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FOUR AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE  
PLAYWRIGHTS, 1910-1950: THE NARRATIVES  
OF THEIR HISTORICAL, GENTEEL, AND  
BLACK FOLK VOODOO PLAYS

by

SAMUEL CHRISTIAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1995

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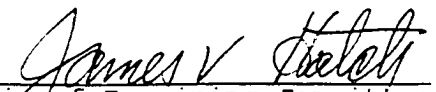
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

FOUR AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS, 1910-1950:  
THE NARRATIVES OF THEIR HISTORICAL, GENTEEL, AND  
BLACK FOLK VOODOO PLAYS

by

Samuel Christian

Adviser: Professor James V. Hatch

This dissertation is a critical analysis of the dramatic structure and historical significance of the narratives of plays by four African American female dramatists. The historical, genteel, and Black folk voodoo one-act plays of May Miller Sullivan, Eulalie Spence, Thelma Myrtle Duncan, and Shirley Graham Du Bois were chosen for three common factors--education, publication, and subject matter. Twenty-one one-act plays and one three-act play by Graham are examined. Several unpublished manuscripts of Miller and Duncan that are available at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Washington, D. C. and the Hatch-Billops Collection, New York, N. Y. are also included.

Although there are several scholarly theatre studies that concentrate on the African American in the early 1900s, few have discussed female dramatists. The portrayals of strong voodoo worshippers as characters have been ignored in African American theatre scholarship. The plays with historical and genteel themes have been included in this dissertation because the roots of Black folk voodooism lies within the common folk.

These four significant pioneers were all educators--high school and college professors--essayists, and dramatists. Their platform for the production of these works was usually the school auditorium or the university theatre. The plays of Miller, Duncan, Spence, and Graham were meant "to be read" and then "to be performed;" now it is time for their plays and the secret society of Voodooism "to be celebrated."

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who helped in the creation of this dissertation.

I am deeply appreciative of the support and encouragement given to me by my committee chair, James V. Hatch. Professor Hatch insisted that I stop moving circumspectly with my research and guided me toward a "do-able" thesis with a happy ending. I am especially grateful to Professors Judith Milhous and Miriam D'Aponte who helped in matters of form. Professor Milhous assured me that my offering was significant from the beginning of my academic career at the Graduate Center, CUNY. Professor D'Aponte also supported my thesis and gave me constructive criticism as well as words of wisdom. Professor Emeritus Gordon Rogoff deserves a special thanks for suggesting I begin a journey in African American women playwrights during my Masters studies at Brooklyn College.

A word of thanks goes to Joellen ElBashir of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, who mailed manuscripts to me and saved me a trip to Washington, D. C. I am also thankful for the research suggestions I received from Kathy A. Perkins of the University of Illinois-Champaign.

I cannot forget the encouragement given to me by my parents, Samuel and Lucy Elizabeth Christian. My mother listened to me read chapters to her over the phone and gave me words of comfort when I called and screamed, "I don't think I'll ever finish this epic." I must also thank my guardian angel who still reigns supreme over her loving family on earth. This is in memory of you, Grandma! I can proudly say there is validity and rich rewards in Black folk beliefs.

Finally, I thank Joseph R. Korevec, my partner and research assistant, who typed until his fingers were tired. He never allowed me to return to my safe haven where the circumspect, procrastinating scholar dreams of what he can do but remains a phantom.

## CONTENTS

Abstract.....		iv
Acknowledgements.....		v
Chapter I	Introduction: The Voice of the Early African American Female Playwright .....	1
Chapter II	An Overview of the African American Female Playwright in the United States, 1910-1950 : Her Social History, Economics, and Theatre.....	11
Chapter III	May Miller [Sullivan]: Trailblazing Suspense. Plays From the Palace to the Poolhall.....	35
Chapter IV	Thelma Myrtle Duncan: Voodoo and New Discoveries--Magic, Mayhem, and Miscalculations .....	76
Chapter V	Eulalie Spence: Domestic Comedies and Folk Dramas. The African American Woman Exempt from Proper Decorum .....	110
Chapter VI	Shirley Graham Du Bois: Creating the Classic American Play.....	139
Chapter VII	Common Ground: A View of African American History through Drama .....	171
Bibliography .....		188

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION: THE VOICE OF THE EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE PLAYWRIGHT

There is a limited library of African American theatre criticism and an even smaller selection of true scholarship, especially in regard to early African American female playwrights. Most scholars are aware of the historical restrictions on people of color. Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., an African American theatre historian concurs:

Both slavery and racial prejudice are certainly among the factors that hindered blacks from utilizing the stage as a medium for the expression of their political, intellectual, and social concerns. The playwright has always needed the formal or informal trappings of the stage to exercise his talents and to develop artistically. . . . There were no such opportunities for slaves to exercise the art of playwriting.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are several scholarly theatre studies that concentrate on the African American in the early 1900s, few have discussed female dramatists. Some scholars have examined several African American women's works, for example, a doctoral dissertation by Patricia A. Young, "Female Pioneers in Afro-American Drama: Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Mary Powell Burrill" (Bowling Green State University, 1986). Gloria T. Hull's Color, Sex, and Poetry (1982) primarily focuses on Dunbar-Nelson, Grimké, and Johnson's poetry and fiction with brief synopses of their dramatic works. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's Their Place on the Stage (1988) includes the work of May Miller without major critical analysis or a discussion of the historical significance of her plays. The works of these women and others have been bibliographically compiled

and some of them anthologized for what Peterson calls their "truthful dramatizations of the lives and concerns of black people on the American stage, while also attempting to correct the distorted images and stereotypes that have too long been perpetuated by writers who lacked a true knowledge of the black experience." <sup>2</sup> There is another group of historians who have successfully rediscovered lost plays and have been given permission to use manuscripts in historically significant anthologies. These are all honorable projects, but white and African American scholars have yet to perform a critical analysis/dramatic criticism of the new library of pioneer work, especially plays which use or employ Black folk voodooism.

The works of these four dramatists which I have included in this study offer clear examples of the genres of historical, genteel, and Black folk voodoo dramas. The selected plays of May Miller are predominantly historical but also exemplify the other two genres. Duncan's and Spence's one acts strongly represent the genteel school, and Graham's works encapsulate all three genres. These four women chose to depict their race in the dramatic form. They comprise a chorus on common ground illustrating the historical, economical, educational, social, familial, and cultural beliefs of people of color. James V. Hatch (Black Theater U.S.A.) explains that the historical plays were written "to liberate the Black audience from an oppressive past, to present a history that provides continuity, hope, and glory. Such feelings and knowledge have positive survival value for the race." <sup>3</sup> Miller's Harriet Tubman (1935) and Graham's It's Mornin' (1940) are two examples of the plays that were written to teach African Americans, especially the children, about the heroes and heroines of their race. Harriet Tubman, for example, illustrates the plight of the courageous heroine from slavery to freedom via the Underground Railroad.

There is also an abundance of genteel plays written by these particular dramatists. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory defines the folk tradition "which stresses the lives of common Black people . . . folk characters distinguishable by language, customs, and beliefs but they are not legendary heroes . . . capture the customs, dialect, myths, earthiness, and very essence of the down-home African American." <sup>4</sup> Miller's Riding the Goat (1929), Duncan's Sacrifice (1930), Spence's Fool's Errand (1927), and Graham's I Gotta Home (1940) are examples of the genteel plays written by these playwrights desiring an audience and wishing to be published. These women chose to adhere to an elegant, graceful manner of writing, free of vulgarity and maintaining a respectability associated with the Victorian Age.

Black folk voodoo plays centered around superstitious and uneducated African Americans who were poor but honest. The African religion, as Du Bois wrote in The Souls of Black Folk (1903), "was nature-worship, with profound belief in invisible surrounding influences, good and bad, and his worship was through incantation and sacrifice." <sup>5</sup> The African American church was "not at first by any means Christian nor definitely organized; rather it was an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation and roughly designated as voodooism." <sup>6</sup> Miller's Stragglers in the Dust (1930), Duncan's Black Magic (1931), Spence's Her (1927) and Graham's It's Mornin' (1940) each have strong Black folk voodoo believers as main characters.

The plays chosen are all one acts except Shirley Graham's I Gotta Home, written in the classic three-act structure of American drama. Their proficient use of the dramatic structural element of suspense complements the stories and captivates their audiences. The historical, genteel, and Black folk voodoo genres were chosen over others, such as anti-lynching, social protest, and feminist themes because these four dramatists and their works strongly support and complement the emergence of Black folk voodoo plays.

Young's dissertation and Brown-Guillory's historical overview and analysis ignore this genre. This dissertation promises to begin the healing and reclaim the word Voodoo (which means Life-Principle, Genius, and Spirit in the Fon and Ewe languages of West Africa).

Luisah Teish, an African American folklorist and professor of African shamanism and traditions, states in Jambalaya that "Anthropology, a pseudoscience, born out of colonialism, has concentrated on the rites and secret societies of African men, superficially, and labeled the matrifocality of African culture as "the mark of savagery." <sup>7</sup> Voodoo is African-based; it views spirituality as an integral part of everyday life. It was

nurtured by a "servant class," its magic is practiced as household acts. Because it survived uprooted from its motherland, it teaches adaptability . . . its truth is found in the oral tradition, it teaches respect for elders. Because its goal is to counteract the savagery created by slavery, cleanliness is its watchword, courage its greatest virtue. <sup>8</sup>

The history of Voodoo stems from both European and African ancestry. In Europe, Teish notes that "Witchcraft was, in reality, the pre-Christian, tribal tradition of the West, in which the immanent spirit was portrayed as the Goddess, and women were respected leaders. The Old Religion survived underground through centuries of persecution so that the immanent world view was never completely lost." <sup>9</sup> In Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro, Newbell Niles Puckett observes that the Southern white was easily misinformed about the spiritual life of the Negro.

Regarding the feelings, emotions, and the spiritual life of the Negro the average white man knows little. Should some weird, archaic, Negro doctrine be brought to his attention he almost invariably considers it a "relic of African heathenism," though in four cases out of five it is a European dogma from which only centuries of patient education could wean even his own ancestors. <sup>10</sup>

Voodooism is a combination of African and European folklore. It has positive and negative connotations within the history of the African enslaved in America as Teish points out: "Slaves were forbidden to practice their tribal religions--because the slaveholders knew what a powerful force for resistance is drawn from a people's culture and religion." <sup>11</sup> The earth-based spirituality is a means of obtaining desirable or undesirable consequences. The positive formula is used for cures, such as folk remedies (toothache, hiccup), and general good luck. The negative control-signs are taboos, for example, black cats and unlucky thirteen. The early slaveholders and overseers used occupational-lore derived from European agricultural folklore. These beliefs were passed on to the Negro field hands as a part of their farm training. Puckett credits the disintegration of folk beliefs to "the whites of the South [who] gave up their superstitions all the more quickly because the Negro took them over and the planter had no desire to be like the slave." <sup>12</sup> He believes that "Negro race pride [forced] many more or less illiterate Negroes to give up, or at least to subdue and refuse to pass on, the old beliefs for fear of ridicule from the more developed members of their race." <sup>13</sup>

The time has come to develop the scholarship concerned with earlier African American female dramatists. Their plays were first meant "to be read" and then "to be performed;" now it is time for their plays and the secret society of Voodooism "to be celebrated." The plays with historical and genteel themes have been included in this exploration because the roots of Black folk voodooism lies within the common folk. Teish concurs, "We will be freed of the acid we feel when somebody calls our tradition "superstition." We will know why our grandmothers claim to know nothing of the voodoo, yet can recount its potions and charms." <sup>14</sup>

May Miller [Sullivan], Thelma Myrtle Duncan, Eulalie Spence, and Shirley Graham Du Bois used drama to depict the African American's possibilities. The voice of the early African American female playwright was slow to emerge because of racial and gender barriers. Before 1940 the American theatre was not ready to

accept the work of the African American. As David Littlejohn notes in Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writings by American Negroes, "Before 1940--which is of course a symbolic, not an absolute line--both parties were laboring under gross delusions, and few Negroes were sufficiently emancipated and mature to tell the whole truth, or strong enough to hit back." <sup>15</sup> Many African American women playwrights wrote plays not expecting ever to see them on stage, for example, Marita Bonner's The Purple Flower (1927). Bonner would write of her plays, "a play to be read," as opposed to being performed.

May Miller [Sullivan] (1889-1995) was fortunate enough to find a platform for her plays in the high school where she taught (Frederick Douglass High School, Baltimore, Maryland). She was born in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 1889. Her father, Kelly Miller, was an eminent author, professor of sociology and dean of Arts and Sciences at Howard University who influenced her to become a writer. W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were house guests of her father. As a Howard University graduate (B.A., 1920), she believed that African American children needed to perform plays and skits about their own history. Dr. Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and head of the Associated Publishers, financed her endeavor with co-editor Willis Richardson and published Negro History in Thirteen Plays (1935). Miller became a leading playwright in the area of historical drama during the Harlem Renaissance; her mentors included Angelina Weld Grimké and Mary Powell Burrill. Miller's earlier plays won contests and received honorable mention in other publications. She, in return, inspired her close friend Zora Neale Hurston to write about her people, e.g., Color Struck and Spears, award-winning plays of the 1925 Opportunity contest. Miller explored sensitive social and political issues of the early 1900s without offending her audience. Her trailblazing works are still studied and performed by high schools, colleges, and little theatre groups across the United States. Miller wrote fifteen plays, ten of which have been published in

periodicals and anthologies: eight will be discussed in this work. These selected one acts illustrate her contribution to the forms of historical, genteel, and Black folk voodoo plays.

Thelma Myrtle Duncan's (1902-?) works were also a product of the drama activity at Howard University under professors Alain Locke and Montgomery T. Gregory. Duncan was born in St. Louis, Missouri and was educated at Howard University (B. Mus.) and Columbia University before teaching music in North Carolina. Her plays were produced by the Howard University Players. Duncan's use of Black folk superstition and the art of Voodoo were subjects dramatized by white American dramatists, e.g., Eugene O'Neill and Paul Green. Duncan wrote nine plays, three of which have been published. Of those in print, The Death Dance (1923), a one act with a musical score by Victor Kerney will not be discussed because it is subtitled "with music and dancing." I have decided that any material including a substantial amount of music would not be fairly analyzed without a knowledge of music theory or musicology. In addition to Sacrifice and Black Magic, three unpublished manuscripts of Duncan (Driftin', Jinda, and Payment) available at the Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. will be examined.

Eulalie Spence (1894-1981), another forerunner in the movement away from the "plays to be read," was interested in getting her work produced. Spence was born in Nevis, British West Indies on June 11, 1894, she immigrated to the United States in 1902 with her family and established residence in Brooklyn, New York. She received a B.A. from New York University in 1937 and an M.A. in speech from Teacher's College, Columbia University in 1939. Spence was active with the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre (1926-1928), a group founded by W. E. B. Du Bois, who produced several of her plays. Du Bois entered Spence's Fool's Errand and Foreign Mail in the David Belasco

National Little Theatre Tournament of 1927. Fool's Errand won the Samuel French \$200 prize, and both plays were subsequently published. Spence, like Miller and Duncan, won several prizes awarded by Crisis and Opportunity magazines during their annual literary contests. She wrote fourteen plays, eight of which have been published. Six of these one acts will be examined in this study.

Shirley Graham Du Bois (née Lola Bell Graham, 1896-1977) was the most professionally produced dramatist of the four African American female playwrights. Graham was born in Indianapolis, Indiana on November 11, 1896, educated at the Sorbonne, Paris in advanced musical composition (1926-1929), and received both her B.A. from Oberlin College (1934) and an M.A. in 1935. She was also awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship (1936-1940) to attend the Yale University School of Drama. Between 1932 and 1942 Graham's plays were produced at Yale and Oberlin. She taught music at Morgan State College (now University), Baltimore, Maryland (1929-1931) and was head of the Fine Arts department at Tennessee A. & I. State College (now University) in Nashville (1935-1936). Graham was one of the few African American women dramatists who prior to the 1950s, actively pursued a career in professional theatre as a playwright, composer, designer, and director. Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project, appointed Graham as one of the directors of the Negro Unit of Chicago (1936-1938). Graham was appointed mediator to investigate the Chicago African American theatregoers' needs and conflicting desires; she was essentially the voice of her people. Prior to her work with the Federal Theatre Project, Graham's Tom-Tom (1932) was the first all-Black opera to be produced on a professional level in the United States. Three of her plays will be discussed--It's Mornin', Track Thirteen, and I Gotta Home.

Miller, Duncan, Spence, and Graham are four significant pioneers whose works were written between 1910 and 1950. They were all educators--high school and college professors--essayists, and dramatists who have more than three published plays.

Their platform for the production of these works was usually the school auditorium or the university theatre. A critical analysis of the dramatic structure and historical significance of twenty-two plays will be set out in the chapters that follow.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II." In Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog by Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts. Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>3</sup> James V. Hatch, ed., Black Theater U.S.A.: Forty-Five Plays by Black Americans, 1847-1974 (New York: Free Press, 1974), 351.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Their Place on the Stage (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1988), 14.

<sup>5</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1903), 159.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>7</sup> Luisah Teish, Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985), ix.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>10</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett, Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith Publishing Corporation, 1968), vii.

<sup>11</sup> Teish, xvi.

<sup>12</sup> Puckett, 581.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>15</sup> David Littlejohn, Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writings by American Negroes (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1966), 66.

**CHAPTER II**

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN  
FEMALE PLAYWRIGHT IN THE UNITED STATES,  
1910-1950: HER SOCIAL HISTORY,  
ECONOMICS, AND THEATRE**

In the early 1900s African Americans struggled tenaciously in hopes of civil rights, integration, and freedom. National associations for African American men and women, Supreme Court amendments, educational institutes, integrated theatre casting, and African American national theatres led people of color out of bondage. In Woman's Legacy: Essays on Race, Sex, and Class in American History, Bettina Aptheker notes that national associations for women, especially for African Americans, were an important stepping stone toward equality: "the Black woman sustained the devastating blows of a double bondage as woman/slave and chattel/slave."<sup>1</sup>

In 1905 the National League for the Protection of Colored Women was founded by Francis Kellor (lawyer and female activist) and Ruth Standish Baldwin (founder of the New York Association for the Protection of Colored Women). Their main goal was to help impoverished women to find employment and living quarters in New York. Branches were established in Norfolk, Virginia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Baltimore, Maryland. The league aided African American women who were trying to escape from the harsh realities of the South. On June 11, 1911 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was incorporated. It focused upon legal action to end racial discrimination. The three focal concerns during the organization's early years were lynchings, denial of civil rights, and segregation.

Du Bois was editor of the organization's official periodical, The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races and a pivotal figure in his views of women:

Du Bois began the scientific study of the Afro-American and African peoples in an era when predominant scientific and theological opinion held the Negro to be an inferior, if not subhuman form . . . . A conspicuous theme in much of his work is the subjugation of women, especially Black women. He originated theoretical ideas on the nature of woman's oppression and liberation . . . . He understood that only with the combination of economic independence and reproductive freedom could woman rise to a position of equality and dignity with man. <sup>2</sup>

In 1912 a Southern African American domestic worker wrote of her experiences as well as the unstandardized and personal nature of the work.

It is this abuse above all else that reveals the sale of personage inherent in domestic servitude: "I remember very well the first and last place I was dismissed. I lost my place because I refused to let the madam's husband kiss me . . . I was young then, and newly married, and didn't know then what has been a burden to my mind and heart since: that a colored woman's virtue in this part of the country has no protection . . . . When my husband went to the man who had insulted me, the man cursed him, and slapped him, and had him arrested. The police judge fined my husband \$25 ." <sup>3</sup>

An African American husband had neither legal protection nor exclusive rights to his wife's sexual availability. In 1913, the National League of Urban Conditions was incorporated. Its purpose was broadened to address the needs of all African Americans in urban settings, particularly those outside the Deep South. The objectives of the league cited in 1916 included, "to secure and train Negro social workers; to protect women and children from unscrupulous persons; to fit workers for/to work; to investigate conditions of city life as a basis for practical work." <sup>4</sup>

The National Association of Colored Women (NACW) supported the suffrage cause; by 1914 its membership was 50,000. Mary Church Terrell was its founding

president and the head of the Anti-Lynching Bureau of the National Afro-American Council. She was also the first African American woman to serve on a board of education anywhere in the United States (1894: Washington, D. C., Board of Education). The nation was also faced with appalling African American illiteracy statistics as reported in Opportunity magazine in August and September 1925, for example, from 1919 to 1925, the State Illiteracy Commission supervised services for 35,000 African American illiterates.

Nevertheless, African American women were being educated. Between 1895 and 1925 the majority of Black college graduates were women. Female students were generally enrolled in one of three programs: domestic science, nursing, or teaching. Domestic science (Home Training) prepared graduates to secure such positions as cooks, dairy workers, housekeepers laundresses, milliners, seamstresses, and waitresses. Nursing trained women to acquire employment as medical assistants in their own communities. In 1879, Mary Eliza Mahoney was the first African American woman to receive a diploma in nursing from the New England Hospital for Women and Children, Boston, Massachusetts. In 1864, Rebecca Lee received her degree from the New England Female Medical College, Boston, Massachusetts and became the first African American woman physician in the United States. The teaching program included missionary training and its graduates were expected to fulfill their missions in Africa. Several African languages were taught as part of the program. In Color, Sex, and Poetry (1987), Gloria T. Hull clearly cites the negligence of the historians of the Harlem Renaissance who failed to inform the world about the activities of their women populace.

The general female populace--to whom the Renaissance was an unknown or unheeded phenomenon--was maintaining the basic foundation of the world, as usual . . . . The smallest segment is the leisured wives and

daughters of business and professional men . . . . The second category comprises active, progressive women who are themselves in business and the professions. They are secretaries, administrators, doctors, lawyers, . . . nurses, librarians . . . and above all, school teachers, whose sympathy and judgment in the classroom make them a mighty force for spiritual and mental balance among black youth. The third group . . . women in the trades and industry [is] only recognized in cookery, where they are not allowed to advance to managerial positions . . . . The fourth group fares worst of all. For these domestic and casual workers, "health and morale suffer" because of the material conditions of their lives! <sup>5</sup>

Social ills were remedied through the theatre by Montgomery T. Gregory, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Angelina Weld Grimké. These three African Americans began to help educate their race through theatre during the 1910s. Gregory from 1919 to 1924 in Washington, D.C., helped educate African Americans by organizing and directing the Howard Players. In Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959 (1967), Doris E. Abramson included Gregory's description of the project's goal.

Our ideal is a national Negro Theater where the Negro playwright, musician, actor, dancer, and artist in concert shall fashion a drama that will merit the respect and admiration of America. Such an institution must come from the Negro himself, as he alone can truly express the soul of his people. The race must surrender that childish self-consciousness that refused to face the facts of its own life in the arts . . . . The only avenue of genuine achievement in American drama for the Negro lies in the development of the rich veins of folk-tradition and the past and in the portrayal of the authentic life of the Negro masses of to-day . . . . The "New Negro" . . . places his faith in the potentialities of his own people. <sup>6</sup>

Marie Moore Forest and Cleon Throckmorton also held positions in the Howard University Department of Dramatic Art. Forest was nationally known as director of drama and pageantry and Throckmorton was scenic designer. The little theatre movement declined at Howard University in the absence of Gregory soon after the venture began but it was revived under Sterling Brown and James W. Butcher.

Alice Dunbar-Nelson was once married to the African American poet, novelist, playwright, and musical comedy lyricist, Paul Laurence Dunbar. She was also a playwright, author, editor, and teacher. Dunbar-Nelson's Mine Eyes Have Seen (1918) is a melodrama in one act and was performed by her students at Howard High School, Wilmington, Delaware prior to its publication in Crisis (April 1919). Peterson views it as a patriotic play.

Dramatizing the loyalty of blacks to their country in spite of the terrible racial injustices that they have faced. A young man who receives a military draft notice feels that he should claim an exemption from service as the sole support of his crippled brother and sister, neither of whom is able to work. They are the last remaining members of a prosperous middle-class family forced to flee north after their house was burned down . . . and their father murdered. . . Why, the young man asks, should he serve a country that has done nothing for him. . . He is exhorted by his family and their white friends . . . to answer the call of his country . . . for the honor of his race, which has served in every war from 1776 to the present. <sup>7</sup>

Angelina Weld Grimké was also a playwright, educator, and poet. Her three act protest drama Rachel (1916) was first performed by the Drama Committee of the NAACP, at the Myrtila Miner Normal School, Washington, D.C., March 3 and 4, 1916. The play depicts several incidents of racial violence, lynching, and prejudice encountered by the Loving family. It was a pioneering work in the use of racial propaganda to enlighten white Americans.

Following World War I, African American soldiers returned only to find, as David Levering Lewis in When Harlem Was in Vogue (1979), shows that

the army was determined to do its best to hide them from history. No Afro-American troops participated in the glorious victory parade down the Champs-Élysées, although the blacks and browns of the British and French forces were prominently represented. The ultimate injustice

was the War Department's insistence that Afro-American soldiers not be depicted in the heroic frieze displayed in France's Panthéon de la Guerre.<sup>8</sup>

In the South, newspapers "editorialized ghoulishly about the fate awaiting any Afro-American veteran daring to come home uniformed . . . striding up main street like a white man."<sup>9</sup>

The Fifteenth Regiment of New York's National Guard marched proudly up Fifth Avenue. The regiment was officially the United States 369th Infantry Regiment with Lieutenant James Reese Europe, the sole African American officer. By the end of 1919, Lewis states that "there had been race riots in two dozen cities, towns, or counties, rampant lynchings and resurrection of the Ku Klux Klan, and a dismal falling off of jobs in the North for Afro-Americans."<sup>10</sup> Aptheker gives the legal definition of a lynching as

A murder committed by a mob of three or more persons. There are no accurate figures as to the number of lynch victims, and the estimates vary. James Elbert Cutler, who produced the first scholarly treatment on the subject in 1905, estimated that 3,337 human beings were lynched in the United States between 1882 and 1903. According to a later study by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) issued in 1929 and based upon only those killings acknowledged by white officials, 4,951 persons were lynched in the United States. Approximately 3,500 were black, and 1,400 were white. [Ida B.] Wells placed the number of lynch victims at 10,000 before the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup>

Ida B. Wells, an African American journalist from Memphis, Tennessee began an international crusade against lynching. Mary Church Terrell described lynching as "the aftermath of slavery."<sup>12</sup>

As a result of African American unemployment in 1921, the first labor organization of Black women in the world was founded in Washington, D.C.

The objectives of the proposed labor union, as outlined by Neverdon-Morton, included "to develop and encourage efficient workers; to assist women in finding suitable work; to elevate the migrant class of workers and incorporate them permanently in service of some kind; to secure a wage that will enable women to live decently." <sup>13</sup>

The United States government was also fostering international race relations abroad. On June 1, 1928, Alice Dunbar-Nelson secured the full-time, paying position of Executive Secretary of the American Inter-Racial Peace Committee (AICP), a subsidiary organization of the American Friends (Quakers) Service Committee. The aim of the AICP, according to Hull, was "'to develop and enlist the active support of the Negroes of America in the cause of Peace,' while fostering equality of understanding between the races and the general idea of international peace." <sup>14</sup>

Marcus Mosiah Garvey, a Jamaican, began his contribution to the African American's struggle for civil rights in the early 1900s. In 1914 he had a revelation to lead 400 million Blacks out of imperial bondage. On July 20, 1914 he founded the Universal Negro Improvement and Conservation Association and African Communities (Imperial) League, subsequently shortened to Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). On July 12, 1918 Garvey incorporated the UNIA in New York where he launched a weekly newspaper, The Negro World, that was published in Spanish, French, and English.

In 1925 John D. Rockefeller, Jr. aided the African American by donating securities worth one million dollars to the Hampton-Tuskegee Fund. The securities were, according to Neverdon-Morton, "to aid the sound work achieved by the two institutes in helping to solve the race problem." <sup>15</sup> Booker T. Washington, a former slave, was

the first principal of Tuskegee Institute. He believed in industrial training to "fit students for occupations which would be open to them in their home communities." <sup>16</sup> Full time resident positions on the staff were given only to African Americans. In 1917 there were 2,132 African Americans in college; by 1927 there were 13,580 of whom 200-300 attended white schools. In 1927 there were 39 doctorates awarded to African American students. From 1895 to 1925 both white and African American laypersons and educators offered arguments against the education of women. A summary of the views held by these men was provided by Buell E. Gallagher, former president of Talladega College, Alabama in American Caste and the Negro College. He wrote that

(1) Biologically determined differences in temperament and (2) inherited inferiority in mental ability make the education of women beyond the elementary stages a dubious affair. But if they must be educated, then let the curriculum be designed especially for the needs of women as indicated in (3) the preponderance of intuition rather than reason in feminine psychological processes; in (4) the social demands that women restrict themselves to the arts of graceful consumption rather than invading the masculine areas of production and distribution, and (5) the actual fact that three-fourths of the women do become homemakers, so that education should fit them for continuance in their place . . . if women . . . object that they do not want to be given this special education designed to fit them for a peculiar place in society, then (6) it must be admitted that the whole idea of educating the two sexes in the same manner implies an effort to assimilate the two sexes making them physiologically as well as psychologically alike, which is patently absurd and therefore explodes the whole affair. <sup>17</sup>

Educational statistics were published in several African American periodicals and were usually the only sources that would include works by African American women. In addition to Crisis there was the New York Age, the leading Afro-American newspaper; the Messenger, "The Only Magazine of Scientific Radicalism in the World Published by Negroes, founded by A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen"; the Chicago Defender,

a widely circulated African American newspaper; and Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life of the Urban League launched in January 1923. Opportunity editor Charles Johnson's statement of purpose spoke of artistic creation. "to encourage the reading of literature both by Negro authors and about Negro life . . . to foster a market for Negro writers and for literature by and about Negroes . . . to stimulate and foster a type of writing by Negroes by which shakes itself free of deliberate propaganda and protest." <sup>18</sup> Johnson announced an outstanding achievement award to be presented the following year and in May 1925, a banquet ceremony was held at the Fifth Avenue Restaurant to award Opportunity prizes. The judges for drama included Eugene O'Neill, Montgomery T. Gregory, et al. By 1928 Opportunity magazine's circulation had reached 11,000 copies per month and included 40 percent white subscribers. Opportunity was published monthly from 1923 to 1942 and quarterly from 1943 to 1949. A decline in the quality of both prizewinners and judges led to the publication's demise.

Alain Leroy Locke's anthology The New Negro (1925) was published to help promote African Americans' artistic and cultural talents. Locke's conviction was "that the race's more immediate hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowment and cultural contributions, past and prospective." <sup>19</sup> Locke was a Harvard Ph.D., Rhodes scholar, and Howard University philosophy professor. The anthology, composed of writings by thirty-four African American authors, included Countee Leroy Porter Cullen, Phi Beta Kappa poet; Aaron Douglas, university trained painter; and W. E. B. Du Bois, novelist and civil rights activist. The New Negro was written to encourage artists and, in the view of Leon Coleman in "Carl Van Vechten Presents the New Negro" (1974), took three forms in its theory:

General writing upon Negro arts and artists . . . assistance in securing publication for the works of individuals and encouraging their efforts through bringing them to the attention of the public . . . attempts to

promote social contacts between Negro artists and their white counterparts, thus disseminating information about Negroes to the wider community. <sup>20</sup>

Technically the Harlem Renaissance began with the return of African American soldiers from World War I and ended in 1929 with the Great Depression. David Levering Lewis offers one definition of the Harlem Renaissance as,

[it] reveals itself to be an elitist response on the part of a tiny group of mostly second-generation, college-educated, and generally affluent Afro-Americans--a response, first, to the increasingly raw racism of the times, second, to the frightening Black Zionism of the Garveyites, and finally, to the remote, but no less frightening, appeal of Marxism. <sup>21</sup>

Leon Coleman believes the era "was a reflection in literature and art of the cultural changes experienced by the American Negro, as he left the rural South for the economic and social advantages to be found in northern cities." <sup>22</sup> Gloria T. Hull summarizes the Harlem Renaissance as "a channeling of energy from political and social criticism into poetry, fiction, music, and art." <sup>23</sup>

While African American women were struggling to be included, many Black male intellectuals were contending with Marxism, Garveyities, and the absence of opportunities for minorities. Among them were Festus Claudius McKay, Nathan Eugene Toomer, and Wallace Thurman. A quarterly magazine entitled Fire!! was initiated by Thurman in November 1926, and devoted its pages to the younger Negro artists. The editors included Aaron Douglas (illustrations); Langston Hughes (poetry); Zora Neale Hurston (a one act play, Color Struck); and Robert Bruce Nugent (drawings). Fire!! offered in print the first appearance of the more interesting minor characters of the Harlem Renaissance.

African American artists such as Toomer and Thurman needed a place to congregate socially. One refuge for intellectuals was provided by Georgia Douglas Johnson's Saturday Nighters salon in the livingroom of her 'S' Street house in Washington, D.C. Johnson was an African American novelist, poet, and playwright. She opened her home to poets, e.g., Langston Hughes; novelists, e.g., Countee Cullen and Alain Locke; artists, e.g., Richard Bruce Nugent; playwrights, e.g., May Miller, Alice Dunbar-Nelson; and intellectuals and civil rights leaders, e.g., James Weldon Johnson and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Harlem's principal salon-keeper A'Leila Walker Robinson, the African American hair-straightening heiress, welcomed artists to her Edgecombe Avenue (135th Street) apartment. According to Lewis, A'Leila was "fond of homosexuals and those who might otherwise have voiced disapproval of manners and pursuits considered strange or decadent." <sup>24</sup> She provided a safe haven where artists could meet and discuss their plans in the arts and she invited Aaron Douglas and Richard Bruce Nugent to decorate the room. Nugent suggested calling it "The Dark Tower" after Countee Cullen's newspaper column. When the salon officially opened in 1928, A'Leila catered to more affluent individuals. Nugent observed that "Colored faces were at a premium, the place was filled to overflowing with whites from downtown who had come up expecting that this was a new and hot night club." <sup>25</sup> It became a social forum for the elite and artists and writers could not afford her prices.

In addition to the salons, Carl Van Vechten and his wife Fania invited Harlem to their westside apartment for integrated parties. Zora Neale Hurston appreciated their courage and ingenuity and wrote to Van Vechten, "You have had such a tremendous influence on the arts of the last twenty-five years, that I think it ought to be precipitated

out of the mass of lies that are now claiming credit for the many things that you were responsible for." <sup>26</sup> Van Vechten was interested in preserving specimens of indigenous folk art such as spirituals and folk songs.

Carl Van Vechten's racially mixed parties were an important aspect in his attempt to break down racial barriers and promote better race relations. These proved to be an important forum, especially for African American women who were discriminated against and ostracized from literary agents and publishers. Events at his home included George Gershwin playing Broadway tunes on the piano and Paul Robeson or Bessie Smith singing; guests included such notables as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Tallulah Bankhead, Salvadore Dali, Fannie Hurst, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Rudolph Valentino. Van Vechten was concerned with the white patrons' conception that African American intellectuals were not considered Black. Howard Allison of Columbia Law discoursed on the civil rights ambitions of the New Negro:

Of course, Paul Robeson . . . and Countee Culeen can go anywhere within reason. They will be invited to white dinner parties, but I don't see how that's going to affect the rest of us . . . . Because the white people they meet will regard them as geniuses, in other words, exceptions. Yes, they will say to themselves, these are certainly unusually brilliant and delightful individuals, it's a pity all Negroes aren't like them. So they will go on neglecting the plight in which our respectable middle-class finds itself. <sup>27</sup>

White Americans were commercializing on African American talent and folklore. Russett Durwood (Mencken), editor of Vanity Fair also commented, "If you young Negro intellectuals don't get busy, a new crop of Nordies is going to spring up who will take the trouble to become better informed and will exploit this material before the Negro gets around to it." <sup>28</sup>

In lieu of the salons and integrated parties: night clubs were forums for everyone. On March 12, 1926, the Savoy, an over \$200,000 block-long building opened in Harlem.

The Savoy could house 4,000 people at one showing. The artists and writers who were socially shut out of A'Leila's salon could gather inside. In contrast to the Savoy, the Cotton Club, managed by George "Big Frenchy" Demange, was off limits to African American patrons. The only African Americans at the Cotton Club, as Lewis notes, "were high-stepping, high-yellow chorines . . . and tuxedoed musicians belonging to . . . Duke Ellington's orchestra."<sup>29</sup> Langston Hughes once encapsulated the African American's social position in New York, "And as for Harlem, alas all the cabarets have gone white . . . and everyone I know is either in Paris or Hollywood or sick."<sup>30</sup>

White Americans were also commercializing on African Americans in the theatre. In February 1926, David Belasco opened Lulu Belle, a melodrama of Harlem street life on Broadway. The play was written by two white dramatists, Edward Sheldon and Charles MacArthur, and starred Leonore Ulric in blackface but had real African Americans in the cast. This Broadway hit sent white theatregoers straight to Harlem in search of the real thing. Eric Walrond, a former editor of Opportunity, commented on the mania, "Harlem was becoming a white man's house of assignation."<sup>31</sup> This craze had begun prior to Belasco's successful production with Eugene O'Neill's All God's Chillun Got Wings, (1923) a play about miscegenation, starring Paul Robeson. On October 1, 1927 DuBose and Dorothy Heyward cashed in on Porgy. African Americans were cast appropriately, Rose McClendon as Serena and Frank Wilson as Porgy while the chorus of Catfish Row included Robert Bruce Nugent and Wallace Thurman. Porgy played at a segregated Guild Theatre.

African Americans were struggling in the theatre and gaining recognition whenever possible. In 1916 James Weldon Johnson joined the NAACP as Field

Secretary and was promoted in 1920 to Executive Secretary, its ranking administrative officer. Johnson's lineage placed him among the elite of African Americans whose families had been freeborn, literate, and prosperous before the Civil War.

In February 1900 in honor of Lincoln's Birthday, Johnson and J. Rosamond wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a song that came to be called the "Negro National Anthem." Johnson and Rosamond also composed an opera, Toloso (1900) about well-intentioned American imperialism.

In 1921 Shuffle Along opened on Broadway. It was the first postwar musical with music (Eubie Blake), lyrics (Noble Sissle), libretto (Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles), cast and production entirely by African Americans. During its run the cast included Miller and Lyles, Florence Mills, Paul Robeson, and Josephine Baker. Garland Anderson's Appearances (1925) was the first full-length play by an African American to be produced on a Broadway stage. It was revived during the 1929-1930 season as well. Wallace Thurman's Harlem (1929) was the first play on Broadway written by an African American playwright with a white collaborator, William Jourdan.

Many African American theatre groups were forming during the 1920s. In 1924 the Ethiopian Art Players was founded and directed by Raymond O'Neil and Mrs. Sherwood Anderson. The repertoire included Willis Richardson's The Chip Woman's Fortune (1923). Mrs. Sherwood Anderson brought the company to the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. Richardson's play was the first serious drama by an African American to reach Broadway. The Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre, however, became the most successful African American little theatre movement of the era. Krigwa (the Crisis Guild of Writers and Artists) was founded by W. E. B. Du Bois in the basement of the 135th Street Harlem branch of the New York Public Library.

Du Bois believed the African American audience had the desire to see its own life on the stage. He modeled the theatre on four fundamental principles:

1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is.
2. By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today.
3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval.
4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people . . . . Only in this way can a real folk-play movement of American Negroes be built up.<sup>32</sup>

The Krigwa Players were a group of thirty persons trained by Charles Burroughs, a dramatic reader for the New York City Board of Education. The New York Public Library authorities built the stage and dressing rooms and furnished the lighting equipment. The group of players provided the theatre with a curtain, scenery, producers, and secured the audiences. Three one-act plays were selected for the first production: two tragedies by Willis Richardson (Compromise, The Broken Banjo) and one comedy by Ruth A. Gaines-Shelton (The Church Fight). Compromise was published in The New Negro; The Broken Banjo won first prize in the Crisis contest of 1925; and The Church Fight was awarded its second prize. On May 3, 10, and 17 the cast of twenty players performed for full houses with an average of 200 patrons per performance. The policy of the Krigwa Players was to allow other groups to use their playhouse.

During the 1920s there were other African American female dramatists being published and performed, for example, works by Marita Bonner, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Myrtle Smith Livingston. Bonner, another product of the literary activities of Crisis and Opportunity, won first prize in the Crisis Contest Awards of 1927 for The Purple Flower and Exit: An Illusion. Her plays, as mentioned in the "Introduction," were written to be read rather than performed. Her themes include infidelity, suicide, racial relations, and the color complexes among African Americans. Johnson, in addition

to her "Saturday Nighters" salon in Washington, D.C. won first prize in the Opportunity Contest Awards of 1927 for Plumes. It is a folk tragedy that explores the superstitions of lower-class African Americans. Johnson's plays include the issues of lynching (A Sunday Morning in the South, 1925), miscegenation (Blue Blood, 1926), and African American historical characters (Frederick Douglass, 1935). Livingston was the recipient of third prize in the Crisis Contest Awards of 1925 for For Unborn Children, the subtitle of which is "A Plea Against Intermarriage." Her one-act tragedy explores the love of a young African American Southern man for a white woman and its consequences when he surrenders himself to a white lynch mob.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, African American women were becoming involved and organizing more associations. In December 1935 Mary McLeod Bethune organized the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) and was the only woman to serve in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Black Cabinet as Director of the Minority Affairs Department of the National Youth Administration. Bethune, with the help of NCNW, forged a national unity among African American women.

Bettina Aptheker states that "Although civil-rights historians tend to see the NCNW as a social club and church-based movement rather than a political association, it was, in fact, all three, and served as an essential agency for civil-rights agitation."<sup>33</sup>

African Americans, especially women, believed the three mainstays in their lives were home, church, and school. The typical objectives of African American institutions at this time were to uplift the quality of life and to maintain families and their finances. African American women strove toward these ideals and participated in community services such as socials and drives.

During the 1930s professional theatre was struggling to survive.

White American dramatists were continuing to capitalize on African Americans in

the theatre. Marc Connelly's Green Pastures, a folk play, opened on Broadway at the Mansfield Theatre on February 26, 1930. Green Pastures was a dramatization of Roark Bradford's Ol'Man Adam an' His Chillun (1928), a book of short stories. The cast included Wesley Hill as the angel Gabriel, Richard B. Harrison as De Lawd, and the Hall Johnson Choir. After Green Pastures' first run of 557 performances and a national tour, it was revived on Broadway for a five-year run. While on tour it brought cultured African Americans to theatres and auditoriums rarely patronized by people of color. On March 22, 1931 Richard B. Harrison was presented with the NAACP's highest honor, the Springarn medal, by Lieutenant Herbert Lehman at the Mansfield Theatre.

In 1935, Congress created an opportunity for unemployed writers, musicians, artists, actors, and technicians to work under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Hallie Flanagan was appointed director of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). From August 1935-June 1939, the FTP brought free theatre to the culturally neglected and included vaudeville, opera, dance, classical plays, musical revues, marionette shows, and drama. The FTP included African American theatre artists. According to Rena Fraden in Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre (1994), by 1936, there were seventeen Negro units established across the United States including Alabama, Oklahoma, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, California, and Washington. There were four projects in New York City alone.

What played in New York might not go over in Peoria, and even within one city, one group might argue with another about what was deemed appropriate Negro theatre. There was an ongoing debate over what plays should be produced: folk drama exploring rural roots and culture; urban and social realistic dramas depicting contemporary dilemmas for blacks; the musical entertainment so popular with black and white audiences; white drama adapted (or not) for black troupes.<sup>34</sup>

The esteemed African American actress, Rose McClendon and John Houseman directed the Harlem FTP unit. Carlton Moss, an African American aide in the unit who later became one of its directors, expressed his opinion about having a white director, saying "There was an assumption that having been raised outside the United States he [Houseman] would not have the manifestations of racism that conceivably most people who come up in the United States could have or might have or do have."<sup>35</sup> The first problem encountered by the Harlem FTP unit was the absence of performable African American scripts. In 1936 FTP tried to develop African American dramatists who could write honestly about their lives. George Zorn organized the Negro Dramatists Laboratory and invited one hundred African American writers to attend a symposium for four months that would improve their style and form of writing. Lectures were given on script forms, research techniques, technical requirements, copyright laws, and African American theatre possibilities. The New York Harlem unit's Haitian Macbeth (1936) complete with voodoo chants and dances, and the Chicago unit's Swing Mikado (1938) that moved onto the Broadway stage proved to be FTP's most memorable African American productions. The Chicago unit of FTP also had an African American ensemble. Theodore Ward's Big White Fog was produced at the Great Northern Theatre from April 7-May 30, 1938 for thirty-seven performances.

The struggle for the advancement of African American women in the United States continued into the 1940s. The NCNW broadened its focus to include programs and activities on the special problems faced by African American women workers in employment, housing, child care, and federal welfare programs. The Harlem Renaissance was now history and the United States concentrated on rehabilitating itself

after the Great Depression. The Broadway theatre welcomed Richard Wright and Paul Green's Native Son on March 24, 1941 at the Mercury Theatre. The play was an adaptation of Wright's novel Native Son (1940) and Green, a white dramatist, acted as collaborator. The production was directed by Orson Welles, starred Canada Lee, and ran for ninety-seven performances. After its national tour Native Son returned to Broadway on October 23, 1942 for eighty-four more performances.

African American national theatre companies were on the rise again. On June 5, 1940 Abram Hill and Frederick O'Neal founded the American Negro Theatre (ANT). Hill expressed his interest in developing a valuable institution saying, "We need a people's theatre which will in effect, be a national theatre. The people who want a theatre will have to organize it and pay a part of the expense for both its creation and support."<sup>36</sup> Hill chose New York City as the logical area for an African American theatre because "its population in excess of seven million, offers the largest potential audience to a Negro theatre than any other location in the world."<sup>37</sup> The A.N.T. Constitution included in their aims and purposes.

Working to develop An Art. A permanent co-operative acting company co-ordinating and perfecting the related arts of the theatre; eventually deriving its own theatre craft and acting style . . . A Vital Theatre. Calling for plays which furnish commentary, interpretation, illumination and criticism of our common lives during contemporary times . . . General Policy. . . A non-profit cooperative theatre. Its financial support shall be derived from annual subscriptions, contributions and endowments. The policy of the organization is to remain independent of any financial support . . . Repertory. . . The plays are to be regarded as independent art forms which shall stand or fall on their own intrinsic merits plus their dramatic emanation. Thus, the American Negro Theatre may repeat any of its productions without the plays becoming dated . . . Preamble. . . Complete collaboration is essential among all participants to achieve the harmonious relationship inherent in collective theatre art.<sup>38</sup>

The Executive Committee of ANT included Abram Hill, Executive Director and Frederick O'Neal, Company Manager. The members of the managing directorate would hold the position indefinitely unless they were dismissed. The Trustee membership was comprised of dramatists, actors, and technicians, *e.g.*, Alice Childress, Ruby Dee, and Clarice Taylor. The first ANT production to be reviewed by the daily press on May 7, 1941 was Theodore Browne's Natural Man (1937). It was originally written for the FTP Negro unit of Seattle, Washington.

From the early 1900s the emerging African American actor, playwright, and intellectual vied with their white counterparts for an audience. The whites succeeded with more ease. Richard A. Long illustrates the realities of the time for both races when he says, "With the exception of Carl Van Vechten and of Paul Green, the white writers in question had little or no contact with the black intelligentsia."<sup>39</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, literary editor of Crisis, was concerned that African Americans were continually depicted at their worst and judged by the white public. She clearly outlined the relevancy and urgency of this dilemma in Crisis:

Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them. . . . [The Negro] must learn to write with a humor, a pathos, a sincerity so evident and a delineation so fine and distinctive that their portraits, even of the "best Negroes," those presumably most like "white folks," will be acceptable to publisher and reader alike.<sup>40</sup>

African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright were constantly struggling with white publishers to have their authentic works printed, while as Long notes, "The white writer who wrote about black folk in the twenties, whether they were central to his fiction or merely ancillary, was

writing for a white audience, both publishers and public." <sup>41</sup> Fauset strengthens the contemporary observation when she says,

Even more than the public, I do believe, [publishers] persist in considering only certain types of Negroes interesting and if an author presents a variant they fear that the public either won't believe in it or won't "stand for it" . . . white groups . . . are keenly interested in learning about the better class of colored people. <sup>42</sup>

A few pioneers broke the barriers: in the 1910s, Gregory and the Howard Players; Du Bois and the Krigwa Players in the 1920s; the FTP Negro units in the 1930s; and Hill and the American Negro Theatre in the 1940s. Generally speaking, however, African American Theatre during 1910-1950 reflected the historical, economical, and educational restrictions of people of color.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bettina Aptheker, Woman's Legacy: Essay on Race, Sex, and Class in American History (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 224.

<sup>5</sup> Gloria T. Hull, Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Doris E. Abramson, Negro Playwrights in the American Theatre 1925-1959 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Peterson, Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers, 72.

<sup>8</sup> David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was in Vogue (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1979), 14, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>11</sup> Aptheker, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>13</sup> Neverdon-Morton, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Hull, 91.

- 15 Neverdon-Morton, 34.
- 16 Ibid., 33.
- 17 Ibid., 14.
- 18 Lewis, 97.
- 19 Alain Locke, ed., The New Negro (New York: Atheneum, 1925), 14.
- 20 Leon Coleman, "Carl Van Vechten Presents The New Negro," Studies in the Literary Imagination 11, no. 2 (Fall 1974): 88.
- 21 Lewis, xvi.
- 22 Coleman, 85.
- 23 Hull, 2.
- 24 Lewis, 168.
- 25 Ibid., 169.
- 26 Coleman, 87.
- 27 Lewis, 186.
- 28 Ibid., 187.
- 29 Ibid., 209.
- 30 Ibid., 239.
- 31 Ibid., 165.
- 32 W. E. B. Du Bois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre: The Story of a Little Theatre Movement," Crisis (July 1926): 134.
- 33 Aptheker, 147.

<sup>34</sup> Rena Fraden. Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 47, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>36</sup> Abram Hill, "Those Were the Days," in Artist and Influence, vol. 8 (New York: Hatch-Billops Collection, 1989), 123.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>39</sup> Richard A. Long, "The Outer Reaches: The White Writer and Blacks in the Twenties," Studies in the Literary Imagination 11, no. 2 (Fall 1974): 65.

<sup>40</sup> Jessie Fauset, "The New Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed. A Symposium," Crisis (June 1926): 71.

<sup>41</sup> Long, 71.

<sup>42</sup> Fauset, 72.

**CHAPTER III**  
**MAY MILLER [SULLIVAN]: TRAILBLAZING SUSPENSE,**  
**PLAYS FROM THE PALACE TO THE**  
**POOLHALL**

May Miller (Sullivan) was the most widely published African American female playwright during the Harlem Renaissance. Miller's plays were performed at Frederick Douglass High School, Baltimore, Maryland, where she taught speech and drama. She received a wider circulation of her plays by participating in annual playwriting contests sponsored by the NAACP Drama Committee, *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines, and the Krigwa Movement. After 1944, when Miller retired from the Baltimore school system, she concentrated on poetry because she no longer had a platform to perform her plays. These works were written before her marriage to John Sullivan. During the 1960s, she was Arts Coordinator of the Washington, D.C. public schools under the auspices of the Washington Commission on the Arts and also served on the Folger Library Advisory Committee. In 1986 she was presented with the Mister Brown Award for Excellence in Drama and Poetry by the National Conference of African American Theatre at Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland.<sup>1</sup> Miller's plays and poetry never brought her celebrity status; she believed, "If out of a silence I can fill that silence with a word that will conjure up an image, then I have succeeded."<sup>2</sup>

Miller was inspired to write historical and folk plays. In *Black Theater U.S.A.*, James V. Hatch states that "Another important influence was Randolph Edmonds of Morgan College who thought it idle to have children only read history; he believed

that productions on stage of those great Negro characters would help the children understand." <sup>3</sup> Carter G. Woodson, who wrote the "Introduction" to Negro History in Thirteen Plays (1935), reaffirms the exigency.

Some of these days, too, the Negro will awake. He will not always slumber in his present slavery. We must believe that he will arise and address himself to the tremendous task before him. Let us hope that the awakening will not come too late. It cannot be brought about through the powers now in control of the race. The large majority of those in charge of our schools and churches have no conception of the demands of the hour and no courage to meet these exigencies if they understood them. The Negro must undergo a right-about-face in his thinking, and with the determination to conquer or to die. Not until then can the race start upward in the direction taken by the Jews and other oppressed people who struggled against odds and triumphed over opposition. <sup>4</sup>

The editors of early anthologies of African American plays placed restrictions on publishable works. In the "Introduction" to Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro (1930), Willis Richardson listed the guidelines to be considered when choosing or rejecting an African American play to be published. Richardson emphasized that the anthology was a collection of plays written primarily for use in schools, churches, and little theatre groups. The criteria for a dramatist's work to be published in an anthology included: it must be written by an African American playwright; must not be written in dialect, for the most part; and should contain subject matter suitable for young people of school age. The plays rejected were those that were written predominately in dialect, contained sexual inferences, depicted undesirable characters, or themes deemed too controversial for young influential minds. Richardson was aware of the criticism he would encounter with these restrictions and wrote, "It is probable that some may consider these plays and pageants too simple; but simplicity has been our aim and if we have achieved that our work has been awarded." <sup>5</sup>

Miller's historical heroes are African American, Black African, and Haitian leaders illustrated in courageous plights. She uses the dramatic element of suspense to accentuate the urgency of her stories. Miller's historical plays Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Samory, and Christophe's Daughters were all published in Negro History in Thirteen Plays. Harriet Tubman was produced by Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana, during the 1935-1936 season. This drama is set on the eastern shore of Maryland on a Saturday evening in the middle of the nineteenth century. Henry Ross and his sweetheart Catherine are secretly meeting in a covered area of the marshland. Henry tries to persuade his betrothed to escape with him and the other slaves that evening. Catherine is fearful of the consequences and declines the offer. Henry vows to return and bring her to Canada once they have reached safety. Sandy, a mulatto house servant, appears and offers to buy Catherine's freedom if she will marry him. Unbeknownst to Sandy, Catherine manipulates him into exposing the slaveowners' plans to capture Harriet Tubman. Catherine is now indebted to Henry as they both plot to ambush Sandy. The slaves successfully capture and restrain Sandy and proceed to escape on the riverboat.

The play describes one incident in which Harriet Tubman helped slaves escape in spite of blockages on land and sea. Miller juxtaposes Harriet's heroism against Sandy's disloyalty and uses the corrupt institution of slavery and the indomitable will of the fugitives to create a suspenseful play. In one act Miller introduces her audience to love intrigue (Catherine and Henry), unrequited love (Sandy), and both African American and white characters. In Their Place on the Stage (1988), Elizabeth Brown-Guillory comments on Harriet Tubman. "Miller insightfully comments on slavery as a corrupt institution, on its engendering mistrust and deception among an enslaved people, and on the existence of strong black male and female relationships that have endured in spite of

the shackles of slavery." <sup>6</sup> Miller holds the attention of her audience by postponing Harriet's entrance until half way through the play. In Black Heroes: Seven Plays (1989), Erroll Hill concurs. "Although the Tubman character appears but briefly in the play, her presence is felt throughout." <sup>7</sup> She is described as a religious woman with such aliases as Angel, Black wench, Black witch, and Moses. The slaves believe she is a leader and risk their lives for freedom and liberty. Harriet accentuates their declaration:

Harriet.            Trouble or no trouble--thar's two things Ah got a right  
to, an' they is death an' liberty. One or t'other, Ah mean  
to have. No one will take me back into slavery alive.  
Ah'll fight foh mah liberty, an' when the time come foh me  
to go, the Lawd'll let 'em kill me. <sup>8</sup>

The average reader absorbs these dramatic quotations from Miller's historical drama and does not realize some of them are direct quotes. In Before the Mayflower (1966), Lerone Bennett, Jr. cites Harriet Tubman's memorable speech.

I had reasoned dis out in my mind . . . there was one or two things. I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as strength lasted, and when de time come for me to go, de Lord would let dem take me." <sup>9</sup>

Harriet is also described in the Negro hymns Miller chose to include in this play.

The slaves enter carrying lanterns and croon softly. "Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom, ovah me, ovah me. Rather than to be a slave, Ah'd be buried in mah grave, An' go on to mah Lawd an' be free." <sup>10</sup> Sabena, an old slave, also sings a Negro hymn to warn the runaways before the heroine's first entrance "Moses, go down to Egypt, 'Til ole Pharaoh let me go: Hadn't been foh Adam's fall, Shouldn't hab to die atall." <sup>11</sup> The lyrics serve a dual purpose, as a literary reference to a well-known Bible story used as an espionage tactic and to a historical character (Harriet) who was surnamed "Moses of her people."

The love triangle subplot reveals African American slaves as emotional and loving--the same human qualities of their white masters. Catherine has been promised in marriage to Sandy and therefore cannot marry Henry who belongs to a rival plantation owner. Catherine sincerely tells Sandy she does not love him. "You dream the dreams Ah dream. You's jes' as happy bein' a slave as Ah'd be bein' free. You don' neber hab no thought of freedom."<sup>12</sup> Sandy is a loyal house servant, estranged from the other slaves, and is referred to as Judas, an Uncle Tom. Despite Sandy's intervention the slaves do escape and the house servant is punished by being sold to another slaveowner. Illiteracy does not hinder Harriet's strategic plans for their escape on Saturday evening. Henry explains her ingenious plot to his betrothed.

Henry.            She had to come now, if she was a-comin' a-tall. She send word 'lon' the way. 'Sides that, if we starts foh freedom tonight, being'st its Saturday, no advertisements kin be sent on Sunday. That'll put us one day 'head o'em. That's the way Harriet figures.<sup>13</sup>

Harriet Tubman (c. 1821-1913) was born in Dorchester County, Maryland.<sup>14</sup> In 1849 at the age of twenty-five she escaped to the North. Harriet returned to the South nineteen times and brought over 300 slaves to freedom in Ontario, Canada. By 1852 she had become a legend in antislavery circles. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and the Quakers aided her heroic endeavors as undercover agents. The Underground Railroad was an informal network of slaves, freed African Americans, and whites who believed slavery was evil. These courageous individuals gave assistance and provided shelter for the fugitives to rest in hiding until it was safe for them to continue their journey. Harriet also attended women's suffrage conventions and gave three years outstanding war service to the Union army as a spy, scout, guerrilla leader, nurse, and cook in hospitals.

She was commander of eight or nine men under the direction of Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War. In 1898, a petition made Harriet eligible for a belated government pension to help support her home for aged freedmen in Auburn, New York. She also raised funds for the home by selling reprints of her biography, Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman, edited by Sarah Bradford (Auburn, New York, 1869).

Sojourner Truth was also a pioneer in the struggle for freedom and women's rights. Miller's historical drama, Sojourner Truth, is set in Northhampton, Massachusetts on a summer afternoon during the nineteenth century. Sojourner is seen with a clay pipe in her mouth sitting upon a mud-spattered cart on the campgrounds. Mr. Clarkson, the white attendant, discovers Sojourner and orders her to leave the premises. Sojourner asks Clarkson for permission to attend the meeting to spread the gospel; her request is denied. Before Sojourner exits, she overhears the conversation of a group of mischievous white youths who plan to burn down tents at the camp meeting as a prank. She interrupts them and praises one boy (Malcolm) for not giving into peer pressure. Sojourner gives the wayward boys a sermon choosing appropriate biblical references and personal slave history to illustrate the repercussions of their destructive plot. Clarkson reappears and threatens to have Sojourner arrested. The rehabilitated young men speak on behalf of her innocence and in return, Clarkson escorts Sojourner to the meeting.

Miller commingles the themes of religion, history, and racism to dramatize an incident in the life of this legendary heroine. Clarkson represents the white majority's prejudice and suspicion of the freed slave. The teenagers are taught a valuable lesson by the missionary. In turn, Clarkson is enlightened about the infinite possibilities of the African American woman. Sojourner is compelled to speak at the camp meeting and

preach the word of God to the masses. She considers herself a messenger and explains her mission to Clarkson:

Sojourner Truth. I's free an' I ain't no tramp. My old master call me Isabella, but God come to me in a vision an' told me to call myself Sojourner. Then I added the Truth 'cause that's the message I's on my way to teach. <sup>15</sup>

Sojourner's dialogue is historically accurate. It was delivered to church groups with prayer and song and is included in Margaret Busby's *Daughters of Africa* (1992).

When I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wasn't going to keep nothing of Egypt on me, and so I went to the Lord and asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave Sojourner, because I was to travel up and down the land, showing the people their sins, and being a sign unto them. Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth because I was to declare the truth to the people. <sup>16</sup>

Miller creates suspense by manipulating the vignettes as outlined by Pfister.

"Thus, the suspense in the receiver increases with the degree of his or her individual identificatory involvement in a figure and/or situation, and decreases with the degree to which he or she is distracted by disruptive elements on both the internal and external dramatic levels." <sup>17</sup> This construction can be seen when Malcolm receives peer pressure from Jerry, the leader of the clique, as Henry, another boy, sides with the outcast. Sojourner's interruptions frustrate the gang and prevent their devilish deed. Clarkson's immediate assumption that Sojourner is the fire starter compels Malcolm to tell the truth, but he is deterred by Henry. Clarkson's pursuit of Sojourner strengthens the dramatic tension. In the midst of the chase Sojourner returns to educate the boys. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory takes special notice of the sermonized monologue:

"Miller with quiet anger, mirrors the plight Sojourner Truth and thousands of slaves endured, many of them heroically willing to fight, escape, and die for freedom." <sup>18</sup>

Her compassionate speech is filled with biblical quotes and references, illustrating the inhumanity of American slavery. It also reinforces Sojourner's faith and courage to endure her past. She preaches a better future for these boys, who miraculously transform themselves from a degenerate clique into a chorus/congregation.

Sojourner Truth.      The speriences, boys, what I've had won't never happen to you. An' God my witness, I wouldn't want 'em to happen to none o' God's creatures. 'Mos' the first thing I kin remember is my Mammy sittin' on her doorstep starin' an' starin' at the stars, then weepin' an' weepin.' then starin' some more. An' I say to her, "Mammy, why you look at the stars an' weep?" An' she say to me, "Isabella, I look at the stars; my children look at the stars. I know not where they be; they know not where I be."

Ralph.                      An' didn't she never see 'em again?

Sojourner Truth.      Not in this world, lad. Then I could tell you 'bout when I was a little girl an' how my master once whipped me 'til the blood streamed from my body an' dyed the floor beneath me. But whipping like that is common. Even now thousands o' my black sisters an' brothers are still barin' their backs to the bitin' lash. Still their children are snatched 'way an' sold where they never see nar hear o' 'em again; an' still they toil an' pray. Sometimes I say to myself, "Sojourner, is God dead that He cannot hear them? With pain like that in the world I couldn't hurt nothin. I don't even want to see no fires 'cause they might be takin' food 'an clothes 'way from poor people what has to struggle to git more. Whenever I see flames lickin' joyous-like at the heavens I say to myself, that's the devil's work. Who knows, tomorrow heart-broken pappies and mammies may be rakin' them ashes for charred bones that was once happy, laughin' little children. No lads, fires ain't fun; they's jes' a taste o' hell."<sup>19</sup>

Sojourner Truth (née Isabella Baumtree, c. 1797-1883) was born in Ulster County, New York.<sup>20</sup> On July 4, 1827, she became a free woman under New York State's Gradual Emancipation Act. In 1843 she changed her name and left New York to teach, preach, and lecture. In Before the Mayflower, Bennett also included a quotation by John Brown, an abolitionist from Kansas, who made a distinction between Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman's missionary styles, indicating the latter would be considered an "acting" abolitionist.

Sojourner Truth was a "talking" abolitionist--a preacher, seer, and teacher . . . She loathed slavery, but bore five children for her master. She was a religious fanatic, but she was associated with a scandalous religious movement which dissolved in charges of adultery, incest and murder.<sup>21</sup>

At a religious meeting where a speaker praised the United States Constitution, the illiterate Sojourner questioned civil rights. "Now I hears talkin' bout de Constitution and de rights of man. I come up and I takes holt of dis Constitution. It looks mighty, big, and I feels for my rights but dere ain't any dare."<sup>22</sup> Sojourner was the first African American woman anti-slavery lecturer, abolitionist, and crusader for women's rights. In 1852 at the second National Woman's Suffrage Convention, Akron, Ohio she delivered her renowned "Ain't I A Woman?" address. "I have born thirteen children and seen most all sold into slavery and when I cried out of mother's grief none but Jesus heard me . . . and ain't I a woman?"<sup>23</sup> She also worked for Union causes in Battle Creek, Michigan and in 1864 was received by President Abraham Lincoln. In 1867, at the age of 70 plus, Sojourner delivered a speech at the American Equal Rights Association Convention in New York City.

I feel that I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as a man. I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about the colored man getting their rights, but not a word about the

colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. . . . I want women to have their rights. In the courts women have no rights, no voice; nobody speaks for them. <sup>24</sup>

Sojourner raised funds at lectures by selling copies of her autobiography, The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century, edited by Francis W. Titus (Battle Creek, Mich.: Review and Herald Office, 1850, 1884).

In addition to her plays about women, Miller also wrote historical dramas about heroic men of color. The power, sophistication, and intelligence of the Black African is presented in Samory. The play opens on a clearing in the hills of the environs of Niagassola, African Sudan in 1881. The French militia plan to feign illness and scare the native troops into believing the fever is plaguing Niagassola. Samory arrives at the clearing for noon prayers. He offers the soldiers medicated drinking water; two men reluctantly accept it. Samory confides in his lieutenant, Mamodou, because he feels the foreigners are false messengers and questions the delayed message from Bakamessa. A beggar appears and reveals his true identity; he is Bakamessa's alternate. The messenger informs the Sudanese that it is safe to enter the town. Samory decides to use the French soldiers as hostages to gain control of Niagassola.

Miller begins the drama with a tableau of the French army soldiers pacing restlessly back and forth, creating suspense from the rise of the curtain. Samory is described as a shrewd warrior, Black giant, Defender of the Faith, and a cannibal. Paton educates his comrades on the natives' attributes. He boasts of their being the first to domesticate animals and to smelt iron. The Frenchmen's scheme and the ensuing suspense of the play depends on successfully convincing Samory of their illness and delaying his mission. Samory is a good judge of character, and Miller reminds her

audience that a strong warrior can also be capable of compassion. After prayers, Samory questions the enemies' sincerity. "I am uneasy about the appearance of the Frenchmen. I suspect they are not so ill as they seem. When a man is fever-sick he drinks any water, little does he care whether it's drugged or not. One Frenchman at first refused to drink until signalled to by the other."<sup>25</sup> The Frenchmen's plot has created an uneasiness among Samory's troops. The audience is kept in suspense until the last possible moment. Samory orders the soldiers to escort the beggar off for interrogation after his cryptic announcement and offering the warrior kola nuts. Samory questions the beggar's gift and orders his men to retrieve their hostage. The Black African leader begins to crush the kola nuts under his feet and picks up a piece of paper. The note informs Samory that Bakamessa was under suspicion by the French and the beggar was entrusted with the mission. Samory's lieutenant, Mamodou, and the others beg their leader to finish reading the note. Samory exclaims, "The best news a general ever received--Niagassola is deserted. The natives fled at word of our coming and only a handful of Frenchmen hold the town."<sup>26</sup>

Miller introduces her audience to an authentic picture of Black African warriors of the 1800s, praying to Mohammed, draped in loin cloths with huge bows containing survival supplies, and goatskin bags filled with water. Samory (c. 1835-1900) was an African Sudanese conqueror.<sup>27</sup> From 1883 to 1895 he successfully forestalled efforts to colonize his native town. He was a religious Muslim of West Africa who united the tribes of the hinterlands of Guinea and the Ivory Coast, a feat which brought him into conflict with the French. This long struggle ended in his capture and eventual death in exile.

Miller explored the courage and strength of Black Haitians in her historical drama Christophe's Daughters. The play opens in 1820 on Milot, Haiti, the eve of the people's revolution against King Henri Christophe. Athénaire and Améthiste, daughters of Christophe, await their father's orders in the Grand Salon of Sans Souci, the Palace of the King. Améthiste, the older daughter, is loyal to her father's reign and scolds her sister for having empathetic feelings for the natives. The caste system is illustrated by three classes: royalty, militia, and servants. All of the king's servants have deserted the palace except Marie, who is preparing to return to her home. Marie is denounced as a traitor and heathen by Améthiste because she chooses life and family over loyalty to Christophe. Jean, a young mulatto of the regular army, pledges his love for Athénaire and promises to save her family. He is convinced that if Athénaire consents to marry him, both houses will be united and peace restored. Their intimacy is interrupted by the news of King Henri's suicide. The suspense climaxes as they escape to safety through the secret passage.

Miller produces a suspenseful story by using offstage events that are reported or described as the present scene unravels simultaneously. Pfister classifies this dramatic structural device as a type of narrative mediation: "a report of temporally hidden action that is often presented in the form of a messenger's report."<sup>28</sup> Miller's examples include her choice to reveal the opinions of the rebellious servants through the sole remaining maid, Marie; Jean's supposed solution to deliver the family from demise; and the report of the king's suicide. Pfister continues to analyze the structural device adding that "if the locale remains neutral or largely unspecified the focus of the presentation shifts towards the figures' inner consciousness."<sup>29</sup> Améthiste stands at the balcony door at twilight amidst ornate Louis XIV divans, gilded chairs, and rich tapestries. In contrast, offstage cries for independence and the rumble of drums, are heard which accentuate her

reflective monologue. Miller allows the princess to describe the offstage scene with sad retrospection as she educates her audience.

Améthiste. But he has done much. Under him, Haiti has grown rich. A merchant marine floats in the harbor. We export now, besides sugar more coffee, cocoa, and cotton than people ever dreamed of. We buy with produce and are paid in gold. They ought to look at the chateaux throughout the Kingdom, to this palace and the citadel, La Ferriere, and see that their King's dreams are not idle. They should have pride, but they haven't. Maybe some day they will understand and be sorry.<sup>30</sup>

As memories are recalled, the audience is informed of the King's paralysis. Athénaire is clearly set in opposition to her sister's patriotism.

Athénaire. But he was not magnificent this morning and still they hate him. When he came down from the balcony, dragging his poor paralyzed legs to mount his horse before the army, it was pathetic. They should have loved him for his courage, but when he fell in the mud, I heard someone jeer. I didn't wait to see them carry him in. I fled from the balcony into my chamber and wept.<sup>31</sup>

The suspense continues with women pacing, shadows, and the drum sounds approaching a crescendo. Marie brings the princesses an update on the affairs of state as she asks for their blessing to desert. "Duke Richard comes then with men to burn the castle and take the King. Claude said when the drums beat, they start burning the chateaux in the Plaine de Nord. I heard the drums. Now they march here and I must leave."<sup>32</sup>

As the city burns in the distance, Améthiste tries to analyze Duke Richard's vengeful plans. The two women are interrupted once again by another messenger, Baron Vastey.

who is dressed in the elaborate regalia of Christophe's court. The scene that follows accelerates the rhythm of the dialogue into stichomythia.

- Baron Vastey.            I bring a message from the King. The chateaux are  
                                      aflake. He orders me to escort the princesses to  
                                      safety. There is yet time for secret passage.
- Améthiste.                Does the King agree to leave with us?
- Baron Vastey.            No, Princess.
- Athénaire.                And Queen Marie-Louise?
- Baron Vastey.            The Queen remains with the King.
- Améthiste.                And I remain, too.
- Athénaire.                But sister, our father thought it best that we  
                                      should go.
- Améthiste.                Our father is considerate to give us a chance to  
                                      make our own decisions. Nevertheless,  
                                      Christophe's daughters can no more run away than  
                                      Christophe himself.<sup>33</sup>

Améthiste decides to go off and talk with her father personally.

Jean, Duke Richard's nephew, a young mulatto dressed in the uniform of the regular army, appears shortly after her exit. The impending tragedy is interrupted by the lovers' scene. Jean and Athénaire are juxtaposed to represent the struggle between love and honor of family. Athénaire is unconvinced, and their romantic interlude is disrupted by a shot heard offstage in the interior of the palace. Améthiste reports that their father has committed suicide. Athénaire calls upon Jean one last time to hold off the mob by throwing their jewels and coins to the rioters, giving the sisters ample time to escape with

their father's remains. Miller successfully continues the heightened tension until the curtain falls.

Queen Marie-Louise, Vastey and Améthiste stagger into the room, bearing the stretchers weighted down with Christophe's heavy body. . . . Silently bracing themselves against the heavy structure, they push it slowly out from the wall. Choking back hysterical sobs, Athénaire joins the procession, taking an end of the stretcher from the hand of Vastey. The group moves slowly through the opening, carrying their burden. After they have disappeared, the half-choked sobs of Athénaire can be heard. Then they are drowned by loud cries from below. "Down with the King! Long live independence!"<sup>34</sup>

Elizabeth Brown-Guillory criticizes *Christophe's Daughters*: "[it] shows the courage and strength exhibited by two princesses as their father's throne is being usurped. The language. . . is artificial, vapid, and saturated with euphemism."<sup>35</sup> Despite the dialogue's artificiality, the Athenian-like sentinels' (Améthiste and Athénaire) descriptions of the chaotic offstage events, crescendos of the drum sounds, melodramatic posing, poetic imagery of the burning city, disrupted love scene, and urgency of the moment make Miller's historical drama a captivating tragedy of race pride and familial honor.

Henri Christophe (1797-1820) was one of François-Dominique Toussaint L' Ouverture's top generals before he became a tyrannical revolutionary leader.<sup>36</sup> Christophe defaulted and went over to the French under Napoleon, who despised Blacks in leadership. He needed Haiti and slave labor to complete his plans for the Louisiana Territory. On January 1, 1801, Haiti was proclaimed a free country, and the new Black republic abolished slavery as one of its first official acts. Christophe created an autocracy from 1811 to 1820 patterned after the absolute monarch of Europe and in 1820 he began to suffer from paralysis.

Miller's genteel plays are folk comedies that also contain the dramatic structural element of suspense. The definition of the genteel genre was discussed in the "Introduction." Elizabeth Brown-Guillory uses the term to describe plays that examine the folkisms of characters in both sentimental and controversial situations in a graceful manner, free of vulgarity. Riding the Goat was originally published in Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro. It was produced by the Krigwa Players at the Albert Auditorium, Baltimore, Maryland, February 16, 1932. Scratches appeared in Carolina Magazine of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in April 1929. Manfred Pfister also discussed dramatic suspense in comedies.

One factor that directly influences suspense is the extent that the receiver can identify with the fictional protagonist of the ensuing plot sequences. The stronger the identification, the more committed the audience becomes in the way they follow the plans made and the decisions and risks taken by the fictional protagonist, and the more he or she will look forward with anticipation to ensuing plot sequences. The degree of identification and empathy is not left to the audience entirely, but it is also determined by the text itself.<sup>37</sup>

Riding the Goat is set in the sittingroom of Ant Hetty's home in South Baltimore, Maryland in the early part of the twentieth century. It is six o'clock on a June evening and preparations are being made for the United Order of Moabites Parade. Ant Hetty is concerned with Dr. William Carter's reluctance to lead the parade as elected Grand Master. She discovers that both Carter and her granddaughter Ruth are not proud to participate in the traditional community event. Christopher Columbus Jones, the son of a rich businessman, is envious that he was not chosen to lead the parade. Jones is determined to find a flaw in Carter's character and win Ruth's love. Unconvinced that Carter will join the Moabites, Ruth disguises herself and marches in his place.

Carter returns too late and finds his betrothed has upheld his good standing in the community. Jones attempts to expose Ruth's fraudulence but Carter intercepts his scheme and saves the day. Ruth's respect and love for Carter is restored.

Miller explores African American fraternal lodges, respect for ritual with pomp and pageantry, and the barriers between educated people of color and the poor, uneducated older generation. The ideas of the younger educated generation have created crises in the community. Ant Hetty's dream is dying, and Carter is sabotaging his practice and must make a choice between educational philosophy and race pride. If he does not participate in the lodge's event, the townspeople will patronize the white physician. Ant Hetty intimates that Ruth and Carter have allowed education to alienate them from their community.

Ant Hetty.     You ain't got no time to sleep an' eat an' see the parade too.

Ruth.           It's too hot for parades.

Ant Hetty.     I've heard that 'nough fo' one day. You young ones gits me. You'se too pert fo' your years. There's Doctor Carter now agettin' to high an' mighty fo' parades, says he's tir'd of useless marchin'. Did you evah hear the lak of it?

Ruth.           I don't blame him.<sup>38</sup>

Ant Hetty is disappointed with their disrespect for one of the few organizations an African American could join in the early 1900s. She always dreamed of a coed lodge where a woman could lead the men. "A woman ought to have it; she'd know a good thing."<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, Ant Hetty's feminist statement is historically accurate. African American women were not allowed to participate in lodges or parades. The clear contradiction, according to Hampton University's (Hampton, Virginia, 1909) catalog course description, "Training in Community Work would prepare the students to

relate their special work to the needs of the communities in which they are to live, and will train them for effective influence in the home, in the school, in the church, and in other activities for school betterment." <sup>40</sup> Community service included parades and drives, the catalog misleads the African American female student. Ant Hetty realizes her limitations and wants to live vicariously through Ruth and Carter.

Ant Hetty.     It was so different when your grandpap was livin'; I had somethin' to watch fo' then. Since he died I been out of it. Then recently I been thinkin.' "Here's Ruthie growed up wid a nice doctor an' he gran' mastah." I could hold my haid higher 'n the res.' Now he's 'bout to spoil it all, an' you aidin' an' abettin' him in it. <sup>41</sup>

Christopher Columbus Jones is Carter's rival for both notoriety in the community and Ruth's love. Jones was appointed Grand Lodge Inspector of the parade. His father is the richest drayman (one who hauls a strong low cart or wagon) in the neighborhood. Jealousy has prompted Jones to confess his true feelings for the outsider.

Jones.           'Course lodge inspector is a mighty good job, but I don't see why I couldn't be gran' mastah same as some nigger from the outside. I'm jest as fittin' as that doctor chap.

Ruth.            Then you aren't satisfied?

Jones.           I'm proud all right of this job, but I'd be prouder of that one. Mebbe if I was gran' mastah you'd like me a little better. <sup>42</sup>

The commencement of the parade grows nearer, and Ant Hetty updates the audience as she watches from the window. Carter, on the other hand, grows

more disgusted with the traditional ritual, and selfish pride exposes his disrespect for the community.

- Carter. Oh, Ruth, I am sick of all that foolishness. From the day I put on that little white apron and rode a bony gray mare around the block, I've been hating it, and I'm just about through with all of it.
- Ruth. They don't think it's foolishness.
- Carter. They've got to be taught.
- Ruth. But not in that way.
- Carter. Why?
- Ruth. Because I know them better than you do. If you leave their lodge now, they won't have you attend them; even grandma wouldn't and she's no member.
- Carter. Well, if that's the way they feel, let them cut me. I guess I can manage to get along.
- Ruth. But they will suffer for it.
- Carter. Which will be their own fault. They ought to suffer.
- Ruth. But aren't they your people?
- Carter. Of course, they are, but not even for my people am I going to don that regalia again.<sup>43</sup>

Ant Hetty continues to describe the offstage event as the bugle call is heard. The music ("Maryland, My Maryland") reminds Ruth that time is running out and she must save Carter's honor within the community. She hastily changes into his costume with a bright golden-plumed hat and a large black mask. Carter returns to retrieve his uniform as Ruth secretly runs off to join the parade. He searches for the missing costume as Ant Hetty completes her commentary. Ruth returns and undresses hurriedly.

Jones rushes in accusing her of impersonation and threatens to expose her sacrilegious act. Carter surprisingly appears in uniform, confusing and startling everyone. Ruth's act of bravery is acknowledged and the lovers embrace.

Riding the Goat focuses on an impending parade within a community of African American middle-class draymen. The ceremony within the play involves a formal performance that is set offstage and surrounds the action. Clearly, Carter and Ruth both learn a valuable lesson from their participation in the lodge event. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory expounds on Miller's genteel approach: "May Miller cleverly emphasizes that the black community traditionally has been steeped in rituals that have enabled them to survive the middle passage, slavery, reconstruction, and beyond." <sup>44</sup> Miller believes that education is the key to rise above oppression. Brown-Guillory adds, "that education is of little value if it does not train the person to contribute significantly to his community." <sup>45</sup> The divisions of the caste system among these middle-class African Americans are demonstrated by those who are educated and speak articulately and the citizens who speak in dialect. Miller captures the humor using Negro stage names such as Christopher Columbus Jones, and the folk qualities in the foibles of the community. The suspense is contained in the fast-paced witty dialogue and the questionable future of a young African American physician.

Scratches depicts another side of existence for the African American--Black ghetto life. It opens on the Poodle Dog Pool Parlor, LeDetroit Park, Washington, D.C., in 1915 on a blustery January day. Stump, a hunchback, prepares the pool tables and racks for the evening patrons. Abbie and her girlfriend Meladora stop by on their way to the theatre. Abbie inquires about her boyfriend's whereabouts and inadvertently spots her estranged husband begging in the street. This compels her to confide in Meladora.

Abbie explains that Daniel became a religious man back in Philadelphia, leaving her no choice but to abandon him. She worships money, materialistic possessions, and ended up with Jeff, a rich pool hustler. The women sneak out without being recognized as Daniel comes in from the cold. Jeff arrives momentarily and persuades Daniel to play a game of pool. The proposition is, if Daniel wins he will win money but if he loses they must exchange identities. Jeff wins and surprisingly reneges on the bet, courageously facing the police like a gentleman. Daniel is left with his dignity, money, and Abbie.

Abbie is the epitome of a beautiful mulatto, high-class whore of the early 1900s. She enters in a black fur coat, possessing everything but love and compassion:

Meladora. I was jus' judgin' by 'pearences.

Abbie. You can't never tell. You know there's some folks that scratches in life jus' like the men does at that table. They aims at one thing an' hits two. Wid Jeff, bein' respectable has to mean bein' poor too.

Meladora. An' some folks I know ain't got no better sense 'n to leave good providers foh them that scratches.

Abbie. Don't be no fool, I ain't leavin' Jeff an' his money foh no beggar.<sup>46</sup>

The daughters of the rich believe they are guiltless. Meladora commends Abbie for having the courage to leave Daniel, an ex-gambler turned evangelist. Jeff is a fugitive and his unattestable fortune creates an atmosphere of mystery. The suspense begins with Abbie's uncontrollable urge to avoid her estranged husband. The women bribe Stump to provide access to the street through the back door. Daniel enters without an overcoat, hungry, cold, homeless, and angry with the world. He slowly gains composure as his body thaws out in front of the large stove. When Jeff arrives the audience recognizes that these men of similar stature represent two extremely opposing lifestyles.

Daniel is unaware of the con involved when he is propositioned. The tension heightens as Jeff continues to run back and forth to the window, anxiously anticipating the arrival of the police. Stump becomes the game's referee/commentator, and lookout man for Jeff. The pool game begins and the audience's attention is held by their report of each shot missed and successfully executed. Daniel appears to be winning until he shoots and scratches on his fifth shot. Jeff completes the game and informs Daniel that he is a fugitive and can out smart the cops by swapping identities.

Jeff. I knowed dey had me spotted. An' what's mo' dere's two in de back what's been dere.

Daniel. I can't see that I kin help none.

Jeff. Yes, yuh kin. De onliest clue dey got is dat gray hat an' coat on de wall, dat's your'n from now on. Dey're goin' grab de one dat wears it out of dis room, an' yuh're jus' 'bout my size. All niggers look alak tuh 'em, an' dey'd jus' as soon have yuh as me.<sup>47</sup>

Despite Jeff's acknowledgment of the African American's stereotypical depiction instilled in him by white America, Miller delivers a surprising dénouement. She demonstrates the unexpected magnanimity of two African American men who have made scratches in their lives.

Jeff. Git out de way. Dis is my job an' I'se goin'a see it through. Remember de gal's part of de bargain. . . . Look out foh her.

Stump. Jeff, don' go walkin' right into 'em.

Jeff. Jus' don' yuh go followin' me into de street. Dere's still a chance I mought make it. So long boys.<sup>48</sup>

The pool game is a ceremonial ritual within the play. It stresses the cultural traits of the African American pool hall patrons of LeDetroit Park, Washington, D.C., and propels the plot and characters toward change. The locale is male-dominated and therefore does not leave room to explore the female characters, Abbie and Meladora. The pool term "scratch" is used when the cue ball follows the number ball into the pocket and the player loses both the point and turn. Scratches bears resemblance to an earlier American play, The Easiest Way (1909) by Eugene Walter, in its handling of the subject of a kept woman and the exploration of social realism. Miller uses this structural element in her descriptions of the set and character in the opening tableau.

The room is the typical pool room of pre-war days. In the rear wall are two large windows, suggestive of a shop, and between them a door opens on the street. . . . On the right wall two cue stick racks are hung and above these a cheap gas fixture extends. . . . Cheap prints and advertisements decorate all the available spaces. Well out in the room from the left down-stage is a large egg stove behind which in the corner a chair is almost hidden from view. Four pool tables are [ar]ranged in the middle of the room. . . . The shadows of dusk are gathering. The brisk pace of the stooped figures that pass by the windows indicate the severity of the weather. (When the curtain rises the room is vacant save for Stump, a dark brown hunchback. . . who is asleep on the chair behind the stove. He awakes with a start and with apelike movements goes to the stove. . . . From the box at his feet he scoops two shovels of coal which he throws on the fire).<sup>49</sup>

Miller's contributions to the genre of Black folk superstition plays include The Bog Guide and Stragglers in the Dust. The Bog Guide (1925) won third prize in the Opportunity Contest Awards. It was produced by the Intercollegiate [Drama] Association at the Imperial Elks Auditorium, on West 129th Street in New York City, on May 5, 1926, but not published. Stragglers in the Dust was written in 1930 but first

published in 1989 in Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950, edited by Kathy A. Perkins.

The Bog Guide is set in an African swamp. Rupert Masters and Elwood Bealer, two English tourists, are on a sporting expedition that has gone awry and await the arrival of their bog guide. Masters confesses that he had an ulterior motive for making this journey. He is remorseful for mistreating his mulatto cousin, Chauncey Bayne. The discovery of Bayne's mixed blood caused him to leave England to find a less discriminating society. Masters intends to find Bayne and bring him back home. Sabali, the bog guide, finally arrives. Unbeknownst to the tourists, her parents have died from a tropical disease and their funeral ceremony has begun offstage. After Masters discovers that Sabali is Bayne's daughter, he attempts to persuade her to return to England. Sabali plans to avenge her father's disinheritance and leads them both into the mire where they sink and drown.

Miller's descriptive scenic design, e.g., green moss, vines, quagmire, and gray mist, immediately captures the atmosphere of mystery and suspense. Masters and Bealer are two middle-aged men who enter as cries of wildlife are heard offstage. Bealer is uncomfortable with the sounds of the forest and unappreciative of the paganistic tom-tom ceremony in the distance. Masters and Bealer were warned by the villagers of the quarter-mile bog. These Englishmen are set in opposition to one another with prejudicial opinions of the African forest and the natives' rituals. During the scene time passes and twilight approaches as Bealer paces in silence anxiously awaiting the guide. In several melodramatic monologues Masters confides in Bealer explaining Bayne's disappearance.

Masters' confession introduces other themes such as love rivalry, miscegenation, alienation, and racism.

Masters. I must tell you. Do you hear. I must tell you.

Bealer. Forgive me, old chap, of course.

Masters. Elwood, it's an ugly story. I loved Audrian. God, how I loved her! And she loved Chauncey. Two days before their proposed wedding I went to her. . . O! the torture of seeing the girl you love about to marry another.

Bealer. Yes, yes and--

Masters. Lord Bayne had two children, a son and a daughter. When still young, they married and sons were born to both.

Bealer. Yes, I know Chauncey was the child of the son and you of the daughter.

Masters. Chauncey's mother, the son's wife, was too reserved. However, her unnatural attitude was explained when she was dying in childbirth with Chauncey. She called her husband, my mother, and grandfather to her and told them that she thought they ought to know before she died that she was a Negro.<sup>50</sup>

When Chauncey grew up, he went off to find a place where prejudice was nonexistent and Masters married Audrian the following year. Masters is not the only soul in search of Bayne. Miller subtly suggests that a heavenly spirit, supernatural being, has coerced Masters to persevere.

Masters. We never saw him again, and the next year I married Audrian. The following year grandfather died, a broken old man; Chauncey was his heart.

Bealer. My God, this is like a message from the dead. (He pauses, listening to a stir of leaves.)<sup>51</sup>

The rustle of the leaves reaffirms his grandfather's presence and the importance of their journey. Masters exits to look for the local English trader who may be able to explain the bog guide's delay. Moments later Sabali enters, a beautiful brown girl of fourteen. Sabali's heavenly naiveté is accentuated by her naked breasts. Although she initially speaks in parables, Bealer is enamored with her diction. Bealer is both intrigued by her command of the English language and frustrated by her indecipherable jargon.

Sabali. Flotsam said I was just a solid little strip of land on which he was cast at last, the dancer said I was the music that made her beautiful steps for to come. Flotsam ordered before he lay down to his slumber that Sabali should continue to be solid land for bits of humanity drifting this way, so you see her the only safe path across this bog where only evil should perish.

Bealer. Ah! So you're the bog guide: but, child, who taught you that language?

Sabali. My words with men are those of Flotsam. He brought them with him from Faraway Land, where men build structures to hide their wickedness and clothe their bodies to cover black souls. . . . But the words I use to answer my God's murmur in the water and his whisper in the trees--these are the dancer's and I use them because my God knows them.<sup>52</sup>

Sabali's pagan worship allows her to receive guidance and answers from nature. The whisper in the trees is similar to Bealer's experience with the rustle of the leaves--flora speak to them. Sabali poetically describes Bayne's voluntary departure. "Flotsam was just a bit of humanity tossed on the ocean of discontent by a storm of prejudice."<sup>53</sup> Bayne married a native woman (the dancer) and their daughter became

his mediator. "little anchorage." Sabali has clearly described the Englishmen's fates. Miller's dénouement is ominously approaching.

Sabali.           Oft at night . . . Flotsam and I sat alone . . . and talked far into the night. Sometimes in the darkness he would hold me close, calling me his little anchorage, the one barrier between him and his endless journey. He warned me that even after he slept, some might come and try to lure me away, and he made me promise to stay here. Sometimes we knelt together . . . and prayed God to keep me away from that land where beautiful souls are snatched and shells are left in their places--shells where only bitterness and hatred can hide. <sup>54</sup>

In *Jambalaya* (1985), Luisah Teish explores the nature worship of the Black African. The water (ocean) and shells belong to the African Venus, Oshun. She "heals with cool water. Rivers, lakes, waterfalls, and streams carry Her voice in the tinkling waters. . . . Oshun learned the secret of the shells." <sup>55</sup>

Bealer finally understands her insightful monologue, realizing that the sound of the tom-toms offstage is the commencement of her parents' funeral ceremony. Sabali, Bayne, and his wife have been bitten by the deadly tsetse fly. Masters returns from the English trader with further proof of Sabali's identification. He discovers Bealer is missing and in the only soliloquy of Miller's plays being discussed, Masters' intuition finally surfaces.

Masters.           (The faint echo of distant tom-toms is heard. He is about to put his pipe in his mouth, but stops midway) Oh my God! and they tell me those are the funeral celebrations for Chauncey. Chauncey is dead and all he has left is a beautiful brown savage, who speaks his language and does his bidding, guiding souls over the bog. . . . Oh God! . . . Give me the chance. I'll take her back and fight her battles. Chauncey's child shall be Lady Bayne--please God! <sup>56</sup>

Sabali returns and Masters instantly traces family resemblance in her speech, features, and mannerisms. His plans to rescue Sabali are useless cries because she declares revenge. "Sabali shall not go to Faraway Land. Though Flotsam sleeps he has the promise. Nor shall you go back. You see I know you: you're Prejudice. Already Faraway Land has too many masquerades and Prejudice must not go back." <sup>57</sup> In African culture, according to Teish, "Racism is given a dishonorable burial, starve him out, deprive him of his spirit, eradicate his name." <sup>58</sup> Sabali has led Masters to the quicksand. Miller presents a horrifically chilling tableau as they both sink into the mire. Masters begins to struggle and scream, echoes of the distant tom-toms are heard, the curtain begins to fall, and Sabali speaks, "Sh! you will awake the birds, and we all want to sleep." <sup>59</sup> Miller's vengeful drama is presented with several offstage ceremonies and events. Sabali's parents' funeral rites and Bealer's passage to safety across the bog take place offstage. Miller cleverly suspends action on the stage until the end, allowing her audience to witness the most melodramatic and sensational event.

Stragglers in the Dust also explores Black folk superstition/Voodoo, and illustrates the power of the dramatic structural element of suspense. Pfister states:

A further influence on the intensity of the suspense potential is the quantity and clarity of the future-orientated information which both figures and audience are able to use to develop their respective anticipatory hypotheses. Such future-orientated information is transmitted explicitly in the open discussions of plans, in prophecies, dreams and oaths, and implicitly in the form of psychic or atmospheric omens. <sup>60</sup>

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, D.C. is the setting for an indictment against white America's treatment of the African American soldier during the 1920s. Nan, a fifty-year old African American charwoman, is seen at dusk scrubbing the marble sepulcher. She is convinced that the Unknown Soldier is Jim, her deceased veteran son.

Mac, the white cemetery watchman of the Great Cemetery, appeases Nan's fantastical belief that her son rests in the sepulcher. Lester Bradford, a distinguished politician, overhears their reports of a stranger (the Straggler) who has haunted the monument for two days. Bradford has come to identify the Straggler as his son, who was reported missing two days ago. The Straggler (Captain Lester Bradford, Jr.) appears and informs Mac that he is waiting for the African American soldier's spirit who rescued him and was subsequently killed by gunfire. The Straggler believes his heroism was unjustly rewarded and has come to claim the tomb as his resting place. The Bradfords, father and son, are reunited as Jim's spirit ascends the tomb, propelling Bradford Jr. to follow him. Moments later Bradford finds his son's corpse at the sepulcher where he and Mac stand in silent vigil.

Nan is left with the memories of her son who died in France. The probability of Jim being buried in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is a pathetic and unrealistic dream.

Nan. Ah ain't got nothin' at home. All Ah got is heah.

Mac. All you got is here?

Nan. Well yuh see, Mistah Mac, Ah ain't nevah had nobody but mah boy, Jim. Dere's nevah been nobody but jus' him and me. An' since he's been heah Ah jus' kinda likes tuh stay neah.

Mac. But I never heard about your son working here. Which one is he?

Nan. Who mah Jim? Ah no he ain't workin'. Fact is Jim ain't nevah liked tuh work much, but now he can't work no more. Dey put him in dat marble box dere aftah dey fin' him on de field. Flanders, Ah think dey calls it.<sup>61</sup>

Miller allows Nan to explain the limitations of the African American veteran in the early 1900s. Nan fears that if the white government discovers Jim is buried in the tomb, they

will exhume him from the monument. "Ah know some of dem don' know; but Ah knows an' dat man knows . . . Ah didn' come out cause Ah know'd dere'd be them dere as wouldn't want Jim tuh stay dere cause he's cullud." <sup>62</sup>

It is fifteen minutes to closing when Lester Bradford enters. After eavesdropping on Nan's story, he ponders America's obsession with the Unknown Soldier.

Mac.           Sundays the day, though when we have a crowd.  
Sundays there's nothing else much to do but think of the  
dead. Then hundreds visit the unknown grave. He seems  
somehow to belong to each one separately.

Bradford.      He undoubtedly has had an unexplainable effect on the  
whole white race.

Mac.           No sir, you need'nt make it that narrow. Better say on all  
races. You'd be surprised at the number of Negroes that  
visit here.

Bradford.      For what? Out of patriotism?

Mac.           No telling how many of them feel like Nan. <sup>63</sup>

Mac and Bradford represent both the liberal and conservative view of African Americans. Mac respects Nan's postmortem dream for her son, while Bradford, on the other hand, is not as munificent "But if it were--what a terrible joke on America!" <sup>64</sup> He is convinced the suspicious pallid-faced crazy boy is Bradford Jr., who is in poor physical health. Bradford has resigned his son to a tragic end.

Miller once again postpones the entrance of the main character as long as possible. When the Straggler appears, the deathlike pallor of his skin and tremor of his body indicates to the audience the severity of his condition. Initially, he speaks to Mac, inquiring about Jim's whereabouts. Bradford intercepts and interrogates his son, who

verifies Nan's supposed feeble-minded observations. "I didn't know though that he was her son. You see I met him . . . It was just a few minutes after one of those infernal German shells had exploded near me. I was standing there . . . When he came to save me." <sup>65</sup> Bradford Jr. communicates with the dead and intellectually empathizes with the injustice of African American soldiers but insists on claiming reprehensible notoriety.

- Straggler. He was such a huge black one and it was so easy for him to carry me. We had gone some distance when he missed his gun and went back. A shell got him.
- Mac. Poor lad--poor fellow.
- Straggler. Lucky lad! Didn't they go right to that spot to get him.
- Mac. How would you be knowing that?
- Straggler. He told me himself how shocked he was when he saw where they were putting him, because he knew how they felt over here about Niggers.
- Bradford. But son you said he was dead.
- Straggler. Sure he's dead but I've talked to him and even Niggers learn sense after death. He only stays there from evening 'til dawn. The rest of the time he spends at the Capitol. He says it's lots of fun to come back and see what foolish things big men say and do. Isn't it funny they can't change the only thing that counts?
- Mac. It's bad to be a listen'ning to that lad.
- Straggler. From a black Nigger too who stole my place. He caught the shell aimed at me. He holds the tomb meant for me! He sleeps there and leaves me . . . a shadow tagging after him--me Captain Lester Bradford Jr.--and I can't die. <sup>66</sup>

The Straggler describes the offstage ascension of Jim into the sepulcher to his father and Mac: "He's stepping off now. Doesn't he stride like a king over the city and they don't even know he's there." <sup>67</sup> Bradford Jr. breaks away from his father and rushes off to meet Jim. Seconds later Mac and Bradford reach the young man who is found dead. Bradford has also gained sight of the supernatural being: he confesses to have witnessed the ascension as well. Miller leaves the audience with reasonable doubt that things are not what they appear to be.

Bradford.      You are mistaken; that's not my son's body.

Mac.             But you called him son when you were just talking to him.

Bradford.      Oh yes! That was my son, but he went in the tomb  
                         you know. <sup>68</sup>

Miller uses symbolism and atmospheric devices to create a mysterious mood for the supernatural presence. The Straggler's obsessive descriptions of Jim, Bradford Jr.'s expectant death, and the reports of offstage events help illustrate the invisible power and intensify the suspense of the drama. Manfred Pfister's theory of action versus event substantiates Miller's use of symbolism.

There is another type of dramatic text that is theoretically conceivable and has even become a reality--one whose macrostructure is determined by events rather than actions. This kind of 'actionless' drama has been especially common in recent times. In fact, this lack of action, the reduction of action to events, is one of the most important structural transformations in twentieth-century drama . . . . This also applies to many modern one-act plays, whose structure is generally determined by a single situation. <sup>69</sup>

Miller consciously provides natural explanations for the mysterious foreboding events and uses symbolistic features in her characters, costumes, biblical references, offstage sounds, and music. When the play begins, Nan is seated on the steps of the

sepulcher with a scrub pail. This is a clear image of Nan's oppressive existence in which she struggles to survive. Nan drudgingly works and softly sings, "Keep dis in min' an all'll go right, as on yo way you goes. Be shore you knows 'bout all you tells. But don't tell all you knows." <sup>70</sup> The message in the hymn suggests that Nan does communicate with her dead son and is wary to expose this knowledge because Jim would lose his patriotic honor. When Mac appears, he is dressed in a double-breasted suit with brass buttons, a blue cap trimmed with a gold cord, swinging a watchman's clock in his hand. Mac looks at his gold watch anticipating closing time as Nan initiates a conversation. She compares the boundless opportunities of white Americans to the adverse conditions of the African Americans. Nan has been conditioned to believe African Americans will not receive their civil rights in her lifetime. She dreams of her just rewards in the afterlife and analyzes her position on earth using biblical references.

Mac. Well, Nan, I guess it's about finishing up you be.

Nan. Yes, Mistah Mac, Ah's just 'bout done. Ah's rubb'd and rubb'd all dat brass bright 'nough to make heavenly crowns.

Mac. To be sure might nice things look nice Nan, but I doubt if I'd be wantin' any brass crown.

Nan. No Ah guess not, Mistah Mac, there's still some of us what's deservin' of better. We done tasted the brass here on earth. God sartinly must be a savin' de gold. <sup>71</sup>

The presence of supernatural forces are signified by offstage sounds. Bradford Jr. makes an announcement when he breaks away from his father to follow Jim to the sepulcher. The sound of a faint fog horn ensues hauntingly in the distance as Bradford Jr. explains and runs to the top of the steps. Lester Bradford runs in pursuit of his son as he reaffirms the omnipotent presence. "I believe I did hear something," and Mac replies, "Only some boat, sir, as she puts into wharf." <sup>72</sup> The rationale for offstage noises

continues as the play ends, with Bradford thrusting money into Mac's hand as a reward for his detainment and exiting as "Mac stands dazed for a moment and then rushes off stage after him. At the tomb the soldier [Jim] keeps his silent vigil. A boat whistle calls shrilly in the distance as the curtain falls." <sup>73</sup> The sensitive issue of justice for the early African American war hero is left unanswered verbally but the shrill whistle of the boat suggests the African American will continue to speak out in the struggle for civil rights.

The eight plays that have been discussed are all suspenseful depictions of the African American, Black African, and Haitian in diverse settings from the palace of King Henri Christophe to a poolhall in LeDetroit Park, Washington, D.C. Miller consciously includes white characters as she explores people of color, especially strong, vibrant Black women. In "Teaching Black-Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers," Mary Helen Washington separates the evolutionary process of Black women into three interrelated cycles. The process is both historical and psychological. The first cycle, "the Suspended Woman," can be used to describe Miller's heroines.

In historical terms the women in the first cycle belong to the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. They are, in the words of Zora Neale Hurston, "the mules of the world," carrying the burdens heaped upon them by society and by family, victims of both racial and sexual oppression. . . . Pain, violence, and death form the essential content of these women's lives. . . . Because the pressures against them are so great they cannot move anywhere. Suspended in time and place, they are women whose life choices are so severely limited that either they kill themselves, retreat into insanity, or are simply defeated one way or another by the external circumstances of their lives. <sup>74</sup>

Queen Marie-Louise, Améthiste, and Athénaire are nearly defeated by the rebellious mulattos in Christophe's Daughters. Sabali in The Bog Guide has been poisoned by the tsetse fly, and seeking revenge for her father, chooses to end her life drowning prejudice (Masters) in the mire. Miller portrays her heroines as women emerging from historical suspension, for example, the title characters in Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Ruth Chapman in Riding the Goat. Her female characters are fugitive slaves, missionaries, princesses, college graduates, dancers, and domestic workers.

Miller's three genres of historical, genteel, and Black folk superstition/Voodoo plays encapsulate each other. Harriet Tubman is labeled a "Black witch" by the white slaveowners. They cannot fathom an African American woman being intelligent enough to escape without the use of witchcraft. Marie, the sole remaining servant of Christophe's palace, is denounced as a pagan worshipper because she carries a charm that Améthiste believes belonged to a witch doctor. Miller's plays are presented with suspense, mystery, social realism, and symbolism. They include religion, race pride, and humor to educate the impressionable young minds of the early 1900s about the souls of their people in a genteel manner. She was fortunate enough to find platforms for her plays in the auditoriums of Baltimore's high schools and churches. Her plays were also produced at universities such as Howard University, Washington, D.C., Morgan State College, Baltimore, Maryland, Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana, and St. Augustine College, Raleigh, North Carolina. Miller's professionalism as a dramatist, director, and actress within the high schools, universities, and the Baltimore branch of the Krigwa Players were the components that made her the most widely published African American female playwright during the Harlem Renaissance. She developed an individual style within the genteel school of drama, including stories outside of the

domestic setting. Miller suggests that although African Americans must fight in the freedom struggle, they should continue to love and have compassion for all people. Her plays show Blacks who want the same things as whites in life: family, love, and prosperity. Miller paved the way for other Black female playwrights and brought theatre to her race across the eastern and southern states so that African Americans would live with a sense of pride.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The biographical information of William A. Brown, the manager of the African Company in New York, from 1816 to 1823 is based upon Kathy A. Perkins, ed., Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 141.

<sup>2</sup> Bart Barnes. "Metro/Obituary." Washington Post, 10 February 1995, C06.

<sup>3</sup> Hatch. Black Theater U.S.A., 353.

<sup>4</sup> Carter G. Woodson. "Introduction." Negro History in Thirteen Plays. Willis Richardson and May Miller, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1935), v.

<sup>5</sup> Willis Richardson, ed., Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1930), viii.

<sup>6</sup> Brown-Guillory. Their Place on the Stage, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Errol Hill, ed., Black Heroes: Seven Plays (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1989), 103.

<sup>8</sup> May Miller. Harriet Tubman, in Perkins, 182.

<sup>9</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America 1619-1964 (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 146.

<sup>10</sup> May Miller. Harriet Tubman, in Perkins, 181.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 178, 179.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> Biographical information on Harriet Tubman is based upon the following sources: Bennett, Before the Mayflower, 146; Margaret Busby, ed., Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent From the Ancient Egyptian to the Present (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 76, 77; Hill, Black Heroes, 103; Gloria T. Hull, et al., All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 84.

<sup>15</sup> May Miller, Sojourner Truth, in Richardson and Miller, 316.

<sup>16</sup> Busby, Daughters of Africa, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Pfister, 98.

<sup>18</sup> Brown-Guillory, 13.

<sup>19</sup> Miller, Sojourner Truth, in Richardson and Miller, 329, 330.

<sup>20</sup> Biographical information on Sojourner Truth is based upon the following sources: Bennett, Before the Mayflower, 144-146; Busby, Daughters of Africa, 37; Hull, et al., All the Women Are White, 84.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, 144.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>23</sup> Busby, 38.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, Samory, in Richardson and Miller, 305.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>27</sup> Biographical information on Samory is based upon the following source: Silvio Castro, La Larga guerra de los sofás del Almamy Samory Toure (Havana: Giron, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> Pfister, 208.

29 Ibid., 265.

30 May Miller, Christophe's Daughters, in Perkins, 167.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 169.

33 Ibid., 171.

34 Ibid., 175.

35 Brown-Guillory, 12.

36 Biographical information on Henri Christophe is based upon the following source: Bennett, Before the Mayflower, 105.

37 Manfred Pfister, The Theory and Analysis of Drama, John Halliday, trans. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 99.

38 May Miller, Riding the Goat, in Perkins, 157.

39 Ibid., 155.

40 Neverdon-Morton, Afro-American Women of the South, 31.

41 Perkins, 158.

42 Ibid., 159.

43 Ibid., 161.

44 Brown-Guillory, 63.

45 Ibid., 64.

46 May Miller, Scratches, in Carolina Magazine, no. 49 (April 1929): 39.

47 Ibid., 43.

48 Ibid., 44.

49 Ibid., 36.

50 May Miller, The Bog Guide (Hatch-Billops Collection, New York, NY), 5, 6.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., 8.

55 Teish, Jambalaya, 122, 123.

56 Ibid., 9.

57 Ibid.

58 Teish, 71.

59 Miller, 10.

60 Pfister, 100.

61 May Miller, Stragglers in the Dust, in Perkins, 146.

62 Ibid., 147.

63 Ibid., 148.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 151.

68 Ibid., 152.

69 Pfister, 200.

70 Miller, Stragglers in the Dust, in Perkins, 146.

71 Ibid., 146.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 152.

74 Mary Ellen Washington. "Teaching Black-Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers." in All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 212.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**THELMA MYRTLE DUNCAN: VOODOO**  
**AND NEW DISCOVERIES--MAGIC,**  
**MAYHEM, AND MISCALCULATIONS**

Thelma Myrtle Duncan was another pioneer African American female playwright of the 1920s and 1930s. Her plays were among the first works produced at Howard University under the direction of professors Alain Locke and Montgomery T. Gregory. At Howard University, Duncan wrote The Death Dance (1923), the only play in her repertoire that can be considered a historical drama. It was written in Montgomery T. Gregory's class and first produced by the Howard Players. This play, as mentioned in the "Introduction," contains a substantial amount of music and would not be fairly analyzed without a knowledge of music theory or musicology. It is referred to here because the plot line will recur in her Black folk voodoo plays. In Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers (1990), Bernard L. Peterson, Jr. encapsulates the plot of The Death Dance:

("An African Play" [subtitle] with music and dancing, 1 act, 1923)  
 Musical score by Victor Kerney. Drama of love and death, set in an African village, using drums and dance for theatrical effect. During a "trial by ordeal," a powerful and respected medicine man is exposed as a murderer, robber, and cheat when he attempts to use his medicines to influence the outcome of the "trial." <sup>1</sup>

Duncan's genteel plays contain elements of suspense, murder, Black ghetto life, and Black folk voodoo. Sacrifice was published in Willis Richardson's

anthology. Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro (1930). Payment (1920s, unpublished), and Driftin' (1920s, unpublished) are available at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C. Driftin' is subtitled a "one-act play of lower Negro life" and explores the themes of Black ghetto life, ill-fated romances, battered women, gambling, materialism, alcoholism, and reformation during the days of Prohibition. The curtain rises and Jim Brown is seen seated at the piano on a small orchestra platform playing 'The St. Louis Blues' in a dance hall shortly after closing time at midnight. Pearl Harvey stands at the door listening to his music. Moments later, Pearl tries to get Jim's attention as he looks at her with no sign of recognition and turns back to the piano.

Jim. Whut yuh want, sister? Aint got no time to fool wid yuh.

Pearl. Jim, don't yuh know me no mo'?

Jim. Naw, I don't know yuh.

Pearl. Look at me, Jim. Aint yuh neveh seen me befo'?

Jim. Naw, aint neveh---Let's see---sho' I believes I do know yuh---Yuh is---Let's see---Yuh is -----.

Pearl. Pearl---whut used to be yo' Pearl.

Jim. Pearl! Yuh aint Pearl Harvy[sic], is yuh?

Pearl. Sho' I's her. I'se de same gal.

Jim. Well, well! Yuh don't look lak yo'sef. Whut yuh done done tuh yo'sef? Yuh looks a lot different.

Pearl. I'se thinner, dat's all.

Jim. Sho' nuf yuh was a fat gal when yuh was wid me. No wonder I didn't know yuh. Whar yuh been all de time?

Pearl. Been just driftin'---driftin' 'round. Whut yuh been doin'?

Jim. De same thing---driftin'.<sup>2</sup>

Pearl immediately accuses her ex-lover of being an alcoholic. Jim blames his social disease on Pearl's abandonment and an unsuccessful music career: "I got to drink now, Pearl---I done lost mah nerve."<sup>3</sup> Pearl scolds him for wasting his talents in a dance hall where he is underpaid and supplemented with an endless supply of gin cocktails. She volunteers information about her new boyfriend who is a gambler and liquor salesman from Chicago.

Jim. Got plenty dough. Dat's why yuh sticks to him. Is he good to yuh?

Pearl. He beats me.

Jim. He beats yuh? I neveh did beat yuh.

Pearl. I know yuh neveh beat me---but he does. He makes me do a lot o' things yuh didn't make me do. I has to sell liquor, too.

Jim. Well, he dresses yuh up, kid, an 'yuh sho fall fo' clothes.

Pearl. Yeah, he buys me good clothes.<sup>4</sup>

Pearl continues to vie for Jim's attention. She ascends the platform and sits near him, explaining how she traced his whereabouts. Pearl has grown nostalgic and exposes the true motive of her visit.

Pearl. Yeah, he was wid me, but he don't know 'bout yuh. Oh Jim, yuh was playin' so pretty to-night, an' it made me feel so---full---an' kind o'---foolish. Sometimes I almost cried, 'cause it sounded so sad to me. It made me think 'bout us bein' to-gether. I thought 'bout how good yuh was to me, an' how mean I was to run 'way an' leave yuh. I'se awfully sorry, Jim. I just had to git 'way---from him---an' cum back. Jim, I'd be lots happier agin wid yuh.

Jim. Yuh askin' me to take yuh back?

Pearl. Wouldn't yuh Jim? I loves yuh. De Lawd knows I do.<sup>5</sup>

Pearl unashamedly professes undying love as Jim lists the unhealthy vices her absence has caused him to acquire. "Yuh know yuh went 'way an' left me---'cause I couldn't give yuh money. . . . I been playin' de piano lak a crazy man, an' drinkin' dis rotten stuff just to git yuh off mah mind." <sup>6</sup> Pearl, in a melodramatic monologue, proposes marriage and presents the advantages of a reunion between two drifters.

Pearl. Honest, Jim, I'll be better. I swear I will. Listen, honey I've been thinkin' a lot since I heard all dem pretty pieces yuh played. I've been thinkin' how nice we could start all over agin---maybe 'mount to something. Yuh been driftin' an' I been driftin' an' we aint gittin' no younger, an' we aint done much in life. Yuh been a good man, but a weak one. Yuh aint got much gumption, 'cause if yuh did yuh'd git mo' money fo' de way yuh kin play de piano. Yuh just gifted, dats all wid music. And when I listened to-night, an' danced---I just thought of de sweetest thing--I thought it would be so nice fo' us to git married, an' start livin' right.<sup>7</sup>

Jim laughs at Pearl's heart wrenching speech, he is evidently more amused than touched by her feminist stance. The future dreams of a fading beauty are instantaneously sabotaged.

Jim occasionally interrupts her incessant chatter and exclaims that he is despondent about marriage and women. He regresses to discuss Pearl's sensitive predicament in order to destroy her love interest.

Jim. I aint neveh thought o' gittin' married. Ev'ry since yuh left me I been through wid women.

Pearl. I knows Jim---but dis will be different. We will be married.

Jim. Dat won't make it no better.

Pearl. We'll be so happy to-gether.

Jim. Whut 'bout dat---other niggah?

Pearl. I don't love him no mo'. He beats me.

Jim. But he makes plenty money. He buys yuh fine clothes. I can't give yuh nuthin.

Pearl. Yeah, he does buy me pretty clothes.<sup>8</sup>

Pearl's modus operandi and the ex-lovers' dialogue have gone full circle. Her tiresome lament has propelled this battered woman to take action as she begs Jim to take her home. The urgency of Pearl's passionate plea is substantiated by Bud's unexpected appearance at the door. He is described as a big, burly, and angry-looking Black man. Bud's presence physically disables Pearl and leaves her cringing when he becomes physically and verbally abusive. Duncan bestows the last line of the play on the abuser: "Tryin' to give me de slip wasn't yuh, yuh black devil yuh. Comin' back here to meet yo' man."<sup>9</sup>

Duncan captures the social realism of the lower-class Negro in the scenic descriptions. "A hole-in-the-wall dance hall. In the left center is an orchestra platform with an elevation of three feet from the floor. The platform is extremely small, just room enough to hold a dilapidated piano. . . . Planks of board on legs serve as benches. . . . The walls are bare except for the broken plaster in spots."<sup>10</sup> Jim is described as a small, wiry, shabbily dressed middle-aged man. In Duncan's initial tableau, Jim is seated in profile at the piano dangling an unlit cigarette out of the corner of his mouth with a glass of liquor at his side. The picture broadens with the appearance of Pearl, representing the epitome of cheapness and pretension. She wears an imitation fur coat and is highly made up with cheap cosmetics. Her initial poses are ominous predictions of the telltale romantic proposition that will ensue.

Pearl is caught in a hostile game of survival and returns in an attempt to restore her youth. She shows no personal growth and recoils into the role of a chattel/lover who is perpetually victimized. Pearl's sentimental monologues are juxtaposed by Jim's speechless action: he returns to the piano showing no sign of recognition of Pearl:

turns back disinterestingly to the piano as if unaware of her presence shortly after being reintroduced: Jim fills silences in the conversation with music; and finally avoids an act of chivalry when Pearl is dragged away by her lover. Pearl is convinced that Jim's hypnotic music is a deliberate ploy to romance her with the Blues. "Dat music yuh plays just goes all through me. Don't yuh love me some, Jim?"<sup>11</sup> She is completely entranced and begins to compose poetic imagery to describe her quest for deliverance. "De music---was like--pretty birds flyin' in the air. I wished I was a bird an' could fly in de air."<sup>12</sup> Duncan implies that both the substance and physical abuse of these two drifters will ultimately end in their demise. During the final tableau, Pearl is recaptured by Bud as Jim. "turns from the keys and watches languidly. . . . Bud attempts to strike Pearl, but she dodges the blow, and runs swiftly with a loud scream from the hall. Bud follows her. Jim laughs vacantly, takes a drink, and plays and hums softly 'The St. Louis Blues.'<sup>13</sup>

Drifin' is an example of the traditional "Black ghetto life" plays that were popular with both white and Black audiences during the 1920s. DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's Porgy, now considered a classic American folk drama, depicts the colorful and tragic lives of the Negroes on "Cattfish Row." African American dramatists popularized the tradition as well: May Miller's Scratches, for example, discussed in the previous chapter, illustrates the destitute Blacks who patronize pool halls. Thurman Wallace's Harlem (1929) is a melodrama of Negro ghetto life in three acts. The themes of this play include the portrayal of Harlem as a romantic, wild, and exotic community. Blacks are depicted as sexually promiscuous alcoholics, drug abusers, gamblers, and murderers.

Duncan also explores female victims who live in the rural areas of the South. Payment is a drama of Southern Negro life in two scenes, set in Granny Lou's living room on the fifteenth of August. Granny Lou anticipates a visit from Ted Sidney, the plantation owner. Ted arrives and reminds Granny Lou that the mortgage payment

is due. He threatens to burn the shack down but reneges, considering an alternative--Granny Lou's home in exchange for Lena, her granddaughter. Lena enters and announces that she has been offered a teaching position. Ted destroys her moment of happiness and honor by exposing the family's crisis. Lena pleads for a one-year extension but the plantation owner denies her request. Despite Lena's vow to find a solution, Granny Lou convinces her to leave immediately for a northern city. The preparations for a safe passage are interrupted by the arrival of Lena's betrothed. John promises to ransom her from Ted by selling his inherited real estate to pay off the family debt. Several hours have passed when scene two begins. The women sit anxiously awaiting John's return. In the interim, Granny Lou dies, leaving Lena in mournful hopelessness. John rushes in and exclaims that he sold the property but Ted refused payment: his heroic deed transformed into an act of violence. John confesses to the murder of Ted as the lovers hurry off into the night to escape the approaching lynch mob.

Payment depicts the African American antebellum sharecropper's struggle for survival. Granny Lou's family aspires to rise up from slavery through education and real estate ownership but their oppressive landlord defeats them. The urgency of this suspenseful drama is clear from the rise of the curtain. Granny Lou is seen reading the date on the wall calendar (April fifteenth) followed by Ted's indelible announcement of the deadline and his unsavory proposition. Ted loans Granny Lou the money for Lena's tuition with full knowledge that she will never be able to make payment. This devious scheme clearly illustrates his villainous character. The plantation owner's arrant demeanor is reinforced when he voices an opinion of the educated African American. "Been to school four years. I reckon she is kinda high now. I never saw any use in her going. No use sending a nigger to school. Grades is enough for them. School makes them high minded and impudent, and it's only a waste of money."<sup>44</sup> Ted has not

emancipated his sharecroppers and believes he has the right to treat these women as chattel. Granny Lou is forced to sacrifice Lena's innocence and divulge the family's financial status.

Granny Lou. I'se lied ter you, Lena. . . . I'se lied fo' years. . . Your father neveh left no money . . . jus' a little. . . it was spent long 'go . . . . Ah got money from Marster Ted to send you ter school . . . three hundred dollars . . . and mortgaged the house . . . . You wanted ter go so bad . . . . I'se worked hard to pay back . . . but somehow ah jus' couldn't save . . . fo' years . . . . Ah thot ah had a lot o' time . . . but tain't so . . . I'se gettin' ol'. . . ah can't wash like ah uster . . . ah can't cook like ah uster. <sup>15</sup>

Granny Lou has provided financially for her family by being both laundress and cook. Lena demonstrates that she can take over the responsibility of making the mortgage payments by showing Ted the teaching appointment letter. Ted is inflexible and demands that Lena become his concubine.

Although Granny Lou cannot pay the mortgage, she has hidden enough money away in an old pot on the shelf to start Lena on a safe passage. Lena takes the gift reluctantly, kisses her grandmother, and goes into the other room to pack. Granny Lou begins to pray "Gawd, take care of mah baby . . . take her safely 'way. Don' make her suffer . . . . I'se caused it all . . . make me pay . . . . Don' make her pay. Oh Gawd don' hurt mah baby." <sup>16</sup> Granny Lou willingly accepts full responsibility for her financial miscalculations and the subsequent entanglements. The matriarch realizes she cannot follow Lena because of her poor health and old age. This sentimental scene is interrupted by John who lightens the mood with his good news--an appointment as principal of the high school. John's brief moment of pride and happiness is overridden by Lena's lament about her shattered dreams.

Scene two takes place several hours later. Lena nurses her ailing grandmother as she worries about their impending future. Granny Lou takes her last breath wishing

Lena good fortune. "Don' you know honey, I'se gwine die . . . . Death is comin' to me . . . now . . . . But I'se happy . . . yes, yo' ol' Granny Lou is happy 'cause her baby will be happy . . . . Yes, mah heart hurts, honey . . . fo' the las' time . . . . I'se gwine 'way too, honey." <sup>17</sup> Lena is deprived of mourning: she is startled by John's frightening arrival and savage appearance. She looks upon his torn clothes and begins to laugh hysterically, pointing to Granny Lou's corpse.

Lena. John, you've come . . . come at last . . . . But look she is dead . . . dead.

John. Dead . . . . Lena, he is . . . dead, too. I have killed him.

Lena. Killed Ted! Why John . . . they will lynch you.

John. I couldn't help it Lena . . . . He wouldn't take the money, and when he insulted you . . . I couldn't stand it . . . . Hurry Lena, get your bag. We can get away before they come. <sup>18</sup>

Duncan dramatizes the exploitation of the African American sharecropper and the magnanimous perseverance of a grandmother to educate her ambitious granddaughter. These plot elements resemble another African American play written during the early 1900s. Granny Lou is reminiscent of Aunt Betsy who takes unconditional care of her abandoned grandchild in Katherine Davis Chapman Tillman's play, Aunt Betsy's Thanksgiving (c. 1914). The tragic element of Duncan's play also recalls the plight of the tenant farmers in George A. Towns's The Sharecroppers (1932). Although Payment has a tragic ending, it is a melodrama with the structural elements of suspense and symbolism. In Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience (1968), Robert Bechtold Heilman defines melodrama as "Man pitted against a force outside of himself--a specific enemy, a hostile group, a natural event, an accident or coincidence." <sup>19</sup> Heilman describes the role of the genre in detail: "What melodrama typically offers is the exaltation of victory, indignation at wrong doing, the pitiableness of victims, the frustration of the

indeterminate outcome . . . the despair of defeat, the shock of disaster, the sadness of death." <sup>20</sup> Duncan's melodrama preaches of the social injustices endured by post-Reconstruction African Americans and provides a moral, tempered in optimism and sentimentalism. Granny Lou's family is imprisoned by the beastly white plantation owner who portrays the melodramatic cold-blooded villain. John and Lena represent the reconciled lovers who escape from the torturous oppressor; Ted's murder exemplifies the foiled enemy. Duncan's use of melodramatic elements is further illustrated by Ted's threat to burn down their home; Granny Lou's tearful soliloquy of prayer; and the offstage sounds of the approaching lynch mob at the end of the play.

Duncan cleverly includes symbolistic elements to accentuate her suspenseful tale. The set in scene two is illuminated by two burning candles that force the audience to focus on the ailing grandmother. Lena sits at Granny Lou's side tenderly stroking her hair. The clock on the mantle strikes nine as the viewer is subtly prepared for an ill-fated death. A bird is heard outside the window. Lena jumps and Granny Lou explains, "A bird flutters 'gainst the winda . . . death sure . . . mah baby." <sup>21</sup> Fear leaves Lena speechless until the silence is broken by the sound of a slight wind that extinguishes one candle. Lena frantically clings to Granny Lou who waits patiently, "Death, mah baby, it's comin'." <sup>22</sup> In the midst of Lena's pleading and tears Granny Lou passes away.

In Jambalaya, folklorist Luisah Teish, substantiates the presence of supernatural powers that Granny Lou and Lena encounter. Teish believes candles invoke ancestral beings; this explains the activity of the flickering light. According to Teish, birds are either considered messengers of thanks or of ominous illness and death, this affirms the accuracy of Granny Lou's prediction. Teish explains that the wind reigns over a spiritual event such as this and states,

Those ancestors [who] turn to the Wind Goddess, who lives as an archetype for flying in the collective unconscious. She hands an idea to the ancestor, who filters it through her experience of watching things fly. The ancestor hands it to the subconscious mind as an idea charged with

emotion . . . . That package is handed to the conscious mind in a burst of inspiration ( to ex-pire is to die).<sup>23</sup>

Granny Lou is aided by her ancestors in preparation for a peaceful death. This heavenly experience, directed by supernatural forces, is further delineated by Teish who describes the hierarchy of the African legend, "Oya-Yansa is the Queen of the Winds of Change . . . . She brings about sudden structural change in people and things."<sup>24</sup>

Sacrifice, Duncan's clearest example of a genteel play, illustrates another matriarch's crisis. This one-act drama is set in the Paytons' livingroom of a two-room apartment in a large eastern city. It is Thursday afternoon, the twenty-first of March (the first day of Spring), in 1930. Ina returns from work to find her widowed mother finishing up a client's laundry. Mrs. Payton complains that she is suffering from heart trouble. Ina volunteers to cook dinner and alleviate some of her mother's household duties. Mrs. Payton offers to return her clients' laundry and exits. Moments later, Billy and his friend Roy enter. Ina briefs her brother on their mother's condition. The young men are secretly plotting to cheat on their final chemistry examination tomorrow. Billy is afraid he will fail, jeopardize graduation, and ultimately disappoint his family. Ina coerces Billy to confess and begs her brother to return the exam. Billy, obviously plagued with guilt, decides to correct his mistake that evening. Roy courageously accepts full responsibility for his friend's devious plan and goes off to sacrifice both his academic standing and graduation.

Using lower and middle-class characters, Sacrifice explores the themes of both academic and vocational education and male friendships. The play illustrates the sacrifices an African American family makes to insure the education of their younger generation. The scene opens on Mrs. Payton, a fifty-year old woman, who is bending over a washboard. She is a laundress who takes in wash daily to supplement the family income. Ina returns from the office; she is a business school graduate who works as

a typist. The hard-working daughter allows herself time to occasionally stop and appreciate nature.

Ina.           Why, I opened my window high and let the sweet balmy air pour into the room, and what do you suppose came into the office?

Mrs. Payton.   What was it, honey?

Ina.           A bluebird--and it was beautiful. It hopped right in the window and flew around the room. Clarice wanted to catch it, but I wouldn't let her. The poor little thing was frightened out of its wits. It flopped its wings back and forth around the room until finally it flew out the window. Gee, but it was pretty. <sup>25</sup>

Ina, unselfishly accommodating, volunteers to return Mr. Brown's wash and cook the family dinner. Mrs. Payton wishes to run the errand to keep her daughter away from unsavory characters. "No, dear, I'll take them. There are always a lot of porters hanging around there, and they might get fresh . . . I'll take them." <sup>26</sup>

The family crisis is revealed to the audience when the young men arrive and Ina expresses her concern about Roy's graduation. She hopes that he will find employment soon and become a full-time contributing family member. Ina exits to the roof to hang the laundry on the clothesline. The following scene allows Billy and Roy a moment to discuss their situation privately. They outline the pros and cons of their act to deceive Mr. Burton, the chemistry teacher. Billy informs his accomplice that Percy, a fellow classmate, initially stole the exam. Adolescent jealousy and peer pressure entangle these students in a destructive plot.

Billy.       He already suspects that they've been stolen . . . and you know very well he hates me . . . ever since that time I took Muriel to that frat dance . . . thought I was trying to take her from him. He'd be glad to put me out if I went back to him now.

Roy. Let's see. Surely we can think of something. The exam is to-morrow. Burton ought to have those papers back to-night.

Billy. What must I do . . . What must I do? I've got to graduate . . . .  
It will kill mother if I don't. <sup>27</sup>

The urgency of their predicament and the vital importance of Billy's graduation are accentuated by the continuous interruptions that suspend the ensuing plot. Ina returns and Billy confesses that although he stole the exam he has not looked at it. She insists they conceal this escapade from their mother. They begin to discuss alternative strategies: return the exam and ask forgiveness; mail it back anonymously; or involve other students who assisted in the scheme. Mrs. Payton returns and interrupts their secretive meeting. Billy nervously prepares to leave and exits before his mother can interrogate him. Roy reassures Mrs. Payton that there is no need for her to worry. Nevertheless, as a mother, she expresses her concern for the well-being of her son.

Mrs. Payton. You know, Roy I believe it would kill me if something happened . . . now, and Billy didn't graduate. I couldn't stand it . . . . You know I've worked pretty hard . . . . I'm about to the end . . . of my rope . . . I can't hold out much longer. I'm just waiting until June and then I'm afraid it will be the end . . . . I want to see my boy come out all right . . . then I'll be ready to go. <sup>28</sup>

Duncan includes comic relief and potentially tragic inferences as she educates her young audience on the repercussions of such a deceitful plan. Roy changes the solemn mood of the conversation to remind Mrs. Payton of her son's attributes. They have been buddies since childhood and their undying friendship has even made Roy's father jealous. Roy represents the middle-class African American in this play. His father is a real estate agent and expects Roy to continue his education and go on to law school.

Mrs. Payton brings their conversation back to her reality. She educates Roy as she lists the limited opportunities that await the working class African American.

Mrs. Payton. You are blessed to be able to continue in the law school. I wish . . . . Oh, I wish that my boy could take up a profession . . . but . . . . If only his father had lived. You know John wanted Billy to be something . . . something great. It was his greatest ambition, and he worked hard, too, while he lived. John was a good husband. He made money, too, lots of it, after coming here, and we lived well . . . like other folk, nice home, nice clothes, and plenty of friends. But it didn't last long. He died, and after that . . . I had to carry on alone . . . and it went hard. There was nothing much I could do . . . except wash. I was considered the best laundress down there where we came from . . . so I began here . . . . That's why I'm so broken . . . but the children had to have their chance.<sup>29</sup>

Mrs. Payton's monologue describes the plight of African American Southern migrants during an era of social change. Duncan strategically expresses her thesis--higher education is the key to success. Education was a means of escaping poverty, securing employment, and preparing people of color to address civil rights and discrimination. The matriarch's speech is both historically and dramaturgically informative. It allows the audience to witness Mrs. Payton's angst for her children's reality and understand her past familial lifestyle.

Mrs. Payton excuses herself so that she can attend to some mending. Her absence signals the beginning of the subplot. Roy has listened to Mrs. Payton's sentimental speech and has grown anxious about his buddy's future. He also values Ina's opinion and does not want any indiscretions to jeopardize their relationship. Ina is more mature and dispels Roy's advances as a matter of decorum. She sincerely believes Roy loves her but college-educated women may seek his companionship. Roy attempts to assure Ina of his intentions as Billy returns and interrupts their romantic interlude. He has decided to be a responsible young man and plans to visit Mr. Burton that evening. The main plot is

predictably suspended by Mrs. Payton's entrance from the bedroom. They all prepare to sit down for the meal as mother begins where she left off. "My but it's nice to have children. I don't know what I would do without you all. Roy, you sit on this side of me, and then I will have both of my sons near me." <sup>30</sup> Mrs. Payton has made Roy an honorary family member, which compels Roy to risk his educational standing and make a sacrifice. "Well you all seem to look pretty healthy after your [Ina] cooking. I guess I would survive . . . but I've just thought of something I must do. [Picks up book with examination.] I am borrowing your book, Billy . . . I'm going by to see Burton ." <sup>31</sup> Ina and Billy are startled by Roy's heroic act of brotherly love to save the family from grief and embarrassment. Mrs. Payton continues to make her children feel undeserving of her praise as the curtain falls. " He's a wonderful boy . . . almost as wonderful as you, Billy . . . Eat your dinner, both of you and stop mincing your food. He is coming back." <sup>32</sup>

Sacrifice celebrates the first day of spring. Ina sings a popular song as she fervently finishes Mr. Brown's laundry. Roy observes his lover's radiant liveliness when he enters and shouts, "Well look at my angel!" <sup>33</sup> The Paytons' plain furnishings and their washtub, a symbol of drudgery, do not impede on Duncan's portrayal of a loving, working class family. They are openly affectionate toward each other: exchanging period terms of endearment: for example, Roy describes Billy as a "crackerjack," and Ina considers Roy "a regular sheik." Duncan's rite of spring illustrates the sacrifices a family must undertake to insure the prosperity of future African American leaders.

Duncan's contribution to the genre of Black folk voodoo plays include Jinda (1920s, unpublished) and Black Magic (1931). Jinda is available at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Black Magic was published in The Yearbook of Short Plays by Claude Merton Wise and Lee Owen Snook. Duncan briefly digresses from her exploration of African Americans and examines Hindu religious and matrimonial rituals. Jinda takes place in the chamber of an Indian maiden on her wedding day. Kishna is dressing and adorning Jinda, who is marrying a man she has never seen. Jinda is trapped in a love triangle between a stranger and an Indian youth. Kumar is the handsome young man she loves. The maiden fears he will not return in time to rescue her from an arranged marriage. Jinda's father interrupts the prenuptials to announce that her intended is scheduled to arrive at twilight. Kishna reminds Jinda that Kumar has also promised to return at dusk. Time passes, the moment approaches, and Father with his entourage escort the bridegroom into her chamber. Jinda has been duped--Kumar is her intended husband.

The dramatic event is the pre-wedding preparations and the crisis is Jinda's struggle between two supposed lovers. Kishna is also a confidante who brightens Jinda's lament with happier remembrances. The dramatic suspense is accelerated when Jinda observes the setting of the sun. The faint sound of a trumpet signifies the arrival of her intended. Kishna hurriedly adjusts Jinda's veil as the maiden cringes from the blare of the horns and the revelry growing louder offstage. Jinda hides her face as Father enters, approaches his frightened daughter, and turns her around to face Kumar. Jinda is startled and puzzled by his presence.

Jinda.           Kumar, my Kumar, I knew you would come and take me away. But it is too late Kumar, I must marry my father's choice. (She looks at the attendants, and at his magnificent attire) What means all of these? And you Kumar . . . surely you cannot be.

Kumar. Yes, beautiful Jinda, I am he . . . . The man whom your father has chosen. I knew at the time when I met you in the garden, and I rejoiced within myself because you loved me so. Now are you happy?

Jinda. Happy . . . . I am so happy. And to think it was you all of the time. <sup>34</sup>

Duncan surprises her audience, who also question whether or not they were involved in this chicanery. The father is still unaware of their affair and exclaims, "Women are strange . . . strange . . . very strange." <sup>35</sup>

This romantic melodrama is permeated by non-Christian, idol worshipping rituals. Kishna suggests the maiden kneel in prayer to alleviate her fears that Kumar will not return. They both pray to the Tulasi plant placed in a jardiniere. The Tulasi is a holy plant that is held sacred in the Hindu religion. It can be compared to an altar/shrine built by Afro-diasporic followers that is made of earth, rocks, water, grains, herbs, shells, wood sculptures, feathers, and bones. Jinda prays to God for deliverance through the Tulasi plant.

Kishna. Look sweet mistress, look at the Tulasi . . . . See how green the leaves are. See how fresh it looks. That is a good omen.

Jinda. You are right. It answered my prayer last week . . . . Come Kishna, come kneel with me. Oh divine plant . . . oh, glorious plant. Stay with me in my sorrow. Do not forsake me. Let Kumar come and take me far away to that beautiful land of dreams, and love. Let us flee under your mighty protection and blessing . . . . My father will condemn me . . . . But you will not punish me, will you? You are so fresh and green to-day . . . . Surely your freshness means good . . . . Mighty worshiper do not let us be parted . . . . I do love Kumar. I have loved him for a long time. He promised to come back to-day. Please mighty one, let him come to save me. <sup>36</sup>

Duncan prolongs the melodramatic suspense of the ensuing court matrimonial ceremony until the dénouement and leaves her audience with exultant laughter.

The crisis is based upon the concealment of Kumar's true identity, which enables him to discover Jinda's unadulterated feelings. Jinda illustrates her despondency with a threat of suicide, plot of elopement, prayers, and weeping. She finally accepts her fate, honors her father's wishes, and is rewarded. Duncan creates a taste of East Indian drama for her African American audience.

Black Magic is a satire of Black folk voodoo. The scene is set in the home of Esrael and Mandy Jenkins in a small town of eastern North Carolina in 1931. Esrael, the forlorn husband, has engaged the services of Steptoes, a Voodoo doctor, to help retrieve his wife, who supposedly deserted him. Steptoes produces a love potion and begins to perform the incantation. He warns Esrael to remember to feed the charm. In the interim, Tim, the Jenkins' boarder, interrupts the ritual and condemns Steptoes' pagan worship. Tim contradicts himself by recommending Aunt Liza's services. The old woman's performance is more elaborate than Steptoes' but the same precautions apply--feed the charm and keep it a secret. Mandy arrives unexpectedly and startles Esrael. She is frightened by her husband's obvious madness and demands an explanation. Mandy proves her innocence by presenting Esrael with the note she left explaining her whereabouts. Esrael believes that he has been duped by two charlatans and rushes off to reclaim his money.

Duncan satirizes the African Americans' belief in folk superstition and Voodooism. Esrael is described as "a slave to superstition." His obsessive behavior is so maniacal that he instructs the Voodoo doctor on how to enter his home. "Come on in Steptoes. Ah's bringin' yuh in de back way, but Ah knows yuh don't mind." <sup>37</sup> Esrael's self-conscious observation compels Steptoes to reply, "Ah'll jest 'member tuh go out de back. Yuh knows de ole sayin'." <sup>38</sup> The Black folk belief claims that in order to avoid bad luck, one must enter and exit through the same door. Esrael is convinced that Mandy has left him for another man. Steptoes demands twenty dollars for his services

before proceeding with the appropriate incantation. Duncan describes the preparation for the ritual in detail.

([Steptoos] gets up. Puts can on table. Holds flannel at arms length. This he does three times. Shakes can vigorously. Empties contents of can into flannel. Contents of can as follows: salt, pepper, pins, dried herbs, crumbs of bread, hair, etc. During this process he assumes a solemn air, and as he stirs the mixture in the flannel, he repeats the following in a sort of a chant.) De Gawd befó' me, Gawd behin' me, Gawd be wid me. (He repeats this several times. This done to his satisfaction, he folds the flannel lengthwise in half, and holds it at arm's length. This he does three times. During the performance, Esrael watches in awe. Steptoos, his head reverently in the air, and his eyes closed, repeats the following:) Ah ask hit in de name o' Gawd--um--um--um--Hit got tuh have powah. Hit got tuh be pow'ful. Esrael, bring de whiskey.<sup>39</sup>

Luisah Teish clarifies appropriated hexes and blessings, defining 'Hexed' and 'hoodooed,' as, "terms to describe a situation whereby a person is having serious difficulty due to the conscious and deliberate actions of another."<sup>40</sup> She explains that sprinkling salt or pepper, along with concoctions made of herbs incanted with chants, expedites the spell. Teish defines magic as "the art of using the forces of nature in the manipulation of symbols to manifest a desired change in people and things."<sup>41</sup> Steptoos uses a piece of red flannel that belongs to Mandy to radiate positive energy that will attract and affect her thoughts and feelings for Esrael. The color red symbolizes love, passion, and courage. The shaman also used dried herbs in the potion. Teish lists their attributes. For example, red pepper invokes courage; parsley conjures attraction; and the whiskey is used to stabilize the power of the incantation. Steptoos sprinkles the whiskey on the red flannel and requests, "Powah--powah--mo' powah--mos' powah--in de name o' Gawd."<sup>42</sup> His reverence to God is substantiated by Teish, who reminds the reader that all of these things are powerless without giving honor and respect to the Holy Trinity. Steptoos concludes his part of the ritual by asking Esrael to repeat "Mandy come home" three times. Esrael is instructed to wrap the red flannel around his chest and is reminded that if he feeds the charm the whiskey, it will bring him good luck. Steptoos leaves

Mandy to complete the spell by sprinkling a piece of his wife's clothing (a white hat) with the potion.

Tim interrupts the ritual, entering from the bedroom, and scolds Esrael for hiring a charlatan. He produces evidence that suggests Steptoes' potions are powerless.

Tim. Ah'm glad he's gone. Ah ain't got no use fo' dat man.  
Dat stuff he totes 'round ain't wuth nothin'. An' he chahges  
lak de devil fo' it. Esrael, yuh ain't gone crazy an' bought  
dis mess frum dat fakah, has yuh? If yuh ain't de  
biggest fool! Whut's it fo', anyway?

Esrael. Hit's gwine bring Mandy home.

Tim. Bring Mandy home! Esrael, is yuh done los'  
yo' min'?--Bought Steptoes' stuff tuh bring Mandy home!  
Kim bought some o' dat mess las' spring tuh bring Kizzie  
home, too, but he ain't seen Kizzie yet. If y'all dat crazy  
'bout Mandy after she done run off wid dat othah niggah,  
why didn't yuh buy sumpin' frum ol' Aunt Liza.  
Yuh knows she's got de bes' stuff. <sup>43</sup>

Esrael agrees to try Aunt Liza's potion and asks Tim to invite her over for a consultation.

Aunt Liza arrives momentarily, hobbling in with the help of a cane. She is described as having the face and form of a witch, heavily draped in an old-fashioned cape.

Duncan clearly depicts Aunt Liza as both a shaman and a fishwife.

Aunt Liza. Ah knows ev'thing. Cose Ah knows yuh wants  
Mandy back. Mandy's a good gal--How come huh tuh  
go 'way? Ah bet yuh beat huh, yuh o'n'ry good-fo'-nothin'!  
Now didn't yuh beat huh, Esrael?

Esrael. Well, now, Ah did beat huh--a little, an' she got mad an'  
went 'way wid dat yellah niggah, too: dat's whut make me  
so mad. But hones', Aunt Liza, if Mandy jest come back,  
Ah'd nevah, nevah beat huh agin. Ah'd buy huh all de  
shoes, hats, dresses, an' ev'thing she want. <sup>44</sup>

Aunt Liza's clairvoyance exposes another side to Esrael's personality.

His confession and avowal to repent does not convince the old woman. She begins to prepare for the incantation, producing a box from under her cape. Esrael jumps back in terror when the lid is opened and a snake sticks its head out. Aunt Liza, in compliance with Teish's research, initiates the ceremony by giving honor to the Holy Trinity:

"Whut's mattah, Esrael--'fraid? He ain't gwine hurt yuh. Dat's Fathah, Son, and Holy Ghos'." <sup>45</sup> Esrael expedites the business deal and pays her the ten dollar fee.

Aunt Liza uses more elaborate ingredients for her love potion. She asks Esrael to light the kitchen stove because her concoction must be heated to make the "luck ball."

Duncan's description of her magical process creates a theatrical spectacle on stage.

(Exit Esrael into room. Aunt Liza arises with a can [of white powder]. Looks around for pan, finds one in the bottom of the sideboard. Empties can into pan, and puts it on the stove. All the time chuckling to herself. Presently heavy fumes begin to come from the pan. This happens when Esrael is returning with a bright scarlet shawl. . . . Aunt Liza takes another can from box. This contains the "grave dust." Takes pan from stove and mixes grave dust in it. Then from the same box, she produces a bottle containing blood, which she stirs into the mixture. Moistens enough to pat into a cake. This she puts into a sack. During this process she chants the following:) Eh' eh! Bomba, hen hen; Canga moun de le, Canga Bafio te, Canga do ki la, Canga li! (She sees the whiskey on the table . . . . Continues chant. Pours whiskey into glass, and drops the sack in it. [Esrael] displays a bright scarlet shawl. . . . She squeezes luck ball over shawl.) <sup>46</sup>

Luisah Teish does not discuss "love balls" in Jambalaya but she does include a recipe for a "fussball" that guarantees domestic tranquillity. The ingredients are not as elaborate as Aunt Liza's recipe but it does insist upon intricate preparation and performance.

Aunt Liza's instructions to Esrael are similar to Steptoos' directions. She requests that he repeat "Come, come, Mandy," four times to both the luck ball and the shawl.

Aunt Liza further instructs Esrael to wrap the garment around his right arm and feed the charm daily.

Duncan makes a clear distinction between the two Voodoo doctors. Aunt Liza practices both white and black magic. After she has completed the incantation, the old woman offers to put a hex on Mandy's lover. "Now, how 'bout dat niggah--dat took her 'way? Want sumpin' done tuh him? Yuh kin git rid o' him fo' good, o' keep him out of town, o' make him stay sick--whutever yuh wants." <sup>47</sup> Aunt Liza's proposition stems from black magic that adheres to the same formula but invokes negative energy that results in bad luck. Teish clearly states that her contribution to Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions is confined to self-transforming, practical, and safe information for those who respect its power. Esrael fortunately, declines Aunt Liza's proposal. This scene of theatrical grotesquerie is followed by the awaited arrival of the missing wife. Mandy enters with a armful of packages and naively begins to prepare a meal. She gradually recognizes that her personal belongings have been strewn about. In the interim, Esrael has assumed that Tim has returned and is fidgeting around in the kitchen. His latent recognition of Mandy leaves him elated and satisfied that the investment in love potions was remunerative. "Mandy!!! Ah's so glad yuh's back, Mandy . . . . Been lookin' fo' yuh.---Ah knowed it would wuk." <sup>48</sup>

Mandy is unaware of her husband's earlier visitations and accuses Esrael of insanity, poor health, transvestism, and alcoholism.

Mandy. Esrael, is yuh crazy? Knowed whut would wuk?

Esrael. Oh, nothin' Mandy, . . . Ah's so glad yuh back!

Mandy. Esrael, is yuh sick?

Esrael. No, Ah's feeling fine, Mandy. Why?

Mandy. Den whut yuh got dat shawl wrapped 'round yuh fo'?

Esrael. Ah got cold. Hit's all right now. <sup>49</sup>

Mandy smells the shawl doused with whiskey and assumes her husband is intoxicated. The mystery of her disappearance is solved when she goes to the sideboard and produces the note. Mandy hands it to Esrael who reads, "Esrael. Ah's gwine tuh de Tuckah's tuh wuk fo' a week. Dey jes' come fo' me . . . . Dey's gittin' ready tuh go 'way, an' wants me tuh help. Don't muss up dis house, an' don't run 'round while Ah's gone. Lovingly, Mandy." <sup>50</sup> Esrael's accusation is unsubstantiated and infuriates his wife. Mandy reprimands her husband and reminds him that while he was living a life of leisure, she was being a responsible wife. "Yuh low-down, evil-minded black devil--thinkin' Ah went off wid dat do-nothin' Spivey! Heah Ah been workin' mah head off, an' buyin' grub fo' yuh tuh eat, an' dat's all de thanks Ah gits!" <sup>51</sup> She also unravels the mystery of her missing clothes. Mandy packed away her clothes because of Esrael's messy habits. Duncan continues to surprise her audience and leave the comic protagonist startled by the repercussions of his obsessive use of Voodoo. Mandy inquires about the shawl doused with whiskey and the white hat covered in red pepper; items that Esrael haphazardly sacrificed for the ritual. She informs him that they belong to her close friend, Lucy.

Duncan explores the art of Black folk voodoo including the themes of racial prejudice (dark-skinned African Americans against mulattos), physical abuse, and the question of fidelity. The serious theme of physical abuse is reminiscent of *Driftin'* but implies a more promising outcome. Esrael broaches the subject of same race prejudice when he accuses Mandy of leaving him for Spivey. He implies that his wife would only leave him for a "high yellah" mulatto lover. Duncan cleverly orchestrates common stereotypical impressions of Voodooism and replaces and corrects them.

Traces of Afro-diasporic paraphernalia are placed in the description of the Jenkins' kitchen and dining room, for example, strings of red peppers hanging on the left wall and a vase of peacock feathers in the left corner. It has been previously discussed that Teish notes the use of natural elements such as spices; peacock feathers are used to maintain peace and good luck in the home. Duncan strategically leads her audience to believe

Steptoos is a charlatan when he asks Esrael for a bottle of whiskey. Steptoos is not asking for a drink, he is using the spirits to baptize the charm. Duncan continues to allow her audience to doubt his credibility when both Esrael and the conjurer hear a noise in the bedroom. Esrael is so frightened he screams, "Whew---eeee---Lawd-a-Mercy!--Dis house---is haunted." <sup>52</sup> Tim enters from the bedroom and explains that he was taking a nap.

Duncan creates a scene of theatrical spectacle with her description of Aunt Liza's brew. Aunt Liza's scene of grotesque imagery depicts the dark side of witchcraft with her crooked cane, fire, snake, bottle of blood, witch-like appearance, incessant chuckling, and chants. Duncan alludes to the biblical story of Adam and Eve. She illustrates the shaman, playfully allowing the snake to coil around her face, neck, and bosom as Esrael recoils in horror. She reeducates her audience when Aunt Liza explains the serpent's purpose, "Dat's Fathah, Son, and Holy Ghos'. Dis Fathah (Pointing to snake's head), dat's Son (to middle of snake's body), and heah is Holy Ghos' (to tail.)" <sup>53</sup> Aunt Liza's chants evoke Africanisms as she requests the sacrifice of Mandy's personal garments. Duncan is also setting up the dénouement as Esrael retrieves the scarlet shawl he presumes belongs to his wife. "Yassum, hit's Mandy's. Aint nevah seen it befo', but Ah knows it's hers, 'cause she's allus got sumpin' red lak dis." <sup>54</sup> Aunt Liza's African ceremonial chants are juxtaposed with Steptoos' American tunes: he whistles "Blues" while preparing his charm. Music is also used with comic overtones, for example, Esrael anxiously awaits the arrival of Aunt Liza and whistles "Baby, Won't You Please Come Home" and continues the melody when she exits.

The scene of recognition is a comic device used to expel the stereotypical assumptions of the art of Voodoo, the wayward husband, and the unfaithful wife.

The shock of recognition leaves Esrael speechless and gives Mandy a moment to express her opinion of Voodooism.

Mandy. Yuh heah me! Ah said take off dat shawl! Man, Ah do b'lieves yuh's gwine plumb daffy! Dat's Lucy's shawl Ah borrowed one day when Ah was over tuh huh house an' it tuhned col'. an' Ah didn't have no wraps. She lent me huh shawl an' huh hat--dat white one over dah yuh done spilt red peppah all ovah. How come yuh spillin' red peppah on dat hat? Ah lef' it in de closet. Yuh ain't fit fo' nothin.' Can't trus' yuh a minute. Done gone in de closet an' pulled out dat hat, an' spilt red mess on it. Dat's bad luck sho'--red peppah means heaps o' bad luck. Ain't Ah got 'nuf bad luck havin' tuh live wid yuh, widdout yuh bringin' in mo'? Don't stand dah starin' at me. Is yuh losin' yo' mind? Yuh bettah leave dat whiskey be, o' yuh'll be at de same place dey put Jake. Yuh done done it, now. <sup>55</sup>

Mandy's informative and humorous monologue creates the possibility of multiple endings to this comedy. She may have to commit her husband to an insane asylum. Lucy's charmed red shawl and its potential complications leaves the one-act play open for a sequel. In Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro, Willis Richardson refers to Duncan's The Scarlet Shawl, which has become one of her lost plays. It is possible that The Scarlet Shawl is a continuation of this satire.

The five representative plays of Thelma Myrtle Duncan explore the themes of love, family honor, physical abuse, alcoholism, gambling, race pride, religion, and higher education. Duncan uses the dramatic structural elements of suspense, symbolism, and social realism to illustrate the struggle of African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. Driftin', Payment, and Sacrifice are not definitively historical plays but they include descriptive accounts of people of color. Payment and Sacrifice depict African American women as laundresses and cooks. In Woman's Legacy (1982), Bettina Aptheker reports of the physical and mental abuse of Black domestic workers by white American women.

The ornamental role of upper- and middle class white women reduced them, in fact, to a nonhuman existence. Regarded as mere objects of male

pleasure and a demonstration of male wealth, they frequently treated their servants with cruel and capricious contempt in a pathetic effort to reclaim some semblance of their own dignity and worth. In this way, their upper-class bias and racist bigotry were combined with their actual degradation, to pit woman against woman in a vicious cycle of subjugation that left Black women battered and impoverished.<sup>56</sup>

These employers hired domestics to work slave hours: usually twelve and fourteen hour days, seven days a week. African American women earned a small salary and were deprived of privacy. White women treated their servants with a complete lack of human dignity and self respect. Aptheker concludes, "The employment of Black women as domestic servants was not a historical accident. Black women were systematically excluded from all other areas of employment except laundries . . . . Domestic employment was a confirmation and continuation of their servile status as former slaves."<sup>57</sup> In Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925 (1989), Cynthia Neverdon-Morton's statistics on Southern Black women explain the limited employment opportunities of Mrs. Payton in Sacrifice.

In 1900, there were 1,316,872 black females in the United States, comprising 11.4 percent of the total female population. Of Black women, 34.8 percent were wage earners, 76 percent worked in . . . primarily domestic agriculture. The next highest percentage of black female workers (66 percent) were laborers . . . . Of 1,285,031 female workers in America in 1900, 345,386 (27 percent) were black: 65 percent of all laundresses were black . . . 26 percent of all married black women worked . . . compared to three percent of all married white women.<sup>58</sup>

African American women remained the principal domestic workers through 1925. People of color migrated northward where wages had increased with the opening of public work jobs because of World War I. Likewise, agricultural workers were underpaid, overworked, and denied their human dignity. In Payment, Duncan explores the exploitation of the sharecropper/plantation system. Aptheker observes,

[that] agricultural workers . . . were forced into a servitude that resembled a semifeudal arrangement. The workers lived on land owned by others, were dependent on the landlord for shelter, food, and seed, and were not

paid wages at all, but rather a cash settlement of a portion of the value of their crop after it had been sold on the market.<sup>59</sup>

The serious issue of physical abuse represented, in both Driftin' and Black Magic, is not discussed in a delicate, genteel manner. Aptheker also includes historical reports on battered women. In the early 1900s, women were considered chattel with no modicum of independent legal recognition. Therefore, wife battery was legal, and rape laws protected the rights of the male proprietor over his wife or daughter. Aptheker concludes that "As a group, women were civilly dead and without political rights."<sup>60</sup>

Historically speaking, Pearl in Driftin' did have an alternative to depending on either Bud, a physically abusive man, or Jim, an alcoholic musician. Neverdon-Morton reports that there were facilities available to African American women in the early 1900s.

The Bethlehem House Settlement in Nashville, Tennessee was established in 1908 and by 1914, its program objectives were broadened to include an outreach program.

"[where] visits were made to . . . families when illness, death, delinquency of a youth or other problems were reported."<sup>61</sup> There was also the Colored Woman's Protective League, Travelers' Aid, and YWCA that joined forces in 1913 to provide shelter and counseling for young women. Pearl's dilemma would fall under "other services:" nevertheless, help was available.

Payment and Sacrifice are clear examples of the genteel Black folk play.

Payment explores the plight of antebellum sharecroppers with a tragic ending.

Sacrifice examines other social economic hindrances that can be overcome without a pitiable conclusion. Duncan's female characters indulge in nature imagery to express their longing for equality and happiness. In Driftin', Pearl dreams of escaping her physically abusive relationship and pursuing marriage with Jim. She expresses her desires to her ex-lover and conjures up an image of a pretty bird flying free and spirited in

the air as she listens to Jim's rendition of "The St. Louis Blues." In Payment, Granny Lou and Lena witness an omen of death. Lena discovers a bird fluttering at the window and the dying grandmother explains its symbolism. In Sacrifice, Ina describes her delightful encounter with a bluebird at the office. Ina relives her experience to console Mrs. Payton as they both celebrate the first day of spring.

Duncan's magical plays are considerable new discoveries in scholarly research and contain a theatrically acceptable theme that has not been explored. Aunt Liza in Black Magic recalls the conjurers of Spanish Golden Age plays, such as Fernando de Rojas's Celestina, or The Tragi-Comedy of Calisto and Melibea (c. 1500). Celestina is hired to perform her witchcraft to win the love of a woman, using incantations and the young lady's personal garments. Duncan's satire is also reminiscent of James W. Butcher's The Scer (c. 1937). The farce is a comical treatment of superstitions among an older generation of African Americans. A Black charlatan attempts to capitalize on their superstitious beliefs for his own selfish purposes. Jinda is an example of a romantic melodrama and is reminiscent of fifth-century Eastern drama, for example, Kalidasa's Shakuntala. In A Treasury of the Theatre, John Gassner explains that flora and fauna were components of the plays written during India's classical period (c. 350-800). "Nature is celebrated . . . because it conduces to plain living and high thinking in accordance with religious teachings . . . . The plays of Kalidasa . . . represent a shift from the priestly to the courtly domain. It is from the luxurious life of the courts that they derive their facetiousness, sophisticated naïveté, and buoyant humor." <sup>62</sup> Jinda explores the Hindu's worship of flora and fauna, which is also a component of Afro-diasporic spiritual folklore.

Duncan's exploration of Black folk voodoo is an integral part of African American heritage. In Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro (1968), Newbell Niles Puckett expounds on the derivation of its negative connotations.

Under the more or less rigid caste system which governed the association of the two races, the blacks were looked down upon as cultural inferiors and all things negroid were tabooed to the socially ambitious whites . . . to the Negro, the white man stood as a model to be emulated in all things, from superstitions to straight hair. <sup>63</sup>

Puckett also explains the power of faith in Black folk superstitions.

It is hard to convey to the modern materialist the intense reality of voodoo beliefs to the average illiterate Negro. The astonishing thing to those who are not acquainted with the almost unbelievable actuality of the spirit environment to primitive people is the fact that voodoo so often works. Reputable physicians everywhere recognize the power of faith in human affairs, and it is due to this overpowering belief in conjuration that the hoodoo-doctor so often accomplishes what he sets out to do. <sup>64</sup>

The power of Voodooism, the rite of spring, the rise of the college-educated African American are celebrated in Duncan's one-act dramas. Her unpublished plays remained as such during her lifetime because they did not adhere to the rigid guidelines Willis Richardson outlined in Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro. These restrictions were discussed in the chapter on May Miller. Richardson emphasized that the publishable plays must not be written in dialect, depict undesirable characters, or contain sexual inferences. Duncan's plays encapsulate all of these elements as well as themes that were considered controversial. She was not as steadfast as Miller in promoting her plays to be published and produced, yet her plays educate all ages and races. Duncan acknowledged the existence of female African Americans who were abused by their lovers and spouses, and explored the theatrical possibilities of Black folk voodooism. This African American heritage was lost and misunderstood because of both white and Black ignorance of culture, history, and traditions. Duncan shrewdly entices her audience with endearing, sentimental,

and laughable characters as she reeducates the masses. The oppressive struggle of her people lies within the midst of bluebirds and peacock feathers where magic and mayhem prevail.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Peterson. Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Thelma Myrtle Duncan. Driftin' (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.). 2.3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Duncan. Driftin'. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.. 7.8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Thelma Myrtle Duncan. Payment (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.). 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.. 5.6.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Bechtold Heilman. Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience (Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1968). 79.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.. 95.

<sup>21</sup> Duncan. Payment. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Teish. Jambalaya. 79.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.. 120.

<sup>25</sup> Thelma Myrtle Duncan. Sacrifice. In Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro. Willis Richardson, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers. 1930). 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.. 17. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.. 23.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.. 23. 24

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Thelma Myrtle Duncan. Jinda (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center Howard University. Washington, D.C.). 5.6.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.. 2.3.

<sup>37</sup> Thelma Myrtle Duncan. Black Magic. In The Yearbook of Short Plays. 1st series Claude Merton Wise and Lee Owen Snooks, eds. (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, and Company. 1931). 217.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.. 219.

40 Teish. 202.

41 Ibid.. 207.

42 Duncan. Black Magic. Wise and Snook. 219. 220.

43 Ibid.. 222.

44 Ibid.. 223. 224.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.. 225. 226.

47 Ibid.. 228

48 Ibid.. 229.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.. 230.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.. 221.

53 Ibid.. 224.

54 Ibid.. 226.

55 Ibid.. 231.

56 Aptheker. Woman's Legacy. 116.

57 Ibid.. 114.

58 Neverdon-Morton. Afro-American Women of the South. 68.

59 Ibid., 140.

60 Ibid., 16.

61 Neverdon-Morton. 168.

62 John Gassner. A Treasury of the Theatre: World Drama from Aeschylus to Turgenev, vol. 1. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1935), 140.

63 Puckett. Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro. 520.

64 Ibid., 300.

**CHAPTER V**

**EULALIE SPENCE: DOMESTIC  
COMEDIES AND FOLK DRAMAS,  
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMAN  
EXEMPT FROM PROPER DECORUM**

Eulalie Spence was considered a folk dramatist who wrote plays that both delighted and exalted her audience. From 1927 to 1958 she taught English, elocution, and directed the dramatic society at the Eastern District High School in Brooklyn, New York. One of her most successful high school students was Joseph Papp, former director of the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre. Spence was active in community theatre and studied playwriting under Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Hatcher Hughes (Hell Bent for Heaven, 1928). She wrote one full-length play, The Whipping (1934) that was optioned by Paramount Pictures but was never filmed. The Whipping is a three-act comedy adaptation of Roy Flannagan's novel and was sold to Paramount Pictures for \$5,000. In Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers (1990), Bernard L. Peterson, Jr. encapsulates the plot as it "concerns a southern woman who gains fame as a result of publicity that she has been whipped for misconduct by the Ku Klux Klan." <sup>1</sup> Spence was a forerunner in the movement away from the "plays to be read." In "A Criticism of the Negro Drama" (Opportunity, June 1928) she explains the vital necessity for plays to be performed. "I have seen plays written by our Negro writers with this caption: "To Be Read, Not Played! A play to be read! Why not the song to be read not sung, and the canvas to be described, not painted! To every art its form, thank God! And to the play the technique that belongs to it." <sup>2</sup> Spence defines

Negro drama as, "Any drama or theatrical production which essays to portray the life of the Negro."<sup>3</sup> She acknowledges African American playwrights, actors, and audiences who shudder in distaste at white American dramatists' depictions of stereotypical Negro characters. Spence affirms that subsequently these writers, for example, Paul Green, Du Bose Heyward, and Eugene O'Neill have been a great inspiration and compelled African American writers to create, correct, and reeducate audiences of all races. W. E. B. Du Bois failed to persuade Spence to write propaganda plays. Although she adapted The Whipping, a story about lynchings in the United States, she remained a follower of anti-propaganda drama. Spence also addresses this controversial issue in her article.

May I advise these earnest few--those seekers after light-- white lights--to avoid the drama of propaganda if they would not meet with certain disaster? Many a serious aspirant for dramatic honors has fallen by the wayside because he would insist on his lynchings or his rape. The white man is cold and unresponsive to this subject and the Negro, himself, is hurt and humiliated by it. We go to the theatre for entertainment, not to have old fires and hates rekindled. Of course, if we have a Shaw or a Galsworthy among us, let him wander at will in the more devious by-paths of race dissection. Let him wander wheresoever he will--provided he has no eye for the box-office.<sup>4</sup>

Spence's plays are not void of historical references, but The Whipping is her sole contribution to historical drama. Her female characters are portrayed as very strong, independent, and opinionated women who do not adhere to the proper decorum of women in the 1920s. The four comedies that will be discussed fall under two subgenres: folk comedy and domestic comedy. The Hunch and The Starter are folk comedies of Harlem life. The Hunch was published in the Carolina Magazine, May 1927. In June 1927, it was performed by the Krigwa Players, Washington, D.C. and also won second prize in the Opportunity Contest Awards. The Starter was published in Alain Locke and Montgomery T. Gregory's anthology, Plays of Negro Life (1927) and tied for third place

in the Opportunity Contest Awards, June 1927. Spence's comic portrayal of Harlemites was appreciated by Theophilus Lewis who, was a perceptive drama critic of the 1920s. Lewis supports Spence's thesis for writing folk comedies in his Messenger column.

Drama more than any other art form except the novel embodies the whole spiritual life of a people: their aspirations and manners, their ideas and ideals, their fantasies and philosophies: the music and dignity of their speech--in a word, their essential character, and it carries this likeness of a people down the centuries for the enlightenment of remote times and races. <sup>5</sup>

The Hunch is set in the livingroom of Mavis Cunningham on a summer evening in Harlem. Mavis is getting married tomorrow to Bert Jackson, and is packing her trunk in preparation for a surprise honeymoon trip. The landlady, Mrs. Reed, visits to wish Mavis luck and happiness. The subject of gambling arises during their pleasant conversation. Mrs. Reed informs Mavis that the combination she placed for a former suitor is the winning numbers. The bridegroom arrives, followed by Steve, who escorts Lucinda into the room. Steve introduces her as Bert's present wife. Bert is exposed as both a bigamist and swindler. Mavis remains true to her fiancé despite his crimes. Steve proposes marriage and threatens to murder Bert if she insists on choosing him. Mavis reconsiders and accepts Steve's invitation for a night on the town.

Spence's folk comedy explores the themes of matrimony, bigamy, gambling, and ensuing entanglements. Mavis has second thoughts about marrying Bert after a four-week engagement and considers the odds of a successful union with a Harlemite. The suspense begins when Mavis confides in her landlady: "Yuh know, Mis' Reed, there's a plenty things can happen tuh break up a weddin', 'specially in Harlem." <sup>6</sup> Mrs. Reed becomes more animated and interested in the discussion when Mavis brings up the subject of gambling. Mavis believes numbers playing is a fool's game. Mrs. Reed is so thrilled with her tenant's good fortune that she insists on plotting against Steve in order to obtain a percentage of the prize money. Mavis is further convinced that

gambling only leads to trouble. Her perfect wedding plans are crushed by a witness who can prove Bert is a criminal. Steve persuades Lucinda to deliver her testimony.

Lucinda. Fer Gawd's sake let's be sensible an' cut all the fancy acting! You oughta be caged, no foolin'! Ain't they got women enough in Harlem, without you staging another one of these fake weddings? I oughta let them send you up fer bigamy, I sure oughta!

Mavis. Bert, it ain't true! Say it ain't true!

Lucinda. Say, I'm sorry fer you, kid, but it's all in the game. You ain't got nothing to cry about, take it from me! Bert is a no-good skunk if ever there was one. Mr. Collins here would make a dozen Berts with plenty left over to spare. He paid me fifty dollars to come over here an' put you wise. Bert ain't all there, if you ask me . . . Well, I'm going, Mr. Collins. Guess there ain't nothing else I can do around here.

Steve. Don't you want tuh take along yuh daddy?

Lucinda. Be your age! Say, kid, have a good time, an' don't be rushing after no husband. Take it from me! I didn't pick no daisy, I'll tell the world! <sup>7</sup>

Spence's biased thesis on marriage is illustrated in this scene. Mavis acknowledges that it is difficult to find an honest, loving Black man in Harlem and believes Bert is the perfect choice. Lucinda rushes into the room and exposes her husband's indiscretions and is both unpretentious and nonthreatening as she gives Mavis fair warning and sane advice. Spence places these two female characters onstage together to illustrate the melodramatic, innocent woman who is in love with the idea of marriage and a wife resigned to a polygamous relationship. The surprise turn of events begins when Steve demands his winnings from Bert. Mavis walks to the window to get away from these men as Steve draws a revolver. Steve fails to coerce Mavis to search Bert's pockets and is left to play his hunch alone. He discovers the roll of bills and solves the case. Mavis finds herself caught in a love triangle between a swindler and an idolizer.

Spence creates three distinctive female characters in The Hunch by broadening their stereotypical traits. Mavis is described as a Black woman with soft prettiness who ironically sings "Everybody Loves My Baby" as she packs her delicate undergarments. During the course of one evening, Mavis loses her Southern innocence and succumbs to the treacherous quality of life in Harlem. Lucinda is a light-skinned young Black woman who is candid, brassier, and more street-wise than her peer. Her description sets up the audience to expect a female cat fight. Instead of defending her husband's honor, Lucinda exposes Bert's crimes. She expresses empathy for Mavis and apologizes for destroying her joyous occasion. Mrs. Reed represents the older generation of this community. She is described as a short, stout, twice-widowed landlady of a prominent apartment building. Mrs. Reed is not a member of the distinguished Harlem elite but rather a coarse, conniving, and doting comic character.

Spence illustrates a more genteel picture of Harlemites in The Starter, set in a Harlem park on a summer evening. Thomas Jefferson Kelly, an elevator starter, is reading The News as he waits for Georgia, his girlfriend. Georgia, a seamstress finisher, arrives and the lovers commence to cuddle with each other. She is convinced that they make a perfect couple and manipulates Thomas into proposing marriage. Georgia dreams of being a full-time housewife but she is concerned with their financial status. Thomas insists on their being a two-income family. The issue is dropped and the couple decide to relax and enjoy the nightlife in Harlem.

Spence explores the themes of matrimony, materialism, and community pride in this comedy of romance. When the curtain rises Thomas is seen sprawled upon a park bench in a straw hat and coat. He amuses himself by being insultingly flirtatious with

female passerbys. Two tired African American matrons trudge along searching for a place to rest.

- First Woman. Any wonder we kain't find no place tuh set?  
Looka him sprawlin' on dat bench. will yuh?  
Gawd, it's hot!
- Second Woman. Say, move up, will yuh? Yuh ain't go' no lease on  
dat bench.
- T. J. Kelly. Reserved!
- First Woman. Reserved! Kin yuh beat dat fer nerve, Mis' Clark?
- Second Woman. Ah should say not! Take yo' arms off dat bench,  
you loafin' nigger!
- T. J. Kelly. Now, see here Angel face, and you too, Grape Nuts!  
Ah know you're both dying for a real live hug from  
an honest tuh goodness he-man. Well, come on an'  
get it. I won't charge you nothing.
- First Woman. Kin yuh beat it?
- Second Woman. Ah like yo' gall!
- T. J. Kelly. They all do! You're not the only one.
- First Woman. A woman kain't walk tru dis park no mo',  
'thout bein' insulted! <sup>8</sup>

Georgia comes along the path and interrupts her boyfriend's tomfoolery.

Thomas complains about the limitations of his position at work. "Funny--me standing there in a Palm Beach suit with brass buttons, an' a hat to match with more brass buttons! Sometimes a man gets to thinkin'--Here I am a starter--a starter--just one step better'n the man who runs the cage--Gee! That's a helluva job!" <sup>9</sup> Georgia commiserates with

Thomas and adds, "Why T. J.--yuh knows Ah does sewin' doan yuh? Well, Ah ain't never tole yuh 'bout mah place 'cause it's so low-down. Eytalians and Jews and colored--all in tergether. It's a dump. Well, I'm what they calls a Finisher. Finisher on dresses! See? That's whut Ah meant--You bein' a Starter and me a Finisher!"<sup>10</sup>

She has cleverly veered the conversation toward the question of matrimony.

Thomas proposes and Georgia inquires about his savings. He reluctantly informs her that he only has fifty-five dollars. Thomas elaborates, listing his priorities: clothes, society and lodge membership dues, movie tickets, dances, and cabarets, to name a few.

Georgia has two hundred dollars in her bank account and demands a genuine diamond engagement ring. She is financially responsible and is fully aware of the economic insecurity of the garment industry. "Las' year Ah was outa wuk altogether four months . . . Laid off . . . It's a reg'lar thing in mah line--dull season--strikes--union dues----." <sup>11</sup> Thomas is disenchanted and suggests Georgia apply for a waitressing position. Georgia disagrees and realizes her boyfriend has second thoughts about marriage. Thomas becomes aggressively affectionate to distract his lover. He begins to kiss her and point out the beauty of their community.

Spence uses another African American stereotype and develops him into a three-dimensional character. She captures the humor and the folk qualities of the Harlemitte using a Negro stage name, Thomas Jefferson Kelly. He is described as a tall and dapper smooth talking ladies' man. Thomas appears to be a loafing, clownish dandy. The curtain rises and he begins a comic monologue, commenting on the news headlines. "Hello! 'Woman Gives Birth To Four Healthy Sons'! Gee! A male quartet! Four! . . . 'Father Overjoyed!' Like hell, he is!" <sup>12</sup> Thomas's character traits are reminiscent of the "watermelon-eating" urbanite, once removed from the blackface minstrel shows. He has the gift of laughter and was a popular preconception of white audiences of American Negroes. This comic character was portrayed as overbearing, flashily dressed, and simple yet high-spirited. Bert Williams and George Walker specialized in these prototypes.

Langston Hughes' Little Ham (1935) recalls this type of character. Little Ham revolves around the escapades of Hamlet Jones, a carefree sporting Harlemite during the 1920s. When Thomas grabs Georgia and gives her a "Valentino-fashion" kiss, the women stare disapprovingly and criticize the young lovers' indiscretion. The stereotypical images of this couple are soon diminished. The dreamer and his realistic sweetheart begin to discuss a universal issue--marriage and its commitments.

Fool's Errand and Episode are domestic comedies that involve pertinent problems that exert corrupting influences upon a family. Fool's Errand was first published by Samuel French in 1927 and won the \$200 prize in David Belasco's National Little Theatre Tournament for the best unpublished play. The first production was performed by the Krigwa Players at the 135th Street Library Theatre in Harlem on April 20, 25, and 27. Doralyne Spence, Eulalie's sister, played the role of Maza Lee. The National Little Theatre Tournament produced the play on May 2, and 7 for three additional performances at the Frolic Theatre in New York City. The prize was accepted by W. E. B. Du Bois to pay for production expenses. According to Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., this dispute led to the demise of Krigwa and no other plays of Spence were published by Crisis. Episode was first published by The Archive, April 1928 and is readily available in Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's Wines in the Wilderness (1990).

Fool's Errand takes place in the livingroom of the Lees' cabin on a summer evening. The curtain opens on Aunt Cassie Lee discussing a plan of action to discover the father of her niece's unborn child. She informs Sister Williams, the Parson's wife, that she accidentally found baby clothes hidden in a dresser drawer. Cassie assumes the garments belong to Maza. She decides to sponsor the next church council meeting. Maza is torn between the love of two young men, Freddie Jackson and Jud Bolton. The church auxiliary arrive and presume Freddie's guilt when he attempts to escape the proceedings. Mary Lee returns from an out-of-town domestic assignment and interrupts the hurried wedding ceremony. She claims the baby clothes and shames Cassie.

Douglas, Parson Williams, and his congregation, scolding them for getting involved in a fool's errand.

Spence explores the foibles of a rural congregation in a Negro settlement when they bestow their trust in a interfering relative. The crisis is created by the discovery of insubstantial evidence (the baby clothes) and the assumption that Maza is having premarital sex. Cassie believes it is the duty of the Council for Suppression of Vice and Correction of Sinners to assist in her family dilemma. Cassie and Sister Williams expose their prejudices against the youths and what they deem proper decorum for young African American women. They also compare the indiscretions of the younger generation to those of their white counterparts.

- Sister Williams.      Parson was sayin' only las' night, dat it was high time de Council got tuh dealin' wid some uh dese young folks. Dey's gettin' outer han'--clean outer han'.
- Cassie.                      It's mah 'pinion dey's bin outer han' a mighty long time. Whut wid de way dey cuts de little hair Gawd gives 'em, an den spends all dey's got' tuh straighten it out--flyin' in de face uh Gawd. Ah calls it.
- Sister Williams.      (Whose hair is straightened) Lawd, dat ain't nothin', Cassie! Why, Parson was tellin' me only las' night, 'bout dis here new case de Council's gwine tuh settle. Give a guess will yuh?
- Cassie.                      Reckon it ain't dancin', fer dats common 'nuffl.
- Sister Williams.      No, ma'am! Wouldn't be so bad ef 'twas some uh dis wild dancin', though we doan' hold wid no sech doin's. It's smokin', Cassie! Two gals from de Corners had de low-down nerve tuh smoke cigarettes at our Sunday school picnic!

Cassie.                   What're we comin' tuh!

Sister Williams.       Ef sech doin's keeps on, reckon our young peope'll  
be jes' as brazen's white folks. <sup>13</sup>

Cassie summons her drunken brother to come out of the bedroom and have a family meeting. Douglas is a tall, brawny man who does not believe in organized religion. He is unashamed of his alcoholism and complains of both his nagging wife and intrusive sister. Douglas is unconvinced of the charges against Maza until Cassie presents the baby clothes as evidence. He reacts violently, ripping the garments in half, throwing them on the ground, and reeling toward the street door. Cassie courageously places her back against the door and demands his full attention.

Cassie.                   Listen, Doug! . . . Set down, Doug, an' pull yuhself  
tergether! Yuh bein' drunk shows yuh in a bad light!  
Maza's ma off workin' an' you home loafin' an' on a drunk.  
Fine example yuh shows Maza! Fine care yuh's took uv  
her sence her ma's bin off wid dem white folks! . . .  
Reckon yuh ain't so drunk but yuh kin be 'shamed er yuh  
no' count ways. . . . Now yuh jes' set thar, Doug!  
Ev'ything'll be fixed sure 'nuff! Jes' doan' say nuthin' 'til de  
time comes. . . . It takes a smart man lak Parson tuh know  
de rights an' wrongs uv a case lak dis. <sup>14</sup>

Parson Williams leads the brethren and sisters of the church council into the living room. He brings the meeting to order and acknowledges Cassie with undeserving praise. "She has served faithfully in dis community fer many years. She has been a vigilant watchman 'gainst de inroads of sin an' rebellion, 'specially among our young people." <sup>15</sup> Cassie presents the charges before the council. She presents the baby clothes and demands that the auxiliary force Maza to expose the father of her child. Maza is being unjustly humiliated in front of her elders, peers, and family. Parson Williams asks the young people to repent and reform. Maza hysterically pleads her innocence as they all kneel in prayer, except Douglas, and the youths on trial.

The suspenseful scene climaxes with Freddie's interruption. Douglas grasps the young man's throat and forces his head backwards. Parson Williams rushes to rescue him and tears Douglas's fingers away. Cassie accepts this reaction as a sign of guilt. Mary quietly opens the door and finds the commencement of a cacophonous wedding ceremony. She defends Maza and condemns her sister-in-law. Douglas is surprised to discover his wife is pregnant. Parson Williams attempts to exonerate himself. "Well, Sister Cassie, seems tuh me yuh's brought us on a fool's errand!"<sup>16</sup> Everyone disperses except Mary and Douglas, who stand in the doorway and listen to the congregation singing outside.

Spence's comedy of restoration depicts three women as the mainstay to its comic absurdity. Cassie is a malcontent who creates havoc in the home and church community. Maza is the victimized and humiliated youth and Mary is the messenger who restores her daughter's reputation and saves the day. Spence explores the themes of love, alcoholism, generational controversy, and religion. She illustrates the hypocrisy of organized religion and satirizes the church's biased beliefs. The auxiliary are given the ironical title, "The Council for Suppression of Vice and Correction of Sinners." Their physical appearance is also humorous. The women of the group are dressed in ill-fitting white frocks and ugly black hats, carrying palm leaf fans. Music also accentuates their spiritual belief and underscores the comic element of the situation. Cassie leads them in song, "Thar's a meetin' here ter-night, Doan' let dat sinner hab no res'. Thar's a meetin' here ter-night."<sup>17</sup> The Council doubles as a chorus for Parson Williams, creating clicking and muttering sounds that are intended to express consternation at the effrontery of the young people. The mock court room explodes as Parson Williams warns the youths of the wrath of God. He quotes from the Bible as the Council again rises in song, "Have yuh bin tuh Jesus fer de cleansing power? Are yuh washed in de blood uv de Lamb? Are yuh garments spotless, are dey white as snow? Are yuh washed in de blood uv de Lamb?"<sup>18</sup>

Parson Williams continues the proceedings by leading his flock in prayer. He begins to pray as the congregation answer in a call and response manner.

Parson Williams.	Let us pray! Lawd, soften de heart uh dis erring daughter an' bring her back tuh de fold!
The Council.	Amen! Amen!
Parson Williams.	Give us a sign Lawd, whereby we kin see de truth an' do yo' will!
The Council.	Amen! A sign. Lawd! A sign!
Parson Williams.	Lawd, place yuh han' upon de guilty man! Move his heart! Force him tuh rise! Make him speak!
The Council.	Amen! Amen!
Parson Williams	Thar's a powerful curse fer them dat defies de Lawd! Ah's chargin' dese sinners fo' de las' time, tuh speak!
The Council.	A curse! A curse! <sup>19</sup>

The parson's voice rises higher and becomes shriller each time in a sort of ecstasy. He presumes the young people are laughing mockingly because they have not confessed to the charges. Cassie, Maza, and Mary are clearly the malcontent, victim, and savior of the afflicted family. Spence leaves the audience with further proof of religious hypocrisy as the meddling group sing outside their door.

Ah met mah sister de odder night	
She call me by mah name.	
An' jes' as soon's mah back wuz turned	
She scandalize mah name.	
Yuh call dat a sister?	
No! No! (Chant the Council)	
Yuh call dat a sister?	
No! No!	

Yuh call dat a sister?  
 No! No!  
 Who scandalize mah name! <sup>20</sup>

Fool's Errand is a representative play of the church/religious satire genre.

There were other African American dramatists during the 1920s and 1930s who used this genre to expose the hypocrisies within the Black church. Ruth Ada Gaines-Shelton's The Church Fight (1925) won second prize in the Crisis contest. She used allegorical names such as Sister Instigator and Brother Investigator, for satirical purposes to disclose church politics. Zora Neale Hurston also used religious satire in Mule Bone (1930s), co-authored with Langston Hughes, and The First One (1926). Mule Bone illustrates the biased beliefs and practices between the Methodist and Baptist churches within a rural Southern community. The First One is a satire of the biblical story concerning Noah's curse on his son, who is traditionally held to be the ancestor of the Black race.

Spence continues her exploration of Harlemites in Episode, which illustrates the plight of a nagging wife who attempts to mold a man into the perfect husband. The setting is the Jacksons' living room of their Harlem apartment. The curtain rises on scene one, it is Saturday night, eight o'clock. Mamie accuses Jim of infidelity as he rushes out the door. She composes herself as Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Robinson enter and give their troubled friend marriage counseling. Mamie listens to their advice and gets an idea--purchase a radio and her husband will stay at home. Jim returns with Walt Gilbert, a long lost friend, who plays the coronet in an orchestra. He persuaded Jim to purchase a coronet instead of his surprise gift, a radio. Mamie is disappointed: she hates the coronet. In scene two, it is Saturday evening, six weeks later. Harry Williams, one of Jim's pals, is comforting Mamie. Jim's musical obsession has made him unsociable. The neighbors have signed a petition to evict the Jacksons because of his late night practice. Harry suggests they make Jim jealous by going out on a date together. Mamie puts their plan into action. Jim is unresponsive and continues to practice as Mamie rushes out.

Mamie tries to communicate with her husband as he prepares to once again leave her alone on a Saturday night. She describes her picture of a perfect marriage.

Mamie. Ah'm lonesome, Jim. Seems like yuh out with the boys every night since we been married. Ain't like what Ah thought marriage was goin' ter be. Ah pictured you an' me--jes you an' me--settin' here on this couch same's we useter--in Mom's parlor; or mebbe you smokin' or readin' the paper, or mebbe talkin' ter me. Yuh ain't never got nuthin' ter say ter me no more. <sup>21</sup>

Mrs. Robinson and Mrs. Jennings have different philosophies on the ingredients of a happy marriage. Mrs. Jennings outlines the advantages of having a salesman for a husband. She does not worry about Joe's infidelities. Mrs. Jennings believes if he cheats on her it will be while he is on the road. When Joe is in town, he stays at home. She confesses that they have two separate circles of friends and socialize independently of each other. Mrs. Jennings classifies all men in one category, which compels Mamie to voice her opinion.

Mamie. All men ain't the same, Mis' Jennings. Why, ef Ah had half's many men friends as some women has, he'd kill me.

Mrs. Jennings. He would--not! It ain' bein' done this year. Lemme tell yuh somethin'. Yuh ain't bin married long an' Ah hates ter see yuh makin' a fool uv yuhself. 'Long's yuh Jim knows yuh hangin' roun' here yearnin', he'll let yuh yearn, an' have a wonderful time watchin' yuh do it. Yuh wants ter start the way yuh goin' ter keep up. <sup>22</sup>

Mrs. Robinson expresses her philosophy, confessing that she lost weight to attract Charlie and gained it all back when they got married. Her husband has accepted her obesity and 'homebody' attitude and they have been happily married for five years. Charlie surprised her with a radio two years ago and has stayed at home ever since.

Jim returns with Walt and a coronet as Mamie becomes distressed and explains her abhorrence for this instrument that led to a childhood trauma. "Jim, Jim, yuh doan mean it? Not the coronet. Ah hate 'em. . . . Once, Mom lived next door to a man who was learnin' the coronet. He never did learn, Jim. Seems Ah kin hear the neighbors now, hollerin' fer him to quit." <sup>23</sup> Jim is insulted and reminds Mamie that she inadvertently received her wish. He blows a frightful gasping note that sends his wife staggering into a chair. Mamie laughs hysterically with tears streaming down her face as the curtain descends.

In scene two Mamie is seeking outside advice from Harry. Mamie is unaware that she is still physically attractive to other men. Harry boosts her confidence by showering her with compliments and praise. Mamie proceeds as planned: she asks Jim to take her out dancing. Jim insists on waiting for Walt to give him another music lesson. She bravely declares her independence while Jim blares out a rendition of "Old Black Joe." Mamie makes one more attempt to gain his attention.

Mamie. Sure yuh doan mind mah goin', Jim?

Jim. See here, sister! If yuh goin' go on! Yuh keep on interrupting so Ah kain't git no decent practice.

Mamie. Ah'm goin' with Harry Williams. Harry's some feller!

Jim. Sure he is. Have a good time.

Mamie. Ef Ah has a good time, Ah may not git home 'fore mornin', Jim.

Jim. Take yuh key, Mamie.

Mamie. 'Sposin Ah doan never come back, Jim? <sup>24</sup>

Mamie waits for an answer. Jim blares a hoarse sound from his coronet. She rushes out and slams the door. Jim is relieved and adjusts his instrument and blows out another thundering note.

Spence depicts one episode in which three angry African American housewives live unhappily ever after. They have failed to communicate with their spouses and suffer with the consequences. Mrs. Jennings is a tall, lean, shrewd woman. She professes to be content but her confessions and advice to Mamie reveal the woman's desperation. Mrs. Jennings has convinced herself that socializing independently from her husband is normal behavior. She disagrees with the 'radio remedy' yet exclaims that dancing to band music is entertaining. Mrs. Jennings is married but she does not have a dance partner because her husband finds her undesirable. She jokingly makes a reference to the atrocity of physically abusive husbands. Mrs. Jennings leaves her friends and the audience to infer that she speaks from personal experience. In comparison, Mrs. Robinson is more subtle with her marriage advice. She is described as a plump, plain, homey woman. Mrs. Robinson has convinced herself that Charlie still finds her attractive; she is resigned to remaining fat. This housewife has settled for a husband who sits in front of the radio. Mamie uses these women as a sounding board and politely accepts their advice. She cannot live independently from her husband and considers the idea of purchasing a radio. Jim intercepts her plans and forces Mamie into an act of desperation. Mamie's irrational behavior and Harry's interception could ultimately lead her to have an affair.

Hot Stuff is a domestic drama that gives the audience a tragic insight into the lives of self-oppressing Harlem residents. It won third prize jointly with Spence's melodrama Undertow in the Crisis Contest Awards of 1927. The play is set in the living room of Fanny and Walter King on a winter night. The curtain rises on Fanny boasting of the lucrative numbers racket business to her girlfriend, Mary Green. John Cole, Fanny's next visitor, enters and demands his winnings. Fanny insists that she lost his slip and throws him out of the house. Jennie Barbour, John's lover, is Fanny's next unexpected guest; she threatens her with blackmail. Fanny reconsiders and gives Jennie the money. Isadore Goldstein, another unexpected visitor, appears at the door. He is a Jewish fur

peddler who wants Fanny to buy an ermine wrap. Fanny barter with him to lower the price as Isadore makes an indecent proposal. Isadore will accept sex to supplement her cash payment. Fanny agrees to the settlement and escorts him into the bedroom. Walter returns from his business meeting earlier than anticipated and finds them in an embrace. He throws the peddler out, beats his wife, and exits. Fanny emerges from the bedroom, cancels a date, and stands in front of the mirror admiring herself in the new ermine wrap.

Spence insinuates that marriage is an obstacle for urbanites who are self-centered and morally decadent. Fanny King is also known as the "Red Hot Mama." Gender role playing is reversed at the beginning of this play. Fanny confesses to Mary that marriage is an inconvenience. She receives two phone calls in between visitors: a woman calls to place a bet and a gentleman confirms a date with her. John arrives and interrupts her date preparations. He accuses Fanny of dishonesty and appropriation. She is further harassed by Jennie, who stoops to Fanny's level.

Jennie.           Yuh can steal all the silk dresses an' stockings yuh wants--I don't care! But when it comes to stealin' cold cash what don't belong to yuh, that's where I take a hand.

Fanny.           Well, of all th--

Jennie.           Listen to me! I work in the same building with Walter King. I know the name of the firm he works for. Want to know their name? See yuh don't. Well, yuh shipping clerk daddy ain't pinin' to go up the river, is he?

Fanny.           How dare you! Get outa here, right now, you dirty little. . .

Jennie.           Cut that! I know two people who bought dresses from yuh! They're friends uh mine. Do yuh want 'em to go down to twenty-eighth street with me as witnesses? <sup>25</sup>

Fanny realizes that she is an accomplice to her husband's larceny and agrees to make payment. Jennie retorts, offering a comment on race pride. "I ain't got no love fer Saltzberg and Olinsky, an' I ain't got none for you. But just the same, I ain't one fer doin' my own people like some folks I know." <sup>26</sup> Isadore conveniently bars Fanny from closing the door on his sales pitch. He displays the ermine wrap and Fanny instantly falls in love with it, gliding up to the mirror to preen herself. Isadore compliments Fanny profusely and offers her the bargain price of two hundred and fifty dollars in cash for the wrap. He makes aggressive sexual advances--stroking her hair and placing his arms around her waist. They commence to barter until the price is reduced to one hundred and twenty-five dollars. The seduction continues and she finally relents. Fanny goes up to him, puts her arms slowly around his neck and kisses him. Isadore drapes the wrap around Fanny as they retire to the bedroom.

The audience observes two simultaneous scenes as Walter returns home. Walter slowly opens the front door and notices the salesman's suitcase. He proceeds into the bedroom as loud exclamations, the sound of a blow and fall are heard offstage. Isadore dashes out of the bedroom with Walter in close pursuit. The peddler grabs his hat and suitcase and fumbles at the door. Walter sends Isadore sprawling out of the apartment, hurling his suitcase after him. He returns to the bedroom and continues to physically abuse his wife. The sound of screams, sobs, moans, and scuffling are heard offstage until Fanny cries "Yuh's killin' me! Gawd! Oh! Murder! Murder!" <sup>27</sup> The shrieks cease, there is a knock at the hall door, and Walter emerges and exits. Fanny reappears looking disheveled and walks painfully across the room to the mirror. She admires herself draped in the ermine wrap and exclaims, "The dirty brute! Glad he didn't scratch my face none." <sup>28</sup> Fanny displays no indication of personal growth. She calls her lover, cancels their date, and reschedules it for the next evening.

Hot Stuff un.masks several indiscretions of a corrupt urban society.

Spence displays an excess of issues that cannot be properly explored in a one-act play. For example, her list of themes include: corporate pilfering, gambling, adultery, prostitution, materialism, vanity, blackmail, deception, and physical abuse. Fanny's home needs a revolving door to sustain the numerous unexpected guests and their con games. Three women are portrayed as self-oppressive and self-debasing sexual chattel. Jennie enters Fanny's home a victim and appears to be as morally decadent as her peer when she leaves. Mary allows men to intimidate her into submission. Her present lover is out of town, which gives Mary the opportunity to date another man for material and monetary gain. Fanny is a painted woman with a sensuous body. She is in tragic pursuit of social change and allows both Black and white men to exploit her powerlessness. Fanny sells hot merchandise that her husband steals from his employer at the clothing warehouse. She cons her friends into buying stockings and dresses from her sideline to aid and abet in her game of survival. Fanny's easy money is made by being a numbers agent: she earns two hundred and fifty dollars a day. She is disappointed by romantic love and marriage and submits herself to prostitution. Fanny will sleep with a Jewish peddler who calls her a "little brown devil." She accepts Isadore's degrading endearments to support her obsessions. Hot Stuff depicts Harlem as a decadent place where everyone is on the hustle.

Her is a drama of Black folk superstition/Voodoo and is subtitled, "A Mystery Play in One Act." It was first published by Kathy A. Perkins in Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950 (1989). Her was produced by the Krigwa Players and directed by Charles Burroughs at the 135th Street Library Theatre in Harlem on January 7, 19, and 24 and was presented again on April 20, 25, and 27, 1927. Spence's sister Olga played the role of "Her" in the production. This ghost story centers around an offstage character, a Filipino woman, who committed suicide after she failed to

find happiness in the United States. The curtain rises on the apartment of Martha and Pete Alexander in New York City on a rainy spring evening. Martha is ironing a client's laundry as her crippled husband prattles on about not being able to support his family. John Kinney, the white landlord, is expected to arrive and show the vacant apartment upstairs. Martha complains of having had two sleepless nights because of the noise coming from the unoccupied apartment. Pete confesses that he has never heard the noise and he is unconvinced that the place is haunted. John enters and confronts Martha and denounces her foolish omens. He presumes that the power of suggestion has kept him away from the apartment for twenty years. Alice and Sam Smith arrive and John shows them the rooms. Martha is compelled to warn the young couple and save them from making a bad investment. When they return, John discovers his wallet is missing and exits. His absence enables Martha to speak to the potential tenants. Martha divulges the history of the haunted place. Alice and Sam are finally convinced when they all hear a loud crash upstairs. Martha rushes to the door and describes the offstage event--"Her" and John are walking down the stairs hand in hand.

Her is a story of a scorned woman who seeks revenge in the afterlife.

Pete watches Martha ironing and suspects she is upset. He is self-conscious about his handicap and considers applying for a job that hires cripples. Martha reassures him that she can manage to support them alone. She explains that her moodiness is caused by the idea of potential tenants living upstairs. This disturbance sets forth the mysterious references to "Her."

Martha.        Pete. Ah seen Mr. Kinney this mornin'. He's got some folks fer up above.

Pete.            Fer upstairs?

Martha.        They's ter come ter-night ter see the rooms.

Pete.            Ter-night?

Martha. Ah'm ter show them 'round--so he said. Reckon ef it keeps on rainin' they won't come.

Pete. Reckon they won't. . . Martha, did yuh tell him?

Martha. Yuh bet Ah tole him. But it didn' do no good, Pete. Nobuddy ain't goin' change him.

Pete. Ah reckon yuh's right, Martha.

Martha. 'Lessen its Her. <sup>29</sup>

John Kinney arrives and decides to face his fears and unload the history of his phobia.

John Kinney. Looking back over the years, twenty you say--Twenty! I can see what a fool I've been--what a fool you've helped me to be. You--with your talk of signs and omens--sound and night alarms. You've filled my mind with superstitious fears. I, who used to laugh at fears! Well, you've frightened away my tenants long enough with your gossip and your fancies. I won't say that you've done these things out of malice, but--by God! Some men might! <sup>30</sup>

John plans to wipe the tragic incident from his mind and show the rooms to the couple. The landlord concludes that he must sell the apartment building to free himself from his phobia. Martha discusses the dilemma with her husband while John is showing the apartment.

Martha. Yuh' allus bin a disbeliever, Pete, an Ah reckon yuh'll never change 'lessen yuh's give a sign.

Pete. Ah doan need no sign, Martha.

Martha. Yuh ain't read that thar Book frum cover to cover 'thout comin' cross signs an' wonders a-plenty.

Pete. Sure they's signs. But--

Martha. 'Tain't you Ah'm thinkin' uv. Pete. nor John Kinney.  
It's that girl Ah'm thinkin' uv--her an' that young feller.  
She's got a sweet face. Ah took ter her right off. She ain't a  
bit older than *she* was when she come here. They ain't goin'  
have no happiness up thar. <sup>31</sup>

Martha agrees to wait for a sign from God for the appropriate moment to tell the couple about the tragedy that occurred upstairs. John escorts them back into the Alexander home to close the deal. The Smiths make a payment and John sits down to make out a receipt. He discovers his wallet is missing and searches feverishly for it. He insists on going back up to the dark apartment alone. Martha accepts this action as the awaited sign. The suspense accelerates as Martha prepares to reveal the tragic event. Martha is obliged to tell the "Her" story even though she surmises that John will evict them. Martha is under time restraints and shouts, "Yuh musn' take them rooms. lessen yuh wants ter have more trouble than yuh knows 'bout. They's--they's haunted!" <sup>32</sup> Alice and Sam are unconvinced, leaving Martha with no alternative but to disclose the tragedy.

Martha. Listen. It's nigh on twenty years ago when we first seen Her. She was one of these here Philippine gals. . . She was pretty's a picture. . . An' she had plenty money. . . He tole Her he's goin' buy her a beautiful house--an' he takes her money. . . He buys this apartment house. . . She wanted him ter fix up one uv these floors. . . But. . . he figgered on the rent from them apartments, an' he wouldn't let her have one. . . She was jes' a little wild bird, caught an' put in a cage in a dark room. Well, seems lak John Kinney tole her one time that she could have the next floor that got vacant. . . Well, 'bout three months later, the folks on the top floor move away. . . the ole devil. . . tell her he'd changed his mind. . . The next afternoon John Kinney found her up thar hangin' between the parlor an' the bedroom. <sup>33</sup>

The young couple are convinced that the apartment is unsuitable. They prepare to leave before John returns, when a loud crash is heard from upstairs. Martha steps out into the hall and rushes back into the room. She shuts the door and runs over to her husband's side. Martha announces that Pete has received his sign. "Pete! Pete! Yuh wanted a sign! Ah jes seen John Kinney walkin' down the stairs with *Her*! She had him by the hand an' she was laughin!"<sup>34</sup>

Spence juxtaposes the themes of Black folk superstition/Voodoo, power of suggestion, and religion to explore a play of mystery and revenge. The tragedy that takes place offstage is framed by the set that is designed with social realism. "Her" came to the United States with money and expected to sustain a high standard of living. She was forced to live in a working class apartment building with the Alexanders. Martha and Pete's livingroom illustrates their economic status. The room is filled with cheap religious prints on the walls, odd tables, and cast off chairs that are "hand-me-downs" from the white people. Martha is a laundress and uses their livingroom and kitchen area as a work space. The clotheshorse has been brought inside because of the rain. The inclement weather impedes on Martha's work schedule. Martha supplements their income by also being the rent collector for John Kinney. Despite their financial constraints, she is immaculate, in her grey dress and apron. Martha is a dominating woman but she remains loyal to her invalid husband. Pete has been crippled and confined to a wheelchair for over fifteen years. Martha warns Alice and Sam with sincerity because she is aware of the potential danger upstairs. She befriended "Her" and realizes the Filipino woman plans to avenge her death. *Her* is a suspenseful drama and is clearly a ghost story. The Filipino woman is a ghost that has returned from the afterlife to seek revenge. Unlike most supernatural beings discussed in Black folk voodoo, she is not

a spirit. The delineation between a spirit and a ghost is defined by Luisah Teish in Jambalaya.

To the trained parapsychologist, ghosts are similar to psychotic human beings: incapable of reasoning for themselves or taking action. Spirits, on the other hand, are the surviving personalities of all of us who die in a reasonably normal fashion. A spirit is capable of continuing a full existence in the next dimension, to think, reason, and feel and act, while his unfortunate colleague the ghost, can do none of those things. This is one reason why suicides were not revered in Africa. It is possible to contact ghosts. . . The spirits of ancestors [give] guidance, protection, and healing, so that we may be better able to create a better world. <sup>35</sup>

Eulalie Spence's folk comedies and dramas are not considered plays of propaganda: she insisted on avoiding controversial issues. Spence was opposed to W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of plays as propaganda. In an interview of August 22, 1973, she reiterated her thesis. "A play should never be for propaganda. Give a speech, give any form of presentation but a play that people are to pay to go and see and have an evening of enjoyment cannot depend on propaganda for its success." <sup>36</sup> Du Bois was displeased with Spence's plays because they did not depict African Americans involved in the struggle for civil rights. In The Starter, for example, T. J. and Georgia acknowledge their rich heritage and the attributes of Harlem but they are content to remain working class citizens. Spence depicted these characters as bigamists, gamblers, scandalmongers, swindlers, embezzlers, and solicitors. Their positions in society deprive them of race pride, family values, and successful marriages. She illustrates Harlem devoid of the successful and prominent intellectual elite, civil rights activists, educators, and college graduates: the opportunists in her plays are unsavory representatives. Her female characters, for the most part, are exempt from proper decorum. These women scheme and scandalize their own names.

Spence expresses her dramatic thesis and warns aspiring African American dramatists in her article, "A Criticism of the Negro Drama."

Let him portray the life of his people, their foibles, if he will, and their sorrow and ambition and defeats. Oh, yes, let us have all of these, told with tenderness and skill and a knowledge of the theatre and the technique of the times. But as long as we expect our public, white, and colored, to support our drama, it were wise, to steer far away from old subjects. A little more laughter, if you please, and fewer spirituals! <sup>37</sup>

Spence's choice to observe the grim yet humorous impoverished African American urban and rural dwellers can be substantiated by Theophilus Lewis's vision of the evolution of Black drama. Lewis explains in The New Negro, An Interpretation that "[Black drama] should look to the folk play, which, realistically and imaginatively, was "drama of free expression and imaginative release. . . with no objective but to express beautifully and colorfully race folk life.""<sup>38</sup> Spence's style of writing and dramatic structural choices can be compared to the plays of both Miller and Duncan. Spence's low-life characters are similar to Jeff Broadus, Jefferson Meeks, Meladora, and Abbie in Scratches. Miller explored these undesirables in a genteel manner, while Spence exposed their indecent and decadent lifestyles with fervor. The "Red Hot Mama" in Hot Stuff is the epitome of an adulteress who is indecorous, insolent, and insufferable, yet she is a survivor. Duncan's female harlots are more closely related to Spence's Harlemites. Pearl, in Driftin', is coerced into selling liquor during Prohibition and depends on the ill-gotten gains of her physically and emotionally abusive lover.

Despite the dramatic criticism of Spence's choices, her plays were being produced. According to Lewis, the intellectuals did not determine the trends. The lower-class, less educated African Americans financed the theatre with their patronage and white producers catered to the paying audiences. Spence clearly did not adhere to the decorum appropriate for women of the era. The clearest evidence to her

volition is found in an interview of 1973. Spence was quoted by Kathy A. Perkins, "[who] indicated that perhaps the female characters in her plays were very strong personalities as compared with the weak male figures because of her upbringing. However, she did not consciously intend for the characters to appear as such." <sup>39</sup> In context of the Harlem Renaissance theatre and the other three dramatists being discussed, Spence falls close behind Miller in importance of publication, production, and historical significance.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Peterson. Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers. 179.
- <sup>2</sup> Eulalie Spence. "A Criticism of the Negro Drama: As It Relates to the Negro Dramatist and Artist." Opportunity (June 28, 1928): 180.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Theophilus Lewis. "Survey of the Negro Theatre--III.." Messenger, vol. 8, no. 10 (October 1926): 302.
- <sup>6</sup> Eulalie Spence. The Hunch. In Carolina Magazine, vol. 4, no. 7 (May 1927), 22.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 27.
- <sup>8</sup> Eulalie Spence. The Starter. In Plays of Negro Life, Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory, eds. (New York: Harper and Row, 1927), 207, 208.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 210.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 210.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 213.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 207.
- <sup>13</sup> Eulalie Spence. Fool's Errand. In Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950, Kathy A. Perkins, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 121.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 123.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 126.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.

17 Ibid., 124.

18 Ibid., 127, 128.

19 Ibid., 128.

20 Ibid., 131.

21 Eulalie Spence, Episode, in Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present, Elizabeth Brown Guillory, ed. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 52.

22 Ibid., 54.

23 Ibid., 56.

24 Ibid., 59.

25 Eulalie Spence, Hot Stuff, Brown-Guillory, 47.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 50.

29 Eulalie Spence, Her, Perkins, 133, 134.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 137.

32 Ibid., 138.

33 Ibid., 139.

34 Ibid., 140.

35 Teish, Jambalaya, 80.

36 Eulalie Spence, Hatch-Billops Archives Interviews with Playwrights, Hatch-Billops Collection, New York, N.Y.

37 Spence. Opportunity. 180.

38 Alain Locke. The New Negro, An Interpretation.  
(New York: Atheneum, 1925). 620.

39 Perkins. 105.

## CHAPTER VI

### SHIRLEY GRAHAM DU BOIS: CREATING THE CLASSIC AMERICAN PLAY

Shirley Graham Du Bois was a playwright, composer, biographer, and civil rights activist.<sup>1</sup> Her father, Reverend David A. Graham was, an African Methodist Episcopal minister. Shirley Graham and her four brothers were raised in parsonages throughout the United States. In 1951, she married William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Graham supported Du Bois's cause from the time of his indictment for activism in the World Peace Movement until her death in Peking, China, 1977. She was the NAACP field secretary (1940-1944) and founder and first president of Freedomways magazine (1960-1963). From 1944 to 1975 Graham wrote one novel, six plays, and twelve biographies including The Heroic Frederick Douglass (1947), Booker T. Washington: Educator of Hand, Head, and Heart (1955), and His Day Is Marching On: A Memoir of W. E. B. Du Bois (1971). Her plays were written before her marriage to Du Bois.

Graham was also a musicologist who specialized in African music research. She wrote and composed Tom-Tom, a three-act full-scale opera in sixteen scenes. It dramatizes the plight of the Black from the jungles of Africa into slavery and eventually to Harlem, New York. On June 26, 1932 Tom-Tom was produced in abridged concert form over NBC radio. The premiere stage production on July 8 was performed by the Cleveland Summer Opera Company at Cleveland Stadium and billed as Tom-Tom: An Epic of Music and the Negro. There were over 10,000 audience members at its premiere and a crowd of over 15,000 at the second and final performance. Tom-Tom was performed by 500 singers and dancers with an all-white orchestra accompaniment. The elaborate stage design included sailing vessels that exploded

and elevated trains on a 50,000 square foot stage. Graham's research compelled her to import Indoxis Chiakazia, a native Voodoo man from Africa, to ensure the production's authenticity. Tom-Tom was the first opera by an African American woman to be performed and the first all-Black opera to be produced on a large scale with a professional cast.

In 1937, Graham accepted a job as one of the directors in the Chicago Negro unit of the Federal Theatre Project. Harry Minturn, the white acting director of the Chicago Project, believed she had the ability to investigate and discover what African Americans wanted to see produced on the stage. In Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939 (1994), Rena Fraden reports that Graham "was set up as the conduit of information, the sole representative of her people. Her role was to represent her people's needs and to reconcile their conflicting desires, if necessary, so that she could speak with one voice when she reported to the head of the project." <sup>2</sup> Graham's position aided the initial promotion of Theodore Ward's Big White Fog, which finally ran for a limited engagement at the Great Northern Theatre in Chicago. Graham wrote five plays during her fellowship in Creative Writing at Yale University School of Drama, New Haven, Connecticut: It's Mornin', Track Thirteen, and I Gotta Home are three of those works.

It's Mornin' was produced at Yale in 1940 and directed by Otto Preminger, a noted Hollywood director. Her play was first published under the title, It's Morning in Kathy A. Perkins's Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950 (1989). It was also published as It's Mornin' in Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present (1990) by Elizabeth Brown-Guillory. This analysis is based on the text in Brown-Guillory's anthology. It's Mornin' depicts one African American family's tragedy during the patriarchy of the Civil War. The one-act play takes place on a cotton field plantation in the Deep South, December 31, 1862 through the morning of January 1, 1863. The curtain rises on slave revelers singing and dancing outside Cissie's cabin.

Cissie is hosting a New Year's Eve party in honor of her daughter, Millie. Mrs. Tilden, the white plantation mistress, interrupts the celebration to remind Cissie that Millie will be sold to another master in the morning. Grannie Lou, a Voodoo prophetess, fills Cissie's mind with grotesque images of a woman who prevented her three sons from being sold down the river by decapitating them. Cissie considers the alternative and plots to murder her daughter. The celebration ends and the slave women attempt to discourage the desperate mother. Dawn approaches as a Union Army soldier arrives to declare their emancipation. The news comes too late: Cissie carries Millie's corpse out into the bright sunlight and whispers to her child, "Hit's mawnin'!"

Graham's suspenseful play begins with laughter and celebration. The New Year's Eve party is in full swing when the curtain rises: young people are dancing and singing to Cripple Jake's banjo music. Cissie calls the guests from the yard into the cabin for a barbecue supper of hamhocks and corn pone. Sam, a young slave, is trying to kiss Millie under the mistletoe. Cissie's overprotective nature possesses her to intercept the lovers and suppress their affection for each other. The scene is interrupted by a musical interlude. Cripple Jake accompanies Millie as she sings "Dar's a great camp meetin' in da promise lan." Grannie Lou becomes nostalgic as she watches Millie and reminisces about Cissie's youthful jubiliace.

Grannie Lou. Cissie useter sing lak dat. . . Jes' lak huh gal. . .  
 Yes, Cissie! She war beautiful! Black as a berry an' lovely  
 as da night. Slender an' swift as a young colt. She nevah  
 walk, jes' prance an' run about da place. Ah seen da buekra  
 eyein' huh, an' she jes' laf. Den come a day when she war  
 very still. Ah donno why, til one night seen huh slippin'  
 t'rough shadows lak a hounded coon crawls tuh his hole to  
 lick his bleedin' wounds. . . An' when he'd come along da  
 row, she tremble lak a leaf, an once she fall down cryin' at  
 his feet. He laf an kick huh wid his foot, not hard, but lak  
 you kick a bitch what's big wid puppy out o' yo' path.<sup>3</sup>

Graham uses Grannie Lou, the prophetess/storyteller, in this monologue to expound on the events that caused this state of affairs in the first place. Cissie's overprotective reaction to Sam's act of affection for Millie is further substantiated by Grannie Lou's reminiscence. The only aspects of Cissie's past rape and physical abuse experiences revealed are those that are immediately relevant to the present dramatic situation. Grannie Lou explains the introductory situation with her tragic pathos sequence of retrospection. This in turn, is juxtaposed to Millie's animated performance outside of the cabin and Cissie appearing and standing lifelessly in the doorway. The suspense of the present dramatic situation is accelerated when Fess exposes his hunting knife and boasts, "So sharp dat Ah could draw hit right cross yo' troat--an' you'd not know. . . . Until you saw yo' head come fallin' down! Ha! Ha! Ha!"<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Tilden arrives unexpectedly and interrupts the festivities. Cissie explains that she wanted Millie to be happy one last time and decided to have a going away celebration. The other women have been unaware of the slave trade deal until this moment. The suspense continues as the women complain about the new master's reputation. Cissie describes the encounter she secretly observed when they closed the slave trade deal.

- Aunt Sue.      Ah knows now why ole Missie cry all day. Dat man give huh no peace: he say he will hab Millie gal else tu'n us out tuh starve. An' Missie too.
- Phoebe.        He'd do hit, kase he's cruel an' hard. He's lak a beast what's scented fresh, young meat. He's ole. . . he'll suck huh blood lak da swamp t'ing.
- Aunt Sue.      His jowls hang down lak empty 'tatah sacks, an' bacca juice falls drippin' f'om his mouth leavin' a trail o' slime what he has passed.

Cissie. Ah seed him lick his lips an' smile an' grin. Ole Missie beg him wait till cotton bust an' promise him da best bales in da lot. He say he wait no mo' . . . He wan' da gal. Ah seed his han's . . . dey touch huh golden breas'. She was so scared she couldn't run. An' den she scream . . . an' Missie tell huh go. Ah heard him laf an' spit upon da floah! <sup>5</sup>

This dialogue sequence describes the plantation owner who will use Millie as his concubine. He is described by Cissie and the chorus of women with grotesque imagery. Aunt Sue and Phoebe's dialogue is dramatically constructed in the Greek tragedy style. Aunt Sue makes a rhythmically composed statement like a strophe and Phoebe comments and reacts to it with an antistrophe. These narrative images enhance the anticipation of the ensuing tragedy.

The ominous scene is suspended by a musical interlude: Millie sings, "Oh! see dat sun. See how he run. Don' you ebbah let 'im catch you. Wid yo' wo'k undone." The song underscores the scene as Cissie secretly takes Fess's knife, puts it inside her dress, and rushes out the door. Cissie requests that the revelers have one last dance. The intensity and rhythm of the music illustrate her trance-like state. Outside the young slaves dance feverishly as the women inside watch from the window and comment on the offstage event. Cissie shouts to the revellers like a half-crazed woman, "One mo' dance! Now Jake, beat hit down! Make it a good one! Louder! Faster! All togedder now. Dance, Millie, dance! Everybody dance! Dat's hit! Dance! One mo' dance 'fore you go--home! Dance!" <sup>6</sup> Phoebe is compelled to send for Uncle Dave to intervene in Cissie's premeditated murder plan. Cissie and Millie retire to the bedroom. Their absence gives the remaining guests an opportunity to discuss the dilemma. Graham allows the chorus to comment on the crisis in a judicious manner. Rose and Aunt Sue represent the voice of

reason while Fess rationalizes Cissie's motivation and intention. He defends Cissie's motive in terms of their economic and social status--they are slaves.

Rose. She'll nebber do hit. She can't.

Aunt Sue. Ah see hit in huh face. She's gotta min' to.

Rose. You gotta stop huh, Fess, you gotta stop huh.

Fess. Ah donno . . . Ah donno what tuh do. Sometimes when Ah kills wild t'ings in da woods Ah feels bad. Ah has to tell mahself 'bout all us hungry. Ah hates tuh do hit . . . but . . . Millie . . . She ain't free.

Aunt Sue. But Cissie kain't . . .

Fess. Why not? Po' Millie's dancin' days am gone. Cissie know 'bout pain dat breaks an' keep on breakin' till dey ain't nothin' left . . . Ah donno. Right now, Ah'm all mixed up. <sup>7</sup>

The impending tragedy is accelerated when Cissie interrupts their discussion, tests the blade's sharpness, and exclaims, "She sing an' dance till she kain't dance no mo' . . . Till sleep pull hebbly at huh lids, an' she sink down wid belly full o' joy. Happy will be huh dreams--huh long, long dreams." <sup>8</sup> Cripple Jake has accepted Fess's rationale for Cissie's plot of murder. He supports his confession with biblical references, "Ah'm t'inkin' 'bout dis t'ing--Hebben is a high an' holy place. Dat gal ain't done no wrong; dyin' will bring huh joy. Da good book say "I am's in His Bosm--safe." While Cissie know dat livin's jes' a slow decay wid worms gnawin' lak nits into huh heart an' soul." <sup>9</sup>

Uncle Dave, the old plantation preacher, arrives and gives Cissie religious counseling. He urges her to leave Millie's fate in God's hands and falls to his knees in desperation. During the latter part of his prayer the sound of a galloping horse

approaching is heard. There is a knock at the door, a Union Army soldier enters, and Cissie slips into the bedroom. Day is breaking as the messenger proclaims their freedom. "Don't be scared of me. You don't have to be scared of nobody no more. You're free! This is the day! Abe Lincoln said it. You're free! No more slaves!"<sup>10</sup> Cissie appears at the bedroom door cradling the corpse of Millie in her arms. "You come too late--mah gal is dead! She [sic] how huh red blood falls hyear in da sun. Hit's warm an' pure . . . Come dip yo' han's in hit: she will not shrink away. Huh tears will nevah choke huh song nor will huh limbs grow hebby wid despair . . . Mah gal is dead!"<sup>11</sup> This scene of tragedy is juxtaposed by the chorus of singing voices outside swelling and forming a joyous obbligato to the spirited marching music of the band. Granny Lou stumbles into the room and reaffirms her prophecy. "Ah tole you. She don' hab tuh go! He! He! He!"<sup>12</sup> Cissie stands and gazes at the bright morning sunshine holding her daughter. The cock crows as Cissie falls to her knees under a single spray of mistletoe swaying in the morning breeze.

It's Morning, in Perkin's anthology, is divided into two scenes. The Union Army Soldier is the sole white character; Mrs. Tilden is referred to but never appears on stage. Cissie exposes the family crisis to Phoebe and Rose. The speech about Cissie's youth is delivered by Aunt Sue instead of Grannie Lou. At the end of scene one, Millie confronts Cissie about her dilemma. Cissie evades the question and makes preparations for a party in Millie's honor. When the curtain rises on scene two, it is one hour before dawn on January 1, 1863. The New Year's Eve celebration has taken place between the scenes. Cissie proceeds with the murder plan upon the arrival of the Union Army Soldier. In this version, the Soldier's speech is more poetic and he is described in more detail: a youth stands poised in the doorway like a radiant messenger of glad tidings.

Soldier.	Look! Look, the day has come! The day for which we fought. Stilled for a moment are the guns And from the fallow earth do rise
----------	---

The souls of those who fell  
 That they might see you go forth  
 Free to greet this Dawn!  
 . . . Free! Do you understand?  
 You're free! No longer slaves.  
 Loud sound the bugles and the drums.  
 The mighty armies march--  
 For this day sets you free! <sup>13</sup>

This version is an earlier draft of the play and lacks the suspenseful intensity created by allowing the action to unfold in one scene. The party and several songs which accentuate the ensuing tragic event are omitted. Perkins includes an author's note that explains the dialectical inconsistencies in the characters' dialogue. "The dialect . . . is not uniform. It is not intended to be. Many African languages express different meaning by changing vowel sounds. Also, the old type Negro preachers used a biblical mode of expression which cannot be expressed in dialect." <sup>14</sup> Graham's note on dialectical inconsistencies is debatable in terms of the manner in which Miller, Duncan, and Spence use Southern Negro dialect. The only inconsistency that appears throughout all these dramatists dialogical composition is their incongruous use of vowel sounds for an individual character. For example, a character's lines includes parts of speech written as, "Ah," "ob," and "gwine." Later in the scene these words are pronounced as, "T'se," "uv," and "goin'." The dialect is therefore not uniform because the playwrights have failed to consistently sustain an individual characters' dialogical traits.

Graham combines dialogue, music, song, dance, and chants to maintain the Aristotelian Greek tragedy structure. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory points out that the title is a biblical reference: "[it] alludes to the dawn or rise of a new day, just as Jesus arose from the dead after he died on the cross to save mankind." <sup>15</sup> *It's Mornin'* is filled with elements of the historical drama, genteel drama, and Black folk veoodoo drama. The themes of this tragedy include slavery, religion, pagan worship, and infanticide. Graham uses the dramatic structural elements of suspense, symbolism,

grotesquerie, and storytelling to explore some of the casualties of slavery and the Civil War.

The historical elements fall under the theme of slavery and include slave trade, rape, and concubinage. Cissie has been sexually abused in the past by white plantation owners. She is determined to save Millie from a master who will use her as sex chattel. Graham revises the traditional portrayal of the plantation mistress, who was seen as a mean, evil, jealous, and vengeful woman. She describes Mrs. Tilden as a caring, helpless, desperate, and pitiful woman, who is as much at the mercy of the white patriarchy as Millie. She shows compassion by affectionately placing her hand on Cissie's shoulder and promising to buy Millie back some day. Graham's tragedy can be compared to William Wells Brown's The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom (1858), an antislavery melodrama in five acts. Brown focuses on the tragic plight of a newlywed slave couple whose master wishes to separate them in order to use the young wife as his concubine. The abolitionist is used as the *deus ex machina* to aid the lovers in their escape. Unlike the Union Army Soldier, he arrives in time to rescue the victims from a tragic ending.

The folk/genteel dramatical elements are illustrated with the use of religious practices and a holiday feast. The slave revelers are in ecstasy, dancing and singing to the banjo music around the glowing bonfire in the yard. Jake and Sally stand under the sprays of mistletoe to kiss and express their love in spite of their social and economic circumstances. Historically speaking, slave jubilees were encouraged by the plantation owners and allowed to take place at Christmas and Easter. The young and old slaves seek religious counseling from Uncle Dave, who educates them by using biblical quotes and references. Uncle Dave pleads with Cissie to recognize her intent to murder as a sinful act. "We be forgettin' God! Didn't He bring Daniel out ob da lion's den an' de Hebrew chillun out da fiery furnace? Didn't He open up da Red Sea an' save Jonah from da belly ob da whale?"<sup>16</sup>

Graham also uses Black folk voodoo as a dramatic structural element.

Grannie Lou is described as a wrinkled-face, toothless, half-crazed, Voodoo woman with an old corn cob pipe in her mouth. She is the oldest slave on the plantation. Grannie Lou represents the bridge between religious gospel of the colonized Blacks of America and the pagan beliefs of their African ancestors. She is a powerful and honored figure in their community. Grannie Lou tells a story of a slave woman's antiheroism.

Grannie Lou. Ain't Ah nebbah tole you bout dat 'oman long time gone? Dey say she straight from jungles in da far off Africa . . . Dat war a 'oman--straight lak tree, an' tall, swift as a lion an' strong as any ox. Da sugah cane wen' down fo' huh big knife lak cotton stalks under da fierces' gale. No mahn could walk wid huh. . . da niggahs wo'k dem days--when Ah war young. . . Lissen--she hab t'ree sons, dey black an' tall lak she. An' one day come dat dey sole des sons down ribbah . . . dey bring good price. She say dey nebbah go. Da white folk laf, but niggahs dassent laf. . . dey see huh face. She don' say not'in mo', but go away. An' early in da mawnin' call she boys, an' when dey come, she tell 'em to stan' close an' watch da sun come up out ob da hill. Dey sort ob smile at huh an' look, an' den dat 'oman lift huh big cane knife, she cry out sompin' in a wild, strange voice, an' wid one sweep she cut off all dey heads--dey roll down at she feet. All t'ree ob dem! <sup>17</sup>

Grannie Lou is a prophetess. Her grotesque imagery of the triple infanticide is a foreboding omen. Cissie presumes the story of the vengeful woman is her only alternative. The distressed slave woman does not ask Grannie Lou to elaborate on her prophecy. Grannie Lou does not insinuate that Cissie should murder her daughter; she merely predicts Millie will not have to be sold in slave trade.

The character of Grannie Lou can be compared to other older generational African American women in Thelma Myrtle Duncan's Payment, Dr. John Frederick Matheus's 'Cruiter (1926), and Ridgley Torrence's Granny Maumee (1917). Granny Lou in Payment is an antebellum sharecropper who respects Black folk voodoo and is capable of interpreting the flora and fauna ill-fated omens. She is a religious woman and not a

practicing conjurer. Granny in *'Cruiter* is also depicted as a religious grandmother, who believes in voodooism and omens. She sacrifices her happiness and persuades her grandson to accept the recruiter's offer to become a government factory worker. Granny is convinced that if he does not move his family to a northern city, the landowner will either injure or murder him. Granny Maumee is an old Negro woman character created by a white dramatist. She is a great-great grandmother and the last surviving relative of five generations of Negroes in a Louisiana rural community. Granny Maumee is more obsessed with Voodooism and incantations than religious doctrine. She conjures up a black magic spell to murder her great-granddaughter's white lover. These "Granny" figures can be considered stock characters, but Graham chose to develop Grannie Lou within Aristotelian dramatic structure.

The Aristotelian dramatic structure helps to accentuate the suspense of the play. *It's Mornin'* begins with a ceremonial feast with music, song, and dance. The catastrophe has been set up before the beginning of the play. There are two separate choruses, the slave women who are commentators and counselors and the young revelers who create a divertissement. The chorus of old slave women (Rose, Aunt Sue, and Phoebe) are a jury of decision-makers that attempt to intrude upon the ensuing tragic event. They sit in silent vigil until Jake speaks for Cissie's rationale to murder her daughter. The young slaves are used as a chorus for Millie's Negro spirituals and slave songs. They sing refrains in a call and response manner. The youth chorus underscore and accentuate the developing action inside the cabin. The musical interludes are placed in between the scenes like stasima to suspend and divert the action. Cissie, Millie, Grannie Lou, Uncle Dave, and the Soldier are individual characters. Millie is the innocent victim whose fate depends on Cissie's choice of action. Cissie is the tragic heroine who reacts prematurely, emotionally consumed like Medea, and stabs her daughter. Grannie Lou is the soothsayer who traditionally presents the fatal curse prophecy; she also evokes the pagan gods of Africa with her storytelling.

Uncle Dave represents the opposing religious sect, professing one God as their savior. The sole object, Fess's sharp knife, is illuminated throughout the anticipatory episodes. The catastrophic event is performed offstage as the messenger delivers the proclamation from Abraham Lincoln. Graham cleverly employs the Greek tragedy dramatic structural elements to illustrate the atrocities of American slavery.

Track Thirteen is a radio comedy. It was published in Constance Welch's Yale Radio Plays: The Listener's Theatre (1940). In 1941, the Yale University School of Drama broadcast the play over WICC Radio. A production by the Karamu Theatre of Cleveland, Ohio was scheduled and canceled because of Pearl Harbor. The plot of Track Thirteen revolves around a Black folk superstition: it is considered bad luck for a train to leave on track thirteen. The one-act play in seven scenes is set on board the Overland Limited and in train stations from Chicago, Illinois through Cheyenne, Wyoming. The scheduled time of departure is postponed by an investigation led by Mr. Jones. He warns Wilson, a porter, that a bank robber may be traveling on the train. Wilson accidentally discovers Ace Kelly's stolen bag of bonds and plots to unmask the fugitive and receive the cash reward. The culprit is caught and Wilson is proclaimed a hero. Wilson discovers that the unlucky number thirteen can also be a sign of good fortune.

Graham's comedy explores the entanglements of a mystery aboard a train. The African American train employees and white passengers engage in a series of capers to expose the bank robber. Scene one opens on the La Salle Station, Chicago, Illinois. A voice over the loudspeaker announces the call for train number twenty-seven to leave at 10:25 on track thirteen. Several passengers are introduced as they inquire about traveling arrangements. Ned Wilson escorts the passengers to their reserved berths. Maxine threatens to sue the company if her dog is not allowed to travel in her compartment. Wilson is rescued from the contemptuous woman by an Englishman who

inquires about the proper stowage of his luggage. The porter spots Speck, a co-worker, and confides that he has discovered a bad omen.

- Porter.            You know, Speck, there's one thing worrying me  
                         . . . Do you know what track this train is standing on  
                         this minute?
- Speck.            Track 15, where it always stands for this trip.
- Porter.            Is that so? Well, cast your eyes over to that train leaving  
                         for Seattle at midnight.
- Speck.            That *is* on fifteen. Then what track is this?
- Porter.            I reckon you can count.
- Speck.            No! No! It can't be--Don't tell me--Ned, this must be 17!  
                         No, there's seventeen over there--Oh, Lawd have mussy!  
                         We're rollin' out on 13!
- Porter.            Something's bound to happen.
- Speck.            Sweet angels of light! <sup>18</sup>

Wilson and Speck's fear stems from the negative, taboo control-signs of Black folk voodoo discussed in the "Introduction." Newbell Niles Puckett observed that one of the Southern Negro folk beliefs was the unlucky number thirteen. Jones approaches Wilson and gives him the details of Ace Kelly's crime. Ace Kelly is an escaped convict from Joliet who has stolen five hundred thousand dollars in bonds, and whose capture will bring a five thousand dollar cash reward. As the last passenger boards the others begin to ring their bells persistently with inquiries and complaints. Wilson becomes harried and blames the state of chaos on superstition. "I knowed wasn't no good gonna roll offa Track Thirteen!" <sup>19</sup>

Scene two opens on the sleeping car at one o'clock in the morning. Elizabeth is startled by the sharp telegraphic beat of a hard steel object. The sound is repeated as she awakens her friend, Fran. The women eavesdrop on a conversation between two men

who are plotting to drop off their "stuff" at the Omaha, Nebraska station. The meeting is interrupted by the sound of a bell ringing in the distance. The train rumbles along as a porter sits and shines the passengers' shoes. He analyzes a particular pair and determines that they are expensive and old yet hardly worn. The porter surmises that the shoes must belong to a man who has been in the hospital or in prison. At that moment, Wilson discovers that the "Drunk Man" is missing and is now suspected to be the alleged bank robber.

Scene three begins and the Announcer signals the elapse of time. The train is passing through Iowa in the early morning. Wilson finds the Drunk Man waking up in a stuffy hole instead of his berth. The porter dismisses him as a suspect. Breakfast service is announced as Elizabeth and Fran spot three gentlemen in the corridor. Billy Jennings and Allen McArthur introduce themselves to Dr. Frederick Lock and decide to have breakfast together. Elizabeth and Fran presume that the men were the mysterious voices they heard last night and follow them into the dining car. The train stops at the Omaha, Nebraska station. G-men come aboard and inform Conductor Jamison and Wilson that everyone is under suspicion. The federal agents announce that they intend to search the train when it pulls out of the station. During the train stop, the Young Mother asks Wilson to store a rubber baby bag filled with wet diapers in another space. Wilson takes the bag into the boiler room, unzips it, and discovers the stolen bank bonds. Ace Kelly cleverly hid the loot in the bag when the seat was unoccupied. Wilson plants the roll of bonds in a dirty coat and stuffs them in the boiler room and asks Speck to assist him in a plan to disclose the robber.

Speck.            Jus' gather up them pieces of paper and fade offa my horizon.

Porter.           But that woman isn't the thief. She put diapers in this bag. Somebody hid the bonds here. Speck, we could capture him!

- Speck.           What you mean "we"? Now, listen! Much as Ah needs money Ah ain't never makin' no date with the undertaker to get it.
- Porter.           Come on, be a sport . . . We're in the middle of the prairie, going sixty miles an hour. Ace Kelly ain't going to leave this train without his bonds if he can help it!
- Speck.           Oh, Lawd! This is the fus time Ah ever invited Mister Trouble to step right up an' kiss me! <sup>20</sup>

In scene four, the G-Men are seen detaining passengers from going into the observation car. Conductor Jamison calls for calm and cooperation and announces that there is a dangerous criminal on board the train. At the beginning of scene five, the Announcer updates the audience on the investigation. There was no evidence found in Car 23, jovial fellowship has diminished, and dinner has ended. The train stops at the Cheyenne, Wyoming station. Wilson declares that his plan will be put into action that evening. Conductor Jamison calls, "All aboard" as the train rumbles down the track. In scene six, the coach has been transformed into a corridor of curtained bedrooms. Wilson moves up and down the aisle making sure all the passengers are secured in their berth. He stops in front of the compartment where the mother and baby are sleeping and returns the diaper bag. Wilson apologizes for being detained, places the bag on her shelf, and excuses himself. The train rumbles on as the narrator announces the final scene. The silence of the thundering Overland Limited is interrupted by the loud scream of a woman. Wilson catches a man stealing the diaper bag from the berth. Dr. Frederick Lock is unmasked as Ace Kelly.

Track Thirteen was originally written as a radio comedy. Graham integrates both Black and white characters into a comedy of mystery and suspense. She weaves vignettes, separating them by the Announcer's narration and sounds aboard the train. There are clues to the mystery plot from the beginning of the play. The Newsboy peddles his papers shouting, "Extry! Extry! Read all about daring robbery--Ace Kelly slips through net!" <sup>21</sup> Fran discourages Elizabeth from buying a paper but Ace Kelly,

disguised in a toupee, inquires about the headlines. Elizabeth eavesdrops on the man's conversation and discovers he is a physician. Shortly afterward, Maxine becomes obsessed with Mr. Terry, the Englishman who sounds like Leslie Howard, the movie star. Elizabeth and Maxine carry out their infatuated escapades throughout the play.

The physical humor and the stage reality are also integral components of the radio comedy. Graham uses caricature-like dialogue to audibly illustrate Maxine's personality. For example, Maxine threatens to sue the transit company if her dog, Mimi, cannot ride in the same compartment. The irate woman's dialogue is followed by the sound of Mimi's nasty, yelping bark. Maxine is also visualized by personal descriptions of herself as a weak woman and the wife of a man, who makes uncomfortable train reservations for his spouse. In scene three, Maxine finally receives a proper introduction to Mr. Terry. He cordially invites her to lunch which allows Maxine to flirt. "I know you think we American women quite superficial. English women have *brains*, but we----." <sup>22</sup>

The Drunk Man also creates physical humor as he stumbles aboard, sleeps in compartments other than his berth, and continues to nurse a hangover throughout the trip. The alias Dr. Lock cleverly makes friends with Jennings and McArthur to alleviate suspicion. Elizabeth and Fran presume all three men are criminals as they eavesdrop and entangle themselves in scenes that create pandemonium amongst the passengers.

The stage reality of the Overland Limited en route to San Francisco, California is created by the sounds of whistle blows, hissing steam, bells ringing, train rumbling and picking up speed, doors slamming, footsteps, muffled voices, snoring passengers, and a baby crying. The characters are types, for example, Conductor, Redcap, Shoeshine Man, Englishman, Drunk Man, G-Man, and Newsboy. Speck and Wilson are reminiscent of the stereotyped "Steppin-Fetchit" superstitious porters. Graham clearly brings dignity to Wilson's portrayal of a train porter. He is respected by Conductor Jamison and is not imposed upon by the other passengers. When the Mother requests his assistance with the rubber baby bag she is polite and not condescending. Wilson's dialogue is written

without unnecessary indecipherable dialect. Track Thirteen is not a play about Black folk superstition as stated by Bernard L. Peterson in Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers (p. 65). It is a comedy with an element of mystery and superstition in which an African American porter becomes a hero.

I Gotta Home was published in Perkins's Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950. It was first produced by the Gilpin Players in 1940 in Cleveland, Ohio. On February 17, it was performed as a benefit for the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center at Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. There was a third performance of the play on February 21, at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. On March 23, the Goodyear Theatre in Akron, Ohio produced the comedy as a benefit for the Association for Colored Community Work. I Gotta Home is a three-act comedy in five scenes spanning a period of six weeks. It is set in the parlor of an African American church parsonage of a large Midwestern town in 1938. The Cobb family needs a miracle: Reverend Elijah J. Cobb's position is threatened by the decrease in weekly church membership donations. The family's reputation in the community is further jeopardized by the arrival of Elijah's sister, Mattie Cobb. She was a maid for a white Hollywood actress who died recently, and the newspaper reporters have exaggerated her story. It is rumored that she has become a rich heiress. Mattie is in fact penniless and schemes with one of her nephews, E. J., to win an Irish Sweepstakes cash prize. The Cobbs win fifty thousand dollars and their faith, happiness, and esteem are restored.

The curtain rises on act one, scene one: it is Saturday morning at 10 o'clock. The parlor of the parsonage shows physical evidence of past lives. The room is filled with an eclectic decor of donated furniture. The initial tableau is a Saturday morning portrait of a typical family, who happen to be African American. Mrs. Cobb enters dressed and ready to clean with a dust cloth tied around her head and carrying a broom, brushes, and other cleaning supplies. Mirah, the oldest daughter, is sitting at the dining room table. E. J., the oldest son, is at a desk copying information from a slip of paper

into a notebook. Lilacs, the youngest child, is practicing at the piano, balancing her weight upon a wobbly stool. The quarterly church conference has made the children irate and restless. E. J. has given up his bedroom to accommodate the Presiding Elder and Lilacs believes the dinner portions have been smaller. Mirah is suspicious of her brother as he hides a ticket in his pocket and finishes a cryptic conversation on the phone. She fills him in on the family crisis and predicts disaster. "And, E. J. you know what that means. Moving again! Moving--Moving! I don't want to move now. After painting all that old furniture in my room--painting the woodwork--trying so hard to make it look like a room in a real home!"<sup>23</sup>

The Norman Rockwell family picture fades away as a loud crash is heard offstage. The sound of shattering glass in the dining room is followed by a sudden hush. Toussant, the second son, flings open the hall door, pulling his younger brother, Ben-Hur, into the room. Ben-Hur stands in the doorway with a bat in his hand and listens to Mrs. Cobb scold him. She is displeased and believes this incident will provide another reason for the Council to fire her husband. Over the years, Mrs. Cobb has become intolerant of the life of a traveling preacher's wife. She denounces their father, saying, "Even if I did marry a poor preacher my children are going some place in life. I thought he was going to be something--a Bishop, maybe, or something--but he just goes preaching . . . dragging his family from pillar to post."<sup>24</sup>

The Cobb family are divided in their perception of the world. Mrs. Cobb and E. J. are both realists. E. J. is frustrated with his father, the dreamer and complains, "I don't go around talking about how ravens fed the patriarchal namesake in the wilderness. I been hearing that ever since I was born. Say, have you ever seen any ravens lighting around this house? I saw one once and of all the evil, vicious, wicked-looking creatures--,"<sup>25</sup> E. J. is well-read and demonstrates his literary and biblical knowledge humorously when he concludes, "Pop's just got his birds

mixed: T'ain't Elijah's raven that sits over our doorway--it's Edgar Allan Poe's--and all he does is croaks!"<sup>26</sup> Lilacs warns the family that the church committee is approaching the house. The door bell rings and the Cobbs rush about the parlor trying to conceal the broken window.

Mrs. Cobb wants to create a wholesome family picture for her guests. She instructs her children on how to appear when the committee enters: Lilacs returns to her piano practice; Mirah rushes into the study to retrieve the choir drape; and Toussant answers the door. Sister Saboy, Sister White, and Deacon Perkins are escorted into the parlor. Mrs. Cobb makes a grand entrance, carrying the drape and a sewing basket. She devises several excuses to prevent the guests from exploring the dining room and kitchen areas and discovering the broken window. Sister Saboy, an inquisitive, meddling church stewardess, coerces Mrs. Cobb to talk about her children's career plans.

Sister Saboy. How is E. J.? I haven't laid eyes on him lately.

Mrs. Cobb. He's fine, thank you, but he's awful busy.

Sister Saboy. Is he workin'?

Mrs. Cobb. Well, he doesn't have a job--but, he is working.  
He's reading law.

Perkins. Readin' law?

Mrs. Cobb. Of course, we couldn't afford to send him to the university,  
but Clark and Simon's said they'd take him in their office  
this fall. He's studying hard to make a good showing.

Sister Saboy. Sounds powerful highferlutin' to me!

Mrs. Cobb. My brother was a lawyer. He went out to Liberia and--

Perkins. Ain't that there where that missionary was from spoke las' week?

Sister Saboy. Yes--she said it was a awful country. Folks don' wear no clothes attal! <sup>27</sup>

Dr. Calab Green, the Presiding Elder, descends the stairs and interrupts the interrogation. The Council discuss their concern about the Reverend's resistance to collecting quarterly church dues in arrears. E. J. has a plan: he wants to slip an anonymous church envelope with fifty dollars enclosed into the collection plate. Special delivery arrives with a copy of the Chicago Watchtower, a weekly newspaper. Sister Saboy disapproves of the Watchtower's editorial policies. Mrs. Cobb defends her husband and points out the advantages of the periodical. "It does carry lots of national news. Reverend wants the children to read about what Negroes all over the country are doing." <sup>28</sup> Mirah innocently exposes a family secret as she peruses the headlines and reads aloud, "Colored Maid Left Fortune by Movie Star." Reverend Cobb enters, opens the mail, and announces that his sister who he has not seen in twenty years plans to visit them. Mirah, out of curiosity, asks her father to divulge his sister's name. The colored maid and the mysterious long-lost sister are one and the same. The curtain falls on the shocked family and parishioners standing paralyzed with open-mouthed, stunned expressions.

When act one, scene two begins it is one week later, Saturday, mid-afternoon. The appearance of the room has improved with elegant doilies on the back of chairs and new cretonne drapes at the windows. Mrs. Cobb loses control over her children and demonstrates her natural talent to direct tumultuous scenes. She instructs Mirah on the placement of the new rug; directs the white movers with the sofa; coaches Toussant on his speech about Paul Laurence Dunbar; scolds Ben-Hur for dropping bread crumbs on the floor; and reprimands Lilaes for wearing her good dress. The chaotic scene of

sibling rivalry ceases when Lilacs announces the arrival of visitors. Mrs. Swan and Miss Hall enter from the hall. They have called upon Mrs. Cobb to inquire about the Hollywood heiress. Mrs. Swan is the wife of an African American physician who puts on airs to impress and degrade everyone below her economic status.

Mrs. Swan. Well, how they have fixed up this room is elegant--positively elegant!

Miss Hall. It isn't every day a Hollywood heiress visits our parsonage.

Mrs. Swan. Maybe. But, it behooves us people what represents the real Society of this town to remember that she was only a maid. Naturally the money makes a difference, but there is such a thing as po-sition!

Miss Hall. I don't see exactly how we can--

Mrs. Swan. You wouldn't. You're not the wife of one of the profession. A school teacher has to come in contact with all the--er--classes. There are people what recognizes distinctions. The club was asking me did I think we oughtta entertain her. And I says we gotta give the matter careful de-liber-ation.

Miss Hall. But--

Mrs. Swan. Miss Hall, the Daughters of the New Revolution stands for something--it's gotta long line of standin' fur something--an' we ain't picking up some presuming nu-vo-rich and presenting 'em on our plane. We gotta keep our culture pure. <sup>29</sup>

Reverend Cobb returns with a visitor, Brother Pugh, who is a pastor of a parsonage in a neighboring town. They are left alone to discuss Brother Pugh's financial crisis. He is an older counterpart of Reverend Cobb and fears his position will

be passed on to a younger, well-educated minister. Reverend Cobb attempts to boost his colleague's confidence with the biblical story of Elijah's ravens.

Reverend. Brother Pugh I'm ashamed of you . . . A God-fearing man, if ever there was one. You led our people when they didn't have books and fine churches: you been a true soldier and here you are doubting God's love. Why, you're like the prophet Elijah. Remember that time he ran away--discouraged--afraid, even. He thought the Devil himself was running everything. But, our Lord didn't get angry at his prophet--not Him. He knowed Elijah was just a little beat and tired. He just showed him. Remember? God sent his ravens to feed Elijah! <sup>30</sup>

Mirah and E. J. appear in the dining room door and eavesdrop on their conversation.

Reverend Cobb confides in Brother Pugh, proclaiming his faith has been revived.

An anonymous donation of fifty dollars was found in the collection plate.

Reverend Cobb offers Brother Pugh his broadcloth coat as a gift of good will.

The siblings stand in amazement at their father's generous donation. E. J. confirms his father's visionary madness. "It's the ravens again. Hey, sis, do we look like ravens?" <sup>31</sup>

The doorbell rings and the anticipated arrival of Mattie Cobb brings the family and parishioners into the parlor. Lilacs escorts a policeman into the room. The policeman reports that Mattie is being detained at the precinct.

The curtain rises on act two, scene one, two hours later. Mattie has been in a car accident. The white driver in the other car was injured. Mattie was not recognized as a celebrity. Mrs. Cobb acknowledges the racist attitude of the town's police department as Mattie makes a dramatic entrance. She tears a camera away from a reporter's hands and hurls the man to the floor. The reunion is interrupted by the dinner call and a surprise visit from Leo, the numbers agent. E. J. promises to pay off his fifty dollar debt as soon as he receives a share of his rich aunt's inheritance. In the dining room, Mattie expresses her appreciation for their hospitality and acknowledges past accommodations in which

she was discriminated against. "I found the hotels all right--but, a lady of my complexion does run into complications." <sup>32</sup> Mattie is compelled to make a true confession.

Mattie. Sadie was a grand gal, the best in the world, but she never did know nothing about money. The wonderful times we've had matchin' pennies to see who'd get the last one--sleepin' in the theatre dressin' rooms cause the hotel was so cold--or maybe there weren't no hotel! When she got in the movies and begin to make money so much was hanging over from the lean years--we couldn't catch up. And she didn't have no sense--bought everything anybody offered her! . . . Never could get through her head she was a star. . . Her long illness stripped all of us. <sup>33</sup>

Brother Perkins ushers in another crisis: he accuses Ben-Hur of stealing the collection plates. Ben-Hur defends himself and explains that he found them outside in the back lobby. He polished and resold the collection plates to help support his family. Brother Perkins is unconvinced and threatens to have Reverend Cobb fired. Mattie makes an avowal to save the Cobbs from disgrace. The curtain descends on Mattie speaking to her employer in the afterlife.

Mattie. You oughtta been here tonight, Sadie. This was your joke! Rich aunt! It's good! But, now you gotta help me out. Look, Sadie, we've been through so much together and you always found a way. There must be one now. Did you hear him? . . . He sold the collection plates! Ain't it funny? Did you ever hear anything funnier? Well, why don't you laugh? Oh, Sadie! <sup>34</sup>

Act two, scene one opens on the following morning. Mrs. Cobb is polishing two family heirloom silver trays that will be used as collection plates at the service. Ben-Hur, dressed for Sunday school, is sprawled in a chair reading the funny papers. Toussant is reading the news section as Mirah looks over his shoulder. E. J. receives a phone call from Leo, the numbers agent, and begs to be rehired to pay off his debt.

The typical American family Sunday morning tableau fades as the children rush out the door. The choir is heard offstage singing "Bringing in the sheaves." Mrs. Cobb confronts her husband as Mattie and E. J. eavesdrop on their marital discussion.

Mrs. Cobb. I'm not going to church. . . You've seen this picture. . . (reads) Sadie Kessler's Maid Socks Reporter! Preachers Sister Left Fortune! . . . They'll laugh at it because they think she's got a fortune! . . . But, it's this lie about her money . . . That's what will ruin us.

Reverend. Now, ma. I told you the money couldn't make any difference. It would have been *her* money, anyhow, and--

Mrs. Cobb. For twenty years I've listened to you tellin' me why other people should have so much and we have so little--for twenty years I been seein' other men pass you one by one--While you talk, talk, talk. These other men think about their families . . . their wives can have something--their children can be somebody. You know what all this means to us. When the Bishop hears about these disgraceful--

Reverend. My dear, my dear. Don't worry. The Lord will--

Mrs. Cobb. Stop it! I can't stand it! I've heard it too many times . . . He's provided all right. He provided you with a series of parsonages to live in and five children you can't even educate!<sup>35</sup>

Reverend Cobb rushes off to services and Mrs. Cobb runs into the kitchen. The doorbell rings and E. J. escorts Jasper Jones and Peewee into the room. They are two unexpected visitors from Harlem. Mattie makes a deal with the gentlemen. She offers them two dollars and fifty cents plus her wrecked car for one of their three Irish Sweepstakes tickets. Mattie has a hunch that the ticket will pay off. She describes her dream last night in which the numbers four and seven were floating on silver water. The last digits on the ticket correspond to her vision. Jasper opens a cablegram and explains that the ticket holder will receive seven hundred dollars whether or not the horse

wins the race. E. J. introduces the next hurdle: he needs a plan to get his father to accept the money. Jasper will pretend to be an investment consultant who has discovered that a worthless stock Reverend Cobb bought years ago is now valuable. E. J. reconsiders his devious plan when he reads the cable.

E. J.           It's called--Raven!

Mattie.       It's another sign--black letters they was on the  
water--*black*--and now--Raven.

E. J.           No--no--you don't understand. Pop--he's always talkin'  
'bout them. His name--Elijah--Elijah and the ravens!<sup>36</sup>

Mrs. Cobb interrupts their meeting and announces that she is going to church. She has never missed her husband's sermon in twenty years. Mattie is so excited that she insists that they all attend the service. "We're all going to church and hear Eli preach about the ravens!"<sup>37</sup>

The curtain rises on act three, Wednesday afternoon, three days later. The family sits in anticipation of the four o'clock broadcast. Offstage, a hymn is being sung by the congregation at prayer service. The radio buzzes and clicks several times as the sports announcer is heard delivering the race commentary. The suspense accelerates as Number 4, the "Raven" runs neck and neck with two horses and finishes in third place. Toussant faints from the excitement as Reverend Cobb appears in the hall doorway. Jasper pretends to be the investment consultant and the reverend's confidence is restored. The choir can be heard through the open window starting a new song.

I gotta home in that rock  
    Ain't that good news  
I gotta home in that rock  
    Ain't that good news  
Let the billows o'er me roll.  
I can safely hide my soul.  
I gotta home in that rock  
    Ain't that good news.<sup>38</sup>

I Gotta Home is a comedy that explores the themes of family, love, honor, religion, education, and race pride. Graham uses historical, folk, and Black folk voodoo elements to illustrate the foibles, crises, and aspirations of an African American family. The Cobbs' main crisis is the dismal future of the Reverend's position at the church. The financial success of the parish depends on membership dues and donations. Mrs. Cobb has not sheltered her children from their economical status. E. J. has grown tired of their financial constraints and shouts, "It's all you talk about! If money's so important why don't you let me go out and get a real job instead of all that dam study. I can make money!"<sup>39</sup> E. J. becomes an illegal numbers agent to prove that he can help provide for his family. Ben-Hur also wants to demonstrate that he can be a responsible businessman. He decides to open up a junk shop in their basement. The youngster innocently resells the collection plates which further familial complications. Ben-Hur defends himself and confesses, "Everybody else is doin' something--I wanted you all to know I'm a good businessman. Can't you understand?"<sup>40</sup>

In the midst of their financial chaos, love and honor struggle to survive. Mrs. Cobb's intolerance and frustration with her husband leads to an explosive marital confrontation. Reverend Cobb may not have been an exceedingly praiseworthy role model but he demonstrates other attributes. He unselfishly gives his only coat to Brother Pugh, a genuine example of brotherly love. Mirah is a teenager and has become infatuated with the idea of love. Richard "Butch" Johnson, an awkward, stocky, young fellow tries to court the preacher's daughter. In act three, Butch finally wins her trust and love. Butch confesses that he is hurt and confused by Mirah's affections. Mirah explains that she has been more concerned with the family's financial crisis. Butch announces that he has been pledged into a fraternity and wants Mirah to wear his pin. Dr. Calab Green's devious scheme to win Mattie's attention creates a humorous depiction of romance. He wants to marry Mattie because she is supposedly rich.

Mattie explains that she is not an heiress and Calab reneges immediately. She seizes the opportunity to expose his insincere proposal and lunges towards him. Calab removes himself from a romantic embrace and cowardly rushes out of the door.

Religion, its attributes and hypocrisies frame this comedy. Reverend Cobb's religious philosophy is based on his obsession with the biblical story of Elijah's ravens. The scripture is found in the King James version of the Bible. The story is from the Old Testament, First Book of Kings, chapters seventeen through nineteen. Elijah was known as a gentle prophet who warned King Ahab of Israel and his people to repent or be punished for their audacious crimes. King Ahab threatened Elijah's life and the Lord commanded him to seek refuge by the brook of Cherith in Jordan. God provided nourishment for Elijah by sending the ravens to feed him bread and meat.

E. J. challenges his father's belief and teases him by using humorous yet blasphemous analogies. The parishoners are depicted as hypocrites with misconstrued priorities.

Sister Saboy is worried about appearances. She nearly faints when the patrol wagon drives up in front of the parsonage. Sister Saboy watches Mrs. Cobb and Sister White hem the starched white choir drape and brazenly takes full credit for its creation.

She protests and complains about a female choir member's lack of decorum.

"Deed, yes. Ah jus' couldn't stand it no longer, skinny Sally Brown hitchin' huh skirts higher an' higher. It was gettin' disgraceful!"<sup>41</sup> Mattie is not a religious woman but she wants to help her brother's family. She calls upon her guardian angel, Saddy Kessler, to help her devise a plan to raise money. Mattie appears to be less hypocritical than her religious counterparts.

Mrs. Cobb has raised her children to be both proud of their heritage and educationally ambitious. She boasts to the Council of her brother, the lawyer, practicing in Liberia. Mrs. Cobb insists that her children read about African Americans nationwide in the Chicago Watchtower. She does not criticize or discourage Lilacs' dream of

becoming a dancer, or Toussant's ambition to follow in the footsteps of the famous actor, Paul Robeson. Toussant is aware that he was named after the eighteenth-century Haitian liberator, François Dominique Toussaint-L'Ouverture. He recites poetry and is being coached by Mirah and his mother on a speech about Paul Laurence Dunbar. The children are impressed by their aunt's life in the theatre. Mattie eloped and ran off with an actor and became a chorus dancer in Williams and Walker's theatrical company. I Gotta Home depicts a comic view of an African American religious family. The plot development is propelled by the suspense and numerous crises that develop: Reverend Cobb's impending loss of position; Mattie's arrival and questionable inheritance; and Ben-Hur's theft. The Cobbs persevere despite the ensuing controversy and succeed against all odds.

Graham's dramatic picture of the strong, righteous, and loyal female who is married to a weak and seemingly helpless, impoverished husband is reminiscent of characters from plays written by other African American dramatists. Willis Richardson's The Chip Woman's Fortune (1923) depicts Silas, a store porter, who loses his job in a small Southern community. Silas tries to borrow the money from an old woman, Aunt Nancy, who is nursing his wife back to health. Liz protests and reminds Silas of their past hardships and how thankful they should be for Aunt Nancy's health care. Unlike Mrs. Cobb, Liz attempts to reeducate Silas rather than condemn him.

In George A. Towns' The Sharecropper (1932), Victor Turner, a Black tenant farmer, refuses to be bullied by a white landowner. Towns provides longer speeches for Liza, Victor's wife, to reprimand her husband. Liza forces Victor to observe that the landowner abuses them physically, as they work long hours like mules, and cheats them out of their share of monetary profits. She accuses Victor of having more faith in the landowner and insists that they move away from the community. In Theodore Ward's Big White Fog (1938), which was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Victor Mason is a Southern migrant, Garveyite leader. Victor is disillusioned by the lack of opportunities for a Black family in Chicago. Ella, his wife, and Martha Brooks, her mother, demand

his respect and condemn Victor's choices in politics, education, and economical opportunities. Eulalie Spence's Fool's Errand and Her illustrate strong women who struggle within their marriages to weaker husbands. In Fool's Errand, Mary Lee is not home long enough for a lengthy speech but openly informs her family and the church council that she is married to a lazy, alcoholic, and abusive fool. In Her, Martha Alexander single-handedly supports the family on one income. Pete is a cripple, which exonerates him from participating in a lengthy marital confrontation. These four dramatists depict women as strong wives and mothers who forewarn their spouses but inevitably watch them fail as providers.

Graham's studies in playwriting at Yale and African music research at Oberlin College were creatively profitable. She modeled her plays after the classical Aristotelian dramatic structure of the Greek tragedy and the traditional three-act structure of the western drama. Graham's characters struggle to survive and are rewarded with emancipation, heroism, and restoration. There were several African American playwrights who preceded Graham that wrote in the three-act form, for example, Angelina Weld Grimké, Rachel (1916), Garland Anderson, Appearances (1925), and Theodore Ward, Big White Fog (1938). Graham's experience with the Federal Theatre Project's Chicago unit was also beneficial. She was the most professionally produced of the four dramatists during the Harlem Renaissance. Yet, in context, Graham falls into third place behind Miller and Spence in terms of publication and historical significance. Graham is placed at the end of the study in chronological order and because she illustrated the African American within the confines of the more desirable and commercially accepted dramatic structure. She wrote plays that entertain, educate, and inspire the African American theatre audience to respect and honor their heritage from the Civil War through the early years of the 1900s.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Biographical information on Shirley Graham Du Bois is based upon the following sources: Peterson, Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers, 64, 65; Peterson, "Shirley Graham Du Bois: Composer and Playwright," Crisis (May 1977): 177-179; Kathy A. Perkins, "The Unknown Career of Shirley Graham," Freedomways (First Quarter, 1985): 6-17.

<sup>2</sup> Rena Fraden, Blueprints for a Black Federal Theatre, 1935-1939 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 121

<sup>3</sup> Shirley Graham, It's Mornin', in Wines in the Wilderness: Plays by African American Women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present, Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, ed. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 86.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Shirley Graham, It's Morning, in Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950, Kathy A. Perkins, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 222.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>15</sup> Brown-Guillory, 83

- 16 Graham. Brown-Guillory. 93.
- 17 Ibid.. 90.
- 18 Shirley Graham. Track Thirteen (Hatch-Billops Collection. New York. NY). 8.
- 19 Ibid.. 12.
- 20 Ibid.. 23.
- 21 Ibid.. 2.
- 22 Ibid.. 20.
- 23 Shirley Graham. I Gotta Home. in Perkins. 228.
- 24 Ibid.. 231.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid.. 233.
- 28 Ibid.. 236.
- 29 Ibid.. 243. 244.
- 30 Ibid.. 246.
- 31 Ibid.. 247.
- 32 Ibid.. 257.
- 33 Ibid.. 258.
- 34 Ibid.. 261.
- 35 Ibid.. 264.
- 36 Ibid.. 270. 271.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 233.

**CHAPTER VII**  
**COMMON GROUND: A VIEW**  
**OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY**  
**THROUGH DRAMA**

May Miller Sullivan, Thelma Myrtle Duncan, Eulalie Spence, and Shirley Graham Du Bois chose to depict the African American in the dramatic form. These four dramatists wrote historical, genteel, and Black folk voodoo plays to educate and entertain their audiences. They dramatized the lives and concerns of Black people to liberate the African American audience from their oppressive past. Many national leaders, among them, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., believed that a movement needed both the radical and conservative view to succeed in an integrated society. Willis Richardson, Alain Locke, Carter G. Woodson, and Montgomery T. Gregory published these women's plays that presented the Black in a conservative and genteel manner. Some of the works by these dramatists were not published because they did not adhere to restrictive guidelines. The plays illustrate that not all African American heroes are men and some of the degenerates and self-oppressive stereotypes are female. These historical and fictional characters were portrayed as abolitionists, college graduates, vixens, and Voodoo priestesses. Miller, Duncan, Spence, and Graham used the three mainstays, home, church, and school, to frame early African American life between 1910 and 1950 within the one-act dramatic structure.

Five of the plays discussed are historical dramas: Miller's Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Christophe's Daughters, Samory, and Graham's It's Mornin'. These plays depict the political, economical, and social concerns of the African American from slavery through Reconstruction, Harlem Renaissance, Great Depression, and the World Wars. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and It's Mornin' describe the atrocities of slavery. In the essay, "Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave," Erlene Stetson notes the tendency of male-dominated scholarship: "Scholars treat the slavery experience as a Black male phenomenon, regarding Black women as biological functionaries whose destinies are rendered ephemeral--to lay their eggs and die." <sup>1</sup> Bettina Aptheker reports that Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth appealed to the public opinion for mass organization and developed oratorical skills. They were abolitionists and activists in the Women's Suffrage Movement. In 1850, Frederick Douglass observed the utter and bitter subjugation of Black women in slave breeding which "[was] relied upon by Virginia as one of her chief sources of wealth." <sup>2</sup> Stetson also acknowledges the reality of all slaves. "By 1705, the General Assembly of Virginia was no longer oblique. It stated that "All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves shall be held, taken, and adjudged to be real estate, in the same category as livestock and household furniture, wagons, and goods." <sup>3</sup> Graham's description of slave trade in It's Mornin' is accurate: Black women committed suicide and infanticide rather than see themselves or their children remanded to slavery. Haitian and Black African leaders are dramatized as well in Miller's Samory and Christophe's Daughter's. These plays describe the struggle of Samory, the African Sudanese warrior, and the demise of the tyrannical Haitian leader, King Henri Christophe. These historical dramas recall Black heroes and heroines and record their courageous plights as they struggled for civil rights for all humankind.

Thelma Myrtle Duncan's Payment and Miller's Stragglers in the Dust represent different genres, but also include historical elements. The exploitation of the emancipated African American as sharecropper is exposed in Payment. The discrimination of the African American soldier is sketched in Stragglers in the Dust. Miller discloses the inhumanity and racism of American military forces who deny a Black veteran his rightful honor as a war hero.

The genteel dramas that have been discussed illustrate the classism, education, employment, and folkisms of the African American. The four dramatists have written ten plays which fully represent this genre: Miller's Riding the Goat, Scratches; Duncan's Sacrifice, Driftin'; Spence's The Hunch, Episode, Hot Stuff, The Starter, Fool's Errand; and Graham's I Gotta Home. These works depict men and women who fight for civil rights and prosperity by pursuing a formal education. Miller described the foibles of a draymen community in Riding the Goat and the truisms of Black ghetto life pool hustlers in Scratches. Riding the Goat is a fictional depiction of South Baltimore, middle-class African American citizens who contend with religion, education, and community affairs. The lower-class foibles and rituals are examined in Scratches. Jeff Broadus is coerced into playing a game of pool which becomes a duel for money and freedom. In Duncan's Sacrifice, Mrs. Payton insists that Billy get a high school diploma to help support his family. Driftin' depicts dysfunctional lower-class Blacks who struggle to survive in the midst of alcoholism, materialism, gambling, and physical abuse. Spence created immoral characters of Harlem and explored the themes of marriage, bigamy, infidelity, and gambling in The Hunch, Episode, and Hot Stuff. In The Starter, she also depicted simple and humorous common folk characters who take pride in their community despite their economic status. In Fool's Errand, Spence included the themes of hearsay, religion, premarital sex, generational controversy, and alcoholism. In Graham's I Gotta Home, Mrs. Cobb expects all five of her children to receive formal

schooling and become financially independent. The characters in I Gotta Home represent the entire caste system and employment opportunities available to African Americans: domestics, religious leaders (preachers, bishops, and missionaries), athletes, musicians, actors, teachers, doctors, attorneys, and investment consultants.

Education and personal income shaped the social status of the family structure. In Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925, Cynthia Neverdon-Morton reports that there were regional differences in class and interests which separated groups of Black Americans.

Adella Hunt Logan of Tuskegee Institute believed that "the needs of country folk are about the same as those of town and city residents. Means of social uplift do not differ greatly . . . . In home, in church, in school and social service, the country woman is in her handicapped way doing what she can. Probably not all she can, but she is a potent helper." In keeping themselves morally "straight and strong," rural women were seen as aiding the general improvement of Afro-Americans in rural areas. <sup>4</sup>

Domestic work was usually the sole resource of employment for uneducated African American women. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Domestic Science Movement elevated their careers but generally these women were resigned to domestic servitude which in retrospect was a continuation of slavery. Nan, in Miller's Stragglers in the Dust, is a charwoman for the National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Duncan created characters who were domestics also: Granny Lou in Payment is a laundress and cook; Mrs. Payton in Sacrifice is a laundress; and Mandy in Black Magic is a housekeeper who has to live away from home during assignments. In Spence's Fool's Errand and Her, the female characters support their families on one income. Mary Lee in Fool's Errand travels to neighboring towns to work as a domestic while her drunken husband sits at home. Martha Alexander in Her uses the livingroom area as a laundry room. Martha's spouse is a cripple, confined to a wheelchair and unable to work. Mattie Cobb in Graham's I Gotta Home is a theatrical maid, out of work because her employer passed away.

These characters' religious beliefs are also observed: for example,

Spence illustrates the biased beliefs of Southern African American rural dwellers in Fool's Errand. Cassie Lee and the church council are portrayed as religious hypocrites. Graham takes a humorous look at the African American church in I Gotta Home. The parsonage in a Midwestern city is the setting used to explore the Cobb's crises and dreams. The church council intervenes and nearly destroys their home and position within the community. All of these characters are reminiscent of the genre of religious comedy. There were other African American playwrights between 1910 and 1950 that satirized religion and the church. Langston Hughes' and Zora Neale Hurston's Mule Bone (1930s) is a folk comedy that involves a feud between members of the Methodist and Baptist churches. Mule Bone, a three-act play, examines the themes of generational controversy and the love of a young girl for both a boy in her parish and in the opposing congregation. Ruth Ada Gaines-Shelton's The Church Fight is an allegorical comedy in one act that concerns rebellious church members who scheme to excommunicate the presiding pastor.

Black folk voodooism, another religious belief, is explored by all four playwrights. Five of the plays discussed represent the genre of Black folk voodoo. Miller's The Bog Guide, Stragglers in the Dust, Duncan's Black Magic, Jinda, Spence's Her, and Graham's Track Thirteen. Elements of this genre are also included in Miller's Harriet Tubman, Duncan's Payment, Graham's It's Mornin', and I Gotta Home. These dramatists reclaim the life-principle and explore the Southern Negro folk beliefs. Voodoo incantations provide courage, cures, and good luck. Miller's Harriet Tubman, The Bog Guide, and Stragglers in the Dust include characters who are condemned or ridiculed for their nature-worship. Harriet Tubman is respected by the slaves who call her an angel and the Moses of their people. Thomas, the white overseer, is convinced that she is a Black witch with magical powers. The Bog Guide celebrates Black African nature-worship; Sabali is proud of its spiritual power that enables her to communicate with flora and fauna. In Stragglers in the Dust, Nan explains to Mac, the cemetery

caretaker, that she watches her son's spirit ascend the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier each night. Duncan's plays of Black folk voodoo include Black Magic which satirizes the Afro-diasporic spiritual folklore. Duncan educates her audience on the existence of both black and white magic. Aunt Liza has the power to create desirable and undesirable changes in people and things. Duncan presents the common stereotypical impressions of Voodooism and replaces and corrects them for her audience. In Jinda, Duncan digresses from her exploration of African American folkisms to illustrate another culture which worships and celebrates flora and fauna. Granny Lou in Payment communicates with supernatural forces that foretell her ill-fated death. Spence dedicated a one-act play to the genre of Black folk voodoo. Her explores three views of the power of supernatural forces. Graham includes the Black folk superstitious belief in the unlucky number thirteen in Track Thirteen. She adds an element of the supernatural in I Gotta Home. Black folk voodoo is practiced in a highly religious home and inadvertently resolves the Christian family's financial crisis. In It's Mornin', Graham illustrates both the colonized Blacks' belief in Christianity and the African folklore.

The research in Afro-diasporic spiritual folklore in Luisah Teish's Jambalaya substantiates these characters' beliefs in Black folk voodooism. Teish redefines the word "superstition" after examining the Southern Blacks' use of African magic. "*Superstition* as a belief or practice whose origin and context has been lost to us and/or is in conflict with the beliefs of the dominating culture." <sup>5</sup> Teish believes that Voodooism has become taboo and is either feared or ridiculed because of both African American and white ignorance of Black culture, history, and traditions. Racism and oppression have diminished the African American's awareness of an indigenous spiritualism and concurrently limited their sources of wisdom and inspiration. Teish refers to the life of Negro slaves in retrospect and concludes:

On the plantation they encountered back-breaking work, sadistic cruelties, and a two-faced moral code. It must be remembered that these people

were owned as property, poorly fed, whipped, and mated like breeding animals for sale. What they needed most was the spirit of the warrior to counteract the savagery of slavery. Consequently a large body of Voodoo magic is directed toward the following tasks: (1) Hexing and killing enemies; (2) Protecting oneself from physical and spiritual abuse; (3) Outwitting the law; (4) Attracting luck in financial matters; (5) Getting and keeping a lover. <sup>6</sup>

The five tasks in Teish's outline are explored in these plays: Aunt Liza in Black Magic creates a love potion to restore Mandy's love and offers to put a hex on her supposed lover, Spivey; Grannie Lou in It's Mornin' provides spiritual consultation to deter Cissie from committing infanticide; and Mattie Cobb in I Gotta Home requests the assistance of her guardian angel to attract luck. The images of these so-called witches, prophetesses, and Voodoo priestesses are also redefined by Teish:

Words such as witch have been redefined in the light of their true origin and nature. Instead of the evil, dried out, old prude of patriarchal love, we know her as a self-confident freedom fighter, defending her right to her own sexuality, and her right to govern her life and community according to the laws of nature. <sup>7</sup>

In the early 1900s, Black folk voodooism was considered to be a creed of poor but honest uneducated people. W. E. B. Du Bois described Voodooism as nature-worship involving invisible surrounding influences and using incantations and sacrifices. Teish expounds on the African religions that have been described in the past by people who sought to suppress their practice:

Because the African perspective on life, nature, and worship are in conflict with the rigidity of Christianity and the materialistic-mechanistic world view, false images have been fostered and nonapplicable concepts have been imposed on the African point of view. As a result, this tradition is often seen as a random collection of foolish superstitions and "devil worship." . . . Christianity usually views the world as a battle between differing and hostile forces. All good is posited in God, and all evil in the devil. *The Africans had no devil.* <sup>8</sup>

Spirituality is an integral part of everyday life for some African Americans and the servant class nurtured this secret society. The portrayals of strong Voodoo worshipers

as characters have been ignored in African American theatre scholarship. The genre existed in the early American theatre and was included in plays by white dramatists. The Scarecrow (1910) by Percy MacKaye explores folk superstition and witchcraft. Goody Rickby also known as "Blacksmith Bess" is considered both a fortuneteller and a witch. She is a white woman who is revered by the townspeople in a Massachusetts community. The House of Connelly (1931) by Paul Green includes two emancipated servants, Big Sis and Big Sue, who are described as old sibyl-like Negro women. They conjure up spirits and foretell the future by reading tea leaves. In The Emperor Jones (1920) by Eugene O'Neill, Brutus Jones is defeated by psycho-biological fears as he faces the ghosts of his past and is murdered.

Miller, Duncan, Spence, and Graham composed their stories within the one-act structure and created suspense and mystery by placing action offstage in their historical, genteel, and Black folk voodoo dramas. This structural choice emphasized the realistic connection between the seen and the unseen and was used frequently in Neoclassical tragedy. The principle of restraint was adhered to for example by Pierre Corneille who prohibited events of violence or death on the stage. In Drama, Metadrama, and Perception, Richard Hornby emphasizes the emergence of the neoclassical style in modern drama. "Offstage ceremony is again important in modern naturalistic [plays]. . . the impulse came from a desire to depict an extended world, of which the onstage world is merely a part, a "slice of life." <sup>9</sup>

Miller's dramas within the frame of settings from the Palace of King Christophe in Haiti to the Poodle Dog Pool Parlor in Washington, D. C. are sketches of the simple lives of Black people. These dramas captivated her audiences as she illustrated chilling tableaux of sensational events that occurred offstage: blazing fires, rebellious uprising, and suicide in Christophe's Daughters; the ceremonial parade in Riding the Goat; funeral rites of Sabali's parents in The Bog Guide; and the ascension of the spirit in Stragglers in the Dust. Duncan's plays of magic, mayhem, and miscalculations depicted female

characters from faded beauties to royal Indian maidens in situations of melodrama and theatrical spectacles. These scenes stimulated her audiences to believe the unseen tragedies were happening, for example, the murder of Ted Sidney and the approaching lynch mob in Payment. Spence also manipulated the violent and death scenes to occur offstage in her plays that described African American woman exempt from decorum. In Hot Stuff, Walter King physically abuses his wife Fanny behind the curtained bedroom. In Her, John Kinney's fatal accident takes place outside the Alexander's front door. Graham also used this structure in It's Mornin' when Cissie enters from the bedroom and reports her act of infanticide.

The themes of these suspenseful comedies, tragedies, and dramas include African American, Black African, and Haitian history, slavery, sharecropping, race and community pride, education, religion, marriage, physical abuse, alcoholism, gambling, prostitution, and Black folk superstitions. The protagonists of these plays are predominately female but also include some male representatives. For example, Miller's Samory, Duncan's Esrael Jenkins in Black Magic, Spence's Thomas Jefferson Kelly in The Starter, and Graham's Ned Wilson in Track Thirteen. The antagonists in these chosen plays, for the most part, are depicted as white racist villains. In Miller's Harriet Tubman, Thomas is a plantation owner who has a reward out for the capture of Harriet and the other fugitive slaves. In Duncan's Payment, Ted Sidney is the white landowner who wants to take Lena as his concubine in exchange for the mortgage payment. In Spence's Hot Stuff, Isadore Goldstein, a Jewish peddler, accepts Fanny King's sexual favors as partial remuneration for her ermine wrap. In Graham's It's Mornin', Mrs. Tilden is forced to sell Millie to another plantation owner who plans to use the young slave as his concubine.

The portrayals of women characters can be separated into three cycles of historical movements. Mary Helen Washington's article, "Teaching Black-Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers," includes Alice Walker's personal historical outline: she views "the experiences of Black women as a series of movements from a woman totally victimized by society and by men to a growing, developing woman whose consciousness allows her to have some control over her life."<sup>10</sup> Walker examines African American females as Suspended Women, Assimilated Women, and Emergent Women. The Suspended Women were discussed briefly in Miller's chapter. The Black women in the first cycle are defined as victims of both racism and sexism. They have no control over their own destiny, and no awareness of the forces which control them. Their limited life choices lead them to suicide, insanity, or they are defeated by external circumstances. The Assimilated Women of the second cycle have more options than the Suspended Women. They are described in Washington's article as "victims, not of physical violence, but of a kind of psychic violence that alienates them from their roots and cuts them off from their own people and also from a part of themselves."<sup>11</sup> These women have some awareness of their condition and are capable of struggling to shape their own lives. The Assimilated Women are educated yet they have not achieved equality within their race or white America. Walker assigns this cycle of women to the decades of the 1940s and 1950s. The Emergent Women are defined as female characters on the edge of a new awareness: in search of a meaning in their heritage and traditions; reclaiming their past; and reexamining their relationship to the Black community. Political changes have affected their choices and lifestyles. Walker allocates this cycle of women to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Three strong examples of the Suspended Woman can be found in Miller's Christophe's Daughters, Scratches, and Stragglers in the Dust. Queen Marie-Louise, Athénaire, and Améthiste are Black Haitian women of royalty. Their impending future

rests in the outcome of the rebellion. In Scratches, Abbie worships monetary and material possessions. In Stragglers in the Dust, Nan is an oppressed charwoman who works at the Great Cemetery. Duncan's female characters in Driftin', Payment, and Sacrifice can also be defined as Suspended Women. Pearl Harvey in Driftin' is a physically abused, kept woman. Granny Lou in Payment sacrificed her pride and borrowed money from the plantation owner to send Lena to school. Mrs. Payton, in Sacrifice, supports her family by taking in laundry and seeks redemption by investing in her children's educational future. These women are also portrayed in Spence's Episode, and Her. The three angry housewives in Episode are not defeated by racial oppressors but by their husbands who control their lives. In Her, Martha Alexander and "Her" represent both poles of female victimization. Martha is oppressed by the racist society and must support her family as a laundress and rent collector. The Filipino woman was racially and sexually oppressed by her white husband. Graham's contributing characters to this cycle are slaves in It's Mornin'. Cissie, Millie, and Grannie Lou represent three generations of women in double bondage as both woman/slave and chattel/slave.

The Assimilated Woman can be found sparingly in the chosen plays. Ruth Chapman, in Miller's Riding the Goat, is a college graduate and a feminist. Lena, in Duncan's Payment, also receives an education and dreams of her new appointment as school teacher. The women in Spence's Hot Stuff, Fanny King, Mary Green, and Jennie Barbour have not striven for a higher education. These characters pilfer, gamble, sell hot merchandise, and solicit with their bodies. Their misconstrued ambitious endeavors ultimately enslave them; these Harlemites are resigned to be victims--immoral social climbers. Mrs. Swan, in Graham's I Gotta Home, is the wife of a prominent doctor. Mrs. Swan is discriminating; she classifies Mattie as a member of the nouveau-riche. This society woman forgets she is also discriminated against by the white American majority.

The Emergent Woman can also be found in Miller's Sojourner Truth and Graham's I Gotta Home. Technically speaking, using Walker's definition, Miller's depiction of Sojourner Truth clearly represents the Emergent Woman. Sojourner Truth was a freed slave, therefore, political changes affected her lifestyle. She became an abolitionist and a missionary who reclaimed her oppressive past and gave speeches across the United States in the struggle for civil rights for African Americans and women. Mrs. Liza Dell Cobb in Graham's I Gotta Home becomes an Emergent Woman as the family crises unfold within the play. The economic circumstances of her marriage to an impoverished preacher have compelled Mrs Cobb to seek a resolution actively. Mrs. Cobb has reclaimed her past and is proud to educate her children on their colorful heritage. She reexamines her relationship with Elijah and sacrifices her conservative religious beliefs.

The one-act plays of Miller, Duncan, Spence, and Graham merit the respect and admiration of both Black and white American audiences. The Folk Play Movement illustrated the three mainstays of the African American (home, church, and school) and preserved the Negro folk songs (spirituals, worksongs, dance songs, field hollers, and chants). They illuminated and criticized common lives of the African American with humor, pathos, sincerity, and distinction, reflecting their historical, economical, educational, and social restrictions. These four dramatists struggled with racial and gender barriers to get their plays published and performed. They were educators--high school teachers and college professors who won annual contests awards in playwriting in Opportunity and Crisis magazines. The high school auditorium, college theatre, and little theatre were their platforms to produce the plays. Influential African American men such as Willis Richardson, Alain Locke, Carter G. Woodson, Montgomery T. Gregory, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Abram Hill were sponsors of these projects. The plays were performed by recognized Black theatre groups such as the Howard Players, Krigwa Players, Gilpin Players, and also by the Yale University School of Drama.

As an African American scholar, playwright, director, and actor, I have observed that several of the twenty-two plays present matters that are still contemporary issues. Since most are all one-act plays, a selection of three or four of these dramas can be produced as an evening of theatre. For example, a program of Black folk voodoo plays including Miller's The Bog Guide, Stragglers in the Dust, Duncan's Black Magic, and Spence's Her would reeducate audiences about Afro-diasporic folklore. These choices encourage theatregoers to reevaluate their ancestors' folk beliefs which many have presumed are Black folk superstitions. All four examples describe racism within the African American race as well as whites against Blacks in the United States and abroad. Black Magic can be staged as a major theatrical spectacle with an elaborate performance of the incantations. The Bog Guide complements Duncan's folk comedy because Miller returns to the roots of Voodooism in her play. An extension of the African tribal funeral rites, music, and the tragedy that occurs on stage could be performed simultaneously in view of the audience. A director might also choose to produce an evening of folk dramas, for example, Miller's Riding the Goat, Duncan's Driftin', and Spence's Fool's Errand. The fraternal lodge parade, music, and regalia in Riding the Goat could be incorporated and performed. Driftin' explores the indigenous music of African Americans and examines the uneducated, decadent lifestyle of Blacks. Fool's Errand as the final one-act would expose other foibles of African Americans and leave the audience in uproarious laughter. An evening of tragedy and drama is also possible with Miller's Christophe's Daughters, Duncan's Payment, Spence's Hot Stuff, and Graham's It's Mornin'. This program followed in the suggested order begins with the fall of King Henri Christophe and ends with the emancipation of Negro slaves.

After an evening of madness, mayhem, and melodrama with music, a director might be compelled to schedule the folk drama and tragedy productions in repertoire.

This would dispel any possible tragic uprisings in the theatre amongst audience members. There are several plays that remain suitable for young adults in the 1990s. Miller's Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Duncan's Sacrifice preach of African American history and the importance of education. Other plays that were discussed are archaic, such as Miller's Samory and Duncan's Jinda. Spence's The Starter and The Hunch have no major substance and therefore, should only be used as curtain-raisers. The suggested repertoire can be produced on a full-scale university or commercial theatre stage successfully. These one-act plays are filled with endless possibilities for a creative director and scenic designer. Several of them allow a director to take advantage of integrated casting, for example, Miller's The Bog Guide, Stragglers in the Dust, Duncan's Payment, Spence's Hot Stuff, Her, and Graham's I Gotta Home.

Graham's I Gotta Home was included in this study because it has the most universal themes and is well-written. I Gotta Home could be commercially successful as a period piece of the middle-class African American family in the 1940s. It includes elements of all three genres, and celebrates the American family's values, struggles, and dreams. The narratives of the four women dramatists' plays were discussed and analyzed in terms of their historical significance to introduce the scholarship that is available to people of all colors. These comedies, tragedies, dramas, and melodramas include accurate depictions of the limited opportunities available to African Americans. There are very few theatre texts to consult that describe and historically analyze Black characters within plays by African Americans. The works of these early women dramatists and others must be resurfaced to demonstrate the extensive library that is available. Miller, Duncan, Spence, and Graham's contributions should be dusted off and placed back on the stage for audiences to reevaluate, reeducate themselves, and enjoy an evening of entertainment.

May Miller Sullivan was a trailblazer as a high school teacher, playwright, poet, actress, and director. Her most popular and frequently produced play was Riding the Goat, written during her studies at Columbia University. Miller received a royalty of five dollars from each church and school performing Riding the Goat. She persevered despite financial shortcomings. Miller was a leading playwright during the Harlem Renaissance and her plays were widely produced. She is the most historically significant of the four dramatists. Eulalie Spence is second to Miller in notoriety, historical significance, exposure in production and publication. Spence never visited the South yet Fool's Errand is her most popular folk comedy. Despite the controversy, Spence opposed Du Bois's theory of plays of propaganda and adhered to her philosophy. She became a successful folk dramatist in the African American little theatre circuit. Shirley Graham Du Bois places third in popularity and historical significance. Graham was a playwright, composer, biographer, and civil rights activist. She was a member of the NAACP, editor of Freedomways, and a Federal Theatre Project Negro Unit director. Graham had the opportunity to travel and study internationally: her scholarship at Yale provided an opportunity to develop original work within the more acceptable dramatic structure of the classic three-act American play. Theima Myrtle Duncan's contributions are less known because she did not adhere to thematic limitations put upon dramatists by African American publishers, professors, and producers. Several of these men were homosexuals and discriminated against women playwrights. Duncan chose to write in a non-genteel manner and therefore, many of her plays remain unpublished. Duncan's biographical background is incomplete. She worked with the Howard University Players and studied at Columbia University but her full birth information and death date are still undiscovered. All four African American female dramatists were breaking the barriers in the American theatre at the same time that white female dramatists, Lillian Hellman and Susan Glaspell, for example, were writing for the Broadway stage. These pioneers

educated and entertained Black audiences in New York, Washington, D.C., Maryland, Connecticut, Ohio, and Delaware on the non-commercial stage. Miller, Duncan, Spence, and Graham viewed the African American through the dramatic presentational looking glass of the theatre.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Erlene Stetson. "Studying Slavery: Some Literary and Pedagogical Considerations on the Black Female Slave." in All the Women Are White, 62.

<sup>2</sup> Aptheker. Women's Legacy, 135.

<sup>3</sup> Stetson, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Neverdon-Morton. Afro-American Women of the South, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Teish. Jambalaya, 109.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 109

<sup>9</sup> Richard Hornby. Drama, Metadrama, and Perception (London: Associated University Press, 1986), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Helen Washington. "Teaching Black-Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers." in All the Women Are White, 212.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 213.

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