Wedding Band Study Guide

Wedding Band by Alice Childress

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Introduction

Although Alice Childress wrote *Wedding Band* (the full title of which is *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White*) in the early 1960s, the play was not performed professionally until 1966. There was interest in producing the play on Broadway, but because of its controversial subject matter the play remained largely unknown to audiences. Finally in 1972 *Wedding Band* was produced in New York for the first time. Subsequently, a New York Shakespeare Festival production of the play, based on Childress's screenplay, was broadcast by ABC in 1973; however, several ABC affiliates refused to carry the television production. The play examines the enduring nature of love between a white man and a black woman in 1918 South Carolina. *Wedding Band* confronts racism, but Childress reveals that racism is not only directed at blacks, but is also displayed by blacks. In the play, whites, Asians, and Jews are also victims of racism. Childress's depiction of an interracial love affair broke long-standing taboos on stage and television. While white critics argued that Herman should have been stronger and more determined to break away from southern racism, black cntics maintained that Childress should have focused her writing on a black couple. Childress's characters are not idealized human beings; they are the imperfect men and women of a real world. Rather than present audiences with a model for racial harmony, Childress exposes the reality of life for black and white Americans as she explores the frailty of a humanity so entrenched in maintaining rules and social lines that it forgets that there are lives at stake.

Author Biography

Alice Childress was born October 12, 1920, in Charleston, South Carolina. Childress, who dropped out of high school after two years, was raised in Harlem in New York City by her grandmother, Eliza Campbell. Campbell had only an elementary school education, but she was an accomplished storyteller and likely instilled in Childress an early interest in telling stories. Although her formal education ended early, Childress continued to educate herself during hours spent reading at the public library. She became interested in acting after hearing an actress recite Shakespeare and joined the American Negro Theatre (ANT) in Harlem when she was twenty years old. Childress was an actress and director with ANT for eleven years and appeared in some of their biggest hits, including *A Midsummer-Night's Dream, Natural Man*, and *Anna Lucasta*.

Childress wrote her first play, *Florence*, in 1949. This one-act play explored racial issues and was well received by critics and audiences. *Florence* examined the prejudices of both white and black characters and established the direction many of Childress's subsequent plays would take. She followed this early success with another play, *Just A Little Simple*, an adaptation of the Langston Hughes's novel, *Simple Speaks His Mind*. Childress's third play, written in 1952, *Gold Through The Trees*, became the first play by a black woman to be professionally produced on the American stage. Childress's next play, *Trouble in Mind*, focused on a topic she knew well, the difficulties black women faced as actresses. The play was very successful, and Childress became the first woman to win the *Village Voice* Obie Award (for the best original Off-Broadway play of the 1955-1956 season), A revised edition of this play was published in *Black Theatre: A Twentieth-Century Collection of the Work of Its Best Playwrights*, Childress next composed *Wedding Band* and *Wine in the Wilderness*; the latter was written for public television in 1969 and was the first play broadcast by WGBS Boston as part of a series "On Being Black." This was followed by a one-act play in 1969, *String*, an adaptation of the Guy de Maupassant story "A Piece of String." Another one-act play, *Mojo: A Black Love Story*, followed in 1970.

Childress continued to write plays, including two for children. *When the Rattlesnake Sounds* (1975) and *Let's hear it For the Queen* (1976). Childress also wrote several books; the first, 1986's *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*, was based on conversations with black domestic workers. She also wrote several novels for young adults, including *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But A Sandwich* (1973), *A Short Walk* (1979), *Rainbow Jordan* (1981), and *Those Other People* (1989).

Although Childress never attended college, she was much in demand as a lecturer and speaker at colleges. She was married twice and had a daughter from her first marriage. Childress died of cancer on August 14, 1994.

Plot Summary

Wedding Band depicts a tragedy involving an interracial affair. The action takes place over a period of three days near the end of World War I. The setting is 1918 South Carolina where state law prevents interracial marriage. Julia is a black woman in love with a white man, Herman. They would like to escape the south and move to the north where they would be free to marry, but Herman is not free to leave, since he must repay money borrowed from his mother when he purchased his bakery. As the play opens, Julia and Herman are celebrating ten years together. Faced with the disapproval of her neighbors, Julia has been forced to move several times; it is clear that she is lonely and discouraged. While the law poses the very real threat of arrest and criminal punishment for any interracial couple who marry or rive together, the condemnation of Julia's black neighbors is just as damaging and helps to reveal that racism is not only directed toward blacks but also toward whites.

In Act I, the audience is introduced to Julia's neighbors. Her landlady, Fanny, is a pretentious black woman who is revealed to be superficial and hypocritical. The other women who rent from Fanny, Lula, and Mattie, have been victimized by brutal husbands and have experienced personal tragedy. And it is clear that all of the women in this play have struggled against economic oppression and social injustice. In this first act, Julia's new neighbors ply her with questions about her personal life. To satisfy their curiosity, Julia tells them that she has been in love with a man for ten years but that she cannot marry him because he is white. Her neighbors cannot understand why Julia would choose a white man with no money and their disapproval is clear as they walk away from her. Next, Herman appears with a boxed wedding cake and a ring to celebrate their tenth common-law anniversary. The ring is mounted on a chain so that Julia might wear it, since they both realize that she cannot wear the gift as a wedding ring. Herman gives Julia enough money to buy a ticket to New York, and she makes plans to leave in two days. Herman states that he can repay his debts and join her in a year; in the interim, Julia can stay with her cousin. Herman and Julia begin to make plans for their wedding, but Act I ends with Herman becoming ill.

As Act JJ opens, Herman has influenza and has collapsed at Julia's home. The landlady refuses to call a doctor for fear of legal action directed against her for sheltering this couple; the landlady also fears that social disrepute will be aimed against everyone present, especially herself. Instead, Herman's sister and mother are sent for but Herman's mother will not move him until she has the protection of darkness. Like the landlady, Herman's mother is more interested in keeping up appearances than in saving Herman's life. Years of racial hatred explode in the room as Julia and Herman's mother shout racial insults at each other. Finally, Herman is taken away amid many accusations and much rancor.

The last scene opens with Julia dressed in her wedding dress. She seems artificially excited and there is evidence that she has been drinking wine. Julia is surrounded by her neighbors, and it is revealed that her neighbor Mattie is not legally married, since South Carolina does not permit divorce. Although her first husband had beaten and

deserted her, Mattie cannot be free of him so that she can marry the father of her child and the man with whom she has lived for eleven years. At this moment Herman arrives with two tickets to New York, but Julia is unable to forget the confrontation of the previous day or a lifetime of racial hatred, and so she gives the tickets and her wedding band to Mattie and her child. As Herman and Julia talk they remember the years of love and closeness, and they finally resolve the tensions that separated them. Herman is ill, however, and dying. Julia locks Herman's mother out of her house, and the play ends with Herman dying in his lover's arms.

Characters

Annabelle

Annabelle is Herman's sister and is in her thirties. She is evidently very tall and is happy to have finally found a man who is taller than she. She wants to marry Walter, but he is a common sailor, not an officer, and so not socially acceptable as a husband according to her mother. Annabelle wants Herman to break off from Julia and marry a white woman who can help care for their mother; she sees this as the only way she will ever be freed from her mother and able to marry Walter. Because she is German, Annabelle has been discriminated against and so places a sign in a window of her home proclaiming that her family is American. Annabelle is a war-time volunteer at the Naval hospital, but when Herman falls sick she is of little help; like her mother, she is also opposed to calling a doctor and wants to wait for the protection of darkness before moving Herman out of the black neighborhood.

Julia Augustine

Julia is a thirty-five year old black seamstress with an eighth grade education. She is lonely, isolated, and ashamed thai she is not respectably married. She is in love with Herman even though he has no money and is uneducated. She is a social outcast, not really a member of her own black race and certainly not welcomed by whites. She is showing the strain of ten years of social disapproval and isolation. She tries to free Mattie by giving her the tickets and the wedding band. For Julia, all white people are the enemy except for Herman.

Bell man

Bell man is a thirty year old white peddler who extends credit to his black female customers, and is owed money by most women in the neighborhood. He asks Julia for sex and offers to give her stockings in return.

Frieda

See Thelma

Lula Green

Like Julia and Mattie, Lula has also suffered economically and personally. Her husband chased women, abused her, and then died. Her young son died when he wandered in front of a train and was struck. Lula adopted Nelson from an orphanage after these deaths; she now channels all of her energy into caring for her adopted son and worries

about him excessively. She tries (o shelter Nelson from anyone she thinks might do him harm, even apologizing to bell man to protect her son from the peddler's anger. Lula makes paper flowers to earn extra money.

Nelson Green

Nelson is the adopted adult son of Lula. He is home on leave from the army and due to report back in a couple of days. He is filled with bravado but is really scared and intimidated. He recognizes that, as a black man, he has no real future. Should he survive his time at war, he will return to the same lack of opportunity, the same segregation, and the same hostility he has left; he will not even allow himself to hope that he might come back to something different. Nelson is so cowed by the system and his environment that even when a pail of dirty water is dumped on his head he reacts with apologies and is unable to assert himself. Nelson proposes to the woman he is courting, but she declines his proposal because, as she tells him, he has nothing to offer her.

Herman

Herman is a forty year old uneducated man, who is slightly graying. He is a poor but hardworking baker, is genuinely compassionate, and is trapped in South Carolina by the loan he received from his mother when he purchased the bakery. Herman seems to be the only character who does not see people in terms of race; he treats Julia and her black neighbors the same as he would treat any person of any color. Herman is caught between his mother's disapproval of Julia and his love for Julia, In one of the play's climactic scenes both women engage in a shouting match as Herman is dying from influenza.

Fannie Johnson

Fannie is Julia's landlady. Fannie wants to "represent her race in an *approved* manner." She is a nosy woman, full of pride, and pretends to belong to a better social class as a property owner. She fears a quarantine, social condemnation, and legal difficulties if a doctor is called for Herman. Fannie ingratiates herself to Herman's mother because each sees the other for she is, namely a pretentious social climber and hypocrite. Fannie propositions Nelson to live with her as a "business manager."

Mattie

Mattie is a very poor black woman with all the economic problems of a single mother. Her common-law husband, October, is away at sea in the merchant marines. She has a great deal of dignity and struggles to earn extra money making candy and babysitting a white child, Princess. She was deserted by her first husband who beat her, but she cannot divorce him because divorce is not legal in South Carolina. She has been with

October for eleven years and they have a daughter. When Mattie tries to claim her husband's merchant marine benefits, she is told their marriage is not valid, Julia frees Mattie when she gives her the two tickets to New York and her wedding band.

Princess

Princess is the eight year old white child who Mattie babysits, and who serves as a playmate for Teeta,

Teeta

Teeta is Mattie's eight year old daughter. As the play opens, Teeta is weeping because she has lost a quarter. Her desperate search for the lost money illustrates how scarce cash is for Mattie and reveals the poverty of her life.

Thelma

Herman's mother is a fifty-seven year old white woman who is bitter, miserable, and without love. She calls herself Thelma, but her real name is Frieda, a German name that she conceals out of fear of discrimination. Frieda is intolerant and would rather her son Herman die then be with Julia. Herman's job as a baker is a source of embarrassment for his mother as is Annabelle's romance with a common sailor; yet, Frieda is a sharecropper's daughter who pretends to belong to a higher social class. She reveals that she was not happy being married to a common man and that five of the seven children she bore were stillborn. She has loaned Herman $3,000 to buy his bakery, and this unpaid debt keeps him in South Carolina. Frieda believes in a racist ideology and is a supporter of the Ku IGux Klan. She so hates the black woman her son loves and is so repulsed by their relationship that she refuses to call a doctor for him. As she waits for the cover of darkness to move him from Julia's house, Frieda accuses Julia of stealing money from Herman's wallet. The women's shouting escalates into a horrific verbal battle of racial insults so intense that both Julia and Frieda seem to forget Herman's illness.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Alienation and loneliness are important themes in *Wedding Band*, because they accurately describe the reality of Julia's life. Because of her love for a white man, Julia is alienated from her own race. She is not accepted by black society and rejected by her own white culture, and she has been forced to move several times by prying neighbors who disapprove of her interracial love affair with Herman. Because marriage and cohabitation between blacks and whites is forbidden by South Carolina law, Julia must isolate herself or risk being prosecuted and punished by legal authorities.

Human Rights

Human Rights is an important issue, since the major conflict in *Wedding Band* is the result of social and racial injustice. Julia and Herman do not have the same rights under the law as a white couple or a black couple. Because their love crosses color lines, they confront the intolerance of society, which is represented by unjust laws. It is the desire to keep races separate that lies at the heart of laws that forbid interracial marriage. Wedding Band presents a convincing argument for the rights of all people to love one another and live together as equals.

Custom and Tradition

Julia and Herman represent a new order in the American south during the twentieth century. They are confronting a tradition of separation of the races with their love for one another. Social custom dictates that Julia should love and marry a black man. Even the law reinforces that custom, but in this play Julia attempts to establish the right to change custom and tradition.

Freedom

The inability to act on personal choice emphasizes the importance of freedom in *Wedding Band*, Julia and Herman lack the basic freedom to love and marry; laws circumvent that freedom, and consequently, this white man and black woman are forbidden personal choice in terms of whom they will love and marry.

Friendship

Julia's quickness in giving money to Mattie and in helping her read the letter from October illustrate how friendship is a theme in *Wedding Band*. It is Julia's need for friends that led her to move back into the city. Her isolation in the country, while

providing her with an element of protection from the law, resulted in a loneliness so profound that she was forced into risking social ostracism and legal consequences if her relationship with Herman was revealed. The theme of friendship is also important in a second way; it is the friendship of the women in this play Julia, Mattie, and Lula that forms a bond against the poverty and racism that permeates their lives.

Limitations and Opportunities

All of the characters in *Wedding Band* are limited by their location and by time in which they live. Julia lacks the opportunity to marry the man of her choice because the law sets limits on who can and who cannot marry. Herman cannot free himself from his mother and marry the woman he loves because he is limited by the terms of a loan he needs to repay. And although she has been abused and deserted by her first husband, Mattie cannot divorce legally. Her opportunity to marry her partner of eleven years and the father of her child is denied by law, and poverty limits her ability to move and thus seek the divorce she needs. Nelson is limited by the social conditions of the period which require him with to risk his life in the defense of his country but which deny him protection from the racism of his countrymen.

Prejudice and Tolerance

Prejudice and tolerance are important themes in *Wedding Band* because it is the community's intolerance and society's racism that keep Julia and Herman from marrying and from seeking medical attention for the dying Herman. And while it clear that Herman's mother is prejudiced against black people, it is also clear that the black characters in *Wedding Band* are suspicious of the white characters, particularly of Herman. Additionally, Julia's isolation from the community is the result of prejudice and intolerance. She lives alone, moves frequently, and has no friends because the world in which she lives has declared that whites and blacks cannot marry. The law that forbids their union serves to illustrate the depth of social intolerance and prejudice that characterized the south earlier in this century. There is even a prejudice within both white and black society based on class. Fannie sees herself as a step above her tenants because she is a property owner, and Herman's mother is opposed to her daughter's marriage to a "common sailor." Both Fannie and Herman's mother illustrate that subtle nuances of prejudice can be just as oppressive as the more obvious racial prejudices that create tension in this play.

Race and Racism

Race and racism serves as the most prominent theme of *Wedding Band*. It is racism that leads to Herman's death and to ten long years of denied love. Racism lies at the center of a law that prevents blacks and whites from inter-marrying. *Wedding Band* examines how legal authority and social custom serve as a force to maintain racism within society. There are also examples of other types of racism in the play. The

characters are intolerant of Jews, Germans, and of one another. The actions and words of the characters reveal that racism is more than white oppression of blacks; prejudice can also be found in black Americans' distrust of white Americans.

Style

Structure

Wedding Bandh a two act play. The exposition and complication are combined in the first act when the audience learns of the love between Julia and Herman and the issues that prevent their marriage. The climax occurs in the second act when Herman's mother confronts the two lovers. The catastrophe also occurs in this act when Julia and Herman are reconciled.

Conflict

The conflict is the issue to be resolved in the play. It usually occurs between two characters, but it can also occur between a character and society. Conflict serves to create tension in a plot, and indeed, it is often the motivating force that drive a plot. In *Wedding Band* , there is a clear conflict between Julia's love for Herman and the expectations of a society that forbids and even punishes the love between black and white partners. There is also conflict between Herman and his mother who disapproves of her son's love for Julia. And finally, Julia's isolation from her own race also represents the conflict between the expectations of black society and Julia's choice in loving a white man.

Empathy

Empathy is a sense of a shared experience and can include emotional and physical feelings with someone or something other than oneself Empathy, an involuntary projection of ourselves, is different from sympathy, which denotes a feeling for someone, rather than an understanding of his or her situation. For example, Mattie and Lula can sympathize with Julia who loves a man who cannot offer her marriage and protection, but they empathize when they reveal that they share the same experience, despite the fact that Julia is involved in an interracial relationship.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for *Wedding Band* is South Carolina in 1918. The action occurs over a period of three days near the end of the war. The women characters live in poverty, which is depicted by the circumstances of their homes.

Historical Context

Racism and Racial Intolerance

In 1966, Alice Childress addressed the lack of freedom that defined the lives of black Americans. In an essay published in *Freedomways*, Childress noted that immigrants arriving in the United States have more freedoms than African Americans: "We know that most alien visitors are guaranteed rights and courtesies not extended to at least one-fifth of American citizens." Childress argued that the story of the black woman has not been told by Hollywood or the popular press. It was the need to tell this story that motivated Childress's writing. In the 1960s blacks were still denied equality in education and in the right to vote. Neighborhoods, towns, and cities were segregated, and black Americans who wished to marry white Americans had to be able to pass as whites or face the punishment of laws that regulated marriage between the two races. Childress noted that children born to mixed couples were required to be registered as such at birth, and so a child's very existence provided the means to imprison his or her parents. Childress reminded her audience that the lives of black people were still controlled by a legal system dominated by white society. This was the reality of the world in which Childress composed *Wedding Band* in the early 1960s.

Although the action of *Wedding Band* takes place in 1918, the topic of interracial marriage was still so controversial in 1966 that Childress's play proved difficult to produce. It was not until 1973 that the play was performed in New York. Yet even then the controversial content of *Wedding Band* resulted in the refusal of several ABC affiliates to broadcast the production. Childress stated in the *Negro Digest* in 1967 that her play serves as a reminder that, for black women, the world of 1918 had changed little by 1966. That producers were so reluctant to produce *Wedding Band* and so sensitive to public opinion that the play languished for seven years before its New York debut lends credence to Childress's statement.

Miscegenation Law

The inspiration for *Wedding Band* was, in part, the miscegenation law that forbid the marriage or cohabitation of two individuals of different races. Yet even though interracial marriage was forbidden by law in the south, Julia could not have escaped segregation by fleeing to the north. In spite of the fact that her marriage to Herman would have been sanctioned legally in the north, social pressures and racism would still have served to ostracize Julia from the community. In fact, in 1966 laws forbidding interracial marriages were still on the books and being enforced in South Carolina.

Role of Women

After the end of the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, laws were passed in southern states proclaiming that all children born to black women were the responsibility

of the mothers only. The purpose of this law was to provide protection for slave owners from black women who might seek support for their children fathered by white slave owners. The result was that black women were abandoned to raise their children alone without any assistance from either black or white fathers. In the years following the war, women were free to find a black man willing to marry them and assume responsibility for their children; however, most African American men were in no position to support a family, having no access to education or wellpaying jobs. With laws designed to keep the African Americans separate from white society, access to parks, neighborhoods, education, and even drinking fountains ensured the subordination of blacks. Consequently, the first fifty years after the end of the civil war saw a series of laws enacted that served only to enslave African Americans with invisible chains forged out of prejudice and hatred. This lack of opportunity and the devastating poverty that ensued is dramatically illustrated in the opening scene of Wedding Band, in which the loss of a quarter represents the loss of significant income for Mattie. It is further depicted when Nelson's marriage offer is rejected because he has no future. Although he will risk his life defending his country as a soldier, he will return to South Carolina after the war and once again assume the position of subservience that has defined his behavior. His mother, Lula, asks Julia to reassure Nelson that he will return to a different world, one in which he will have opportunity and equality, but both Julia and Nelson recognize that his future after World War I is as limited as it was before the war. In short, he had no future and no opportunity in the American south.

Critical Overview

Wedding Band was largely ignored by critics and producers when it was written. Producers shied away from such controversial topics as interracial marriage and the miscegenation laws still in effect in many southern states. There was a rehearsed reading in 1963 and the play was optioned for Broadway by producers but after changing hands several times was not produced. The first production was at the University of Michigan in 1966 and received positive reviews. But it was not until late 1972 that *Wedding Band* was finally produced in New York before a larger audience. ABC finally presented a production of the play for television audiences in 1973; however, several ABC affiliates in the South banned the showing. In an article in *Melus*, Rosemary Curb reported that there is no clear explanation for why the play was ignored by American producers, since no producer told Childress directly that the subject was too controversial. However, Curb related that Childress herself thinks that the content was simply unpopular and speculated that there was little interest in the story of a middle-aged black woman.

When *Wedding Band* was first produced in New York in 1972, Childress was set to direct. *Southern Quarterly* contributor Polly Holhday asserted that Childress was quick to respond to the actors' concerns and suggestions and that Childress's rewriting always "enhanced the suggestion" of the actors. Holliday also observed that "the rewriting was always done with artistry, incorporating all her knowledge of form, rhythm and picturesque speech. She was, to my mind, a complete professional." However, as the play neared opening night there were problems, and Childress was dismissed as director; Joseph Papp, the director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, took over Still, much of Childress's direction was retained and the show opened to good reviews.

Wedding Band opened off-Broadway to slightly mixed reviews. While the critics were largely enthusiastic and applauded it as a play about black America that is not a "black play," it was also described as a story that could have been taken from a women's magazine. In an essay in *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*, Catherine Wiley noted that denying that the play is a "black play" reassures a potential audience that the play will not be of interest to only a black audience and assumes that white audiences would not be interested m seeing a play about black Americans. Of the review that assigned the play's content to the genre of "women's magazines," Wiley declared that the reviewer assumed that men would have no interest in a subject that focuses on issues of home and hearth. Wiley noted that the fact that none of the critics expressed any shock at the theme of miscegenation was because the New York production occurred six years after the initial Michigan performance, implying that the lack of interest m this play was a reaction to the play's content, although no reviewer would say so in print.

Both black and white critics of the play offered different reactions to *Wedding Band*. Some black reviewers criticized Childress for not having Julia reject Herman, and they argued that Childress should have depicted a black couple's struggle and not focused on the problems of interracial love. And several white critics argued that Herman should

have been a stronger individual with the power to reject his mother and a willingness to move North to be with the woman he loved so very much. However, it has also been noted that both black and white critics ignore the fact that Childress is portraying the real world that people experience and not the idealized world of positive models. In *Wedding Band* Childress is suggesting that despite poverty, racism, and social ostracism, loving relationships can survive.

In an interview with Shirley Jordan in her *Broken Silences: Interviews with Black and Women Writers*, Childress was asked if she had felt pressured by a publisher, editor, or audience to portray a particular kind of character or theme, particularly with respect to women's and racial issues. Childress's responded:

Oh you get pressure Everyone gets pressure and if you ignore it or pay it no mind, they squirm loose from you or try to get it changed themselves or interfere with it in some way or let you alone. It's not so much that they disagree with you The commercial world is very smart They know the place from whence rejection will come. If you show your work to that place where finance will be provided they know what they're doing Discrimination, racism, prejudice is not what is called a loose cannon It's a well-organized thing. They'll say 'Don't you think maybe you can do without this17' But what is your main point You think, Til give in on this and give in on that and save this one to go straight on down the middle to the heart of my subject' That's the one they'll find on page 52 Never think they're so dumb they don't see it We share that with sisters of any race and some brothers too

It is clear from the lengthy efforts to get *Wedding Band* produced that Childress was not willing to compromise her integrity to popular culture. The reviews of the critics and the decision by certain ABC affiliates did not result in a play that ignored the reality of miscegenation; rather, the play depicts the realities of racism.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is an adjunct professor at Embry-Riddle University. In this essay she examines some of the ways in which American society discriminates against African Americans particularly black women. She also discusses the manner in which Childress's play deals with these issues.

Alice Childress noted in a 1966 essay in *Freedomways* that America extends basic rights and opportunities to foreign visitors and to immigrants that are not offered to black Americans. She reminded her readers that visitors may "travel, without restriction, reside in hotels, eat at restaurants and enter public and private places closed to Americans who have built up the country under bondage and defended it under a limited and restricted liberty." This is the injustice that Childress illuminates m her play *Wedding Band*. Childress maintained in a 1993 interview with Shirley Jordan in *Broken Silences: Interviews with Black and Women Writers* that Americans who say they know nothing about racism are failing to look beyond the obvious. When Fanny Johnson says "Don't make it hard for me with your attitude. Whites like me. When I walk down the street, they say "There she goes' Fanny Johnson, representing her people in an *approved* manner," what is really happening is that Fanny is as trapped by the system as the poorest black single mother. Fanny is judged as a black person who is trying to better herself according to white society's criteria, but Childress is saying that Fanny should be establishing her strength as a black woman and not as a black woman trying to be white or trying to please whites. The nuances are subtle, but are crucial to understanding the relationship between *Wedding Band* and racism, for it is through the actions and words of the play's primary characters that the audience is forced to recognize and acknowledge the injustice of a system that denies opportunity to African Americans. This is especially evident in the actions of Nelson; he is so cowed by a racist system and so afraid of its consequences diat he cannot protest when a bucket of water is dumped on him. He cannot protest when the woman he is seeing rejects him because he has no future; he can only acknowledge the truth of her opinion. Childress's play makes clear that Nelson is at greater risk from his white neighbors than he is from enemy fire during war. The tragedy of *Wedding Band* is that so little has changed for blacks between the time of the play's setting in 1918 and its initial production in 1966. It is this illumination of racism and its legacy that demonstrates the play's importance in the literary canon.

But *Wedding Band* does have an important message to be heard. And, according to Catherine Wiley in her essay in *Modem American Drama: the Female Canon*, the play presents a directive to white feminists that sexism cannot be separated from racism. Human rights are the greater issue of the play, not women's rights. Wiley argued for the inclusion of Childress's play in the literary canon because it functions as a "history lesson pointed at white women to remind them and us, in 1966 or now, that our vision of sisterly equality has always left some sisters out." Wiley maintained that white women need to read the texts of black women in the same way that white men have been forced to read the texts of white women: "Rather than seeing myself reflected in their work, I want to understand why my difference makes these plays a challenge to read."

Childress does not separate the issue of women's rights from human rights, for her the two are inexorably bound. In *Wedding Band*, Julia's problems are not only the miscegenation laws; rather, her isolation from the black community, especially the community of women, lies at the heart of the play. But for white women who early saw a link between women's rights and the abolishment of segregation, the focus has shifted to women's rights as a primary concern. Wiley argued that white women need authors like Childress included in the literary canon because she reminds us all that women's rights and human rights cannot be separated. When Julia's love for Herman makes her vulnerable to the advances of the white peddler, she is reduced to being just another black woman who prefers a white man. "This scene," Wiley declared, "points to the inseparability of racism and sexism, an issue that cannot be isolated from the historical relationship of the civil rights and women's liberation movements. The fallacy of *sisterhood* as word was used in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s lay in its assumption that oppression was universal." But black women face oppression on two fronts: they are discriminated against both as women and as African Americans. *Wedding Band* is important because it exposes both these problems and illustrates that Julia's need extends beyond her love for Herman. Consequently, the play is not only about Julia's love for a white man, it is also about her love for and her need to be loved by black women.

Wedding Band is also about survival, especially the survival of women. Although Herman dies at the play's conclusion, it is clear that Julia is strong enough to survive. Victims' ability to survive, according to Rosemary Curb in her article in *Melus*, is a result of the racism that permeates their lives. The prejudices of society surround Julia; her neighbors are intolerant of Germans, Jews, Chinese, whites, and certain blacks. In this play, Childress constructs both black and white characters who are petty and narrow-minded. But their behavior arises from their fear, and it is clear that both blacks and whites have much to fear. Herman's mother fears being exposed as German at a time when Germans are feared and ostracized; she also fears the loss of the slight social status she has acquired. Her daughter, Annabelle, fears she will lose her one chance at happiness, and so her prejudice toward Julia is more a function of her desire to escape, which she feels can only occur if Herman marries a white woman. Fanny fears losing the respect that being a property owner has bestowed upon her. And while Lula fears losing her adopted son to the violence of war and racism, Mattie fears losing the name and protection of a man. But the fear is greater for black women who have little protection from injustice, violence, or white society. Still, in spite of the poverty that threatens to envelop their lives, these women manage to earn a meager existence and they endure. The audience knows that it will be difficult, but these black women will survive. Their words and actions belie the prejudices that surround them, but as Curb remarked, "if an all-pervasive racism has conditioned the women to be suspicious of white cordiality, it has also toughened them with the stamina necessary for survival." In asserting that Wedding Band belongs in the literary canon, Curb says of the play: "Although all of Childress's published work deserves to be read, *Wedding Band* is her finest and most serious piece of literature and deserves comparison with the most celebrated American tragedies. Like Childress's other plays, it features an ordinary black woman past her prime. What we have here is that Julia's soul-searching in the midst of her moral dilemmas takes place on stage; her confusion is fully dramatized.

The problems which face Mia are complicated by a convergence of historical and political dilemmas with which a woman of her education and conditioning is ill prepared to cope. That she and the other flawed women in *Wedding Band* survive is tenuous but believable." It is this depiction of real people and real problems that makes *Wedding Band* an important resource for understanding twentieth-century racism.

But *Wedding Band* is more than a play about racism. In her *Southern Quarterly* essay, Gayle Austin maintained that what Childress did in all her plays was to "break down the binary opposition so prevalent in western society black/white, male/ female, north/south, artist/critic with their implications that one is superior to the other." (Binary oppositions are the tendency to see issues as pairs of good and bad or simply as opposites inclusive of other ideas.) Instead, by viewing characters and situations that are innately flawed, Childress's audience is forced to acknowledge that there are no clear answers, no simple right or wrong. Herman's mother is not an evil woman simply because she is willing to sacrifice her son's life if it means preserving the sanctity of her position. Rather she is revealed as weak and unhappy (note that she has lost five children to stillbirth, endured an oppressive marriage, and a childhood of poverty as a sharecropper's daughter). Although cast in the role of villain, her fear and self-loathing declare her more victim than villain. And Childress has made it clear that Herman and Julia do not fit the pattern of romantic lovers found elsewhere in literature; they are not like Romeo and Juliet. They are a middle-aged, uneducated couple who lack the strength and ability to escape the confines of the south. But as Herman's mother reminds them, there is no escape in the north. The north may be more integrated than the south, but racism, segregation, and the lack of an economic future will follow them if they try to escape. Consequently, as Austin noted, there is no clear delineation in Childress's play. The characters and the situations are more complex than the stereotypes of binary opposition would permit.

Source: Shen Metzger, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Wiley discusses both racial and feminist issues as they pertain to Wedding Band.

In the first act of *Wedding Band*, a scene of reading and performance occurs that lies at the center of a feminist interpretation of the play. Mattie, a black woman who makes her living selling candy and caring for a little white girl, has received a letter from her husband in the Merchant Marine and needs a translator for it. Her new neighbor, Julia, the educated outsider trying to fit into working-class surroundings, reads the sentimental sailor's letter aloud. After her performance, in which the women listening have actively participated, Mattie tells Julia that, in addition to his love, her husband gives her what is more important, his *name and protection*. These two standards of conventional love are denied Julia because her lover of ten years is white; and even Mattie learns that because she never divorced her first husband, she is not now legally married and cannot receive marital war benefits. Neither woman enjoys a man's name or his protection, in part because the chivalry implied in such privilege was unattainable for blacks in the Jim Crow society of 1918 South Carolina. The women in *Wedding Bandl&am* to depend on themselves and each other rather than on absent men, a self-reliance born painfully through self-acceptance.

Wedding Band received mixed reviews when it opened off-Broadway in 1972. It was described both as the "play about black life in America that isn't a 'black' play"(Martin Gottfried in *Women's Wear Daily*, October 10,1972) and too much "like a story wrenched from the pages of what used to be known as a magazine for women" (Douglas Walt in *New York Daily News*, November 27, 1972). Interesting for their racist and sexist connotations, these comments betray the reviewers' uncritical assumptions about who constitutes a theater audience. The play doesn't look "black" because its integrationist subtext surfaces only occasionally and its political urgency is dressed safely in realistic period costume. New York theater patrons of 1972 applauding the drama as entertainment alone could assure themselves that the play' s World War I setting depicted a reality long past. The first reviewer assumes that a "black" play, one that speaks primarily to a black audience, is implicitly alien and uninteresting to a white audience. Representations of so-called minority lives told from a minority point of view cannot interest the rest of us, if we are white. Likewise, the pages of a women's magazine would bore us if we were men, because they focus on the small, private issues of home and heart. And although none of the liberal reviewers profess any shock over the play's important theme of miscegination, no New York producers would touch *Wedding Band* until 1972, six years after it was written and first performed, attesting to the subject's unpopularity.

My reading of the play argues that its subject is less interracial heterosexual relations than the relations between black women and between black women and white women in World War I era South Carolina. That said, I must add that I perceive a certain danger in trying to read feminist rather than racial politics into Alice Childress's play. White feminists must take care not to offer our own invaluable "name and protection" to black

women writers who do not need them. For a feminist criticism that is not limited to the privileged location of many of its practitioners, it is crucial that white feminists read the work of black women, especially those like Childress who have been all but ignored in academic theater. We might read in the same spirit of canon disruption inspiring the informal creation of a women's literary counter-canon, recognizing that in the same way white women writers were denied membership in the old canon on the basis of "greatness," we may be guilty of blocking black women writers for the same reason. The value of a literary text cannot be defined out of context. White readers should try to decentralize our historically majority context to see ourselves, for once, in the margins with respect to the Afro-American women's literary tradition. I recognize with dismay the truth of Hortense J. Spillers's statement: "When we say 'feminist' with an adjective in front of it, we mean, of course, white women, who, as a category of social and cultural agents, fully occupy the territory of feminism." But does including Afro-American women writers in the canon ... imitate a colonizing gesture? Am I offering the protection of the canon to Alice Childress, protection on the canon's (and for now, white women's) terms? Instead of attempting to answer these questions now, I can only say that I am beginning to learn to read black women's plays in the same way many feminists ask men to read women's texts. Rather than seeing myself reflected in their work, I want to understand why my difference makes these plays a challenge to read....

Set chronologically midway between the poles of Reconstruction and civil rights, *Wedding Band* describes an era when lynching presented one answer to demands for equality in the south, while Harlem flowered as a mecca for black culture in the north. In the 1960s, white women and black men's sexual relations generated tension in the black community, but miscegenation as the white master's rape of his slave retains deeper historical ramifications for black women. Childress's drama, subtitled "a love/hate story in black and white," takes place on the tenth anniversary of Julia and her white lover in the small backyard tenement to which Julia has moved after being evicted from countless other houses. Determined to get along with her nosy but well-meaning neighbors, Julia seems to have won a guarded acceptance until her lover, Herman, visits her. He has brought her a gold wedding band on a chain, and they plan to buy tickets on the Clyde Line to New York, where Julia will proudly and legally bear Herman's name. But Herman succumbs to the influenza epidemic, and in the second act he lies in Julia's bed waiting for his mother and sister to take him to a white doctor. Julia's landlady has refused to help because it is illegal for Herman to be in Julia's house, and she cannot appear to sanction Julia's immoral behavior. Herman's mother sides with the landlady in preserving respectability even at the cost of her son's life, and she will not carry him to the doctor until it grows dark enough to hide him. In the last scene, Herman returns to Mia with the boat tickets, which she refuses to take because his mother has convinced her that blacks and whites can never live together. Finally she appears to relent so that Herman can die believing that Julia, even without him, will go north.

The secondary characters, however, more than the two lovers, underscore the drama's didactic politics. They are types, but not stereotypes, and their separate dilemmas and personalities describe the injustices blacks have endured in the south. The landlady, Fanny, the neighbors Mattie and Lula, Lula's adopted son, Nelson, and the abusive

white traveling salesman give the stage community a historical idiosyncrasy missing from Julia and Herman's relationship. Fanny has proudly joined the middle-class by acquiring property and exploiting her tenants (in 1918 a relatively new possibility for black women) in the name of racial uplift. As homeworkers, Mattie and Lula exist bound to a variety of semi-skilled, low-paying jobs to feed their children. Nelson, as a soldier in the newly desegregated United States army, assumes that when the war is over he will be given the rights of a full citizen, even in South Carolina. He is a forerunner of the militant youth who would later provide the impatient voice to the nascent civil rights movement of the late 1940s, and whose dreams of integration would be realized only partially in the 1960s.

These characters who inhabit Miss Fanny's backward tenement underscore the vexed issue of difference as explored by the feminist scholars cited above. Julia's problem throughout the play is less her white lover than her reluctance to see herself as a member of the black community. Although a mostly white theater audience would see her as a different sort of heroine because of race, her black neighbors perceive her as different from them for issues more complex than skin color. She assumes that her racial transgression with Herman will make her unwelcome among the women she wishes to confide in, but her aloofness from their day-to-day interests also serves as a protective shield. In this, Julia is similar to Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's *The Street*, written in 1946. Both characters are ostensibly defined by their unequal relations with men, but their potential for salvation lies in the larger community that depends on the stability of its women. Lutie Johnson is so determined to move off "the street" in Harlem she thinks is pulling her down that she refuses to join the community Harlem offers her, a community that in some ways defies the white society keeping it poor. Neither poor nor uneducated, Julia finds herself defying the black community by asserting her right to love a white man, but his self-assertion is, in a larger sense, a more dangerous defiance of the white community. She wants her love story to be one of individual commitment and sacrifice, but it is that only in part. Julia's refinement in manners, education, and financial independence, which are middle-class, traditionally white attributes, make her and Herman available to each other. But theirs is, as the subtitle insists, a "love/ hate" story, in which interracial love cannot be divorced from centuries of racial hate....

The urgency of integration as a method of combatting such engrained hatred marks Julia's turning point in the play. After Herman and his family are gone, she must face her own difficult reintegration into the community of Fanny's backyard. As the women prepare to escort Nelson to his proud participation in the soldiers' parade, the air of festivity inspires Lula and Julia to perform an impromptu strut dance to the music of Jenkin's Colored Orphan Band. They discover a small common space in the mutual performance of a "*Carolina folk dance passed on from some dimly-remembered African beginning*." Later, to send Nelson on his way, Lula begs Julia to give him a farewell speech telling him "how life's gon' be better when he gets back ... Make up what *should* be true," whether Julia believes in her performance or not. Julia makes a speech proclaiming the abolition of the "no-colored" signs after the war and the new lives of respect awaiting Nelson and October after their return home. Although the stage directions do not specify this, according to reviews of the play, she addresses these words directly to the audience. Edith Oliver, writing for the *New Yorker*, called the

speech "dreadful ... like something out of a bad Russian movie," in part because by addressing the audience Julia moves the issue of racism north of the Mason-Dixon line. Breaking the fourth wall or realism brings the drama out of its historical context of 1918 into the present and makes Julia's words about integration harder for a northern audience to ignore.

At the end of the play, Julia gives her wedding band and boat tickets to Mattie and her daughter, finally admitting that "You and Teeta are my people... my family." But the gesture is compromised by its implication that the only choice for Afro-Americans is to leave their homes in the South. It was still illegal for blacks and whites to marry in South Carolina in 1966, but, despite the laws, by that time blacks had already begun to reclaim their homes. As Alice Walker argues in her essay "Choosing to Stay at Home," one thing Martin Luther King gave his people was the possibility of returning to the South they or their parents or grandparents had left. The civil rights movement recreated the South as a site of militant resistance, resistance enacted equally by black women and men. Set in South Carolina and staged in Michigan and New York, *Wedding Band* provides a site of resistance like the political movement from which it grew. Julia's decision to stay at home, to keep her own name, makes the spectator witness to her newfound ability to celebrate, as she says, her "own black self."

Despite her helplessness regarding her mother, Annabelle, the literal "white sister" in the play, is a character who, like Julia and Nelson, embodies hope for the future in the South. Like the audience, she witnesses Julia's articulation of her newly-won independence. Julia's curtain speech with Herman dying in her arms escapes sentimentality only through the staging of Annabelle's mute participation in it. Julia and Herman remain inside Julia's house, after she simply but irrevocably bars Annabelle, Herman's mother, and Fanny from entering. Everyone leaves the stage except for Annabelle, who moves toward the house, listening to Julia's words to her brother. Without entering the house, to which the black woman has denied her access, she hears the other woman's words and so manages to share silently the loss of Herman without translating it into white terms. As Julia comforts Hennan by describing their pretend journey north on the Clyde Line Boat together, she says, "We're takin' off, ridin' the waves so smooth and easy ... There now ... on our way...." Julia and Herman are not on their way, but perhaps Julia and Annabelle will someday be on *their* way to mutual respect. I can only read these words as a directive to the audience of college students at the University of Michigan in 1966, empassioned with the growing fervor of the anti-war and women's liberation movements and prepared in their innocence to change the world. They cannot do it, *Wedding Band* gently but firmly insists, as gently and firmly as Julia closes her door on the other women, without a renewed commitment to civil rights for all people in the United States, in the South as well as in the North. Sisterhood, especially from the point of view of white women learning to understand black women, begins with listening, not to what one wants to hear but to what is being said.

Source: Catherine Wiley, "Whose Name, Whose Protection- Reading Alice Childress's *Wedding Band*" in *Modem American Drama- The Female Canon*, edited by June Schlueter, Associated University Presses, 1990, pp 184-85, 187-89,194-96

Critical Essay #3

In this review o/The Wedding Band, *Clurman states that despite minor flaws, Childress's work offers trenchant realism and qualifies as a significant piece of theatre*.

Clurman is highly regarded as a director, author, and longtime drama critic for the Nation. *He was an important contributor to the development of the modem American theater as a cofounder of the Innovative Group Theater, which served as an arena for the works of new playwrights and as an experimental workshop for actors. Along with Lee Strasberg, he is credited with bringing the technique known as "method acting" to the fore in American film and theatre*.

Alice Childress' *Wedding Band* has an authenticity which, whatever its faults, makes it compelling both as script and performance. The locale is some place near Charleston, S.C., during the last days of World War I. The play tells of a frustrated love; one that has endured for ten years between a black woman, Julia Augustine, and Herman, a white man who is a baker of humble means. They have not been able to marry because such mixed unions were illegal at the time. They both hope to escape the trap of their existence by going North, but poverty prevents them.

The play's basic theme emerges from the portrayal not only of the bigoted opposition of Herman's family, with its vile Klan spirit, but just as saliently m the suspicion and fear with which the blacks confront the two lovers. Herman, on the verge of death during the influenza epidemic which raged at the time, proves his deep attachment to Julia by buying her a ticket to New York even as he lies helpless, still in the grip of his wretched family. She on the other hand, though convinced of his love and freedom from racial bias, despairs of overcoming the barriers between them.

There is an honest pathos in the telling of this simple story, and some humorous and touching thumbnail sketches reveal knowledge and understanding of the people dealt with. The fact that black and white interrelationships have somewhat changed since 1918 does not make the play less relevant to the present. Constitutional amendments and laws do not immediately alter people's emotions; the divisions and tensions which *Wedding Band* dramatizes still exist to a far more painful extent than most of us are willing to admit.

Evidence of this was furnished at the last preview of the play. A black man attempted to heckle the performance. What apparently provoked the outburst was his refusal to accept the sentimentality he found in the treatment of a close tie between a black and a white. He would not countenance it: he felt it an indignity, indeed an insult to the black race.

James Broderick as Herman conveys the character's inner rectitude and hurt with utmost simplicity and truthfulness. He *really* listens to his acting partners, something which cannot be said of many actors of greater acclaim. Ruby Dee too is affecting in her commitment to the man who has shown her deep regard and tenderness as well as in

her tormented revulsion from him as part of the community which has victimized her people. Everyone in the cast is right. Special commendation should be accorded to Jean Davis as Herman's mother a stupefied racist who would be totally abhorrent were it not for the reality of pain with which the actress endows the character. Polly Holliday, as Herman's maiden sister, shows considerable delicacy in communicating the wound of doubt within the girl's narrowness. Apart from the various players' individual abilities, commendation for the general excellence of the acting must go to the Charleston-born author in conjunction with Joseph Papp.

Source: Harold Clurman, in a review of *The Wedding Band* in the *Nation*, November 13,1972, pp. 475-76.

Adaptations

Wedding Band was adapted for television by the American Broadcasting Company in 1973. Childress wrote the screenplay for the ABC production.

Topics for Further Study

Study miscegenation laws in the south and discuss their purpose and effectiveness in keeping blacks and whites separate.

Investigate the role of black men serving in the U.S military during World War I. Pay special attention to the role of segregation within the military ranks.

In *Wedding Band* Herman buys two tickets to New York, but cannot use them because blacks and whites must be separated on the boat. Research segregation laws and the effect they had on public transportation, paying special attention to when the laws were enacted and for what purpose.

Wedding Band demonstrates that the issue of single motherhood is not a new problem; Childress argues in an interview that laws enacted after the Civil War almost guaranteed that black women would be raising their children as single parents. Study the origins of this problem beginning with the laws enacted after the Civil War that gave black women the sole responsibility for supporting their children.

Compare and Contrast

1918: Private Alvin York leads an attack on a German machine gun nest that kills 25 of the enemy. He captures 132 prisoners and 35 machine guns, is promoted to sergeant, and is awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. York was drafted in spite of his status as a conscientious objector.

1966: International Days of Protest in many world cities criticize U.S. policy in Vietnam.

Today: Twenty-two years after the end of the Vietnam war, the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington D.C. has become the most popular tourist attraction in the city.

1918: A resolution providing for a U.S. Women's Suffrage Amendment to the Constitution passes in the House of Representatives, but the Senate rejects the measure for the third time.

1966: Governor Wallace signs a bill forbidding Alabama's public schools to comply with the Office of Education's desegregation guidelines.

Today: Oprah Winfrey, an African American television personality and actress, is one of the highest paid performers and richest women in the United States. She is one of many African Americans who have been able to succeed, despite the fact that racism remains a prevalent American societal problem.

1918: Nearly twenty-five percent of all Americans fall ill from the Spanish Influenza; 500,000 die, including 19,000 in New York. Coffin supplies are exhausted in Baltimore and Washington.

1966: Inadequate health care and poor nutrition among expectant mothers in low income groups are responsible for an infant mortality rate in the U.S. that exceeds that of Britain and Sweden.

Today: Health care continues to be a problem for the nation's poor who have little access to health insurance. New welfare reform laws have further eroded the ability of the poor to seek medical attention and thus the U.S. continues to have the highest infant mortality rate of first world countries.

1918: Al Jolson sings "My Mammy" at the Winter Garden Theatre in the opening of the production *ofSinbad*.

1966: The television drama *Star Trek* has its debut on NBC with a cast that included a black woman in a role of the communications officer. Nichelle Nichols provides young black women with one of the few positive role models in television.

Today: The movie *Rosewood* opens in theatres with a story of racism and the destruction of a small town in post-World War I Florida.

What Do I Read Next?

Florence (1949), Alice Childress's first play, focuses on two women waiting in a train station. While Mama's interactions with the other characters serve to reveal the nature of racial prejudice, the play also examines basic assumptions regarding the public's treatment of women and the elderly.

Wine in the Wilderness (1969), also by Alice Childress, examines what it means to be a black American in a segregated and racist society. The play examines several of the issues touched upon in *Wedding Band*, including single motherhood and the lack of opportunity faced by black men.

A Raisin in the Sun (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry also explores segregation, racism, and the lack of economic opportunities that beset black Americans. The integration of white neighborhoods by minority families is still an important issue nearly forty years after this play was first produced.

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) examines what it means to grow up black and female in America. Morrison explores how white standards of beauty affect young black girls, and she looks at the nature of the relationship between black and white women.

Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), details her childhood in rural Arkansas. Readers are forced to confront racism and segregation as the author confronts these realities, but they are also exposed to the importance of family in shaping the black experience.

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens (1974) by Alice Walker is an autobiographical essay that argues for the importance of matrilineage in the growth of a young black girl.

The Color Purple (1982), also by Alice Walker, is a fictional look at the effects of segregation and racism on blacks. The novel and the 1985 film adaptation celebrate the strength of black women.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, editor. *Modern Black American Poets and Dramatists*, Chelsea House, 1995, pp 51-63

Bloom assembles excerpts of critical discussions and reviews of Childress's work.

Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth. "Black Women Playwrights-Exorcising Myths" in *Phylon*, Vol. 48, no, 3, Fall, 1987, pp. 229-39.

A critical comparison of Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Ntozake Shange, three black women playwrights.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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