth has any money because he hasn't held a job in years. Lincoln wonders if maybe Booth has been putting aside some money from the budget for himself, but Booth proudly declares that he has money of his own. The two brothers size each other up before Booth disappears. He returns with a nylon stocking containing money. A spell ensues.

Booth tells Lincoln how he discovered their mother's "Thursday man." He tells about the time he overheard their mother asking her man for some money because "thered been some kind of problem some kind of mistake had been made some kind of mistake that needed cleaning up." Booth alludes to his mother having an abortion. Her man refused to give her any money, so she had to face the problem by herself. Booth does not know if she kept the baby or "got rid of it," but he remains certain that she knew he was going to walk in on her because, before she left, she had $500 to give him in a nylon stocking. Booth places the nylon stocking on the table to match Lincoln's bet.

"Now its real," Booth says, but Lincoln does not want his brother to bet his money. Booth orders Lincoln to throw the cards, but he says he does not want to play. Booth yells at him to throw the cards, and Lincoln begins his patter. Again, Lincoln asks Booth to pick the deuce of spades. Lincoln reminds him that this time it is for real, so he had better choose the right card. "You pick wrong Im in yr wad and I keep mines," Lincoln says. "I pick right I got yr [sh□□t]," replies Booth.

Lincoln asks if Booth thinks they are really brothers; Booth says he does. A long spell ensues, and Lincoln asks Booth to find the deuce. Booth quickly points out a card. Before he turns the card over, Lincoln asks Booth if he is sure that is the one. The brothers stare at each other, and then Lincoln turns over the card Booth picked. Booth breaks away to see that he has chosen the wrong card. It is the deuce of hearts.

Lincoln collects the money and wishes Booth better luck next time. He begins to ridicule Booth, saying he has two left hands. Lincoln backs off, however, saying that cards aren't everything. After all, Booth has Grace. Booth does not respond, so Lincoln asks him if something is wrong. Booth says nothing's wrong, so Lincoln begins to boast a bit. Dejected, Booth admits that his brother still has the moves. Lincoln chuckles, though he is quick to tell Booth that he is not laughing at him. The game is too complicated, he says, perhaps amazed at how quickly he has regained his old form. Lincoln then sits down in the easy chair and starts untying the knot at the top of the nylon stocking.

Lincoln comments that their mother tied the knot tightly, which prompts Booth to admit that he has never opened the stocking. Lincoln cannot believe that his brother was never tempted to spend the $500 the stocking contains. Booth says he has been saving the money. He asks Lincoln not to open the stocking, but Lincoln wants to see what's inside. Booth angrily tells him that they don't need to open it because they already know what's inside. Lincoln calls Booth a "chump" because there could be more than $500 in there□or there could be nothing. Booth begs Lincoln not to open it, and a spell ensues.

Lincoln cannot untie the knot. Again, he tells Booth that he is not laughing at him; he is just laughing. Lincoln asks his brother how he knew his mother was for real when she gave him the money. How did he know she was not "jiving" him? Lincoln, now the topdog, continues to taunt Booth about how he was in too big of a hurry to learn the cards correctly. The first move separates the player from the played, says Lincoln. "And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning." The only time you win is when the man lets you, Lincoln says. He mocks how Booth thought he was a winner. Lincoln let him win. He played him.

Humiliated, Booth screams "[F□□k] you!" several times, each time growing in intensity and anger. Lincoln ignores him, however, and pulls a knife out of his boot so he can cut the knot, chuckling all the while. Booth joins in the laughter as Lincoln holds the knife high, ready to cut the stocking. He tells Booth to turn his head because he may not want to look. Booth turns away slightly as they continue laughing. Lincoln lowers the knife to cut the stocking.

Out of nowhere, Booth makes a confession. "I popped her," he says. "Grace. I popped her." He said he popped her because she said he had nothing going for him. He showed her what he had going on by popping her two, maybe three, times. Booth says Grace is not dead, but Lincoln gets him to admit that she is indeed dead. Lincoln says he will give Booth back the stocking. Booth says he cannot take being condescended to anymore. He just could not take any more of that "little bro [sh□□t]." Booth says that he is 3-Card now; he is not Booth anymore. Lincoln once again says that he will give Booth back his money, but Booth grows even more angry, asking "Who thuh man now, huh? Who thuh man now?!" Lincoln tells Booth to take the money, but Booth says he will not be needing it. He tells Lincoln that he should open the stocking because he won the money, but Lincoln refuses. Booth orders him to open the stocking, and a spell ensues shortly thereafter.

Booth grabs Lincoln from behind as he lowers the knife to cut the stocking. Like the assassins in the arcade, Booth pulls out his gun and places it against the left side of Lincoln's neck. "Dont," Lincoln tells him, but Booth pulls the trigger and Lincoln slumps out of his chair onto the floor. Booth paces the floor, the gun smoking in his hand.

Booth begins a final monologue in which he rails against his brother for taking his inheritance. Lincoln had his own inheritance, and he blew it. Booth says that Lincoln will not be needing the money anymore, so he might as well take it. The money was his inheritance, one which he had been saving ever since he received it. Lincoln should not have taken it because it was still his; their mother had given it to Booth, not Lincoln. Booth practices his patter again, thinking about how he will match his brother's fame as a dealer. He bends down to pick up the money and crumples to the floor. Booth sits beside Lincoln's body, holding him close. He sobs and lets out a wail to end the play.

Scene 1

Scene 1 Summary

Booth, a young black man, is practicing 3-card monte in his room at a boarding house when his older brother Lincoln gets home from work. Booth is surprised by Lincoln's sudden appearance. He pulls a gun out, pointing it at Lincoln, and he threatens to kill Lincoln if the latter ever sneaks up behind him again.

Booth shows Lincoln a ring with a fake diamond. Booth intends to give this ring to his girlfriend Grace. Booth says, "She's in love with me again but she don't know it yet." This implies that Booth and Grace had a falling out, but that Booth intends to make up with her and, indeed, to ask her for her hand in marriage.

Lincoln is dressed like Abraham Lincoln. He is wearing a costume and white face paint. He explains to Booth that he didn't have time to change back into his own clothing after work. He had to ride the bus home in his Lincoln costume. He tells the story of his bus ride. A kid on the bus asks Lincoln for his autograph because he has learned all about Honest Abe in school. Lincoln offers to give him the autograph for $10, but since the kid only has $20, Lincoln takes the $20 and promises to give the kid change tomorrow. Lincoln has no intention to give the kid his change. When Booth asks Lincoln what he did with the money, Lincoln explains that he went to a local bar, Luckys, and spent it all buying a round of drinks for everyone.

After the brothers eat their dinner, Booth goes back to practicing 3-card monte. Booth's card dealing is awkward, and Lincoln advises him to practice smaller parts of the card hustle rather than try to learn it all at once. Booth is clearly a novice card hustler, and Lincoln has much more skill and experience.

Booth proposes to Lincoln that they team up together to use the 3-card monte scam as a moneymaking venture on the streets. Lincoln refuses because he no longer wants to make money by hustling others. He would rather earn an honest living. Lincoln's response upsets Booth. Booth recalls the time when their mother left them. She told Booth to take care of Lincoln, but Booth thinks that this is backwards because the older brother Lincoln should be caring for and supporting the younger brother Booth. In particular, Booth thinks that Lincoln is not fulfilling his duties as an older brother because he isn't supporting Booth in his moneymaking venture.

During the brothers' conversation, Booth also reveals that he wants to change his name. He wishes to be called "3-Card" from then on. The scene ends with Lincoln revealing to Booth that their father gave them their names as a joke.

Scene 1 Analysis

In this scene, the audience is introduced to the two main characters of the play. Their names suggest the fates of the characters. Historically, Booth is famous for assassinating Lincoln, and the play ends tragically with Booth murdering his brother Lincoln. The fate of the character is also suggested by Booth's response to Lincoln's sudden entrance. The startled Booth's first impulse is to pull out his gun and point it at Lincoln. Moreover, he threatens to shoot Lincoln if the latter surprises him like that again. Booth's behavior suggests that he is prone to violent overreaction, which is precisely the kind of conduct that leads to Booth's final murderous act.

The choice of the names "Lincoln" and "Booth" is supposed to be a joke. Ironically, the historical figures Abraham Lincoln and John Wilkes Booth were both white men, and that the brothers in the play are both black men. Even more ironically, the older brother Lincoln impersonates the assassinated president. In order to do so, he must wear white face paint, a parody of the black face paint that was worn by white actors playing black characters on stage. President Lincoln was famous for honesty, but even though this Lincoln wants to earn an honest living, he takes $20 from a young boy.

Also important are the different attitudes that the brothers bring to the 3-card monte hustle. Booth is practicing the card game in the hopes of developing a career in card hustling, but Lincoln has sworn off the game. When Lincoln refuses to join Booth to form a card hustling team, Booth accuses Lincoln of being an obstacle to his professional advancement. Booth sees himself as a victim of Lincoln's refusal to cooperate with him.

Booth also seems to think that Lincoln is shirking his fraternal duties. Booth thinks that brothers should take care of each other and work together as a team. However, Booth's opinion about how his relationship with Lincoln ought to be does not fit well with how it actually is. In fact, Booth and Lincoln are closer to being rivals and opponents than they are to being teammates.

Scene 2

Scene 2 Summary

The following day, Booth returns to his room and unloads some merchandise that he shoplifted from a local department store. He has brought home stylish new clothing and shoes for both himself and Lincoln. Booth hopes that the new clothing will impress Grace and that Lincoln's new outfit will help him to find a girl. It is implied that Lincoln hasn't done well with women ever since his ex-wife Cookie left him.

Lincoln returns home from work with his pay. He notices the stolen goods, but he doesn't reprimand Booth for stealing. Rather, Lincoln seems quite impressed with the new clothing. Booth budgets the money for rent and other expenses, including the phone bill. Lincoln protests that they don't have a phone, and hence, they don't need to set aside money for a phone bill. However, Booth insists that they need a phone in order to impress women. Booth argues that a woman asks a man for his number as a way to glean information about him. If he gives her a number, she can infer that he is not homeless, that he has the financial means to possess a phone with a working number and that he doesn't have a wife or girlfriend living with him.

The clothing causes Lincoln to think out loud about his job pretending to be Abraham Lincoln. He claims that dressing up in a costume doesn't make him Abraham Lincoln and that his identity isn't influenced at all by the clothing he wears. Nonetheless, Lincoln claims to enjoy his job, and he is afraid that he might lose it.

Booth doesn't understand why Lincoln would put up with such a job, let alone why Lincoln would want to keep it. Lincoln responds by alluding to the death of his card partner Lonny. Lonny was shot and killed while throwing cards. This scared Lincoln out of the business. Lincoln left card hustling in order to save his life, but Booth questions whether the life Lincoln now leads is really worthy of being called a "life."

Scene 2 Analysis

Scene 1 leaves the audience wondering whether a name makes a man. After all, the names "Booth" and "Lincoln" seem correlated to the assassin and the victim in the contexts of history and of the play. However, this scene raises the question of whether clothing makes the man. According to Lincoln, clothing doesn't make him who he is. Long before he landed a job impersonating Abraham Lincoln and dressing up in his Honest Abe costume, he was who he was, namely, Lincoln.

This observation, in turn, raises the question whether one's identity and the trajectory of one's life are the product of any single factor. Although the play suggests a connection between name and identity, it is surely an oversimplification to treat a name as the only factor that determines one's identity and the direction of one's life. Moreover, if clothing (or outward appearance) doesn't contribute to identity, what is left? As the play

progresses, it seems that a person's identity and life path depend on the choices that person makes, the actions that person takes and the ability to take responsibility for those actions.

In this scene, the audience also gains some insights into the characters' ambitions. On one hand, Lincoln seems to be a man who used to have it all. He was a skilled card hustler and made good money doing it. According to Booth, Lincoln had a wife, but he was the kind of man who attracted many women and even had affairs with some of them. However, since Lonny's death, Lincoln has retreated to a simpler life with fewer risks, but also with less fun and pleasure. Lincoln has lost interest in women, and he seems content to be a boring working stiff who brings home a weekly paycheck. Booth, on the other hand, is hopeful about his career and personal prospects. He is smitten with Grace, and he's convinced that the feelings are mutual. Moreover, he's optimistic about his chances of becoming a successful card hustler despite the current sorry state of his card skills. Booth sees himself as a man on his way up in the world and as someone who is capable of accomplishment. However, it will become clear in later scenes that Booth suffers from a misperception of himself and his status. His relationship with Grace isn't as great as he imagines it to be, and he lacks the necessary talent to become a card hustler. Indeed, Booth's overconfidence and misjudgment of his own abilities prove to be weaknesses that Lincoln can exploit in later scenes.

Scene 3

Scene 3 Summary

Later that night, Booth returns after an evening making up with Grace. Booth discusses with Lincoln the details of his evening with Grace. Booth is boastful in an almost adolescent way. Lincoln seems to be living his sex life vicariously through Booth.

Lincoln mentions having discovered Booth's stash of pornographic magazines. Booth defends himself, claiming that he's the kind of man who needs a great deal of sexual release. Booth accuses Lincoln of being impotent and suggests that this is why Lincoln's ex-wife Cookie left him.

In conversation, Lincoln suggests helping Booth with his 3-card monte scam. He proposes getting Booth in touch with his old crew. Lincoln used to hustle cards for a living, but when a member of his crew, Lonny, was shot, he swore that he'd never hustle cards again. Although Lincoln himself refuses to join Booth in hustling cards, he does offer to set Booth up with some of his old card hustling mates.

Lincoln advises Booth that if the latter ever goes into the card hustling business, he'll have to pack a gun. Booth claims that he already has one, referring to the gun that he pulled on Lincoln in the first scene. Lincoln responds by saying that Booth's gun is a toy compared to the guns that hustlers pack. Booth claims that Lincoln doesn't know what he's talking about because it's been 6 or 7 years since he consorted with hustlers and that Booth himself knows more about guns than Lincoln does. Lincoln's lame reply is that he works around guns all the time because the tourists pretend to shoot him with guns that fire blanks. Booth takes this opportunity to emasculate Lincoln yet again by comparing Lincoln to the guns at his workplace. According to Booth, they both "fire blanks."

Lincoln also expresses more concerns about his job. His work only involves sitting still and pretending to be Abraham Lincoln watching a play. Tourists sneak up behind him and pretend to assassinate him, and he pretends to die. Since this sequence of actions can be simulated by a dummy, Lincoln is afraid that he'll soon be replaced by a mechanical device. Booth suggests to Lincoln that the latter spice up his act by pretending to die in a way that would be realistic and inimitable by a machine. Lincoln and Booth rehearse Abraham Lincoln's death a few times so that Lincoln can work on his act. In the end, Booth suggests that if Lincoln does ultimately lose his job, he could just go back into the card hustling business with Booth.

Scene 3 Analysis

In this scene, the audience gains some more insights into Booth's character. Although Booth is a man in his early 30s, he often talks and acts like a teenager. With juvenile bravado, he delivers his description of his night with Grace and his justification for his

stash of pornographic magazines. Moreover, he tries to embarrass and emasculate Lincoln by accusing his brother of having many sexual shortcomings. Booth's cheap shots at his older brother demonstrate Booth's own lack of maturity and suggest that Booth himself is the one who falls short of being a real man.

The audience also witnesses some tension between Lincoln's attitude towards card hustling and external pressures which seem to be pushing him with increasing force back to card hustling. Although Lincoln makes a decent living at the arcade at the moment, he is in danger of being replaced by a mechanical dummy. If Lincoln does lose his job, he won't have other employment prospects. The changing circumstances at the arcade could put pressure on Lincoln to return to card hustling. Nonetheless, Lincoln resists Booth's constant invitations to join him in forming a team. Although Lincoln refuses to team up with Booth, he does want to help Booth by offering to set him up with some experienced card hustlers. Thus, Lincoln seems not to have anything against card hustling as a profession in general, but he is particularly committed to keeping himself out of a career in card hustling.

The scene ends with Booth and Lincoln practicing the latter's arcade act. Booth pretends to be John Wilkes Booth, and Lincoln pretends to be Abraham Lincoln. They practice the assassination a few times. This part of the scene seems like a rehearsal for the final scene in which Booth does actually murder Lincoln.

Scene 4

Scene 4 Summary

The next morning Lincoln wakes up in a bitter mood, and Booth is still sound asleep. He is ranting about how he's mistreated at work. Other men also play the part of Abraham Lincoln at the arcade, but he's the only one whose costume is checked every day. It's implied that this is so because Lincoln is black. Talking to himself, Lincoln argues that he should quit when his boss gives him a hard time about the condition of his costume. Lincoln's monologue about his job contrasts with what he's said about it in conversation with Booth. Lincoln seems to be speaking more honestly when he's alone than when he's talking to his brother.

Lincoln's feelings of dissatisfaction with his job lead him to reminisce about his card hustling days. According to Lincoln, he had a talent for it, but he quit because his intuition told him it was time to quit. Indeed, when he started to feel like it was time to stop hustling, but played one last game, his friend Lonny ended up dead. Since then, Lincoln hasn't touched a card. Since Booth is still sound asleep, Lincoln sets up a 3-card monte table in the room and pretends to hustle. Unlike Booth's movements in Scene 1, Lincoln's movements are fluid and natural. Lincoln clearly has a natural talent for card hustling.

Scene 4 Analysis

In this scene, the audience observes Lincoln's evolving attitude toward re-entering the 3-card monte profession and toward his present state of employment. In earlier scenes, we have the impression that Lincoln is satisfied with his job. He earns an honest salary, and his work seems undemanding. However, according to Lincoln's monologue in this scene, he feels mistreated at the arcade, and the work is a lot harder than Lincoln let on earlier. Lincoln's dissatisfaction with his job and his fear of losing it has led him to romanticize his card hustling days. He is a natural card hustler, and he enjoys doing it. Although he swore off the cards, he now seems less committed to his past vows because he has begun practicing 3-card monte in the boarding room.

Scene 5

Scene 5 Summary

A few days have passed. It is late at night, and Booth is waiting for Grace in his room. She is already a few hours late. The room is prepared for a dinner date. Lincoln returns home. He has lost his job. Booth unsympathetically tries to convince him to leave. Lincoln tells Booth that he'll stay in the room until Grace arrives.

While the brothers are waiting for Grace, they reminisce about their family life. They talk about how their parents left them when they were still teenagers. Their mother left first, and their father left them two years later. According to Lincoln, neither of their parents was fit for domestic life. Both of their parents were attracted to different kinds of lives. Although they struggled to keep the family together for years, in the end, both parents just couldn't keep up the charade of family life.

The boys describe the circumstances surrounding each parent's departure. According to the boys' account of events, when their mother left, she left a $500 "inheritance" with Booth, and when their father abandoned them, he left a $500 "inheritance" with Lincoln. This suggests that each parent had a favorite and was more concerned about the preferred son. Indeed, their mother instructed Booth not to mention the money to Lincoln, and their father told Lincoln to keep the inheritance a secret from Booth.

Booth declares that he didn't mind that his parents left because it left Booth and Lincoln to fend for themselves as a team. Booth hints, again, to his brother that they could be a team once again if they went into the card hustling business together. Lincoln doesn't commit to the scheme, but he shows Lincoln a few moves with the card setup in the room. Lincoln pretends to be the dealer, and Booth picks card. Booth picks correctly a couple of times, and he takes it as evidence that he's learning the card hustling trade quickly. They practice until early morning, and Booth finally realizes that Grace has stood him up.

Scene 5 Analysis

In this scene, the audience learns more about the brothers' past and their relationship with their parents. At a young age, the boys were left to fend for themselves. This reinforces the portrayal of life as a struggle. Each person must live his life by acting and reacting to many factors. Some of these factors align so that a person occupies the role of a top dog, and others lead to an individual falling into the role of an underdog.

Since each parent left an inheritance with only one of the brothers, their parents seem to have already set the boys up for a struggle between themselves. The mother intends for her money to be used exclusively by Booth, and hence, she is under the impression that she's given Booth an advantage over Lincoln. Similarly, the father wants Lincoln to use the money for his own purposes. Although each boy eventually ends up with an

inheritance equal to that of the other boy, the circumstances under which each received his inheritance encourages each boy to view the other as his rival.

Although their parents set the brothers up for sibling rivalry, Booth still romanticizes his relationship with Lincoln. He perceives his parents' departure as a blessing in disguise because he believes that it brought the brothers closer together. Booth fancies that he and Lincoln are a team, and that the brothers' struggle is between them and the rest of the world. Booth says, "It was you and me against thuh world, Link. It could be like that again." (pg. 69) However, Booth seems simply to be deluded about his relationship with his brother. Perhaps there is some weak sense in which the two brothers are struggling together against the forces of the external world, but Booth doesn't seem to recognize that there is also an important struggle between the two brothers.

Since each boy was given a $500 inheritance, the boys seemed on equal footing in the game of life. However, as the years pass, it becomes apparent that the boys aren't equally well equipped to cope with their lives. Although Lincoln made a choice in the past to lead an honest life, he clearly has a talent for card hustling, and if his employment prospects were sufficiently bleak, he could always return to card hustling. Booth doesn't seem to have much of a talent for anything except shoplifting. In particular, Booth doesn't have his brother's gift for card hustling. To exacerbate the situation, a person's success at 3-card monte seems to be the measure of that person's place in Lincoln and Booth's relationship. The brothers play 3-card monte in their room, and by the end of the scene, it looks as though Lincoln is no longer the top dog when it comes to 3-card monte. Booth seems in a position to take over. However, as we will discover in the next scene, Booth is never really close to climbing up from his underdog status.

Scene 6

Scene 6 Summary

The following day, Lincoln returns to the room first. He spent the day card hustling, and he's made a lot of money at it. Booth enters shortly afterward, and he announces that he and Grace will be getting married. Booth tells Lincoln that he'll have to move out of the room, and Lincoln doesn't object because he has enough money to find a place of his own. Booth is suspicious because Lincoln just lost his job at the arcade. Lincoln lies by telling Booth that he just landed a job as a security guard.

Booth asks Lincoln what he thought about while he worked as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator. Lincoln reports that he thought about songs, women and sometimes his ex-wife Cookie. Booth asks if Lincoln still thinks about the time that Cookie came looking for Lincoln, but instead, found Booth alone. Booth confesses to having had a one-time affair with Cookie. He admits that he promised her everything that Lincoln couldn't give her, and he expresses some recognition that what he did was wrong. Booth blames what happened to him on "the bad part of [him]." Lincoln claims not to think about it anymore.

Lincoln advises Booth to find steady work because Grace won't tolerate a husband who expects her to support the family by herself. Booth claims that he's got work lined up, but Lincoln doesn't believe him. Lincoln guesses correctly that Booth is planning to hustle. Lincoln expresses his disapproval of Booth's career choice. Booth accuses Lincoln of being jealous that Booth is getting a piece of Lincoln's action. Lincoln challenges Booth to show that he has what it takes to hustle.

Lincoln and Booth pretend to play 3-card monte, and Booth manages to pick the right card. Booth figures out that Lincoln was out throwing cards earlier that day. Booth is upset that Lincoln seems convinced that Booth will fail at card hustling, even though Booth has already correctly picked the right card in the practice games that they've played in the room. Lincoln claims that he lost the practice rounds because they don't feel real enough, and he suggests that they play for real money in order to make the game feel more authentic.

Lincoln puts down the money he made earlier in the day throwing cards. His bet totals $500. To match Lincoln's bet, Booth puts down his "inheritance," which is purportedly valued at $500. Booth's inheritance is the money that his mother left with him when she abandoned the family. When the brothers play their card game, Booth picks the wrong card and loses his inheritance. Lincoln laughs, and it becomes clear that Lincoln has hustled his own brother. Lincoln let Booth pick the right card when nothing was at stake, but when real money was on the table, Lincoln took everything that Booth had. In a rage, Booth pulls out his gun and shoots Lincoln.

Scene 6 Analysis

In Scene 6, the audience realizes that all of Booth's previous talk about the brothers being teammates is an inaccurate representation of their actual relationship. Booth's affair with Lincoln's ex-wife Cookie reinforces his role as Lincoln's rival. Since Booth promises Cookie to give her all that Lincoln can't, Booth portrays himself as the Other Man who can offer more. He puts himself squarely in competition with Lincoln for Cookie.

Although Booth seems to recognize that what he did was wrong, he doesn't apologize for it. The closest thing to an apology that Booth offers is his lame observation that Cookie "hooked the bad part of [him]." (pg. 92) Booth seems to be trying both to deflect some of the blame and to lessen his responsibility for what happened. By claiming that Cookie "hooked the bad part of [him]," he thinks that she deserves at least part of the blame. Moreover, since he speaks of a "bad part" of himself, he suggests that the rest of him is good. The bad part overwhelmed the good part of him, and his whole self was simply at the mercy of the bad part. As such, the whole self was not in complete control of what happened. He doesn't deserve to be held responsible for the doings of a rebellious part which momentarily suppressed the good part. Booth's feeble defense of his past actions demonstrates that he lacks moral maturity. Although he can recognize good and bad, he doesn't have enough self-control to act well in the face of temptation. After he indulges in temptation, he is unable to take full ownership of his actions and claim responsibility for his wrongdoing.

Booth's lack of self-control is evident in the way in which he handles the brothers' final contest. Although Booth has won all the previous practice rounds, he loses this round, and he realizes that Lincoln has been hustling him all along. To Booth's dismay, Lincoln was in control of the game from the very first round that they practiced together. Booth realizes that the pride and confidence that he felt were empty and unfounded. Booth was effectively tricked into thinking that he was making progress at the game, and symbolically in his life, but he was always the underdog. This discovery is a painful one for Booth. Booth is determined to prove that he isn't the underdog, the gullible loser that just lost his life's fortune to a hustler. He resorts to violence to prove this point, and he ends up murdering his brother. This is clearly an overreaction to the discovery that he's been hustled, and it is symptomatic of Booth's lack of self-control.

Booth's reaction to his brother's death is ambiguous. When Booth kneels down and hugs Lincoln's corpse, it is unclear whether Booth is sad because his brother is dead or whether he is regretful because he murdered his brother. If the former is the case, then Booth still hasn't learned to take responsibility for his actions. If the latter is the case, then Booth has experienced personal growth. Since the play ends with this gesture, we are not in a position to decide whether Booth has matured in this way.

Has Booth really managed to rise above his underdog status? This is another unanswered question. Booth's "solution" to his problem of being the underdog is to eliminate the top dog. However, by anyone's estimation, this is an inefficient way secure

a higher, more stable social position for one's self. If Booth is unable to develop skills that will enable him to prove his social worth legitimately, and if he is determined to rise to top dog status even at the cost of resorting to violence, he would be in the absurd position of having to eliminate all his competitors.

Characters

Best Customer

The Best Customer is a "miscellaneous stranger" who visits the arcade daily to shoot Honest Abe. The Best Customer "[s]hoots on the left whispers on the right." Link is unsure whether the Best Customer, a black male, knows that Link is also a "brother." The Best Customer utters cryptic messages that possess a quasi-metaphysical quality. He goes so far as to whisper a message in Honest Abe's ear after he has been shot. Link does not think much of the Best Customer, though, ironically, he acknowledges that the Best Customer "makes the day interesting." Booth, on the other hand, regards him as "one *deep* black brother."

Booth

Booth is Link's younger brother, who aspires to become a master of the three-card monte. He rents the room the brothers share, although he does not hold down a job. Instead, he earns his living as a petty thief. Booth tries to get Link to show him how to throw the cards, but Link refuses, which infuriates Booth. Booth believes that if he knew how to throw the cards, he could earn lots of money with which he could win Grace's heart. Booth calls himself "3-Card" to bolster his confidence. However, Grace plays games with him and thus keeps him uncertain about their future. The frustration Booth feels as a result of these personal relationships finds an outlet through the girlie magazines he peruses constantly and through violence, which forever separates the symbiotic bond that binds the brothers together.

Cookie

Cookie is Link's wife from whom he is now divorced. One night, she comes over to Booth's apartment looking for Link, who is out drinking, but ends up having sexual relations with his brother, who promises to marry her if she leaves Link. She justifies her actions because Link is sexually impotent, which contradicts his portrayal of himself as a ladies man.

Grace

Grace is Booth's girlfriend. She attends cosmetology school, thus differentiating her from the "fly-by-night gals" Booth saw before her. Grace is ambitious and career-oriented, yet she also knows how to have fun. Booth describes her as "Wild. Goodlooking." According to him, Grace is so sweet she makes his teeth hurt. She was with Booth for two years before they broke up. She needed time to think, and he had what he refers to euphemistically as a "little employment difficulty." Booth tries to woo her back with gifts and empty promises like the ones he made to Cookie. She is

supposed to come over to the apartment for a romantic dinner Booth has arranged, but she never appears. Booth reacts to being stood up by shooting her dead.

Honest Abe

Honest Abe is the name Lincoln uses to refer to himself when he is in character, including the time when a kid riding on the bus asks him for an autograph. Link, seeing that the kid comes from a rich family, charges him ten dollars for the autograph. When the kid hands Link a twenty-dollar bill, Link promises to meet him on the bus the next day to give him his change. Instead, he spends the entire twenty dollars buying drinks at Lucky's.

The Ladies

The Ladies are unidentified women whom Pops conducts affairs with on the sly. He brings Link along as an alibi, but sometimes Pops would let Link watch him make love, "like it was this big deal this great thing he was letting me witness," says Link. One of the ladies liked Link and took him to bed once Pops fell asleep, thus initiating Link further into the world of adult sexuality.

Lincoln

Lincoln is Booth's older brother, who impersonates Abraham Lincoln□Honest Abe□at an arcade. Before he took the job at the arcade, Lincoln was a master of the three-card monte, but he stopped hustling tourists and other passersby when his stickman, Lonny, got shot. Ever since Cookie left Lincoln, he has shared a room in a boarding house with his brother Booth. Lincoln once thought of himself as a ladies man, much as Booth does throughout the play, although Lincoln understands that his philandering contributed to the demise of his marriage. He is grateful to have a job with "benefits" that allows him to sit down and think his private thoughts all day. Lincoln's concerns about the security of his job cause him to fall into despair, especially when he learns that he has been replaced by a wax dummy. He briefly entertains the thought of throwing the cards again when he sees that he has lost none of his technique. At play's end, Lincoln's display of talent and his mocking tone cause Booth to shoot him in a pique of anger and jealousy.

Link

See Lincoln

Lonny

Lonny was Link's "stickman" when he was master of the three-card monte. The stickman is the member of the crew who looks like another member of the crowd but

knows every aspect of the game in progress. One day, Link is throwing the cards, and the next day he discovers that Lonny has been shot dead. Lonny's death serves as a warning to Link to stop living such a dangerous life hustling people on the street.

Lucky

Lucky is the proprietor of the eponymous bar Link frequents whenever he has a little cash to spare. Lucky has a dog he keeps behind the bar.

Mom

Mom was the first of the brothers' parents to leave. She left two years before her husband did. Before she leaves, she gives Booth a nylon stocking filled with five hundred-dollar bills. Until the time of her departure, she had a lover who visited the house regularly on Thursdays. For this reason, Booth refers to him as his mother's "Thursday man." Booth once overheard his mother and her Thursday Man discussing a problem, which was most probably an unwanted pregnancy. How she resolved this problem remains unclear, though her asking her Thursday Man for money suggests that she intended to have an abortion.

Pops

Pops names his sons Lincoln and Booth as a joke. He leaves the house two years after Mom deserted him and the boys. Pops visits his mistress at the same time Mom sees her Thursday Man. Before he leaves the boys to start a new life, Pops gives Link ten fifty-dollar bills wrapped in a handkerchief and tells him not to mention a word about the money to anybody, "especially that Booth."

3-Card

See Booth

Thursday Man

The Thursday Man is Mom's lover, who visits her at the house every Thursday. Booth knows about his visits, but he does not say anything to anyone about them.

Booth

Booth is a young black man in his early 30s. He lives in a boarding room house with his brother Lincoln. Booth hasn't had much luck in his professional or personal life. He and Lincoln were abandoned by their parents when they were teenagers. Booth has a

turbulent relationship with his girlfriend Grace, and his relationship with Lincoln is equally troubled. Booth seems never to have made an honest living. When he's not stealing, he's trying to convince Lincoln to help him hustle strangers on the street by playing 3-card monte.

Although Booth is a young man, he lacks social maturity. After spending an evening with his girlfriend Grace, he struts around the room trying to get Lincoln's attention just so that he can boast about having intercourse with Grace. Moreover, Booth defends keeping a stash of pornographic magazines by claiming to be at the mercy of his own sexual appetites. According to Booth, if he didn't masturbate regularly with the help of his porn collection, he would be renting the services of prostitutes that he can't afford or shooting people as a means of releasing his sexual energy. Booth acts more like a wild teenager than like a grown man. He lacks self-control and doesn't seem to recognize this as a problem.

In addition to social immaturity, Booth is morally underdeveloped. Booth seems incapable of taking responsibility for his own actions and for his position in life. He shoplifts and steals without remorse. When he recalls the time that he had sex with Cookie, who was then still married to Lincoln, he acknowledges that it was wrong of him, but he falls short of taking full responsibility for betraying his brother.

Booth is a volatile man who has a propensity to overreact in social situations and to underestimate the moral consequences of his actions. Booth is prone to violence. He keeps a gun, which he does not hesitate to point at Lincoln. He threatens his brother for merely startling him. These character traits drive Booth to react violently when he realizes that Lincoln has tricked him.

Lincoln

Lincoln is Booth's older brother. Although Lincoln is officially staying as Booth's guest at the boarding house, Lincoln is the only with an honest job and a steady income. Lincoln used to be a very skilled 3-card monte hustler, but he vowed never to hustle again after his partner Lonny was shot. Since then, Lincoln has tried to earn an honest living. Currently, Lincoln is working at an arcade where he plays Abraham Lincoln. He wears a costume and white face paint. He pretends to watch a play, and paying tourists pretend to sneak up behind him and assassinate him. Lincoln sometimes gets the impression that he is treated more harshly than other employees who play Abraham Lincoln at the arcade just because he is black. Moreover, Lincoln is afraid that his job will soon become obsolete because his employers will replace him with a mechanized dummy. Lincoln's complaints about his job and his fear of losing it encourage Booth to put pressure on Lincoln to revert to his old card hustling profession. However, Lincoln resists committing to Booth's plans to join together as a 3-card monte team.

Lincoln used to be at the top of his game, but he gave it up because the risks were too high. When Lincoln realized that the lifestyle of a hustler put his very life at risk, he made a decision to exchange his exciting life as a card hustler for the boring security of

his current life as a working stiff. If Booth is the model of a man who has no self-control, Lincoln exercises a great deal of self-control. In his former life, Lincoln had trouble controlling himself because he spent money freely and had many extramarital affairs. Now, Lincoln uses his modest salary to pay rent and bills and has no interest in women anymore. Despite the allure of returning to the card hustling life, Lincoln remains committed to his new life as the stable breadwinner. His job is monotonous, and he must tolerate some mistreatment by his employers. Up until the last scene, Lincoln doesn't return to card hustling on the streets.

Lincoln's new life seems dull in comparison with his former one, but it doesn't seem to bother Lincoln. In Lincoln's former life, he had a wife and many mistresses. He had an exciting "profession" as a card hustler, and he made good money enabling him to afford luxuries. Now, Lincoln is divorced and has no girlfriend. He makes a steady wage, but it's barely enough to cover his living expenses. It seems that Lincoln is a defeated man who has simply resigns himself to his current meager existence. However, Lincoln shows no indication of really missing his old life. He shows no interest in women, and he doesn't seem interested in acquiring fancy possessions. His pleasures are very simple. His only indulgence seems to be alcohol.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that Lincoln is settling into the life of a defeated man, a part of him knows his place, at least in relation to his younger brother. Throughout the play, there are suggestions that Booth has the upper hand in the sibling rivalry. Booth emasculates Lincoln by accusing him of being impotent and unable to satisfy his ex-wife, but Lincoln doesn't even bother to defend himself. In practice rounds of 3-card monte, Booth wins several rounds against Lincoln, and it seems that Booth has surpassed Lincoln at his own game. However, it becomes clear in the final scene that Lincoln hasn't lost his touch. He has returned to card hustling and has won a lot of money at it. Moreover, he proves to Booth that, despite all of Booth's bravado and posturing, Booth never even came close to rising to Lincoln's level, let alone surpassing it.

Grace

Although Grace doesn't make any appearances in the play, she is discussed by Booth and Lincoln. Grace is a student in cosmetology school. Booth and Grace were together for two years, and they broke up because Booth had "employment difficulties." Booth is confident that Grace will take him back despite their past problems. Besides Booth's lack of decent employment, it is not specified what other problems plagued the relationship. In Scene 3, Grace and Booth make up. In Scene 5, Booth plans a romantic date with Grace, but Grace doesn't show. It turns out that there was a misunderstanding about which day the two were to have their date. In Scene 6, Booth reveals to Lincoln that Grace has agreed to marry him.

The condition of Grace's relationship with Booth is unclear. On the one hand, Grace takes Booth back and agrees to marry him. Under normal circumstances, this kind of behavior would seem to indicate that the relationship is stable. On the other hand, there

have been past difficulties that are left mostly unspecified, and the difficulties are never resolved. Instead, Booth claims that Grace is willing to overlook the difficulties and wipe the slate clean. This suggests that the apparent stability in the relationship is superficial. The couple seems to make commitments far too easily without investing any genuine effort in resolving any problems or disagreements they have. In a rather childish way, Booth and Grace pretend that the past and all its problems never existed in the first place, and they naively think that this constitutes a full-fledged resolution of their difficulties.

Cookie

Like Grace, Cookie doesn't appear in the play, but Booth and Lincoln mention her. Cookie is Lincoln's ex-wife. While they were married, Lincoln cheated on Cookie, but Cookie was also unfaithful to Lincoln. She had an affair with Booth. According to Booth, Cookie left Lincoln because Lincoln failed to satisfy her sexually.

Booth portrays his affair with Cookie as his way of giving Cookie what Lincoln couldn't. Booth accuses Lincoln of being impotent. In a juvenile and rather vicious way, Booth taunts Lincoln with his sexual shortcomings, and he derives some sadistic pleasure in taking every opportunity available to him to emasculate Lincoln. Although Lincoln often speaks of Cookie with a certain sadness or remorse in his tone, he has no aspirations of rekindling their relationship. Lincoln has resigned himself to the fact that his relationship with Cookie has failed.

Mom

Lincoln and Booth's mother left them with their father while they were still teenagers. Lincoln and Booth haven't seen her since then, but they still talk about her. Even when their mother was still living at home with them and their father, she had many affairs. Booth once saw her with one of her regular lovers. Although Booth never let on that he knew about the affair, Booth thinks that his mother suspected that he knew. Booth once overheard Mom asking her lover for money to "fix" a problem, and it is implied that Mom was pregnant.

When Mom left, she still wasn't showing, but she gave Booth $500. Although Booth calls the money his "inheritance," it seems more like hush money. Moreover, Mom told Booth explicitly not to tell Lincoln about the inheritance. Booth has saved the inheritance ever since Mom left. When Booth and Lincoln finally play 3-card monte with real money at stake, Booth bets his inheritance and loses it. Booth is so outraged that Lincoln has tricked him out of his inheritance that he kills Lincoln.

Mom's rampant infidelity leads the boys to speculate at one point that they aren't full brothers. Lincoln asks, "I know we *brothers*, but is we really brothers, you know, blood brothers or not, you and me, whatduhyathink?" (pg. 102) Booth replies that he thinks that they really are brothers. If it turned out that the brothers were only half-brothers, it is unclear how their relationship would change. If brotherhood is a predominantly social

relationship, then the brothers' different genetic origins would do little to change their relationship. If brotherhood is a principally a biological relationship, Booth and Lincoln's struggle would be arguably less shocking than one which might occur between full-blooded siblings, precisely because the blood bonds would be more dilute, and hence, weaker.

Pop

Two years after Mom left Lincoln and Booth with Pop, Pop left the two brothers on their own. Although Mom and Pop tried to stay together and to lead an ordinary family life together, neither of them could handle the responsibilities of raising two children, holding a steady job, paying a mortgage and paying bills. Like Mom, Pop sought comfort elsewhere and apparently had many affairs. Eventually, Pop left, but before doing so, he left Lincoln with $500 of "inheritance" money. Pop told Lincoln never to share his inheritance with Booth. Lincoln spent his inheritance almost immediately.

One time, when the family was still together, the boys popped the tires on their father's car. Pop immediately blamed it on generic white men who were out to sabotage black men. It never occurred to Pop that the crime could have been perpetrated by members of the same race, let alone members of his same family. This episode reinforces one of the themes of the play, that actions and crimes are performed by individuals. Pop's mistake is to jump to the conclusion that members of a group are responsible for victimizing him on the basis of certain stereotypes. However, if Pop had been interested in the truth, he would have discovered that it was his own sons who vandalized his car.

Lonny

Lonny doesn't appear in the play, but he is mentioned. Lonny was Lincoln's 3-card monte partner. When Lonny was shot during a card hustle, Lincoln vowed to make an honest living and never to return to card hustling.

The Best Customer

At the arcade where Lincoln works, a black man comes regularly to pretend to kill Abraham Lincoln. Whenever he visits, the Best Customer whispers a pearl of wisdom in Lincoln's ear. Some of his utterances include "Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does thuh show go on?" and "God aint nothing but a parasite."

The Kid on the Bus

When Lincoln returns home in Scene 1, he has just gotten off of a bus in which a kid has asked him for his autograph. The kid has been learning about Abraham Lincoln in school, and he saw Lincoln riding the bus in his Honest Abe costume. The kid was so impressed that he asked for an autograph.

Mr. Thursday

Mr. Thursday is one of Mom's lovers who would visit her every Thursday. One Thursday, young Booth skipped school and returned home early only to see Mom with Mr. Thursday. When Mom became pregnant, Booth overheard her one day asking Mr. Thursday for money to "fix" her "problem."

Objects/Places

Boarding-house Room

All the scenes in the play are set in the boarding house room. Any action that occurs outside of the room is reported by either Lincoln or Booth. Officially, the room is Booth's, and Lincoln is staying as his guest. However, since Lincoln is the only one with a steady salary, he is responsible for paying the rent.

Arcade

The arcade is a tourist attraction where Lincoln works. Lincoln works as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator. He dresses up like Abraham Lincoln and wears white face paint. He sits pretending to watch a play, and tourists pretend to assassinate him.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln is not a character in the play, but he is important for two reasons. First, the main characters are named after Abraham Lincoln and his assassin John Wilkes Booth. Second, the play's character Lincoln has a steady job in which he impersonates Abraham Lincoln.

John Wilkes Booth

John Wilkes Booth is not a character in the play, but like Abraham Lincoln, he has an important role in the play. The younger brother Booth is named after John Wilkes Booth. Moreover, at Lincoln's job, tourists pretend to be John Wilkes Booth, and they shoot the older brother Lincoln who is playing Abraham Lincoln.

3-card Monte

3-card Monte is a game that is played to hustle unsuspecting folks out of their money. The game is usually played by a dealer and a team of other facilitators. Lincoln used to be a master dealer at 3-card Monte, but when Lonny, one of his team members, was shot, Lincoln swore that he would never hustle cards again. Booth is practicing to become a 3-card Monte team player, and he desperately wants to lure Lincoln out of retirement. However, Lincoln refuses to team up with Booth.

Inheritance

When the brothers' parents left, they each left one of the boys an "inheritance." When Mom left, she gave $500 to Booth, and when Pop left, he offered $500 to Lincoln. Lincoln promptly spent his inheritance, but Booth saved his until Lincoln hustles him out of it at the end of play.

The Gun

Booth owns a gun, which he keeps in the boarding house room. He uses this gun to kill his brother Lincoln after he realizes that Lincoln has hustled him out of his inheritance.

White Pancake Makeup

This is part of Lincoln's costume for his job impersonating Abraham Lincoln. It is a parody of the black face makeup that white performers used when they played black characters.

Luckys

This is a bar that Lincoln frequents. Lincoln was apparently here when Cookie arrived at Booth's place looking for him. Lincoln was getting drunk while his brother had an affair with Cookie.

The Department Store

In Scene 2, Booth returns home with a remarkable stash of stolen goods. Booth shoplifted all of it from the department store. Booth unconvincingly justifies what he has done by stating that the store makes more money in a day than either he or Lincoln will make in his lifetime.

Themes

History

The play is imbued with a strong sense of history, though it is of a more personal nature than the type of history associated with textbooks. Throughout *Topdog/Underdog*, the brothers reveal parts of their past that have shaped their present circumstances. For example, Lonny's death influenced Lincoln's decision to stop dealing three-card monte. When Booth shows Lincoln the ring he boosted, he reveals a past relationship with Grace that has been nothing short of disappointing. Similarly, during an outburst of anger, Booth reveals the reasons why he slept with Lincoln's wife Cookie. Moreover, the one item that the brothers have salvaged from their days as a family is a "raggedy" photo album. It contains a link to a past that, though turbulent, still held hopes and dreams for the future.

Identity

Identity is an important theme within the play. Although Lincoln may share the name of The Great Emancipator, he knows who he is before he ever donned his costume. "I was Lincoln on my own before any of that," he says. This knowledge allows Lincoln to wear his costume home on the bus without confusion about his identity. In fact, Lincoln is able to swindle the "little rich kid" out of twenty dollars because he knows he no longer plays the role of Honest Abe once he leaves the arcade. The Lincoln who rides the bus is free to hustle at will.

Booth, on the other hand, possesses a more complicated view of himself. He is forever imagining himself to be someone else, whether that someone else is a ladies man, a respectable husband, or a master three-card monte dealer like his brother. Booth even goes so far as to invent a name for himself to solidify his new identity: "3-Card." So fragile is his sense of identity that he will allow no one□not even Grace□to call him by his given name. He insists upon being called "3-Card" or nothing else. When he loses the final game of cards to Lincoln and tells him that he shot Grace, Booth begins to exact his revenge when he announces, "That Booth [sh□□t] is over. 3-Cards thuh man now□"Only by assuming his new identity in full can 3-Card (Booth) commit the unpardonable act of fratricide.

Illusion

Illusion is at the very heart of the three-card monte hustle. Not only must the dealer be a master of sleight-of-hand, but he, with the help of his crew, creates confusion to beat his mark. The crew deflects the mark's attention so that he loses track of reality (i.e., the card's location). Furthermore, by pretending not to want to throw the cards, the dealer creates the illusion that he is an unwilling participant. Knowing what is real and what is not is the key to winning a hand of three-card monte. As Lincoln tells Booth, "First thing

you learn is what is. Next thing you learn is what aint. You dont know what is you dont know what aint, you don't know [sh□□t]."

The theme of illusion is best demonstrated within the play through the "getup" Lincoln wears when he portrays Honest Abe at the arcade. The illusion is made even more incredible when one considers that a black man must wear whiteface to perform the role. According to Lincoln, the arcade is kept dark to "keep thuh illusion of thuh whole thing" going. Even so, he can see the inverted images of his assailants in a dented fuse box before him. The inverted images distort reality even further, and it is not until Lincoln feels the cool metal of the gun against his neck that the assassin knows that he is alive and that he can now be shot dead.

Perhaps the most chilling illusion in the play is the one Booth has about his mother's intentions. He holds onto the nylon stocking because it is his inheritance; it is the last vestige he possesses of the relationship he had with his mother, even if that relationship was based on deceit and complicity in concealing the presence of her "Thursday man." That complicity is compounded by the fact that she may have had an abortion. Moreover, there is doubt as to whether the stocking actually contains the $500 Booth says it does. Booth casts aside any illusions he has about his mother, however, when he bets his inheritance against Lincoln's talent at three-card monte.

Sibling Rivalry

The theme of sibling rivalry is as old as the biblical story of Cain and Abel, and in *Topdog/Underdog* Parks uses a variation of that familiar tale to highlight the "mix of loving bonds and jealousies" that bind Lincoln and Booth together in a symbiotic relationship. As the title of the play suggests, the two brothers compete to see who will have the upper hand. When one succeeds, he is quick to ask, "Who thuh man?" Booth constantly measures his ability to throw the cards against that of his brother, a former master of three-card monte. Even though Booth has a talent for "boosting" things, he remains discontent because he cannot best his brother at cards. This dynamic of sibling rivalry contributes to the dramatic tension that makes the play's final scene so memorable, for, without the constant struggle for power that marks Lincoln and Booth's relationship, the audience would witness just another card game.

Sex and Death

Sex and death are inextricably tied within this play. From the outset, Booth's gun is seen as a symbol of what critic Margaret B. Wilkerson describes as his "sexual potency," one that may be more fiction than fact. He carries the gun with him always, loaded and at the ready, which is how he views himself with regard to women; he is constantly on the prowl for sexual adventure. Furthermore, Booth comments about how the shooters at the arcade fire blanks, which leads him to taunt Lincoln about the sexual impotence that cost him his marriage to Cookie. The theme of sex and death again presents itself when Booth helps Lincoln rehearse his dying so that he will be able to deliver a better

performance and keep his job. Booth tells Lincoln to scream when he dies, but then Booth admonishes him for sounding too much like he is having sex.

Sex is a force for destruction when Ma asks her Thursday Man for some money to help with a problem. He refuses, and Ma is left to take care of her pregnancy on her own. It is not known whether she kept the child or aborted it, but sex, a life-giving force, can also lead to death. Moreover, Ma and Pa's sexual peccadilloes, extended over the course of several years, eventually lead to the death of their family. The most dramatic reference to sex and death in the play, however, occurs when Booth announces that he "popped" Grace. The word *popped* has sexual connotations, but here Booth uses it to refer to his having shot Grace, because she would not grant him her sexual favors.

Victim/ Perpetrator Relationships and Race

This play brings into question conventional wisdom on race and the victim/perpetrator dichotomy. Throughout the play, Parks tries to demonstrate that the relationship between victim and oppressor can exist intra-racially just as well as it can exist interracially.

The shift of emphasis from interracial relations to intra-racial relations begins with the names of the characters. The two brothers are named "Lincoln" and "Booth." Both names have historical significance. Abraham Lincoln's historical role as the white emancipator of black slaves is well known, and his assassin John Wilkes Booth also happens to have been white. Thus, historically, Lincoln's violent assassination involved a perpetrator and a victim who were both members of the same race. Similarly, in the play, Lincoln and Booth are both black men who take turns in the roles of top dog and underdog.

Within the context of the play, Lincoln and Booth are both black men whose roles as victim and perpetrator change dramatically. Although both Lincoln and Booth have troubled personal lives, Lincoln seems to have had better luck than Booth in the professional arena. Booth has never held a job, and he's an amateur at best when it comes to card hustling. In contrast, Lincoln has a steady job that he took only after retiring as a talented card hustler. At least initially, then, Lincoln seems to be in a better position than Booth with respect to the distribution of talents and skills in the family.

When Lincoln loses his job to a machine, Lincoln begins to flirt with the idea of returning to card hustling, without actually committing to teaming up with Booth. Lincoln practices 3-card monte with Booth, and Booth seems to consistently outsmart Lincoln at his own game. It appears, then, that Booth is closing the gap between himself and Lincoln. However, by the end of the play, it becomes apparent that Lincoln was only letting Booth believe that he could win at 3-card monte and that Lincoln was setting Booth up to be hustled out of his inheritance. Thus, Lincoln lets Booth believe that he is no longer the underdog of the family and that he has a chance at becoming a real winner. In reality, Lincoln is still the top dog because he controls the dynamics of the 3-card monte game

and of his relationship with Booth. If anything, Lincoln establishes himself as the top dog of the family even more firmly.

In a rage, Booth retaliates with violence. When Booth realizes that he's been hustled by Lincoln, he murders his own brother, and in a dramatic turn of events, Booth eliminates his only competition for the top dog of the family. Booth, the victim of a hustle perpetrated by his brother, reverses roles with Lincoln. In the end, Lincoln is the victim of murder and Booth the perpetrator.

Throughout the play, the two men who alternate between the roles of victim and perpetrator are the same two men all along. They are both members of the same race, and indeed, of the same family. Who or what counts as a victim and as a perpetrator becomes personalized and individualized.

Autonomy and Responsibility

Since Parks presents the victim/perpetrator or victim/oppressor relationship as a relationship between individuals, the persons bound by that relationship are held responsible for any conduct within it. When Lincoln hustles Booth out of his $500 inheritance, Booth blames Lincoln, and he exacts his revenge on Lincoln. It is not a given race, in general, who is responsible for the victimization of Booth, but rather, it is one person in particular, namely Lincoln. Similarly, when Booth murders Lincoln, Lincoln is not the victim of the conspiracy of a whole race. Rather, he is the victim of one man, namely Booth.

Individual responsibility is reinforced in Booth and Lincoln's memory of a particular episode from their childhood. In Scene 5, Booth recounts an episode when the boys popped the tires on their father's car, and Pop blamed it all on white men sabotaging him. Contrary to Pop's assumption, the damage to his car was not committed by some unnamed white men representing a whole race. Rather, it was the result of a prank devised and performed by two black boys. This case shows that, although it is easy to blame members of another race for victimization, the particular individuals who commit wrongful acts, whether they are black or white, deserve the blame.

Choice and Chance

Lincoln and Booth's lot in life is a product of many factors including their own choices, the choices of others and just plain luck. However, the boundaries between these factors are often obscured.

Lincoln used to be a successful card hustler, and Booth tries desperately to become a card hustler even though he doesn't seem to have much of a talent for it. Lincoln seems to have a natural talent for 3-card monte that Booth lacks. No amount of practice enables Booth to elevate the level of his 3-card monte game to that of Lincoln. Here, Booth's lack of success is plausibly attributed to his own bad luck that he wasn't born

with a natural gift for card manipulation. Booth's merely deciding to take up 3-card monte and to practice it religiously is not enough to make him a good card hustler.

Some crucial events in Lincoln and Booth's lives seem chancy, but they are, in fact, the result of others' choices. Lincoln and Booth were left on their own at very young ages. This may seem like a bad turn of luck, but in fact, it is the consequence of choices, for better or for worse, made by their parents. When Lincoln was a professional card hustler, and his partner Lonny was shot, this changed Lincoln's life dramatically because he swore never to hustle cards. Again, this may seem like a stroke of bad luck, but Lonny's death wasn't a chancy event. Rather, it was the result of the decisions and actions of Lonny's murderer. It was also the result of Lonny's choice to continue playing cards. When Lincoln loses his job at the arcade, his life changes as a result of his employers' business decisions.

Whenever bad luck or others' choices force a reaction from Lincoln or Booth, they must make their own choices about how to respond. When Lincoln's honest life starts to fall apart, he rethinks his vow never to hustle cards again, and he ultimately breaks his vow. In the meantime, Booth sees Lincoln's job loss as an opportunity to pressure him into forming a card hustling team together. Lincoln's return to card hustling and Booth's eagerness to prove to Lincoln that he is skilled enough to be the latter's partner lead Lincoln to hustle Booth out of his inheritance. Lincoln doesn't need Booth's money, but he chooses to hustle Booth anyway in order to make a point, namely, that Booth will never be good enough to keep up with Lincoln at card hustling. Lincoln makes a choice to prove a point to Booth, and Lincoln's choice causes Booth to make his own choice about an appropriate response to Lincoln. When Booth realizes that he's been hustled, he resorts to violence in order to demonstrate that he's not the loser or the underdog. In the end, Booth murders Lincoln, but the events immediately preceding the fratricide involve choices and actions for which each man can be held responsible.

Style

Naturalism

Topdog/Underdog is less fantastic than some of Parks's other plays. Though the set design evokes social realism, the play is naturalistic in the sense that Lincoln and Booth respond to the environmental forces, such as poverty, that shape their lives externally, as well as to the private desires and ambitions that exert an equal, if not greater, force psychically. The brothers are subject to deterministic sociological and economic forces that lead them to contemplate a life of petty crime. Furthermore, Booth's frank discussions of his sexual needs indicates that strong biological instincts also inform his decisions. Fear and the need for escape, whether through drink or through sex, are other primal forces at work in the play. Though characters in naturalistic works of drama or fiction are occasionally viewed as victims of fate, Parks makes no moral judgments about her characters. She remains objective in the presentation of her material, leaving it to the audience to decide whether life should be viewed pessimistically or optimistically.

Humor

Parks often uses humor to underscore the tragedy of a particular situation as it offsets the dire circumstances the play's protagonists live in. Moreover, humor serves to leaven the pathos of the situation, particularly when one of the protagonists appears to struggle against a sense of inertia that has plagued him throughout his life. For example, Booth's attempts to win Grace's heart after their two-year separation is placed in a comical light when he tells Lincoln that he has boosted a "diamond-esque" ring that is slightly too small for her. Booth did this on purpose so that, once the ring is on her finger, she will not be able to give it back to him the way she did two years before. Booth thinks he is "smooth" to avoid rejection this way, but this humorous scene underscores the way Booth is, as Lincoln says, always "scheming and dreaming." Booth's desperation would be tragic if his plan to win Grace weren't so funny.

Humor is also used within the play to juxtapose comedy with moments of vivid realization. For example, when Booth returns from the department wearing layer upon layer of clothes he has stolen, the visual effect is comical because the audience realizes that his ability to steal matches his audacity. "I stole and I stole generously," Booth says. When Lincoln tries on his new suit and says that clothes don't make the man, he reverses a truism: the fact that he can wear a fake beard and hat does not make him a great man. "I was Lincoln on my own before any of that," he says. Ironically, Lincoln seems less beaten down, less despairing, once he dons the new suit. Another example of how comedy highlights moments of clarity occurs during the scene where the brothers rehearse Lincoln's dying. The scene is uproariously comical even though Lincoln's future employment may be at stake.

Language

Booth and Lincoln both speak a street language that is raw with power and filled with poetry. Their speech is also marked by profanity that assaults the very essence of the person it is directed against. By eliminating the use of apostrophes in contractions, Parks, following the example of the great Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, creates a language on the printed page that is immediate and unpolished, yet it contains a quality of verisimilitude that reflects her characters' true natures. They are uneducated but streetwise, and the phonetic spellings indicate this lack of sophistication. In addition, the play's dialogue alone a delight to read and hear. The brothers use words like weapons to undermine each other's confidence, creating a verbal assault that is at times hypnotic and at others menacing.

Stage Directions

In the Author's Notes to the play, Parks includes a short guide to interpreting her "slightly unconventional theatrical elements." Among these are spells and rests. Spells are indicated by the repetition of character names and possess something of an "architectural look." No dialogue is spoken during a spell. Rather, they are designed to aid the characters in revealing "their pure true simple state." Parks leaves any additional interpretation open to the director. Rests, on the other hand, reflect something akin to a musical rest, in that the actor is permitted time to pause, take a breath, or make a transition.

Point of View

Since *Topdog/ Underdog* is a play, the scripted dialogue and actions are intended to be performed on stage and observed by an audience. The interactions between the brothers during a performance is seen and heard by a third party. There is no narrator to mediate between the audience and the characters or to offer insights into the thoughts and motivations of the characters. The characters' words and overt behavior are the only sources of information about the characters and their relationships. Since this is the case, much of the interpretive work is left to members of the audience or the reader.

Setting

All of the scenes in this play are set in a boarding house room. The spatial confinement of the play's events underscores the play's message that topdog/underdog, victim/oppressor or victim/perpetrator relationships are fundamentally relationships that hold between individuals. Since the room serves as the brothers' home, it provides an intimate setting for the interpersonal conflict that drives the play's plot. Moreover, since the brothers' actions are directed at each other and are confined to their home, the responsibility for those actions cannot be assigned to people, groups or entities outside of the room.

Language and Meaning

The play's dialogue consists exclusively of exchanges between Lincoln and Booth. It is written in a vernacular that is riddled with slang. Moreover, there is a notable lack of grammatical structure in the characters' utterances. For example, apostrophes are not used at all, and the characters often speak in incomplete sentences. The overall effect is one of linguistic fluidity which plausibly mimics the flow of words in conversations. The language with which the brothers communicate is characterized by freedom of expression which is unencumbered by strict observation of grammatical rules.

Structure

This play is short and compact, facilitating the swift pace of the plot. It is composed of six scenes. In the first four scenes, Park paints a portrait of Lincoln and Booth and their circumstances, and she effectively sets the characters up for the conflict which ensues. In the Scenes 1-3, Booth spends much of his time trying to convince Lincoln to return to card hustling, and Lincoln resists Booth's suggestion that they form a team of card hustlers together. We get the impression that Booth is unskilled at 3-card monte but that Lincoln was a very talented card hustler. Indeed, in Scene 4, when Lincoln practices 3-card monte while Booth is asleep, there is an obvious contrast between Lincoln's card skills and those displayed by Booth in earlier scenes. By the end of Scene 4, we have the impression that there is an asymmetry in the relationship between the two brothers. Lincoln is more talented than Booth, and Booth wants desperately to prove himself worthy of becoming Lincoln's card partner. In the last two scenes of the play, the tension between Lincoln and Booth escalates until it reaches its explosive conclusion. When Lincoln practices 3-card monte with Booth, it seems as though the former is trying to help the latter to become a better card player, and hence, to close the gap between the two brothers. Indeed, after Booth wins a few practice rounds with Lincoln, Booth seems to have reversed his relationship with his brother and become the more skilled of the two. However, it becomes clear at the end of the play that Lincoln was never in danger of losing at 3-card monte and that he orchestrated all of the outcomes of the practice rounds in order to hustle Booth and assert his status as the topdog in their relationship. Booth is unable to cope with his disappointment in himself for being duped and with his anger at his brother for making a fool of him, and he kills Lincoln in the final scene.

Historical Context

The Assassination of President Abraham Lincoln

As the American Civil War was drawing to a close, President Abraham Lincoln and his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, attended a performance of *Our American Cousin*, a musical comedy, at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. While Lincoln sat in his box seat in the balcony, John Wilkes Booth, an actor and rebel sympathizer from Maryland, sneaked into the president's box and fired one shot at point-blank range from his Deringer, shouting, "*Sic simper tyrannis*!" ("Thus always to tyrants"). Some reports have Booth adding, "The South is avenged!" Booth leaped to the stage below, limping to an exit and escaping on his horse. Lincoln lay mortally wounded and was carried across the street, where he entered a coma until he died the next morning, on April 15, 1865. Booth received medical attention while on the run, but was fatally shot when he was discovered hiding in a Virginia barn.

Blackface

Blackface minstrelsy was among the most popular forms of live entertainment in America during the years preceding the Civil War. Minstrel shows featured white entertainers who wore blackface to imitate the mannerisms and speech of Southern slaves or slaves who had been freed in the North. Many minstrel routines included singing and dancing that bordered on caricature. The entertainer Al Jolson brought this tradition to the silver screen in the film entitled *The Jazz Singer*, which was the first motion picture to feature sound. In *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks stands the blackface tradition on its head by having Lincoln, a black man, apply whiteface to imitate the very man who was responsible for freeing blacks from slavery.

Critical Overview

Les Gutman, reviewing the original Off-Broadway production for the Internet theater magazine *CurtainUp*, observes that, "with *Topdog/Underdog*, [Suzan-Lori Parks] has taken a giant step toward fulfilling the promise with which she was labeled." He finds the narrative "linear and quite straightforward" compared to some of Parks's earlier plays, which have been regarded by critics and audiences alike as rather "meditative and inaccessible." Gutman views *Topdog/Underdog* as the culmination of a talent that is equal to the playwright's ambition. "Parks aims for the sky but succeeds mightily in bringing her subject right into the cross hairs. Kudos all around," he concludes. Elizabeth Pochoda, writing for *The Nation*, remains impressed by the "visceral" impact of the play's flowing language that complements the "swift, inevitable momentum" of the play's direction. "Parks writes dialogue so vigorous and beautiful and hilarious you'd almost think these men were free," she observes.

Not all critics, however, were as impressed with the play's language. Citing dialogue that seems "too diffuse" and an ending that seems "a contrivance" because the audience garners little understanding of the effect family history has had on the brothers' emotional lives, Charles Isherwood, writing in *Variety*, regards *Topdog/Underdog* as a disappointment. He concludes that, although there is a "vaudevillian energy and style to some of the livelier physical set pieces," Parks "may be a playwright who is less comfortable in the real world than in the fantastical one of her imagination." Robert Brustein, writing for *The New Republic*, expounds further upon this static quality, referring to the play as "essentially actionless." Indeed, if there is a common complaint among critics, it concerns what Elyse Sommer calls "that all too inevitable ending." While *Newsweek* critic Marc Peyser concedes that the brothers' relationship possesses a "deadly dynamic," one that projects an "epic feel," a timeless, biblical quality generated in large part by Parks's "linguistic panache," he believes that Parks's fascination with the dramatic potential of street language ultimately does the play and its audience a disservice. "If 'Topdog' has a flaw," Peyser notes, "it may be that Parks flaunts her comic and verbal dexterity at the expense of building to her fatal climax."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Remy is a freelance writer in Warrington, Florida. In this essay, Remy considers the ways in which Parks's use of historical references and figures belies a more compelling sense of personal history within the play.

Topdog/Underdog is a play rich in historical overtones, yet these should not be confused with events that shaped the course of American social and political development during the years after the Civil War. Although the Lincoln assassination exerts a pervading influence on how the audience reacts to developments within *Topdog/Underdog*, the assassination itself is nothing more than an augury of the play's ending. Historical fact serves as a backdrop for theater□nothing more□and the events that occur onstage result from a knowledge of family history that is repressed rather than acknowledged openly. Therefore, the historical figures of Lincoln and Booth should not be identified too strongly with the brothers who bear the same names. Rather than recreate a scene from history on stage, a scene which is remembered more for a single act of vengeance than for the events that preceded it, Parks chooses to focus instead on the dramatic possibilities inherent in a shared personal history, one which the brothers Lincoln and Booth bring to a denouement marked by violence and desperation equal to that of historical events.

Parks draws upon her audience's knowledge of history to establish an immediate conflict between her characters, for the play is a series of reversals wherein power is shared alternately by each of the protagonists. Most everyone who has received a grade-school education is familiar with the attack at Ford's Theatre that forever bound the name of President Abraham Lincoln to that of his assailant John Wilkes Booth, but the relationship of victim and murderer, and the social issues that led to the assassination, should not be perceived as a template for understanding events as they develop between the brothers in *Topdog/Underdog*. The audience would be wise to remember that the brothers were named Lincoln and Booth by their father as a joke, one which is perpetrated upon anyone who interprets the parallels between historical fact and fiction too closely. A more appropriate analogy for the brothers' relationship would be that between the biblical characters Cain and Abel, but then Parks is much too subtle a dramatist to resort to overt comparisons.

If there is a connection between the play's characters and recorded history, it is a symbolic, tangential one. In spite of Lincoln's name, an association with The Great Emancipator that is made even more ironic when Link wears a top hat, fake beard, and whiteface, Link's job impersonating the president at the arcade emphasizes the precarious state of Link's employment rather than his holding a position of power. On the contrary, Link remains at the mercy of his employers, who eventually replace him with a wax dummy. The repetitive act of assassination that occurs when each tourist redeems a ticket symbolizes the static quality of Link's life, which has become increasingly moribund since he accepted a "sit down job . . . [w]ith benefits." Although Link has made a conscious effort to abandon the dangerous street life he knew when he was master of the three-card monte, this change forces him to yield to a form of inertia

that ultimately breaks his spirit. Link's job as an unsuspecting victim of assassination symbolizes his having become a victim of socioeconomic forces that render him helpless□a stationary target, in effect, which is something he never would have become had he continued earning his livelihood on the street.

Rather than dwell excessively on the historical reverberations of her characters, Parks focuses instead on their shared personal history to dramatize an often ambiguous, and ultimately violent, sibling rivalry. In verbal exchanges that move from banter to accusation at a moment's notice, pieces of family history loom large before the brothers and the audience, revealing allegiances that place Link and Booth in the roles of antagonists. For example, in scene 5, when the brothers discuss the circumstances that led to their parents' departures, Booth observes, "They didnt leave together. That makes it different." Booth and Link then assume that, despite the indifference between their parents, they had an "agreement," by which they would each give a son five hundred dollars and then leave. "Theyd been scheming together all along," Booth says. "They left separately but they was in agreement." The brothers' suspicions of a plot against them are ignited further when each reveals to the other that he was sworn to secrecy when he received money from his parent, and this revelation leads the brothers, now temporarily united, to speculate that perhaps their parents abandoned them to start a new family, one that would not include them.

The knowledge of this suppressed history breeds resentment□and, ultimately, violence□as feelings of abandonment and questions about the brothers' respective paternities arise. Even though the brothers have had to depend upon each other to survive, this fact, like the example of false domesticity their parents set before them years ago, does not mean that they must honor their responsibilities to each other indefinitely. Booth is already envious of his brother's ability to throw the cards, and his envy intensifies once he fails to convince Link to return to his old ways. "How come I got a hand for boosting and I dont got a hand for throwing cards?" he wonders. Booth mistakenly believes that his life would improve if his brother showed him how to master the three-card monte, for then he would be able to win Grace's heart and have plenty of cash with which to entertain her. Booth seeks more than knowledge from Link; he seeks freedom. When Booth fails to obtain the object of his desire, he becomes more frustrated and angry, his resentment building to a dangerous level: "Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!" Booth's frustration with his girlfriend and with his brother increases his desperation as it reveals a historical pattern, contributing to what appears to be an impulsive act in the play's final scene.

Furthermore, Booth's feelings of frustration are exacerbated by the brothers' mutual dependency, a form of symbiosis that is governed by Booth's jealousy and impotent rage, and which keeps the brothers locked tightly within each other's orbit. As the brothers begin to question their paternity and the reasons why their parents abandoned them, Booth struggles to find freedom while Link sinks slowly into despair. The pain Booth felt when his mother walked out on them has never left him, as represented by his refusal to spend his "inheritance," for he seems to still hold out hope that one day she will return. Thus, Booth, like his brother Link, remains unable to break free from the

hold of personal history. However, Booth reaches a point where he is willing to do whatever is necessary to change the repetitive pattern of failure his life has taken. In a deluded vision of marital bliss, Booth tells Link to leave (the room is rented in Booth's name), even though Booth fears abandonment and the thought of living his life alone. When Booth's plans again collapse, he chooses to face failure the only way he knows how□through an act of violence. Just as Booth refuses to give Grace the opportunity to dump him for another man by shooting her, so, too, does he prevent Link from mocking him further by pulling the trigger in a scene that transforms his father's joke into a tragic prophecy.

By revealing a family history that Booth and Link reluctantly acknowledge but do not fully understand, one which binds them inexorably toward a violent end, Parks emphasizes the drama of lives that are no less tragic than those of historical figures. The end result is a play rich with associations that simultaneously challenge and satisfy the audience's expectations, creating two brothers who continue to live on in memory.

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Source: David Remy, Critical Essay on *Topdog/Underdog*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Holm is a short story and novel author, and a freelance writer. In this essay, Holm looks at how the brothers in this play prey on each other's insecurities in a tailspin toward tragedy.

Topdog/Underdog is a play about the tension and the contrast between two brothers. Each brother struggles with his own demons. Booth feels inferior to Lincoln. Lincoln is trying to live a respectable life, with a real job. Each brother preys on the other brother's shortcomings, propelling this play toward its volatile conclusion. Booth seems to be meaner to Lincoln than Lincoln is to Booth, but Lincoln also has his dark side. Parks shows not only how each brother preys on the other, but also how each character is tormented by his own insecurities.

Booth is introduced first, and Parks immediately establishes him as an unsavory, frustrated character. Booth reveals an edgy meanness as he practices his con game, alone in his room. While he sweet-talks and cajoles an imaginary mark ("you aint no clown"), Booth lets his meanness come out after the imaginary transaction, in the privacy of his room.

Sucker! Fool! . . . I bet yr daddy heard how stupid you was. . . . I bet yr mama seen you when you comed out and she walked away from you. . . . Ha Ha Ha! And 3-Card, once again, wins all thuh money!!

Booth's mean-spirited outlash directs the reader to wonder what Booth is so angry about. It sets the reader up for further revelations about Booth. Booth knows that throwing the cards does not come as naturally to him as it does to Lincoln. This effectively sets the reader up for the volatile last part of the play, where Lincoln laughs at Booth and Booth shoots Lincoln. Booth wants nothing more than the ease of making lots of money with the con game and making it as easily as Lincoln once did. Booth is upset that Lincoln will not throw the cards and pesters him relentlessly.

Booth is also effectively revealed as a person who deceives himself. There are plenty of examples of this throughout the play. This portrays Booth as a character whose word cannot be trusted. Booth is continually backtracking on what he says, after Lincoln points out discrepancies.

Booth: You could afford to get laid! Grace would be all over me again.

Lincoln: I though you said she was all over you.

Booth: She is she is. Im seeing her tomorrow.

Booth repeats "she is" and Parks runs the words together. The reader can almost hear Booth trying to convince himself, as well as Lincoln, that Grace really does want him.

Booth's insecurities are heightened when it comes to women, as shown when he continues to bend the truth about Grace. Booth says, "Shes in love with me again but she dont know it yet. . . . I got her this ring today. Diamond. Well, diamond-esque, but it looks just as good as the real thing." The reader clearly understands that Booth is continually trying to con himself and his brother.

If Lincoln was a meaner character, he could torment Booth regarding Grace. But Lincoln is usually gentle with Booth in these situations, even when Grace never shows up and the brothers wait all night long. Lincoln does not hesitate, however, to give it to Booth on another occasion, when Booth claims he had sex with Grace.

Lincoln: You didnt get s□t tonight. You laying over there . . . waiting for me to go back to sleep or black out so I wont hear you rustling thuh pages of yr . . . book.

Booth also knows how to hit Lincoln where it hurts. He continually reminds Lincoln that Lincoln is degrading himself by dressing up in whiteface to get "shot" everyday in a reenactment of Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Even though Lincoln tries to find some redemption in his job ("People know the real deal. When people know the real deal it aint a hustle"), Booth tells him that he "aint living."

The terrible irony at the end of the play is that Lincoln's "assassination" comes true, at the hands of his brother. The symbolism of Abe Lincoln's assassination is chillingly apparent. Lincoln's arcade job may well represent another kind of symbolism, the suggestion of a man slowly dying a little every day, having to do a degrading, low paying job and impersonate a white man. The man that talks to Lincoln at the arcade alludes to this when he says, "Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does the show go on?"

All of Booth's actions are driven by his rampant insecurities. He is the younger brother. He does not have a real job nor does he have the ability to con people like his brother. Because of his inferiority complex, Booth is caught between trying to impress his brother by shoplifting fancy clothes or by one-upping him by reminding Lincoln that he slept with Lincoln's wife.

Booth is manipulative and works this skill effectively on his brother. At one point, Booth angrily shouts at Lincoln, accusing him of denying Booth success since Lincoln will not teach Booth about the cards.

Booth: Here I am interested in an economic opportunity, willing to work hard, willing to take risks and . . . all you can tell me is how you dont do no more what I be wanting to do. Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way, YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!

Booth's manipulation is effective. Lincoln appears to buy into Booth's accusation, and it helps lead Lincoln toward his downfall.

It is to Parks's credit that the play sustains such tension and energy. Parks pulls this off by showing the reader what shaped these brothers into the men they are today. The

reader learns that the world has not been good to these men: their parents left them when they were boys; their parents had lovers on the side; and, no one had much money. Because of this past, Lincoln and Booth have had to do whatever is necessary to survive. Because Parks reveals to the reader what kind of circumstances these boys grew up in, the reader is able to understand and possibly sympathize with the characters' actions.

Lincoln is a different character than Booth in many ways. While Booth cut school nearly every day, Lincoln only missed it in an emergency, such as when their mother walked out on them. Lincoln had been married. Lincoln also stopped playing the cards, even though it made him more money than the arcade job. In every respect, Lincoln has made more of an effort at leading a respectable life. However, Booth knows how to zero in on the insecurities that plague Lincoln. Lincoln could not sustain a marriage, is working a dead-end job, and cannot get a woman. It is Lincoln's awareness and frustration with his insecurities, along with Booth's constant nagging, that drive Lincoln back to throwing the cards.

The reader knows intuitively that things are going to begin spiraling downward in this play, once Lincoln picks up the cards. Parks has foreshadowed this effectively with Lincoln's almost irrational fear of even touching the cards, earlier in the play. Like the recovering alcoholic who can never take another drink, the reader senses the dangerous tension and attraction between Lincoln and the cards. When Booth rips the fancy tablecloth from the makeshift table and reveals the seedy card table underneath, it is a fitting metaphor for Lincoln's life. Lincoln tried to live a respectable life and hold a real job. But underneath the respectable veneer, Lincoln still has the heart of a con artist. It is Lincoln's and Booth's fascination with the cards, their ability to prey on each other, and their struggles with their own demons that drive these brothers on a path to tragedy.

Getty Images

Source: Catherine Dybiec Holm, Critical Essay on *Topdog/Underdog*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Ullmann is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, Ullmann examines Parks's use of foreshadowing in her play.

In her Pulitzer-Prize winning play *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks uses the literary device of foreshadowing in telling the story of the relationship between two brothers. The foreshadowing of Lincoln's death by his brother Booth's hand has many layers, from the obvious to the more personal and subtle. By the end of the play, Parks leaves the reader wondering whether Lincoln's death was inevitable, no matter what choice either brother made.

On the broadest, most obvious level, the "joke" of the brothers' names, Lincoln and Booth□after President Abraham Lincoln and his assassin John Wilkes Booth□foreshadows Lincoln's death by his brother Booth at the end of the play. To reinforce the historical connection, the brothers have as their first names what the historical figures used as surnames. There would have been little dramatic impact if they had been named Abraham and John.

Abraham Lincoln was the 16th president of the United States and a crucial figure in bringing an end to legalized slavery in America. The Civil War (1861—1865) began in response to his controversial election because he was so staunchly opposed to slavery in America's new territories. The end of legalized slavery (beginning with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and culminating with the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1865) had a profound impact on the thousands of Africans and their American-born children who were discriminated against based solely on the color of their skin. The fact that the brothers in *Topdog/Underdog* are black Americans is both ironic and indicative of their difficult struggle to overcome their impoverished situation. One could also interpret their tough financial position as a way in which *de facto* discrimination continues to exist in the United States today. Their poverty is an additional overarching foreshadowing of an unhappy ending.

John Wilkes Booth presents an even more interesting comparison as a namesake for the character Booth in *Topdog/Underdog*. John Wilkes Booth was a popular professional actor but still less successful than his older brother, Edwin, who was widely considered the greatest Shakespearean actor of nineteenth-century America. John Wilkes Booth resented his brother's greater fame. He also deeply believed in slavery and conspired with others to abduct President Lincoln. When he heard news that General Lee had surrendered at the Appomattox Court House in Virginia in April 1865, he resolved to assassinate President Lincoln and his Cabinet. Although John Wilkes Booth was successful in assassinating the president, he was captured twelve days later by soldiers and mortally shot after refusing to turn himself in.

The similarity between John Wilkes Booth and the character Booth of *Topdog/Underdog* is exhibited early on in the play by Booth's emulation of Lincoln in three-card monte; Booth wants to play the same game as his brother but has never been as good. His

jealousy is obvious to the observer and reader. At the end of the play, Booth lies and says that he and his on-and-off girlfriend Grace are going to get married. This declaration could be interpreted as another way for Booth to show his brother that he is the topdog since Lincoln's marriage has failed. Booth even claims to have had sex with Lincoln's ex-wife Cookie.

Booth attempts to leave behind his past identity as the underdog, the younger, less capable and successful brother, by renaming himself 3-Card after the shell game three-card monte. Booth sees himself making a successful career hustling people for money, as well as obliquely claiming precedence over his brother Lincoln, who used to be a very good three-card monte hustler. Lincoln goes along with the name change and eventually lets Booth practice his card hustling on him. Booth appears to be improving and even over-taking his brother in skill, but Lincoln is still more practiced than Booth at card handling. After leading Booth and the reader on for the whole play that he was losing his touch, in the last crucial card throw, Lincoln wins his brother Booth's inheritance money. It is a classic shell game ploy. The foreshadowing of Lincoln's win is subtle. He is talked about throughout the play as having once been the best three-card monte hustler; however he keeps losing to Booth and even appears distraught. He is so good at the game that he cannot stop himself from taking in his own blood relation.

LINCOLN: And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you. And when its thuh real deal, when its thuh real f□g deal, bro, and thuh moneys on thuh line, thats when thuh man wont want you picking right. He will want you picking wrong so he will make you pick wrong. Wrong wrong wrong. Ooooh, you thought you was finally happening, didn't you? You thought yr ship had come in or some s□t, huh? Thought you was uh Player. But I played you, bro.

Lincoln's first career, hustling people for money, was a financial success but personal disaster. Lincoln made a lot of money, but the death of his partner Lonny made him turn his back on hustling: "I knew I was next, so I quit. I saved my life." His current job as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator at an arcade, however, foreshadows an untimely end even more strongly. Not only is he named for and impersonating a president who has been assassinated, but his job is specifically to recreate President Lincoln's assassination:

LINCOLN: This is sit down, you know, easy work. I just gotta sit there all day. Folks come in kill phony Honest Abe with the phony pistol. I can sit there and let my mind travel.

When Lincoln loses his job, the reader might be tempted to think that he will be drawn away from what seems to be an inevitable death. But Lincoln is moving in a closed circle. He is drawn back into hustling by his brother Booth's recent interest (and perhaps insistence that Lincoln has lost his touch with the cards), a need for cash so that he can get his feet under him and move out of his brother's apartment, and probably also a need to feel good about himself by winning at something. Unfortunately, three-card

monte foreshadows death for Lincoln as well. In scene 4, just before throwing the cards again for the first time, he says, "Link is just here hustling hisself."

In the opening scene of the play, Lincoln surprises his brother Booth when he walks in the door. Booth's reaction is to draw his gun. This foreshadows and bookends the closing of the play when Booth draws his gun in anger against Lincoln and shoots and kills him.

In this scene, the brothers are having Chinese food for dinner. The fortunes they open foreshadow events to follow:

LINCOLN: Whats yr fortune?

BOOTH: "Waste not want not." Whats yrs?

LINCOLN: "Your luck will change!"

Booth's fortune is an oblique warning against killing his girlfriend and brother. These are relationships that are irreplaceable. Their abandonment by their parents, especially their mother, has been hard on Booth, the younger brother. In the play, he does not appear to have anyone close to him other than Lincoln and Grace, the two people he eventually kills.

Lincoln's fortune is a warning that the honest path he has been arduously following will soon take a turn. Fortunes are often ambiguous and easy to manipulate into an interpretation that pleases the recipient. In this case, although honest work can be unpleasant, it is the safest route for Lincoln to pursue□he should be wary of his luck changing.

Another example of foreshadowing in the first scene happens when Booth threatens to shoot anyone who does not call him by the name 3-Card. Lincoln goes along with this for most of the play but slips up twice near the end, once in scene 5 and once in scene 6. One could also interpret Grace's death at Booth's hand as a result of her refusal to accept Booth's new guise as an up-and-coming three-card monte hustler, although this all happened off-stage and readers only have Booth's version of events to go on.

A strong example of foreshadowing in the first scene is when Lincoln sings the song he made up in his head while at work. The song has a classic blues rhythm and encapsulates his sad life, talking about how his parents have left him, he has no money, no home, his "best girl" has thrown him out, and his "favorite horse" (Lonny) has been ground into meat. In the final lines of the song, Lincoln foreshadows his own death, building as well upon the fortune he got at dinner:

My luck was bad but now it turned to worse

Dont call me up a doctor, just call me up a hearse.

In scene 3, Booth and Lincoln talk about Lincoln's job. Booth is fascinated that his brother has no problem letting people shoot at him all day long. "You ever wonder if someones gonna come in there with a real gun? A real gun with real slugs? Someone with uh axe tuh grind or something?" This line of questioning is ironic and foreshadowing of Booth's passionate and possibly pre-meditated assault on his brother at the end of the play. Booth, as an underdog who wants to be topdog, has a lifelong axe to grind with his older brother.

A stronger element of foreshadowing in this scene occurs when Booth urges Lincoln to practice having a more dramatic death in order to impress his boss and keep his job. In his excitement, he yells, "And look at me! I am the assassin! *I am Booth*!! Come on man this is life and death!" Here Booth is directly identifying himself with John Wilkes Booth while he urges his brother to perform a more dramatic interpretation of President Lincoln's death throes. The comment that this performance is "life and death" is more true than either brother realizes. Lincoln does not return to the deadly game of three-card monte until after he loses his job at the arcade.

In scene 5, returning home after losing his job, Lincoln slips up and calls his brother by his old name, Booth, rather than Booth's adopted new name of 3-Card. Stage directions do not indicate that Booth notices but this still reinforces the foreshadowing from the first scene of the play when Booth declared that he would shoot anyone who didn't call him 3-Card. Lincoln slips again at the beginning of scene 6, although he and the reader are not immediately aware that Booth is in the scene.

Many clues in *Topdog/Underdog* foreshadow Booth killing his brother Lincoln. With so much stacked against them, including history (the Civil War, after all, has been described as the only American war that pitted brothers against brothers), poverty, gambling, and a dysfunctional family, could Lincoln's death by his brother's hand have been avoided? Perhaps if Lincoln had stayed away from three-card monte, then Lincoln may have survived. Then again, as the topdog and older brother, Lincoln□or just the idea of Lincoln, who was older, more successful, more confident, more comfortable with himself□may have been too much for Booth to live up to.

Source: Carol Ullmann, Critical Essay on *Topdog/Underdog*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Quotes

"Booth: ...Packing up her shit. She told me to look out for you. I told her I was the little brother and the big brother should look out after the little brother. She just said it again. That I should look out for you. Yeah. So who gonna look out for me. Not like you care. Here I am interested in an economic opportunity, willing to work hard, willing to take risks and all you can say you shit eating motherfucking pathetic limpdick uncle tom, all you can tell me is how you don't do no more what I be wanting to do. Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!" (Scene 1, pg. 19)

"Lincoln: People know the real deal. When people know the real deal it aint a hustle." (Scene 1, pg. 20)

"Lincoln: ...He was drunk when he told me, or maybe I was drunk when he told me. Anyway, he told me, may not be true, but he told me. Why he named us both. Lincoln and Booth.

"Booth: How come. How come, man?

"Lincoln: It was his idea of a joke." (Scene 1, pg. 22)

"Lincoln: ...They say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that dont make me who I am." (Scene 2, pg. 27)

"Lincoln: I said to myself thats exactly what I would do: wear it out and then leave it hanging there and not come back. But until then, I would make a living at it. But it dont make me. Worn suit coat, not even worn by the fool that Im supposed to be playing, but making fools out of all those folks who come crowding in for they chance to play at something great. Fake beard. Top hat. Dont make me into no Lincoln. I was Lincoln on my own before any of that." (Scene 2, pg. 28)

"Lincoln: ...I dont gotta spend my whole life hustling. Theres more to Link than that. More to me than some cheap hustle. More to life than cheating some idiot out of this paycheck or his life savings." (Scene 4, pg. 54)

"Lincoln: I think there was something out there that they liked more than they liked us and for years they was struggling against moving towards that more liked something. Each of them had a special something that they was struggling against. Mom and hers. Pops and his. And they was struggling." (Scene 5, pg. 66)

"Booth: I didnt mind them leaving cause you was there. Thats why Im hooked on us working together. If we could work together it would be like old times. They split and we got that room downtown. You was done with school and I stopped going. And we had to run around doing odd jobs just to keep the lights on and the heat going and thuh child

protection bitch off our backs. It was you and me against thuh world, Link. It could be like that again." (Scene 5, pg. 69)

"Lincoln: ...First thing you learn is what is. Next thing you learn is what aint. You dont know what is you don't know what aint, you dont know shit." (Scene 5, Pg. 72)

"Booth: Thuh world puts its foot in yr face and you dont move. You tell thuh world tuh keep on stepping. But Im my own man, Link. I aint you." (Scene 5, pg. 81)

"Booth: ...No matter what you do you cant get back to being who you was. Best you can do is just pretend to be yr self." (Scene 6, pg. 93)

"Lincoln: ...But you was in such a hurry to learn thuh last move that you didnt bother to learn thuh first one. That was yr mistake. Cause its thuh first move that separates the Player from thuh Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you." (Scene 6, pg. 106)

Adaptations

Although no audio recording of the play's production currently exists, a DVD entitled *The Topdog Diaries* provides a behind-the-scenes look at rehearsals for the Off-Broadway production of *Topdog/Underdog*, directed by George C. Wolfe at New York's Public Theater. The performance features Don Cheadle in the role of Booth and Jeffrey Wright as Lincoln. *The Topdog Diaries* is produced by Storyville Films and is available through most online film retailers.

Topics for Further Study

Write a short monologue from the perspective of a member of Lincoln's crew. How does this crew member view the mark and the dealer? What are his observations? What role does he play in the hustle? Is it necessary for him to watch the cards at all times?

Research the history of blackface in America. What are its origins? Who were some of its more famous practitioners? Are aspects of blackface visible in today's entertainment media?

Make a list of famous figures and the people who assassinated them. In some cases, the assassin, such as John Wilkes Booth, garners as much notoriety as the person they murdered. Why is this so?

Consider the way in which the set design influences the audience's perception of the drama unfolding onstage. How would the audience's perception of the relationship between Lincoln and Booth change if the play were set on a large stage as compared to a small, confining space?

Cookie, Grace, and Mom are mentioned in the play but never appear on stage. They are also absent from the lives of the play's two protagonists. How does the absence of women in *Topdog/Underdog* illuminate the brothers' emotional, sexual, and social condition?

Identify the ways in which history plays a role in the play. Is this sense of history broadly defined, or is it limited to a more personal interaction among characters? Discuss your conclusions.

What Do I Read Next?

The plays of Suzan-Lori Parks have been noted especially for their reworking of history to provide audiences with political and social commentary that is relevant to today's society. *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990) creates a new view of history that debunks many of the racial stereotypes about blacks that Parks uses to tell her story. Featuring characters with names like Black Man with Watermelon, Black Woman with Fried Drumstick, Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork, and Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* depicts a mythos of archetypal proportions. In the play, Parks transforms black vernacular English into a form of poetry that pays homage to the past as it brings history firmly into the present.

Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) is a group of twenty poems about the power of black women to overcome pain and hopelessness. As each actor recites her poem, she gestures and moves her body in accompaniment to the emotions she expresses while the rest of the ensemble stands silent and motionless. The group then chants and moves as one in response to the actor's poem. This form of call and response creates a unifying bond among the women on stage, an energy that extends to the audience as well.

Sam Shepard's play *True West* (1980) combines humor and pathos to explore the meaning of identity within a dysfunctional family, particularly as identity relates to the idea of the American frontier and the mythological freedom it represents. In the play, which is set outside of Los Angeles, two brothers, Austin, a successful Hollywood screenwriter, and Lee, a burglar, house-sit for their mother while she is away on vacation in Alaska. During the time they spend together, the two brothers fight, drink excessively, and nearly destroy the house as they compete to get their screenplays produced. *True West* addresses the ways in which a materialistic society fosters lawlessness and the desire to obtain freedom, even if that sense of freedom remains ever-elusive.

Through images and associations that range from the surreal to the absurd, Adrienne Kennedy's plays embody a modernist sensibility as they employ avant-garde techniques to address issues of gender, race, and identity within contemporary African-American society. Kennedy's anti-realist approach toward playwriting and stagecraft, such as that found in the one-act plays *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1970) and *The Owl Answers* (1968) mixed genres and narrative techniques at a time when other playwrights were beginning to explore the dramatic possibilities of juxtaposed styles. Her characters so deeply reflected the institutionalized racism of the day that they appeared to have internalized society's mores.

British playwright Caryl Churchill combines text, dance, and music with historical themes to depict the erotic and political desires of characters, mostly women, who, because of the sociological forces that oppress them, are unable to realize their strongest ambitions. Churchill, a playwright with a sense of humor that at times borders

on the macabre, has experimented with various genres and narrative styles to convey her artistic vision. In plays like *Top Girls* (1982) and *Cloud Nine* (1983), Churchill favors an episodic approach toward narrative rather than relying upon intricate plot structures to advance the story. As a result, scenes are loosely connected and build upon one another to form a pattern that emphasizes the play's development rather than its climax.

Further Study

Elam, Harry J., Jr., and Robert Alexander, eds., *The Fire This Time: African-American Plays for the 21st Century*, Theatre Communications Group, 2004.

Taking their title from a collection of essays made famous by James Baldwin, Elam and Alexander have compiled an anthology of African-American plays that reflects a broad continuum of artistic styles and voices, from August Wilson to Kamilah Forbes and Hip-Hop Junction. Suzan-Lori Parks's *In the Blood*, a play about a homeless black woman and her children, is included.

Fornes, Maria Irene, *Plays: Mud, The Danube, The Conduct of Life, Sarita*, PAJ Publications, 1986.

The Cuban-American playwright Maria Irene Fornes, whose plays often engage audiences in unconventional ways, such as incorporating language instruction tapes and marionettes into a production, has been an important influence on the American theatre since the 1960s. Fornes avoids ideological constructs when composing her plays, focusing instead on the needs of her characters. Forness's avant-garde plays, stark and often lyrical, revolve around characters who search for meaning in their lives in the face of psychological tyranny.

Mahone, Sydné, *Moon Marked and Touched by Sun: Plays by African-American Women*, Theatre Communications Group, 1994.

Among the playwrights included in this anthology are Adrienne Kennedy, Thulani Davis, Kia Corthron, and Suzan-Lori Parks. Mahone emphasizes the shift that has occurred in black women's consciousness, one that has contributed significantly to the elimination of racial and sexual oppression within society. In her introductions to each work, Mahone includes in-depth interviews that illuminate the playwrights' perspectives on the role of the artist within a commercial theatre.

Smith, Anna Deavere, *Fires in the Mirror*, Anchor Books, 1993.

Based on interviews with people who witnessed New York City's 1991 Crown Heights racial riots, *Fires in the Mirror* presents, through a series of monologues, a wide variety of characters and insights that cast light on the racial attitudes dividing a city. By juxtaposing her characters' personalities, Anna Deavere Smith captures basic human truths in an artistic blend of theatre, journalism, and social commentary.

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