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**The African American male's family relationships in black plays:
Their evolution and meaning**

Gray, A. Rudy, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1994

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**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE'S FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
IN BLACK PLAYS: THEIR EVOLUTION AND MEANING**

by

RUDY GRAY

**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**

1994

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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**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE'S FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS
IN BLACK PLAYS: THEIR EVOLUTION AND MEANING****by****Rudy Gray****Adviser: Professor Edwin Wilson**

One way of shedding light on the mystery of the black male psyche is by analyzing the interpersonal family psychodynamics revealed in African-American dramatic writing. Through the examination of representative plays--their stories, scenes, dialogue and character interactions--we discover information that is not necessarily revealed in sociological studies or psychological analyses. This dissertation will emphasize the role of African-American dramatic art in illuminating deeper truths about black men. Because a large portion of the playwright's self-expression is, to a degree, automatic, spontaneous and organic, many even inadvertent truths emerge in the work. The psychodynamics among a play's characters, the webbing between their spoken sentences, their utterances, the phrases and the words, even among the silences, all will carry with them a whole sociohistory of the black male. They will also tell the story of the evolving

outside world.

This dissertation will use the following plays to develop its point of view: Rachel (1916), about the effects of lynching on a black family; Big White Fog (1938), a black family and the Marcus Garvey Movement; Native Son (1941), an enraged young man beset by racism and poverty in Depression Chicago; Take A Giant Step (1953), a young man in the suburbs struggling to come of age; The Amen Corner (1954), a female pastor's attempts to escape into the world of religion from the "evils" of the surrounding world which impacts on the males in her life. A Raisin in the Sun (1959) introduces a new era of plays which examine frustrated men and their dreams. Blues for Mr. Charley (1964) and The Slave (1964) examine white liberalism and black rage. Ceremonies in Dark Old Men (1969) shows alternative black enterprise at work. The River Niger (1972), The First Breeze of Summer (1975) are about black men during the Nixon-Ford years and Fences (1985) shows how a middle-aged black man's frustration drives him almost to destroy his family.

These plays are by no means comprehensive. They are meant, rather, to represent the periods during which they were written.

PREFACE

This study will focus on the interpersonal family relationships of African American male characters as they are portrayed in selected plays and how the nature of those portrayals has evolved over the years. The Afro-American male's agon is the center of much of the concern of black drama and also of the surrounding society, so a close look at the nature of this dynamic is in order. Covered will be the period just after the turn of the century through the Civil Rights Movement right up to the Reagan-Bush years.

The plays discussed will be: Rachel (1916) by Angelina Weld Grimke, Big White Fog (1938) by Theodore Ward, Native Son (1941), an adaptation of Richard Wright's novel by Richard Wright and Paul Green, Take A Giant Step (1954) by Louis Peterson, The Amen Corner (1954) by James Baldwin (covering the pre-Civil Rights Movement days); A Raisin In The Sun (1959) by Lorraine Hansberry as the landmark play that turned things around with its new values (covering the Civil Rights Movement years); Blues for Mr. Charlie (1964) by James Baldwin, and The Slave

(1964) by LeRoi Jones (pre-Amiri Baraka), dealing with the black male and white liberals; Ceremonies in Dark Old Men (1969) by Lonne Elder III (covering the Black Power period); The River Niger (1973) by Joseph Walker, First Breeze of Summer (1975) by Leslie Lee (for the Nixon-Ford-Carter years and the decline of Black Power); and Fences (1984) by August Wilson (for the Reagan-Bush years).

There were many other plays by black playwrights which could easily have served this study such as Black Girl (1969) by J.E. Franklin, Mojo (1970) by Alice Childress, or Ron Milner's Who's Got His Own (1965), to mention a few. Their omission in no way denigrates their worth as drama nor does it elevate the chosen plays above them. It is simply that their addition would only belabor the points already made.

This study will hopefully show, as comprehensively and concisely as possible, how art often illuminates life, as life tries to imitate art, and how sociohistory is reflected by this process. The method will be to examine the various relationships between the African-American male character and the various persons in his surrounding world as they are presented in the plays.

Who is this African American male? What are those aforementioned patterns?

To answer these questions, even cursorily, would require enough material to fill a library and they are not the focus here. The intent here is

to reflect on the socio-historical evolution of the above questions and their answers, and how it affects the creation of a particular aspect of African-American drama.

The key to the problem of the black male character in plays, as with his real life counterpart, is his low self-esteem which is engendered by the continuous bombardment of negative vibrations from his surroundings and unpleasant images of himself from the behaviors of others to him, both subtle and overt. To maintain inner equilibrium, he is forced to adapt behaviors of his own which protect his beleaguered ego and, to a limited degree, maintain his psychic cohesion. Then he can continue functioning in his life, however effectively or ineffectively that is done. These adaptations, of course, are largely automatic and unconscious. The actions and reactions of his defense mechanisms are determined by these adaptations.¹

In addition, he must don a multiplicity of masks to present various facades to his outer world, even to his family. It is, after all, not manly to reveal inner hurt, to be "affected" by any mishaps (what is psychically healthy does not count here); it is not wise for a black man to exhibit aggressive tendencies to the outside world. What should be shown by him are ingratiation and calm passivity. These traits do not send threatening messages; thus, threat and danger do not besiege him in turn. Such is his unconscious plan.²

From the days of Reconstruction to today, the black male has had three options in his life: rebellion, assimilation, and escape. This fact, along with his low self-esteem, causes him to hate others in his image as well as to hate the engineer of this condition. Added to this is his need to contain his rage, and his resultant tendencies toward apathy, hedonism, living for the moment and criminality, all of which go into making the unique American puzzle called the African-American male.

A major key to his psyche is isolation, from his parents, his siblings, his relatives, his friends, even from himself. This isolation weakens, precludes or destroys his sensitivity which in turn makes him distrustful of others. He must always be on guard, interpret all social phenomena as somehow threatening to him. Paranoia is endemic.³

Two parts of him are of extreme importance--his ego and his manhood. Both are under constant assault and so his delicate, sensitive psyche must maintain a constant vigil, parrying the myriad thrusts, real and imagined, against him. This does not leave much room for more varied reactions and options. From the time of antebellum slavery when the immediate community, mainly his mother, struggled diligently to suppress his natural male aggression to protect him from punishment, danger, even death, right up to today during which these patterns have changed little, history had painted the African American male into a corner. This study will illuminate and analyze that corner.

How his nurturing and its results are shown in drama has changed over

the years.

What are the ways? What does their transformation mean?

It should be understood that there are two separate realities. One reality is of fiction. The other is of real life. By fiction I mean that of the novel, short story, film, stage play. By real life, I mean everything which exists around us in our everyday dealings with life.

Even the most naturalistic fiction, even in a play in which the actors go into the audience and, as the characters they are playing, address and relate to various people, can never ever equate real life. The dimensions belong to different worlds, the values, the parameters, the special elements and particulars that make it what it is. Fiction has its own laws which the writer confines himself to, or breaks, if he is to be successful. Real life has its own set of special laws which philosophers, epistemologists especially, are still trying to ascertain. A character in a stage play can never show most traits that he or she has--though his real life counterpart might in a lifetime. The play would be a jumble and probably would lose the audience long before it reached its climax. The playwright must select those traits which will help him show enough of the character for the audience's emotions to hold onto, to help him tell the story and to contribute to whatever theme he is putting forth.

Therefore, if I appear to be treating the various characters in the plays as if they are real people, that is not what is intended. None of the characters being discussed could ever be real. Their only reality is the

illusory reality of their stage context. Whatever real persons the playwright had based his characters on remain as such, fixed in their special reality. The fictional creations remain fixed in theirs. I only try to get as close to the reality of that which is contained in the playwright's head as he is bringing that character to stage life. The reality I am dealing with is the reality within the context of fiction. The characters are treated as reflections, not as reproductions.

INTRODUCTION
AN EARLY PROTEST PLAY,
RACHEL BY ANGELINA WELD GRIMKE

Rachel, in the Bible, "weeps for her children 'and she would not be comforted, for they were not'," an allusion to Herod's Massacre of the Innocents.¹ The title character in the play Rachel (1916) by Angelina Weld Grimke, is an idealistic, impressionable, poetically sensitive, positive thinking, though somewhat innocent, young woman. She adores children, showers them with endearments every chance she gets, and reveres her family. She dotes on her mother, Mrs. Loving (note the family name), who has, up to the time the play begins, sheltered her brother Tommy and her from the harsh realities outside their home. The two people from outside her immediate family who come into her life are little Jimmy, an orphaned boy whom she has adopted and Mr. John Strong, her beau. Also, there are many others of the neighborhood children.

Rachel was the first twentieth century full-length play to be written, performed and produced by African Americans--in Washington, D.C. Based on a plot by NAACP Executive Secretary Walter white and called a "race play in three acts," it was presented by the Drama Committee of the District of Columbia Branch of the NAACP at the Myrtilla Miner Normal School on March 3 and 4, 1916. In the committee were the notables

Montgomery T. Gregory and Alain Locke who were strongly instrumental in getting the play on.²

The mise en scene of Rachel is idyllic, tranquil, as if her world (the play's setting) has been lifted from the ugliness outside her home and placed in the sort of paradise which artists, poets and musicians have used as the inspiration for their pastorals. Beethoven might have experienced this household and written his Sixth Symphony. William Wordsworth and the other Lake Poets would have been inspired to write their most exhilarant lyrics while sitting in this living room. That Ms. Grimke is herself a poet, educator and essayist is evident both in the dialogue of Rachel's interactions among the people in her immediate surroundings and in the creation of the character Rachel herself, both as a centerpiece of this play and as a vital member of the Loving family. Her glowing inner and outer beauty will have an impact on all the males in her presence. And it shows.

Still, there are, outside the periphery of this tranquil, romantic universe, the ugly social realities: the physical and psychological violence of virulent, murderous racism whose poisonous tentacles threaten to reach into this household and darken its atmosphere. A terrible secret rests on the soul of Mrs. Loving which she finally must reveal to her two children, an act brought on by the appearance of Little Jimmy (her eyes falling on him causes her to blanch): it is the anniversary of the lynching of Rachel's

father and other brother. (Little Jimmy reminds Mrs. Loving of Rachel's late brother.)

There is also job discrimination which impacts heavily upon Tommy. He must pretend he goes out to a job he does not have and settle for work below his qualifications. This is beginning to poison his inner being, countering his positive immediate surroundings, and Mr. Strong must put forth considerable effort to shore up the discouraged young man, offering to take him on a job with him.

Finally, and perhaps worst of all to Rachel, these outside injustices begin to affect the precious children in her life, stinging their young souls with humiliation and terror against which they are not old enough yet to have built adequate defenses. One little girl, soon to be a neighbor, can barely come out of her shell to respond to Rachel's kindly importunities. This is a young soul already crushed, devastated, and Rachel's heart almost breaks as she looks upon her. Jimmy is threatened with this outside trauma as well which, even in contemplated possibility, pains the play's protagonist.

The agony and terror deepen, finally reaching the point where Rachel must turn down the marriage offer of Mr. Strong. After all, if she has this kind of reaction to hearing of the racial misdeeds done to children of other parents, how will she react to these misfortunes happening to her own children? Something unthinkable.

Mr. Strong, understanding, does not press the issue and leaves, probably going out of her life. This young woman who, at the beginning of the play, wanted more than anything else to be a mother, now, at the end of the play, has closed the door to that possibility. How terrible are the effects of the racist misbehaviors on this delicate soul.

What stands out in this play is the presence of strong men, idealized, secure about themselves--despite the misdeeds of the outside world--even when bitterness appears at the edges of their consciousnesses. There is no displacement of hostile aggression. Tommy can be discussing a frustration about the outside world one moment and the next, turn to Little Jimmy and drop to the child's level as he plays with him. One would think he would roughly push the little boy away from him as male characters in later dramas might. Tommy drops to the child's level and deals with him on his level, totally involved with the boy and his little boy's world. Of course, Rachel sets the pattern with her own warm, friendly interactions with the children who come before her. (Actually, Walter Lee Younger, in Lorraine Hansberry's drama A Raisin In The Sun, also does not let his most frustrated moments prevent him from fooling around with his son Travis. He even takes the boy's side when he runs up against the sternness of his mother, Ruth. This, however, is only the foreshadowing of a later character change in Walter--a later peripeteia, a reversal of events in a play.)

The late father and the stepbrother of Rachel and Tommy had dauntlessly faced up to the Ku Klux Klan, at the cost of their lives. Tommy, on hearing this, does not storm out of the house in justifiable rage and commit irrational retaliatory outrages. He feels rage but it is always under control. The impression here is that Tommy and Mr. Strong would have, if they had been there at the time, helped out, done their part in defending against the Klan. It is obvious that Rachel is surrounded by strong, sedate, steady men and this must reverberate back to her. Still, that is not enough to buffer this impressionable young woman against the shock of learning of the outside world's hideousness.

What is playwright Angelina Weld Grimke saying? True, she is writing in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century style of flowery, poetic dialogue depicting romantic visions of the surrounding world. (In Ms. Grimke's case, it is of the personal inner world of the home.) European theatre and literature had been moving away from Romantic melodrama (and realism) toward the existential cynicism of naturalism, expressionism and the other forms of the avant-garde for some time before this play. The movement--except in small instances--had not yet, however, arrived on White America's shores, still steeped in conventional drama. Clyde Fitch was still the order of the day here--pre-Eugene O'Neill--and the actors still gesticulated melodramatically to show emotion as the playwright did the same in his dialogue and dramaturgy. Also, it was possible to have

characters make narrative, expositional speeches that could go on for twenty minutes or more--though Eugene O'Neill would later outdo that. This pattern accommodated Ms. Grimke's facility with words--perhaps too much at times--and allowed her to wax poetic about all that was dear to her protagonist.

Moreover, the world wars and the various twentieth century revolutions had not yet happened. (Actually, World War I had already begun in Europe but America had not yet been pulled into it.) Though the world was changing, the view of man remained idealized, romantic. The advent of communism and later existentialism signalled a fast-arriving transformation of the human spirit. Admittedly, men had been doing terrible things to one another all along but it was always "over there someplace," not in "my civilized country, city, town, neighborhood, family," "not among my personal friends and neighbors." Certainly, in the arts, the real world, and all its evils, was not yet here. Situations like slavery, the massacre of the American Indians and the treatment of newly arrived immigrants were dealt with only scantily.

For the African-American community, however, the harsh realities had obtained much sooner. There had been over three thousand lynchings since the turn of the century. Jim Crow, in its most virulent form, reigned supreme. African America was emerging from what was called "the nadir of its history"--the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the

twentieth century. The understandable intensity of concern over this emergence would push it to a greater role in the arts.

The result, in the theatrical arts of the black community, was a particular weltanschauung which comprised at once a twentieth-century existentialism, realism of perspective, and a nineteenth-century romanticism, in portraying men and women and their interpersonal dynamics. Black male characters in the plays of nineteenth-and early twentieth-century African-American playwrights suffered the given indignities their like were to suffer later in the twentieth-century but they seemed to transcend the resultant spiritual devastation and remained, on the surface, dauntless and stalwart. The male characters were more manly (as the zeitgeist of that time romantically defined manliness).

No man gave a poor accounting of himself. Nor did any woman. The psychological degeneration, neurotic complexity and explosive anger would come in later plays. In act one of Rachel, when Tommy first learns of what had happened to his brother, he says:

TOMMY

(Still laboring under great emotion goes out into the entryway and comes back and stands in the doorway with his cap. He twirls it around and around nervously)

I want you to know, Ma, before I go--how--how proud I am. Why, I didn't believe people could be like that--and live. And then to find out

TOMMY (CONT'D)

that one--was your own father--and one--your own brother. --It's wonderfull I'm not much yet, Ma, but--I've--I've just got to be something now.

(Breaks off. His face becomes distorted with passion and hatred.)

When I think--when I think--of those devils with white skins--living somewhere today--living and happy--I--see--I--I--goodbye!

(Rushes out, the door bangs)³

When John Strong learns that Rachel had crushed a bunch of roses he had sent her as an expression of his love for her, he smothers the hurt he feels deep inside him and remains strong and deeply moved on the surface as he watches her sing a touching little song (a Nevins octet entitled "At Twilight"):

RACHEL

(Sings)

The roses of yester-year
Were all of the white and red;
It fills my heart with silent fear
To find all their beauty fled.

The roses of white are sere,
All faded the roses red,
And one who loves me is not here
And one that I love is dead.

(A long pause. Then STRONG goes to her and lifts her from the piano-stool. He puts one arm around her very tenderly and pushes her head back so he can look into her eyes. She shuts them, but is passive).

STRONG**(Gently)**

Little girl, little girl, don't you know that suggestions--suggestions--like those you are sending yourself constantly--are wicked things? You, who are so gentle, so loving, so warm--

(Breaks off and crushes her to him. He kisses her many times. She does not resist, but in the midst of his caresses she breaks suddenly into convulsive laughter. He tries to hush the terrible sound with his mouth....)⁴

Does this mean that men's relationships with various members of their families were better then? Or is this how Ms. Grimke and her contemporaries would have liked things to be?

Much can be learned from observing the way in which the human sensibility fantasizes life. Is this how she would have liked African-American men of her time to be because they were quite the opposite? Certainly, it would seem, surrounding conditions would not have permitted them to be like this, could not have. On the other hand, they might have had to be this strong.

Could she possibly be reflecting a reality that, despite the relatively improved conditions of today, seems to have gone away? Has the solid rock center of these men in Rachel softened to the neurotic, enraged, dispassionate, even apathetic and alienated inner male psychology of today? What changed this situation, if this is the case? The wars? The emergence of the "Dark Continent"? The debacle of Marcus Garvey's

shipping line? The image transformation of African-American men in the media from coons and clowns to men of substance, even heroes? The deepening of the probe into the black male consciousness, uncovering those hereunto hidden neuroses and rages? Their gradual revelation to a surrounding denial-cloaked white public? The recoiling in horror on the part of White America from the horrors of "The Red Summer of 1919"? The implications of the Holocaust? The empoisoning of drugs, social containment, frustration from having to wait too long? The broken promises of the Civil Rights Movement and the premature deaths by murder of Reverend King, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers and John F. Kennedy? Finally, the devaluation and near effeminization of the African-American male has left deep scars. The consequent rage generated by his near disfranchisement has, along with socioeconomic factors, pushed him into crime and/or apathy. Fantasy, self-denigrating assimilation or neverending rebelliousness, other unmentioned factors, placed in the context of a hostile, effacing world, have all combined with the above to engender this mystery called the African-American male. I will try to decipher this mystery in this dissertation.

Did Rachel and the Loving family ever exist? Or were they merely the figments of a delicate aesthetic sensibility? There were many black families, both in the North and the South, whose forebears early on had been released from bondage. Many of them, given the time and

opportunity, had been able to build up enough of an estate to become middle class and even wealthy. Some black families had even been owners of slaves themselves,⁵ with that institution's economic benefits accruing.

It would stand to reason that the surviving West African work ethic and family values mixed with that of the Christian-Judaic creed would produce many black families, both rich and poor, which would have households like that of the Lovings, even during this historical "nadir." Ms. Grimke appears herself to have been a product of such a family. One needs only judge from the tone and texture of her writings. Moreover, she was the great grandniece of the famous white nineteenth century feminist-abolitionist Grimke Sisters (Angelina Weld Grimke and Sarah Grimke) of South Carolina.⁶ Being of such a positive family background and being Caucasian in features and complexion which ensured that her family members would not suffer the same indignities more African looking people would, she had to have had a family experience like the Lovings and therefore used it as her model in writing Rachel.

What was Ms. Grimke's purpose other than bringing to light the horrible effects of lynching on an African-American family? Or, in the final sense, an American family?

When attacked by critics of the play, accusing her of advocating race suicide, a kind of genocide, Ms. Grimke herself wrote:

Since I have been given to understand that "Rachel" preaches race suicide, I should like to state at the start, that was not my intention. To the contrary, the appeal is not primarily to the colored people, but to the whites.... Because of environment and certain inherent qualities, each of us reacts correspondingly and logically to the various forces about us. For example, if these forces be of love, we react with love and if of hate, with hate. Very naturally all of us will not react as strongly or in the same manner--that is impossible.... Now my purpose was to show how a refined, sensitive, highly-strung girl, a dreamer and an idealist, the strongest instinct in whose nature is to be a mother herself--how, I say, this girl would react to this force.

The majority of women, everywhere, although they are beginning to awaken, form one of the most conservative elements of society. They are, therefore, opposed to changes.... My belief was then that if I could find a vulnerable point in their armor, if I could reach their hearts, even if only a little, then perhaps instead of being active or passive enemies they might become, at least, less inimical and possibly friendly.

Did they have a vulnerable point and if so what was it? I believed it to be motherhood.... If anything can make all women sisters underneath their skins, it is motherhood. If, then, I could make the white women of this country see, feel, understand just what their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons were having on the souls of the colored mothers everywhere, and upon the mothers that are to be, a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won.⁷

Its reception was mixed. Part of the audience favored the "art for art's sake" approach to the stage. Others wanted the stage used for "race propaganda." The controversy between these two groups resulted in the

founding of the Howard Players organization which promoted the purely artistic approach to drama and the other art forms.⁸ It would seem that Ms. Grimke, given all her considerable talents, satisfied both needs in her drama.

Questions arise around Ms. Grimke and her Rachel. What is an African-American artist to do--focus intensely on his ethnic roots or "strive toward a more generalized American culture"⁹--"avoid rocking the boat" or "tell it like it is?"¹⁰

She wanted the white audience to know and understand empathically and sympathetically the injustices done to the characters of her play, and the black audience to see themselves both as they conceived themselves to be and as they wished themselves to be. Still, she had to be careful. How much of the African-American image is it permissible for the white audience to see? One inch of inadvertent stereotyped, after all, could result in a mile. The razor slashing primitive was already set deeply in the American psyche.

Considering all that has happened down through the years, one might conclude that, despite the history of African-Americans in over three generations, Ms. Grimke's cited mission remains unfinished business.

CHAPTER ONE
THE PROMISE THWARTED
BIG WHITE FOG
BY THEODORE WARD

One day during a Black History Month early in the nineteen-eighties, an eighth grade teacher in a largely black New York City junior high school devoted a classroom lesson to discussing Marcus Garvey, the black nationalist leader of the twenties, of whom most of the class of mostly black and Latino students knew nothing. He related as much of the story of Garvey's life as he could--emphasizing Garvey's importance to the black nationalist movement of the sixties through this day--before the bell rang to end the class.

As he was preparing to go into the hallway to supervise the between classes passage of students, the teacher looked up from his desk and saw one of his students standing next to him, a diffident boy who had said very little all semester. The boy glared at him and, uncharacteristically baring his teeth like an angry dog and in a very thick Jamaican accent seldom heard in class, said emphatically: "Marcus Garvey was a crook! Marcus Garvey was nothing but a crook!" The teacher was flabbergasted. This boy's grandmother could not have been alive when Garvey's Black Star Line ships--which were supposed to engage in international commerce

and transport American blacks who could afford tickets back to Africa--were seized by the authorities because of the poor physical condition of the vessels and suspected improprieties with the corporation's finances. That this rancor was displayed by this young man with such depth and intensity bespoke a devastating hurt his family must have suffered because of the collapse of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (The UNIA). The consequent economic fallout for many black families both in this country and in the Caribbean had apparently left lasting scars.

The teacher thought he had brought to the children's awareness a "new" heretofore unknown African American hero. He thought he had been performing a valuable service to these "deprived" youths. He had not expected this reaction. The boy, who scarcely knew who Clarence Pendleton, a contemporary, was knew with great emotional intensity who Marcus Garvey (a man of the past) was. The teacher, consequently, was forced to reevaluate the role Marcus Garvey had played for many African Americans in their history. He knew now that not all African Americans shared his enthusiasm for Garvey and his significance. He was now more aware of the scars. How widespread had been this feeling?

Thus, in an African-American family of Garvey's time written about by a depression wracked African-American sensibility, there had to be shown a particular kind of effect on the males within that family and on their

interrelationships with other family members.

In Theodore Ward's important naturalistic play Big White Fog (1938), the dilemmas and conflicts in such a family are brought vividly to life. We get a metaphoric glimpse of what must have happened in the Garveyite families of that time--as the Garvey empire collapsed--and to that Jamaican student's forebears in particular. Whether Marcus Garvey was "a crook," a bumbling administrator, or an innocent victim of a fearful conspiratorial power structure threatened by his growing presence, is not the issue here, only how the surrounding catastrophe (the fall of The Universal Negro Improvement Association and The Black Star Line) affected the family.

The play was first produced by the Chicago unit of the Federal Theatre in 1938, running for ten weeks. On October 22, 1940, the play premiered at the Lincoln Theater on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue in New York City where it ran for sixty-four performances. The critics were less than enthusiastic about the play because of its political content--its misinterpreted "pro-communism."

In the play, a black Chicago family, the Masons--having migrated north from the Deep South to escape grinding, oppressive economic conditions and Jim Crow--find themselves in an intra-family whirlpool of caste prejudice, ultra-Garveyism (The Back-To-Africa Movement), capitalist opportunism, Communist activism, Anti-Semitism, prostitution and a host of other accompanying values and conflicts, each bouncing against the

others in a Brownian movement of continuous flux.

Victor Mason, the head of the household and the play's protagonist, is a fanatical Garveyite leader who must contend with a family less convinced of Garvey's credibility than he. He sees his wife Ella's faith in him erode gradually as the family's financial situation worsens because he has invested so much of their savings, along with his faith, in the crumbling Garvey regime. Moreover, because he disrespects his mother-in-law, Mrs. Brooks, and her traditionalist values, he brings about an alienation between him and his spouse that becomes so bad that it cannot be overcome but only endured.

Not only can Ella not forgive his insolence to her mother, but her antagonism and alienation worsen as the family's quality of life goes steadily downhill to the point where the family faces eviction from their home. Finally, it is only after he is gunned down by the police helping the evicting sheriff's men, the bailiffs--to which she at first does not respond--that she is able to bring herself to be his wife again, if a mourning one.

Victor is in conflict with his cynical brother-in-law Dan who is an early black capitalist not averse to exploiting his own people by buying up property, converting it into apartments and renting them out (occasionally evicting non-paying tenants)--an enterprise he is trying to get Vic to join. Though the Garvey Movement has similar socioeconomic aims to that of

the black capitalists--that of independence--there is, in Dan's way, something opprobrious, immoral to the Garveyite value system and sensibility which sets Vic against Dan. During one argument Vic tells Dan:

VIC

Your education is like a pair of knee pads, which enables you to crawl through the slime of white prejudice without the least sense of pain or dishonor.¹

At best, they can only manage between them a "friendly male tension." The final result of their dialectic is that they could never be partners in any enterprise.

Vic's son Les plans to go to college and at the beginning seems to be on the verge of getting a scholarship. The bubble bursts, however, when Les's race is discovered and the scholarship offer is withdrawn. This catapults the disappointed young man into radical politics and all its activities. Ironically, when the time comes for them to be evicted from their home, this leads the Mason family to seek help from the Communist group Les has joined. Tragically, it is also the indirect cause of Vic's death.

His daughter Wanda, not interested in the deferred hopes of her father and brother, is pulled into the wicked life of the nightclub and street and eventually, when the Great Depression hits, she sells her body to help her family.

Of course, it is not out of disrespect for her father and his values that

she makes this decision. In fact, his ideas about education, acculturation in general--and how each affects African-Americans--do not vary from hers. It is just that their ideas have different bases, reasons for existence. Each comes from a different perspective.

This difference brings a question to mind. What does Wanda's going into prostitution say about the nature of her relationship with Vic? Even under their abject and worsening circumstances, the mere thought of her becoming involved in the tawdry nightlife of that day would be unthinkable to him and she knows it. The Garveyites were quite Victorian in their attitudes.

Then, is her decision a consequence of their critical financial circumstances or is it a form of revenge on her part--arising from a deep resentment of Vic for failing to be a satisfactory breadwinner to the family--or does it arise from her identification with her mother's special rage at Vic? Possibly, it is all of these things. Certainly there is a great deal of psychosocial energy, with the father-daughter interrelationship at its core, involved in a woman's decision to sell her body to men.

Wanda also has her Uncle Percy, Vic's brother, as an influence. Percy is a free-living, gin-drinking man who has embraced the life of profligacy as an answer to the psychological and economic frustrations he must face in the outside world. He, too, incurs the contempt of Mrs. Brooks whose hortatory traditionalist barbs can become somewhat annoying to a Wanda

already angered and jaded by the contradicting inequities and injustices of the outside world. In fact, Mrs. Brooks's barbs probably make Wanda identify all the more with her father (although she does not subscribe to his Garveyism) and her uncle as a kind of unconscious rebellion against her grandmother and the value system she represents. The combination of these, plus the realities of the outside world, are enough to drive her to her decision.

Furthermore, Wanda's relationship with her mother Ella is somewhat stormy. In the following scene, early in the play, after she has quit school and gotten a job working for a Mr. Hogan (who apparently wants more than just her labor), her mother asks her for some money to help the family out. Wanda explodes in impatience:

ELLA

(As WANDA heads for the stairs
to go upstairs)

(Intercepting her hesitantly)

Wanda-

WANDA

(Halting on stair)

Yes-

ELLA

Have you--Could you spare me a little money--
a few dollars?

WANDA

(Exploding wildly)

Money! Money! Can't you find anything else to speak to me about except money? Where'd I get money from this time of week--I just gave you all I had payday!

ELLA

(Hurt)

Well, you needn't shout at me.

WANDA

I'm sorry, Mama. But you know I've no money.

ELLA

I wouldn't've asked you. But you know your father's still on strike....²

Earlier in the play--after she has made her announcement to quit school--we see a problem of a different type she has with her grandmother:

MRS. BROOKS

She needs slapping down!

WANDA

I'm no longer a child, Grandma!

MRS. BROOKS

You hear that, Ella!

(Outraged)

Oh, if you was only mine. I'd take you down a button hole lower.

WANDA

But I happen not to be yours, Grandma!

MRS. BROOKS

**Ella, are you goin' stand there and let her
sass me like this?³**

Under these special circumstances, it is difficult to imagine maintaining any spiritual control over the young people in the family. The imperfect, unjust world crashes into the young people's sensibilities at an early age and the parents, the role models, the primary representatives of moral authority are consequently emasculated, stripped of their authority all too soon in their young confused, often angered eyes. Foolish, often extreme, choices are then made by the youths leading to untoward, often tragic consequences.

This condition, needless to say, becomes worse when the family is African-American...surrounded by anti-African-American conditions.

Wanda is brought to shame as a result of her choices but she had been, at the same time, able to help her family out, warding off the inevitable disaster of eviction. This is at least some consolation to her but not enough. The stigma of her nocturnal activities is too strong a negative. When she is about to be found out in front of her family, particularly her mother and grandmother, she shows her real feelings in her reaction.

PHILIP

(Aware at last that something is wrong
but unable to restrain himself)
She [Claudine, Wanda's best friend] said Wanda got
caught in a raid last night-

JUANITA

A raid?

PHILIP

(Going on)
-with some white man named Hogan. But for us not
to worry because the woman who runs the place was
going to get her out on bond this morning.
(The family is stunned.)

MRS. BROOKS

(Outraged, scandalized)
Caught in a raid with a white man! I knowed it! I
knowed it!--I warned you, Ella. I told you-

LES

Hush, Grandma, for God's sakes-

MRS. BROOKS

Don't you tell me to hush-- Claudine never would-er
been hidin' out there three o'clock in the mornin' if
there wasn't somethin' to this-

LES

Awh, that's ridiculous, Grandma. If the police had
caught them, don't you see Claudine couldn't've been
here!

PHILIP

(Blurting)
Claudine said they would've caught her too, if she
hadn't jumped out of the window!

ELLA

(Striding to foot of stairs, and
calling imperiously)

Wanda! You come down here!

VIC

(Loyally, though dreadingly)

I can't believe Wanda's mixed up in anything like this.

JUANITA

(As WANDA creeps down)

Give her a chance, Ella!

(In silence they watch as girl comes down)

ELLA

(Coldly)

Where were you last night?

WANDA

(Frightened)

I--I just told you--Me and Claudine--

ELLA

(Sharply)

I want the truth!

WANDA

(Glancing around, like a cornered animal)

I'm telling you, Mama!

ELLA

Didn't you just get out of jail?

WANDA

(Desperately)

No, no--Who said that?

(To LES, accusingly)

Les, did you--

(She catches herself)

ELLA
(Shooting in the dark)
Oh, so you were!

WANDA
(Striding to LES, she strikes him across
the mouth)
Take that, Big-mouth!
(LES turns away and all are silent in their
pain.)

JUANITA
Lord, have mercy, Wanda. He didn't do it. It was
Philip.

WANDA
Philip?

JUANITA
Yes.

WANDA
(Quietly)
I'm sorry, Les.

LES
Forget it.

ELLA
Is it true, too, you were laying up with a white man?

WANDA
(On the verge of tears)
You had to have the money, Mama-
(Pathetically, her eyes search their faces
for a sign of understanding, and she utters
with a sob)
What could I do?
(Unable to face their stony silence, she
lingers for a moment, then runs above to hide
her shame)⁴

As stated earlier, the Garveyites were basically Victorian in their value system and were staunchly opposed to any kind of miscegenation, holding to a strict special kind of morality in their dealings with women and in their women's dealings with men. (Despite the normal amount of affairs that take place in any organization--Garvey himself had two extra-marital affairs in his time which ultimately contributed to bringing a great deal of trouble to him--many of their modern descendants, like the Black Panthers, were less "hypocritical" in this area.)

So Vic, already mired in the anxiety of an imminent eviction, is devastated by this turn of events. His moral authority has been undercut by seeing his family come to this state. A kind of paralysis has thus come over him and he can only react weakly. Part of him wants to support his daughter. Part of him (the Victorian, purity-of-race Garveyite side) would like to give her a strong scolding. Events, however, have gotten beyond him. He can only react tacitly, helplessly.

Finally, there is the increasingly overt scorn of his wife:

VIC

(Angrily)

I suppose you think I should use that tainted money!

(ELLA whirls)

JUANITA

I thought she borrowed it!

VIC

We were all fools enough to think so--the little tramp!

ELLA

**(Outraged, her old animosity surging up
to condemn him, she extracts roll of money
and hurls it into his face)**

Here! You take this! It belongs to you!

JUANITA

**(Stepping between them, admonishingly)
Oh, Ella--for Heaven's sake!**

ELLA

**(As VIC stands bewildered)
Get out of my way, and don't tell me nothing!**

CAROLINE

**Mama, Mama, please!
(PERCY enters, half drunk and unshaven)**

ELLA

**(Raging)
Calling somebody a tramp! Who made her a tramp?**

JUANITA

Don't Ella!

ELLA

**(Storming)
Who started her on the road to hell?--You! You!**

DAN

No, Ella. It was just fate!

ELLA

**(Seizing the idea)
It was fate all right. Fate from the day she
was born--With something less than a black
fool for a father she was booked for the gutter!**

VIC

(Bowed beneath the impact as one before a fatal blow)

Yeah!...

(PERCY sobers)

JUANITA

(Catching his pain)

Oh, Ella. How can you say such a cruel thing?

ELLA

You ask me how? I'll tell you how. Because I'm sick to death of him, that's how! I thought I had enough when he talked like he did about Mama. But now that I've lived to see my child ruined on account of his stupidity, there's nothing I'd like better than to see him dead!

PERCY

(Angrily to VIC)

You going to stand there and let her talk to you like that?

VIC

(groaning)

That's all right, Ella. It's all right-⁵

Vic, however will not be beaten down. There remains a strength in him, characteristic of the black male protagonists in the plays of this period. It is a curious irony that, at a time when oppression of blacks is at its greatest, the male characters created for plays by black playwrights evidence greater inner strength than those in later plays when the grip of Jim Crow upon the land has weakened. The inner strength seems to have

been replaced by greater outward anger and neuroticism which can be taken as signs of lesser inner strength. Are the playwrights fantasizing? Or has the lessening of oppression taken the need for this strength away and allowed the verbal expression of rage greater freedom? Is it possible that today's playwright has greater freedom to get at truths of character and interdynamics former times did not permit?

How would Walter Lee Younger (of Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun) or Bigger Thomas (of Richard Wright's and Paul Green's Native Son) have stood up under the verbal assault by Ella? Both would have bolted to the streets. Troy Maxson (of August Wilson's Fences) receives no less forceful an invective from his wife when she learns that a heretofore unknown girlfriend of his is pregnant with his baby. How do the reactions of Troy and Vic compare?

Both men had put their families at risk with their actions--Vic's, economic, Troy's, psychological. Both are headstrong in their positions but while Vic has the power of righteous indignation, convinced of the correctness of his cause, Troy is inwardly contrite about his transgression, maintaining only an outward facade of nonchalance (impassivity). Both have lost their wives at this moment but Troy is stoic and accepting, seemingly unmoved; Vic is deeply hurt, crushed, almost destroyed. Both die, "wifeless," but Rose, Troy's wife, makes the magnanimous gesture of raising Troy's love child while Ella, Vic's wife, can only posthumously

forgive him and mourn him.

These consequences are both cause of and reaction to the special circumstances surrounding the deaths of these characters. The portrayal of Vic is still within the realm of romantic realism. He remains stalwart and strong-willed. Playwright Theodore Ward does not get too far into the inner world of his protagonist. By the time we get to August Wilson's Troy Maxson, the playwright's presentation of his protagonist has become more naturalistic, allowing the audience to glimpse more of the neuroticism and anger of the character.

If there is a difference what does that say about the development of the inner world of the black American male down through the years? If not, is this quality something generic that will never change no matter what the conditions?

Vic mobilizes. He sends Les out to get his friends, the Reds, to help them when the bailiffs come. Les does so, taking with him his white Jewish friend, Pitzer, a young Communist. This is the very antithesis of what Garveyism purports, an international and interracial brotherhood gathered for the purposes of opposing the injustices of society and helping out the poor and oppressed. Though their aims coincide, Garvey does not like the Communist's way. They are too ideological, too abstract while attempting to address themselves to the lumpenproletarian masses. Somehow, something in their language does not reach from this

abstraction into the heart of the African-American with his special needs and special history. There is no real understanding here.

To Garvey, some whites are all right as are some black intellectuals. Basically, however, they are not to be trusted. They have their own agendas. Only the ragtag and bobtail can be relied upon. That Garvey himself is not that well educated a man plays into this as well. Like many great leaders, he depends on the adhesive of mysticism and race mythology to cement and generate the thrust of his movement in those he aims mainly at--the lower economic, uneducated classes. Those who are educated who do not fall into his wave do not count in his eyes. They are "white educated," to him. Those who do, of course, are welcome. Vic is one of the latter.

At such an extreme time as an imminent eviction of his family from their home, this represents a major step for Vic...though it is too late in the eyes of Ella. Proud of his membership in the Garvey Movement--despite what the unhappy news is telling him (the debacle of the Black Star Shipping Line and Garvey's arrest)--he is swept up in the joy of his involvement. He wears his gaudy British-military-like Garveyite uniform with great pride and occupies his position as officer (captain) accordingly. Now he violates one of the organization's prime rules: he turns to white socialists for help.

Garvey had once turned to the Ku Klux Klan for help, oddly enough,

since both their goals were to get the African American back to Africa and away from the United States. The attempted collaboration did not work out but he still got into a great deal of trouble for the attempt, losing many outraged supporters and emboldening many of his enemies.⁶

For Vic, his is an act which, at the same time, brings about the stoppage of the eviction and, tragically, his death.

Could it be that, to playwright Theodore Ward, fanaticism and intransigence lead to death? What is the effect of a naturalistic play taking such a melodramatic turn? Is he saying something about the nature of black life in America during the Garvey years? Is he paralleling the turbulent history of Marcus Garvey and his movement with the fate of the Mason family? Why does Dan, the somewhat villainous black capitalist--facing his own personal disaster--end up reasonably intact while the faithful Vic is destroyed? Why does Percy, livid, shake his fist at the policemen who have shot his brother before subsiding into muted rage? Why does Les, falling into the interracial arms of the Reds, appear to be saved? Broadway critics, reeling from the geopolitical and psychological implications of the Stalin-Hitler non-aggression pact were displeased with that fact as they were also displeased with the overall political nature of the play's various themes.⁷ Was this play an anti-Garveyism morality play or a pro-Stalinist-socialist tract?

It was neither that nor a pro-communism tract. It was, rather, an

indictment of a society which makes a Garvey Movement so necessary and possible for such a large number of disfranchised people.

Was the character of Wanda--as well as of Ella, Mrs. Brooks and Juanita--a warning to African-American males about the effects on families of foolish prideful breadwinner decisions come to and adhered to here in America? Was the play a warning to African-American males of the damaging effects of failure to protect their families? Was it about dreams sought after by frustrated heads of households-- whether they are attainable or not--disregarding the needs and concerns of those closest to them, their dependents, the women of the household? It was, to be sure, a caution to black males to beware of folly in pursuing their dreams but it was also a celebration of their quest for their dreams.

Much later in history, the men will lose this power to make their choices so affective in the lives of the family's women. Economic circumstances, the growing numbers of women in the work force, the increasing post-Civil Rights disfranchisement of the males, and the growth of single parent, female-headed households will become the order of the day.

At the time this play takes place, however, can any black male make any other kind of decision than Vic's, Les's, Dan's or Percy's in this country and bring about different results or effects on the household?

CHAPTER TWO
BIGGER THOMAS IN THE FLESH--IS THE
THEATRE AUDIENCE READY FOR HIM?
NATIVE SON--AN ADAPTATION OF
RICHARD WRIGHT'S NOVEL BY
RICHARD WRIGHT AND PAUL GREEN

The Great Depression of the Thirties was nearing its end. Hitler and the Axis Powers were marching over their vulnerable neighbors and America was preparing for war. African-American protest against the injustice and discrimination that marred African-American life was growing increasingly vocal. Because of this protest, because war was imminent and because of a number of other sociohistoric factors, many barriers to African-American progress were falling. One beneficiary of this, the black male, was becoming more assertive. The NAACP was increasingly active and efficacious; CORE was soon to come into being to be followed by other Civil Rights organizations. What had been unspoken, latent and a given--the black man's "place" in American society, the protest against which would soon explode upon the land in a paroxysm of enraged outcry--was now becoming harder to maintain by the power structure.¹

In this context, in 1940, Richard Wright's successful novel Native Son was published. Subsequently, in 1941, Orson Welles, always the daring

showman, approached Paul Green, a white regional playwright from the South, about adapting the novel to the stage and presenting it on Broadway.

In the adaptation by Paul Green and Richard Wright (Green had requested that Wright be present during the adaptation process), more than just the form underwent change. There were major factors to be considered. Instead of a lone reader vicariously going through the novel's adventures and misadventures in the confines of his living room, there would now be a physically present theatre audience (mostly white, apprehensive about the rapid deterioration of international politics, to whom the "negro" was not at the moment a visible presence in the land). If the novel's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, were to be made palatable on the three dimensional, flesh-and-blood stage, Wright and Green would have to aim for bringing out more of Bigger's ostensive humanity than was brought out in the novel. The novel admittedly had the advantage of long passages of character analysis, along with the narrative, to help the reader understand the emotional whirlwinds in Bigger. The play, because of its special representational stage requirements, had to depend on other more physically visual ways of bringing out its hero's humanity.

What is more, the novel's analytical passages investigating Bigger's inner being, his thoughts and fears, could not be done as such on the stage because the emotional impact of any acrimonious thought that

manifested itself there would be tremendously more powerful and possibly overwhelming to the audience. Dramatic power is most effective not when it inundates the audience but when it leaves people in the theatre some room to handle and control its impact. Otherwise, the audience merely turns off, tunes out and shuts down. The required catharsis of pity and fear does not obtain. What is more, too many long speeches--which the above would require--would be boring. The result would be another kind of audience turnoff.

This is not to say that Bigger would be an ideal Aristotelian tragic hero. There is too much not to admire in this character and the Aristotelian hero must capture some admiration from the audience if that audience is to experience fully the catharsis resulting from the tragedy as intended by the playwright. Wright and Green could only aim their character in that direction as much as they could. The novel's tragedy depended on the strong feelings of terror, sympathy and empathy experienced by the reader in the solitude of the living room, in a reclining chair, or in the bed before sleep. To a large degree, it succeeded. The play's tragedy, however, depended on a communal experience in a theatre or hall, whose audience was largely not of the ethnicity of the protagonist. Whatever, at least some sympathy would be desirable enough.

There were other problems to overcome. Bigger, in the stage version, was given greater responsibility for his destiny than was the case in the

novel. True, in the novel--already existentialist and determinist in form and theme--Bigger grows to this at the end. On the stage, this sense of responsibility was enhanced. This would increase his "humanness" and not alienate the audience as much. To emphasize Bigger's helpless victimness would increase the sense of guilt in the audience and therefore their hostility. This was definitely not the effect Wright and Green sought. Thus, little changes were made in the play's adaptation from the novel to downplay Bigger as symbol-victim-monster and bring out Bigger more as human individual.

Furthermore, Wright's novel was naturalistic in form. This meant that the play adaptation and its production would require strong representational naturalistic elements within its cinematically presentational form. Since naturalism deals with the human individual struggling against the forces besieging him, trapped within his sociological and genetic heritage, the protagonist's humanity would have to be emphasized on the stage. The humanity within a realistic or naturalistic form comes forth much more effectively as real than as symbol. Humanity deals with emotions, passions. Symbolism deals with ideas, abstraction and mood. After, any accompaniment symbolic meaning can be connoted. Its central thesis is always there.

One way to make Bigger less a monster was to reduce the amount of on-stage violence. Such horrifying scenes--which would be almost

unbearable for an audience to witness in the flesh before them--as the dismembering and burning of Mary Dalton's body and the bludgeoning to death of Bessie² would have to be changed. By presenting Mary's murder as Bigger's nightmare remembrance, it was made less present, less immediate, more remote. The shock to the audience would be diluted.

This is true also of the intense intrinsic sexuality of the scene. Audiences were not ready yet to experience the sexual electricity between a white woman and a black man, that was at the center of this scene in Mary's bedroom. In the novel, both Mary and Bigger appeared to be losing control of their sexual selves as he was endeavoring to put her to bed while she was in her drunken state. In the novel, Bigger was aroused by her scent and her closeness. Such a moment was technically beyond the stage's ability to present and psychologically beyond the audience's ability to receive, though in the novel there was a dreamlike aura in the prose narrating it. Hence, the sexual tension of the stage scene was conveyed with a minimum of physical sexual contact. Ironically, while this sexuality might have helped the play at the box office, it might have killed the play with the public.³

Furthermore, it is Mary Dalton who is the more sexually aggressive in the play. Although in the novel she offers little resistance to his almost inadvertent sexual attentions, in the play she touches his hair and cheek as Bigger struggles to free himself from her so that he can put her to bed.

This shifts the weight of aggression from Bigger to her and therefore makes him less the object of hostility in the eyes of the white males in the audience.

In Bigger's scenes with his sweetheart Clara (Bessie in the novel), Wright and Green endeavored to make him less of a monster.

First, her name is changed from Bessie (Elizabeth which means: God is [my] oath.) to Clara (she who lives an austere life). This would help make her seem less the victim than she is in the novel and therefore her "murder" by Bigger would be less monstrous. In the novel, after she and Bigger have sex, he, feeling that she presents as great a threat to him as everyone else, bludgeons her head with a brick, just as he had the intruding rat at the novel's beginning, which appeared to threaten his family. In the play, this moment would be too horrible for the audience to watch and would make him truly a monster in their eyes. Still, that he is a murderer now, having crossed that line, must be clearly established. The pattern of his violent murderous behavior must be maintained.

He kills Clara by whirling her around while she is embraced in one of his arms so that her body stands between him and the approaching police who are shooting at him. She gets the bullets, falls to his feet and dies.

BIGGER

Yeh. In front of me, and they shot you--All right, goddammit, I killed you.

(Wagging his head)

Yeh. I said I would. I said so.⁴

Yet, in the stage play, Bigger actually treats Clara with greater kindness, compassion, affection and tenderness than in the novel. This makes her death all the more tragic and him that much less an abusive monster.

Other names were changed as well to prevent confusions during rehearsals and the confusions that can happen in the special theatrical experience. Bertha Thomas, Bigger's mother, became Hannah (in the Old Testament, the mother of Samuel who, because of her vow, was given to the service of the temple as a child, just as Bigger was given to the service of the Daltons), and Boris (too Russian sounding, too Communist) Max, Bigger's lawyer, became Edward Max.

Also, Bigger is that much less disrespectful of his mother's importunities. Any male character who is disrespectful of his mother in any way--unless there is a special psychodramatic purpose within the play's design--tends to lose the sympathy of the audience.

The story concerns Bigger Thomas, a twenty-year-old black youth from Mississippi, who lives with his mother, younger sister and brother in a rat-infested room somewhere in Chicago's black ghetto. Bigger is full of envy, fear and hatred for those around him, for himself, and particularly for white people in control of the society in which he must live and work, who own the neighborhood houses and stores, who get most of the education and job opportunities, and who deny the same free movement to black

people. Bigger, however, also hates African-Americans because they occupy inferior positions in America and the intolerant American part of him makes him hate them. To hide from the awareness of his inability to assist his fatherless family (his father had been killed in the south), he erects a wall between himself and them. Moreover, because he cannot completely hide his own impotence from himself, he hates himself.⁵

This was a formidable protagonist to present to an audience already concerned with Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo, "over there," brandishing their rages at the world. So the rage and villainy of Bigger, "over here," had to be toned down. Words of rage on a written page were one thing; words spewed from a baleful face and hatred-twisted mouth on the stage were another.

He is hired as a chauffeur by the Daltons, wealthy white "liberals" who derive part of their fortune from the very slum houses Bigger's family and neighbors live in. He is assigned to drive the Dalton's daughter, Mary, to her evening classes at the University of Chicago. The adventurous Mary, however, makes Bigger take her to a meeting with her Communist sweetheart, Jan, who tries to enlist the uneasy Bigger in the Party. Mary gets drunk and Bigger, at the end of the evening, finds himself with the chore of taking her home. He helps her to her bedroom where her blind mother surprises him. Fearing that he might be discovered and accused of rape, he covers Mary's face with a pillow to prevent her from responding

to her mother's questions, and accidentally smothers her. After a subsequent chase during which his sweetheart Clara (Bessie, in the novel) is killed by a policeman, he is caught, tried and executed.⁶ (Bigger had raped and killed her in the novel; in the play, he uses her as a shield when the cops shoot at him, which is more cold-blooded than violent.)

Paul Green's adaptation of this work (with Richard Wright looking on approvingly) transformed the character of Bigger Thomas and the theme. Bigger was humanized and made less fearful, less brutal, less cold-blooded, less anomalous, less violent. In the novel, Bigger fights his black friends to prevent himself from realizing that he is too cowardly to rob a white man (reaction-formation⁷); in the play, his temper is the only reason for his fight, something that is more true of the average person and more acceptable:

BIGGER

(Yelling)

Look out! There come the fighter planes!

(Frantically pulling his
pistol.)

Cold steel! Watch the turn--Put
it through the navel.

(The three BOYS look at
him and then spring back in
fear, their playful spirit
suddenly gone.)

G.H.

Great God!

GUS

(Pointing)

Look, he's got a gun! I knowed it.

(BIGGER continues to aim about him. The OTHERS mumble in half fear.)

BIGGER

(Hunching out his shoulder and running at JACK who dodges him.)

Crash him! Crash him!

GUS

(Throwing out his hands.)

Put up that gun, fool!

BIGGER

(Whirling and leveling the gun at GUS.)

Ride into 'em or I'll shoot your lights out.

(He gives a high wild laugh.)

G.H.

Bigger, for Christ's sake! Somebody'll see you!

GUS

I told you he's crazy! Now just look at him!

BIGGER

(Advancing upon GUS with gun leveled.)

You sonofabitch, don't you call me crazy!

GUS

(Backing away toward the other two boys, who stare at him silently.)

He's yellow. He's scared to rob a white man, that how come he brung that gun.

(He moves behind JACK.)

I told you to leave him out of it.

(BIGGER puts up his gun and suddenly shoots out his hand, seizes GUS by the collar and bangs his head against the wall.)

BIGGER

(His face working in violent rage, as he pulls his knife.)

I don't need no gun. Yellow, hunh?

(Pushing the knife against GUS's stomach.)

Take it back.

JACK

That ain't no way to play, Bigger.

BIGGER

Who the hell said I was playing?

GUS

Please, Bigger, I just joking. Oh, you hurt me.

BIGGER

(His lips snarled back over his teeth.)

Want me to cut your belly button out?

G.H.

Aw, leave him alone, Bigger.

BIGGER

Put your hands up. Way up!

(GUS swallows and stretches his hands high along the wall. He stares out with wide frightened eyes, and sweat begins to trickle down his temples. His lips hang open and loose.)

GUS

(In a tense whisper.)

Bigger!

BIGGER

(Pressing the point of the knife deeper against the belly.)

Take it back. Say "I'm a lying sonofabitch."

GUS

(With a moan.)

Quit!

BIGGER

Say it, say it.

G.H.

(Staring horrified at him.)

For Christ's sake, Bigger!....⁸

• • • • •

BIGGER

Next time you whimper on me I'm gonna kill you. Now scat.

(Hissing.)

You ain't gonna be in on robbing old Blum. I'll take your share of the haul.

BIGGER (CONT'D)

(He starts at GUS again, who gazes wildly around him a moment and then flies out of the scene at the right. The noise of the city rolls in across the scene as they are silent.)

Goddammit, somebody say something!....⁹

Up to this point, there had been no African-American male character presented on stage with as much ferocity and determination. The character Abraham in Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom could possibly have been an early preparation in that direction or a contributing model, but no character had quite attained the level of Bigger Thomas.

Granted, the play has the novel as its source and the adapting playwright is confined to the perimeters of the source; still, the demands of the Broadway world of that time were that such ferocity be tempered and that all the concomitant dynamics be adjusted to this change in character. In the zeitgeist of that time, with the Afro-American male more "in his place," with Jim Crow patterns more overt and widespread, the frustration of Bigger and his resultant anger--so vividly and poignantly presented in the novel--were, in the play, more suppressed and replaced by other softer behavior.

This would affect how Bigger's family relationships were portrayed in the play. The dynamics would show in a less overt manner the distrust,

the muted anger, the alienation, the isolation, the brutality--the differences being qualitative. Still, somehow, with the added dimensions of a stage presentation (and an actor like Canada Lee), the primal intensity would definitely come through.

In the first scene we witness the morning rituals of the Thomas family and their interaction:

HANNAH

(She begins singing her shrill morning song as she works.)

Life is like a mountain railroad
With an engineer that's brave--
We must make the run successful
From the cradle to the grave.

BIGGER

(Muttering from his pallet.)

How the hell can a man sleep with all this racket?

VERA

(A little testily.)

Sleep--who'd want to sleep when the rest
of us got to work so hard?

BIGGER

(Growling.)

Yeah, start right in soon's I git my eyes
open!

(He covers his head with
the quilt again.)

HANNAH!

Leave him alone, Vera.

VERA

It's the truth, Ma. He ought to be up looking for that job.

HANNAH

Well, he's got his application in down at the employment agency.

VERA

But he ought to get out--hunt for work-- maybe ask that truck man to take him back, and we can have something for Christmas.

BIGGER

(Sitting suddenly up.)

And him sassing at me?....

VERA

Thought it was you sassing at him?

BIGGER

You go to-

HANNAH

Maybe you better get up, son.

BIGGER

Might as well--all the tongues clanging like fire bells....¹⁰

Here, we get to watch Bigger interacting with his mother and sister and from this we can infer what his attitudes toward women are and will be in the future. Though the novel begins with Bigger's battle with the rat which has come into the room, Wright and Green choose to spend this time leisurely observing the character Bigger in his primary culture. For

instance, in the play, when he kills the rat he holds the creature's body up by the tail like a trophy and calls it Mr. Dalton, the white man who owns the building his family and he live in along with the other buildings in the Black Belt on Chicago's South Side. This moment not only metaphorically reveals Bigger's hate-filled attitudes toward the white world, it also shows how prone he is to murderous violence.

The novel, through interior monologues and emotional narrative, can, within its scope, take time to present a fuller characterization to the thinking reader. The stage, however, leaves the authors only the extrinsic melodramatic action to work with so they must seize opportunities like this for character revelation and make the most of them. The performance dynamics contribute the rest.

No sooner is Bigger up, than his sister begins riding him about one thing or another: in this case his inability or unwillingness to seek work and help the family out. He and Vera spar with invisible swords while their single parent, beleaguered careworn mother, Hannah, uncomfortably acts as referee. The scene bears a slight resemblance to the opening of another Chicago-based play to come later, A Raisin in the Sun.

The male is forever under siege by the women in the house--the sister, the wife, the mother--and even when one is taking up for him she, too, is in a final sense besieging him. Something is expected of him which he isn't fulfilling or he desires something which is out of synch with the

wants, needs or rhythms of the rest of the family.

Bigger's younger twelve-year-old brother Buddy, the other male in the family, is not old enough yet to be initiated into the special rites of passage due him in the family. He is still closer to the periphery and, as such, is still, in his thinking and perceiving, within the realm of traditionalism, the status quo, though he still admires his surly older brother. Therefore, his youth allows his foibles to be tolerated just as in the case of Travis, Walter Lee's son in A Raisin. Instead, his relationships serve as a kind of contrast to Bigger's, pointing up all the more how combative and negative the vibrations to the older brother are from the women in the house.

Though Buddy observes this process, he idolizes his brother. Does this mean there is another Bigger in the making? Or will he go another way?

BUDDY
(Piping up.)

Bigger says we ain't got nothing to smile about, says that's what's wrong with the niggers--with the Negroes--always smiling, and nothing to smile about....¹¹

He uses the epithet "nigger"¹² and then corrects himself with the then more ethnomorphically accepted word. Doubtless, he understands both the right thing and the wrong thing. Perhaps someday he will cease bothering. There were other factors not to be ignored. What material

would the reigning cultural mandarins allow through? What style? What forms? Was there enough interest in the Afrocentric experience to allow, for instance, a Chekhovian kind of portrayal or a Shavian, Wildean wit to color the portrayed interpersonal dynamics? What of the *avant-garde*?

After all, the audiences who attend this kind of play, even those perceived as having a "liberal bent," might not be "ready" for certain kinds of portrayals other than what has been customary, fitting the current image mythology. Poet Paul Laurence Dunbar enjoyed his greatest successes when he wrote his poetry in what was then considered southern Afro-American dialect. When he wrote his poetry in traditional, formal classical English, his work was summarily dismissed.¹³

Green, Wright and Welles had the delimiting perimeters of the times, the terrors and accepted stereotyped images of their day, the specific needs and conventions of the Broadway stage, the then current prejudices of their audiences through which to bring Wright's "truths" into the open. Though much of that was diluted and tempered, they still presented a new force to the audience and from that a series of new archetypes would emerge.

CHAPTER THREE
PROMISED LAND DYNAMICS
TAKE A GIANT STEP
BY LOUIS PETERSON

World War II was over. The fascist Axis forces had been crushed. The "good guys" had won and The United States had emerged as the major power in the world into the bargain. Heavyweight Champion Joe Louis had been right when he had predicted that the Allies would win because "God was on our side." In the period just after 1945, there was good feeling in the air.

The developing events in the Far East were causes of some concern admittedly. Senator Joe McCarthy and his paranoid cronies were running amok and the Warsaw Pact nations had become a solid, if reluctant, block.

Major league baseball had its first African-American ballplayer in Jackie Robinson and had its first African-American borough president, Hulan Jack. A magnificent novel by Ralph Ellison entitled, The Invisible Man had been published. The word "integration" had replaced "tolerance" as the watchword of the day. The Supreme Court school desegregation decision and the Civil Rights Movement were on the horizon; and America was soon to learn that all was not as well as it thought in its back yard.

In 1953, a young black playwright named Louis Peterson presented a

play entitled, Take A Giant Step. It was about a middle-class Afro-American family in the suburbs where the Thomas family could never even dream of moving. In the postwar, economically thriving, integration-oriented American society, it was now possible to present on the stage and in literature an Afro-American family that was not in tatters, not being persecuted by a hostile white society. The prejudice was in the surrounding air; it always would be; that was a given. Now, however, it would not be so blatant and therefore not so in apparent need of counterdefense. Now black playwrights could concentrate on other problems--adolescence, developing libido, rite of passage. The Afro-American middle-class family could have the same family values as a white middle-class family: that is, cleanliness, industry, discipline, cohesion and education as routes leading to achievement and success. This is not to say that lower class Afro-American families did not have these same values. Many of them, in fact, had them even more intensely than the higher classes--they had to, to survive. The old stereotypes rendered the American public ready only to deal with old ideas about blacks, however, because it was more comforting to contemplate the dynamics involved, less threatening.¹ Crime and violence were associated, after all, only with the lower class. Adolescent hi-jinks was the term used to describe any rebellion coming from the middle-class--defined mainly in terms of income, values held and life style.

Moreover, the lower class was considered more "Afro-American," more akin to "soul." It was closer to slavery, the major historico-cultural event in the Afro-American experience. The middle and upper classes were the territories exclusive only to whites. Devoid of the associated deprivation and suffering, these "privileged" areas and their implicit value systems had roots deeply embedded in the Protestant and Puritan ethic. (These values the "heathens" brought over from Africa had to be "taught," notwithstanding that they had already had them, named differently by a then unknown West African culture). The world of seemingly infinite possibilities was opened to them.

They were acceptable, a part of the landscape. Mickey Rooney, Van Johnson, Tom Drake, Lon McCallister, the comic strip character Archie Andrews and their like were the desired symbols capturing the enthusiasm of the American psyche, both Afro-American and white. This was "Quintessential America!"

The lower classes, as in all other cultures which contained the three levels, were to be kept hidden, out of sight. Mickey Rooney might leave his middle class "Andy Hardy" haven to play a lower class tough because it was always the mission of the middle class to "help out" in the cause of the plight of the underprivileged. Though it always impressed the masses, people were happier, however, when he stayed "in his class."

The lower classes were for tragedies, for making leftist statements

about unfairness, injustice, and social pathology. Here, therefore, is where Afro-Americans belonged. They belonged with the dirt, degradation and misfortune, to be brought out and shown only when America's conscience needed buffing, when Americans needed to be reminded that racial progress was not fast enough.

When an Afro-American family did make it into the suburbs (and there were many who did--along with the many who had already had long roots established there), they ventured into alien land. They did not belong there. They were freaks. At worst, they were burned out and chased away. Here, there is not the fear-wracked tension of *Bigger Thomas*. Here, there is now the angst of being somewhere but not quite "belonging," the experience, whether felt or not, of the Scott family in Louis Peterson's play Take A Giant Step.

Spencer Scott (Spence), the protagonist, a proud sensitive Afro-American boy of seventeen years, comes home from high school in a mostly white Connecticut town and tells his grandmother (Grandma), who is affectionate to him and understanding--who is in fact his best friend--that he has been suspended for sassing a white teacher and smoking a cigar in the bathroom.

In addition to this, he feels that his white playmates don't completely accept him. So, in effect, he resigns from their company by giving them his baseball equipment and stamp collection. This is his final divestiture of

everything that had to do with his relationship with them. They are rejecting him subtly--so he feels. He will reject them symbolically and even the score, like the spurned fiancée giving back the engagement ring. He need not just let it happen to him. He will participate in the process.

He wanders into a bar in the black section of town and overhears the conversation of three prostitutes who are trying to raise money. He attempts to connect with one woman but learns that she is married to an overworked man who is seldom home and that she must seek the company of other men to fill her lonely days and evenings. He has \$2.39 so one of the prostitutes, Violet, takes him to her room where she is willing to give herself to him for all he has, but Spencer is innocent of her intent. He is beginning to feel ill and doesn't even want to talk. The outraged Violet demands all his money but refunds him a dime for fare back home.

Later that evening he returns home where his waiting father berates him while his somewhat disconcerted, put upon mother looks on and his grandmother kibitzes, to his father's annoyance. Only the grandmother sticks up for Spencer who finally confesses his misadventures at school. His father strikes him when he opens his mouth a little too much to his mother, and sends him upstairs.

This brings the grandmother forward to berate her daughter and son-in-law and explain everything that has been happening inside and

around Spencer in recent times: the loneliness, the rejection by the neighborhood youths because of the demands of puberty and the restrictions of racism, and his pride.

After she finishes and returns upstairs to her room, this only real friend of Spencer's dies of a heart attack, thus completing his misery.

It turns out that he has pneumonia and for two weeks he suffers it in his bedroom before the beginning of his slow recovery under the ministrations of a hired girl, Christine, older than he is, who shows sympathy for him and understanding of his miseries--chief of which is being black in a white man's world--and even complies with his adolescent wish for a first sexual experience. His mother, learning of this, dismisses her.

Unbeknownst to him, his mother has asked his old playmates--all white--in for ice cream and cake. The reunion is a youthful and friendly one until someone inadvertently mentions a hayride that is being planned. Spencer realizes again that he does not fully belong--that he cannot go on hayrides with white girls--and again he sends his friends away. But now he has taken his giant step toward growing up. He has decided to accept his life as it is and to make the most of it. He will go back to school and obey his teachers, and some day he will go on to college.

As we can see, sensitivity in the character Spencer Scott is a little more now than in Bigger Thomas but his environment is much different.

At this time, Chicago is a more direct link--for black and white migration--from the Jim Crow south than sunny suburban Connecticut is and though racism exists everywhere, it exists in varying degrees and forms. Thus the emotional reactions, motivations and dynamics will be different.

Still, there is anger in Spencer, as in Bigger, but the anger is less overt just as the surrounding racism is less overt, more tied to grating ignorance. His buddies do not share the same despair that Bigger's buddies do. They are white, coming from a different perspective, and they are more innocent of the world's evils--though not completely (their anti-Semitism is portrayed as too blatant). Spencer's understanding is not complete but then again neither is Bigger's, though the latter's is more deeply felt, more paralyzing.

Spencer's sensitivity, on the other hand, is more acute. Nowhere does Bigger have a relationship with anyone such as Spencer has with his grandmother and later with Christine--mock combative but with an underlying warmth. He constantly reaches out to people in his loneliness. He is not afraid to bare himself to them, to become naked, and he is not afraid to "ask a quarter." He will of course have better relationships with women.

Bigger is too locked up inside himself for this. His only reaching out or baring of himself nakedly is in violent form or at best with sadism. Even

Bigger's relationship with Bessie (Clara) is--while sexual--distant, incomplete, withholding, dismissing, cold. This, of course, she must accept. It would not do for her to "buck his unspoken rules." Ironically, with all the restrictions in his neighborhood, Spencer would still have a better chance of developing a substantial relationship with one of the distancing white girls than Bigger ever would with the importuning, radically liberal Mary Dalton.

Spencer's father is present, also a major factor. To the stereotyped-image-filled American sensibility, the Afro-American father was not there in the bringing up of the child or, if he were, his effect was marginal, a presence dotted with occasional outbursts of arbitrary authoritarianism and violence. The family was his organ for absorbing his frustration-generated, displaced rage from an unaccommodating world. Thus, not being able to develop a mutually affecting relationship with this male adult figure created for the boy a host of problems: in identity, role models, in merely having someone of the same gender to hand down many of the necessary values needed to sustain the developing youth through a very difficult life. Simply because the surrounding society demanded this relationship for the developing ego of the youth to be considered "normal," this gaping lack in his life served only to generate a tremendous rage: toward the outside world, toward his immediate surroundings, toward himself. Thus, criminality and poor performance in education were the

results. Such was the explanation for the "general pathology of the black male."²

Now it was possible to have a new kind of Afro-American male figure on the stage--a provider, a disciplinarian, a man not overwhelmed by the surrounding "white pathology." In fact, at times the character Lem (Spencer's father) seemed unaware of this pathology. Then if this character broke the current dramaturgic rules, the offspring character would become a new dynamic on the stage.

Lem is a man of great pride--an important factor in the Afro-American family. He's suffered the "slings and arrows" of racism in his working life but they have not destroyed him, chased him away or beaten him down. He is there, in a lovely, well-provided home, very much a presence, very much in charge though it sometimes doesn't seem so.

His wife, May, saucy, ironic, somewhat sharp-tongued--though not as tart as her mother (Grandma), supports him, cajoles him, teases him. She is never on the attack. She occasionally "bucks him," tempers him when he is coming on a little too strongly with Spencer, keeps him level. She is not Martha to George; she is Blondie to Dagwood, with greater warmth, sensitivity, complexity. She knows when to retreat, when to stand her ground with her arms folded.

His mother-in-law is sharper in her rebukes of him; occasionally she moves up to the border of "attacking him" when she is running

interference for Spencer. One gets the feeling, however, that just below the surface of her jibes, there is admiration and some tenderness if for no other reason than that he has married her daughter, provided a beautiful home and fathered her beloved Spencer. There is, after all, something common between them: their love for Spencer. It is an unspoken, mutually understood given in their relationship. Lem is stern, impatient, at times authoritarian. He can even resort to violence when pushed to the edge of his endurance by his son but that edge is wide, making him not the classical abusive parent as most Afro-American fathers are depicted. This stance implies enormous strength in him and a considerable amount of control in his life outside his home. He wants respect, obedience, his due; given these, he will bend over backwards to reciprocate in kind or, if circumstances permit, with affectionate overtures.

Immediately after he has struck Spencer and his mother-in-law has told off his wife and him he relents and calls Spencer downstairs to talk to him:

LEM

(his back to stairway,
pretends not to notice
SPENCE; gets up his nerve
and then)

Come on down, Spence.

(SPENCE starts down again....)

We're going to have a little talk.

(SPENCE comes into the room)

Sit down--son.

SPENCE

Thanks, Pop.

(sits on stool)

LEM

Are you comfortable?

SPENCE

Yes, Pop.

LEM

How do you feel?

SPENCE

I feel all right, Pop. I'm a little groggy, but I guess that's from the--

(he pauses)

stuff I've been drinking.

LEM

(moves close to SPENCE)

Serves you right. Now you gotta stop going around doing things like that. You hear? And another thing-- You got to stop talking back to me. If there's one thing that makes me good and damned mad it's talking back. I can't stand it and I won't stand it. It don't show the proper respect. You got that?

SPENCE

Yes, Pop.

GRANDMA

Don't mention it.

SPENCE

You're welcome.

GRANDMA

The pleasure was all mine.

SPENCE

For an old lady--you can sure be plenty
sarcastic when you want to be.³

She is often even more mischievous than Spencer and not completely discouraging of his misadventures and immature reactions. She puts the various masks on in dealing with her son-in-law or with her grandson but beneath these masks there exists that certain tenacity of character. In previous plays, that tenacity would be the dominant factor and there would be no variation engendered by the different family males to be reacted to, they were so powerless. Now the females of the family have to make adjustments to a newer Afro-American male. Sometimes they even have to defer to him.

Still, amidst this transformation of the Afro-American stage image, there were remnant evidences of aspects of his family relationships and self-identity that remained unchanged:

MAY

(to SPENCE)

Go ahead--and see how far you get acting the way you act....Your father's right about you. You're too proud. You think you can go through life being proud, don't you? Well, you're wrong. You're a little black boy--and you don't seem to understand it. But that's what you are. You think

MAY (CONT'D)

this is bad; well, it'll be worse. You'll serve them pink punch and ice cream--and you'll do a lot worse. You'll smile when you feel like crying.

(she begins to cry)

You'll laugh at them when you could put knives right into their backs without giving it a second thought--and you'll never do what you've done and let them know that they've hurt you. They never forgive you for that.

So go on out and learn the lesson....You think it's easy for me to tell my son to crawl when I know he can walk and walk well? I'm sorry I ever had children. I'm sorry you didn't die when you were a baby. Do you hear that? I'm sorry you didn't die.

(she is completely overcome)⁴

Hannah could give the same jeremiad to Bigger, despite her circumstances and education being different. The middle-class Afro-American may have escaped the ghetto but the escape could never be complete.

As the Afro-American gained in his rights, the black playwrights perceived a universe of shades of gray, a universe of non-noble, non-villainous human beings who wrestled with life. They could now be more psychological in portraying characters and relationships.⁵ Bigger Thomas could be more uncouth and cowardly. He could lie, rape and murder (even if accidentally). Spencer could be a sensitive, intelligent young Afro-American who acquires education routinely. Although he discerns a difference between himself and the people whom he encounters

when he seeks companionship in a tavern, for instance, he does not envision himself as a person with a mission (not even as an afterthought). He desires merely to adjust to a society which accepts him intellectually, if not socially.⁶

The above is not to deny the love existent inside Vera and Hannah for Bigger. In the earlier play, it is more deeply buried, almost giving the impression that it is not there at all. There is too much else in this play's environment--rats, degradation, demoralization, frustration, rage. Thus, seeming impassivity is the underlying tone in all the characters. In Bigger himself, this impassivity appears to be even more the case. He is so locked up inside himself, so brimming with rage, that the love, the real sensitivity, seems totally concealed.

Lem, on the other hand, however gruff he may be or annoyed he may become, always has the love vibrating from him, from his words, from his reactions to the things going on in the house. One has the feeling he will have it no other way. In Bigger, one knows, exists the thought: if only I could just escape!

The American theatregoing sensibility, in the midst of a prosperous period, with growing tolerance of differences among men and looking to new vistas, was ready to accept the Scott family and its reluctantly integrated Connecticut community. Lem, after all, is doing all right. He is strong and he seems to be accomplishing his goals and taking care of his

responsibilities effectively. Spencer, with a few detours here and there, will grow up to be a fine man.

The audience will perhaps cluck reproachfully a little at the misbehaving surrounding community (even when playwright Peterson pushes the youthful dynamics of Spencer's friends a little too close to hyperbole). It either squirms uncomfortably, cheers relievedly, or hisses accusingly and with scorn-- projecting its own guilt--at the community surrounding Bigger Thomas, Rachel and Tom Loving, Victor Mason and Spencer Scott, as well as at male African-American figures, before and after.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE RELIGIOUS FACTOR
THE AMEN CORNER
BY JAMES BALDWIN

Religion had been presented by black and white playwrights as the sanctuary for all souls besieged by the iniquitous vagaries of their respective communities. To the point, any African-American character presented on the stage in a religious context was in safe territory--physically or spiritually. The social misfortunes visited upon these characters in their lives could be soothed over by an affirmed connection with God. Evil thoughts and reactions were "washed away" by the state of grace. In the opposite state, evil prevailed. Thus, according to myth, anyone inside religion was good; anyone outside was evil. This is how it had to be. How else could the correct values be conveyed? Why else were people "saved"?

On the stage it was possible for a white religious person to succumb to evil, to "cross to the other side" in works like W. Somerset Maugham's Rain, Arthur Miller's The Crucible, or Tennessee Williams' The Night of the Iguana, but many of these were works from another cultural context, from another form whose freedom of expression derived from the private experiencing of the work. The modern theatre was inching toward the concept that there could be evil inside the church or, if not evil, at least

sin, hamartia, intrigue, hubris, misapprehension, cant, hypocrisy. The theatre has always been behind the novel, short story and poem in grappling with the complex realities of the world. The requirements of the communal experience combined with commerciality and sociopolitics has impeded its ability to keep up.

What is more, in dealing with the above elements in the church, the Eurocentric stage looked into areas like deep-seated lust, the intrinsic opposite in the reaction-formation defense mechanism of an otherwise sternly religious man, innate machiavellianism whose essential evil is sublimated through surface religiosity, or habitual satyriasis--self-condemned and not--accepted as part of a lifestyle.

African-American theatre was even further behind that of the surrounding culture in having the freedom to present or bring out its truths and in the subject matter it could deal with. Conditions in the theatre precluded such complexity and paradox in works concerned with religion. With so many negative images and misconceptions to correct, both for the Afro-Americans and the wider culture, things like hypocrisy and/or conscious/unconscious lust would have to be subjects for these plays another time. Any religious plays would have to remain within the "folk tradition" until better, more feasible times. Its heroes and villains would continue to be clearly defined. Inside the church would be purity and sanctification; outside would be evil and corruption.

Then, in 1954, James Baldwin's three-act play The Amen Corner appeared, a year after his novel Go Tell It On The Mountain. Both works would talk about more than the simplistic struggle between good and evil for the soul. Now there was hypocrisy, moral confusion, inadvertent evil and all their cousins in an African-American work about religion; now it would be shown on the stage.

After an initial production at Howard University, Washington, D.C., May 11-14, 1955, Professor Owen Dodson directing, the play languished for several years. Then, in March 1965, producer-director-actor Frank Silvera produced it at the Robertson Playhouse in Los Angeles, California and then at the larger Coronet Playhouse in the same city to mostly Afro-American audiences, many of them church groups.

In 1968, the play was brought by Mr. Silvera to Broadway where it received unkind notices by the white critics because of its "turgidity."¹ Perhaps the tone and texture of the environment, the storefront Pentecostal church, are, because of their very nature, "turgid." Perhaps Baldwin, a former deacon, understood only too well how much its members suffered innumerable indignities in their lives, their consequent rage and frustration in continuous need of sublimation. Does it not stand to reason then that this sublimation, its essential presentationalism staged representationally, might require "turgidity" to express the voluminous intrinsic truths of this subject? Form, after all, must be congruent with

content.

Moreover, Baldwin was primarily an essayist and a novelist--narrative and hortatory prose were his more natural forms of self-expression. He had enormous amounts to say about the myriad contradictions, paradoxes and ironies in his life in America. Therefore, the communal nature of both the theatre and the church with their sermons, monologues, testaments, declamations, self analyses and prose poetry would call for his particular prose style, his particular Jamesian periodic sentences with their qualifiers and ironies.

Sister Margaret Alexander--the protagonist of The Amen Corner--struggles to protect her son David from the destruction she believes awaits anyone "foolish enough" to emulate her husband Luke out in the world of love, passion, fancy cars and good times--things synonymous with sin and evil to her. (The name David means beloved, Luke means the bringer of light and healing and Margaret means pearl or purity--meanings not insignificant in Baldwin's lexicon and in the brief history of the portrayal of African-American males on the stage. It would seem that their representations and significances have changed.)

She is determined to thrust from David's mind any positive memory of his father and if she can't do that she will sully it. In her misconceived, twisted battle against the "forces of evil," she corrupts religion and creates a church, where she serves as pastor, which is removed from the

reality of life. The common struggles of everyday life with its many problems--some with solutions, some not--are to be kept outside the world of the church. They are in fact to be avoided altogether. She herself looks back in guilt at her early experiences with her husband. She sees her youthful love and sexual desire for him as the result of evil, destructive forces in the world.

Luke's appearance in the play makes Margaret's distortions obvious. To Margaret, Luke exemplifies the insanity "inherent in a life devoted to pleasure and love."² He represents the sensual life from which she has retreated, a life she not only has denied herself but which she urges her congregation to avoid. Celibacy leads to holiness, to salvation. In her testimony, Sister Moore, one of the most faithful of the congregation, says:

SISTER MOORE

I want to thank Him for keeping me pure and set apart from the lusts of the flesh, for protecting me--Hallelujah!--from all carnal temptation. When I come before my Maker, I'm going to come before Him pure. I'm going to say "Bless your name, Jesus, no man has ever touched me!"³

Margaret's solution for the ills of all women is quite apparent when she gives advice to Mrs. Jackson, the young mother of a sick child, suggesting that maybe the Lord wants her to leave her husband:

MARGARET

Maybe the Lord wants you to leave that man.

MRS. JACKSON

No! He don't want that!⁴

Mrs. Jackson rebuffs Margaret's advice because she has already discovered that her identity can only be achieved through an open line of communication with her husband. This anagnorisis has yet to come to Margaret.

Because she has built a wall of lies around the memory of her husband--lies about her relationship with him and his devotion to the family--Margaret has difficulty imagining a Christian life as anything other than a denial of love and passion between a man and a woman. Having created the fiction of Luke the Destroyer, she must struggle to remove him from the apartment or, failing that, to prevent his talking too openly with David. So much energy had gone into the rationalization and denial she had mixed into recalling him, so many nights had been spent in reshaping her actual experience with him, that she finds it difficult to believe he is not the fantasy-person she had created:

MARGARET

You ain't changed, have you? You still got the same carnal grin, that same carnal mind--you ain't changed a bit.⁵

Her values by now are so distorted and her fears of the resurrected Luke are so powerful that, when she hears that he is sick and needs care, her reaction is to refuse to postpone a trip to Philadelphia which, ironically, is to visit a fellow minister who is ill:

MARGARET

The Lord made me leave that man in there a long time ago because he was a sinner. And the Lord ain't told me to stop doing my work because he's come the way all sinners come.⁶

Luke has not done any real damage to her but she is convinced that the tragedies she has suffered and those that all African-American people suffer are punishment for a life lived in happiness and shared love. God's plan is that his Afro-American children should suffer in this world and that they resist the temptation to be happy in their bodies, for happiness in this world is a sure indication of suffering in the next. To enjoy each other, to glory in passion, is to invite divine punishment. The reality of her world is suffering, and to escape eternal suffering, she must forgo carnal pleasures and retreat from life. She had ceased being the "funny, fast-talking, fiery little thing" whom Luke had held in his arms. Moreover, she had convinced herself that the other woman was dead, "burned out...by the power of the Holy Ghost." Margaret left Luke's arms and crawled into the cold, unreal matrix of the church.

Luke, on the other hand, represents something other than safety. He

represents the Apollonian ideal who desires to convince his son and his wife that there is a value in living fully, in confronting all of one's desires and not denying the validity of experience. Man is not created to be safe, to nibble timidly at the edges of life:

LUKE

Son, don't try to get away from the things that hurt you--sometimes that's all you got. You got to learn to live with those things--and--use them. I've seen people--put themselves through terrible torture--and die--because they was afraid of being hurt.⁷

And he repeats this attitude in talking to Margaret about their son:

LUKE

I don't care what kind of life he lives--as long as it's his life--not mine, not his mama's, but his own. I ain't going to let you make him safe.⁸

Man should live fully and celebrate his life. This is the theme of Luke and, ultimately, of Baldwin. It is the very essence of evil to Margaret. Thus, the Baldwinian irony is evident here, coming from a former deacon of the church.

Margaret fears living freely, and is also tragically incapable of risking love--things Luke stands for. She has retreated into the "safe" world. Luke has gone out into the "real" world to deal with obstacles and problems.

Margaret's final anagnorisis--and this arrives later than that of her son:

and is partly a result of his action--is not that the church and religion are wrong, but that she has distorted the meaning of both so much; not that loving is dangerous and hence foolish, but that it makes possible a warmth and happiness that more than make up for the risk and pain; not that she and all other African-American people must hide from life, but that life is to be lived as fully as possible.⁹

Mrs. Jackson, her doppelganger, says to her, "I ain't like you, Sister Margaret. I don't want all this, all these people looking to me. I'm just a young woman, I just want my man and my home and my children."¹⁰

Margaret, too, had lost a child when she was a young woman but instead of standing by Luke, she nagged him to drink because she felt that he had been responsible for the baby's death. She deprived Luke and David of the family relationship each needed so badly, though no more than she herself needed it. And as Mrs. Jackson stands alone in the church--a young woman who has just lost her second child--she is bewildered and perplexed. When Margaret resultantly sees her own hamartia from the past, she reverses the advice that she had given to Mrs. Jackson prior to the baby's death. "Go on home to your husband," she finally says with compassion. "Go on home to your man."¹¹

Luke is probably the most sensitive and perceptive character in the play (Is Baldwin saying that the "outside world" renders one sensitive whereas the church erases that sensitivity?). In one scene, describing his suffering,

he tells David that he has failed in his quest for identity--not because of his music--but because he has been denied the most basic human quality--love (and now we begin to see the Afro- American male with susceptibility):

LUKE

I don't believe no man ever got to...[who he is inside] without somebody loved him. Somebody looked at him, looked way down there and showed him to himself--and then started pulling, a-pulling of him up--so he could live.¹²

He realizes that her distorted sense of reality has precluded the extension of her love and understanding, thereby denying David the pursuit of his manhood. He knows that any efforts either to define the terms of that quest or to protect him from its consequences can only result in the pain and misery of failure which he himself knows only too well. To Luke, a man must strike out, against the odds, if necessary, to discover the meaning of his own life. And he encourages David to take the first step toward reaching that goal.

The juxtaposition of Margaret's lack of inner sight to Luke's insight heighten their contrast in this moment when the two parents discuss David--Margaret as if he were dead, Luke affirming that he is alive.

MARGARET

He's gone.

LUKE

He's gone into the world. He's gone into the world.

MARGARET

Luke, you won't never see your son no more.

LUKE

**But I seen him one last time. He's in the world,
he's living.**

MARGARET

He's gone. Away from you and away from me.

LUKE

**He's living. He's living. Is you got to see your God to
know he's living?¹³**

In addition, the references to "dark" and "white" further serve to contrast their moods and their personalities, in their reactions to David's departure:

MARGARET

Everything--is dark. this morning.

LUKE

You all in white.¹⁴

The tragic paradox here is that Margaret's retreat from reality, her religiosity, have not saved her from that dark vision of the world that besets people who "have been in it." Luke, having been in the world, is still able to hold onto an optimistic view of things. To Baldwin, apparently, the embrace of the church is not the balm it purports to be. Heady realism leads to ultimate spiritual peace.

When Luke dies, Margaret feels remorse and becomes more aware of

her own identity. Having experienced a major anagnorisis, she reexamines those values that have brought about her misfortune. She emerges in the final scene with a fuller understanding of her hamartia.

It is not that the church and religion are the incorrect choice. It is that she has distorted the meaning of both; not that loving is folly and full of peril, but that it realizes a warmth and happiness that more than compensate for the risk and pain. In short, it is not that she and all other African-Americans must hide from life, but that life is to be lived as fully as possible.

This pattern had been represented by the two males in her life--Luke and David. The true exercise of religion is a source of strength and in Luke there is a sense of direction and a source of healing. His name, Luke, is that of a doctor--though the doctor is, ironically and sadly, dying. Their son, David, the musician, must leave the safety of his flock and confront the Goliath of life that awaits him in the world outside the congregation.

Clearly, with his characterization in James Baldwin's The Amen Corner, the African American male is becoming a more positively forceful figure on the stage.

CHAPTER FIVE
A DREAM DEFERRED LEADS TO HAMARTIA
A RAISIN IN THE SUN
BY LORRAINE HANSBERRY

The year was 1959. The Civil Rights Movement was headed toward a peak. Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy was soon to become President of the United States. America was about to turn from the relative conservatism of the Eisenhower-Nixon years to the new liberalism of the Kennedy-Johnson era.

The French had lost in an unhappy political involvement in Dien Bien Phu and now the United States was in for another Far East geopolitical miscarriage. Castro had taken over Cuba and Khrushchev, though not as paranoid as his predecessor, was still boldly antagonistic, flaunting his military power, his control over the Warsaw Bloc nations and other spheres of influence, as well as his nuclear potential.

Africa was stirring. The old colonialism was being shown the door. A new entity called the Third World was making itself heard all around the planet. Asians, Latinos, Bantus were losing their invisibility and more often than not were found at odds with America on various international issues brought before the United Nations Security Council. In the global balance of power, America--the distance from the triumph of World War II having lengthened and the debacle of the Korean "police action" still fresh

in the consciousness of the world--was no longer guaranteed the favors, awe, allegiance or good will of the Third World. The competition for these with the Communist world had now grown stiffer.

America, within its borders, could no longer take its minorities for granted either. A "New Negro" was emerging. He had, after all, done himself proud in the wars in Europe and Asia and in Korea a half decade later. He had worked hard in the defense factories and done his part in the domestic war effort. Now he deserved improvements in his way of life and more respect for his dignity. He was no longer willing to wait for his "rights" as a citizen of the United States.

Along with this, his standard of living had risen. His increased income allowed him luxuries formerly denied him. He was more educated now--his levels of aspiration were higher, his aesthetics more fastidious, his ethnicity more treasured--and his race pride was stronger. Black nationalism once again was on the rise.

On the other hand, for large numbers of African Americans, the unemployment situation was worsening, caused by a combination of racism and the effects of the Eisenhower recession years, complicated by sweeping technological changes. These were developments for which many blacks were ill prepared. Automation, the electronic revolution, the shift of many places of employment to the suburbs and the effects on the economy of a fiscally strengthening West Germany and Japan were

changing the makeup of the work force in this country. White workers, helped by strong unions, were usurping the traditional black preserves in the service industries--waiters, bellhops and the like. As a result, the black share of the labor market shrank while, paradoxically, the number of permanently employed blacks grew larger.¹ With this growing threat and spurred on by larger swirling currents in the world, particularly with the emergence of the African States, blacks here became more aggressive and intrepid about proclaiming their concerns.²

Their numbers among theatregoers increased and so paradoxically black characters in plays decreased. The mammies and Toms, servants, clowns, and other forms of stereotyping created by nonblack playwrights would no longer be tolerated by the increasingly visible and exacting African American and liberal white audiences. Black characters would now have to be presented as tri-dimensional real people with serious concerns about the condition of Man, as white characters were presented.³

The stage was thus set for Lorraine Hansberry's driven character, Walter Lee Younger, in her landmark play, A Raisin in the Sun.

As mentioned earlier, A Raisin in the Sun, at the play's opening, bears a strong resemblance to Native Son. Both plays begin early in the morning in extremely cramped quarters in a South Chicago neighborhood. Both are centered upon a young black male--an unhappy chauffeur--who seems to

be on tenterhooks, a coiled wire ready to spring in any direction.

One male (Bigger Thomas) smolders. His mother looks on helplessly as the volcano moves toward eruption. We see hints of the violence to come later as he dispatches a rat, loose in the apartment, and bullies his friends. We also see it in his attitudes. His mother's efforts to forestall the inevitable can only prove feeble. She would like to stir him to the right path toward manhood but too many of the paths are fraught with peril. She is defeated before she can even start.

Walter Lee Younger, on the other hand, though also a coiled wire, is both more verbal and more positive about his prospects. His ambitions are more down to earth, more within reach. Bigger watches an airplane overhead and yearns to be the pilot. He has fantasies the realization of which is totally out of his reach. If he is to be doomed to an unrealizable dream, he might as well go all out in creating it.

Walter's ambitions are doomed also, despite being less unrealistic. His problem is similar to Willie Loman's. He has a dream that suggests that success is not only possible in America, but inevitable, if certain patterns or procedures are followed. With Willie Loman, it is the glad hand, the pat on the back, the hail-fellow-well-met approach. With Walter, it is the right money in the right place and time. It is the ownership of a liquor store as a first step toward the heights away from his spiritually unsatisfying job as a chauffeur.

His mother also wants to stir him toward his manhood, to where his late father was before him. She wants Walter to embrace all the values of her late husband so that he can properly take his place in the world. She also watches helplessly as he rejects these values and embraces the materialistic, shallow values of their time.

Here, Walter and Bigger part company. Bigger goes on to explosive violence against friends and lovers alike, if sometimes by mistake. Walter plunges into devastating folly of a different kind.

In this fifties drama--with prospects for the African-American male more within reach in the surrounding social fabric--Walter Lee Younger is less physically violent (He slaps Bobo in frenzy when he learns that Willie, their would-be associate, has absconded with the money he had given him to use to obtain a license needed to start a liquor store.) but he is emotionally violent. He almost climbs the walls in rage and anxiety at times, wanting so desperately to climb out of his trap. More chances can be taken now, but there is a greater chance of debacle.

The story centers around the conflicts, dilemmas and anxieties that result in a family when a ten thousand dollar insurance check arrives from the policy of its late patriarch who had "worked himself to death." The matriarch of the family wants more space for them which would do much good for their souls and values. This expansion would come in the form of a house in the suburban-ish blue collar neighborhood of Clybourne Park

(practically the country to this family). She wants also to send her daughter to medical school which would represent an advance of the family up the ladder of social worthiness and would vindicate the patriarch's "labor-filled" life. The house, she hopes, will give her son and daughter-in-law more space for themselves and provide a better environment for her grandson Travis to grow up in.

This wish is in conflict with her more "materialistic" son who is "things" oriented. He wants to own a liquor store so that he can "be his own man" and make more money for the family.

She will not have this choice "on her ledger" when she meets her Maker, associating it with the extensive evils the existence of liquor stores and bars has generated in her community. She will not sully her late husband's name or compromise her own existence on this planet.

The moral correctness of her position only serves to frustrate and enrage her son all the more. She is not arguing from a "now" position. She is arguing from some idyllic position that no longer exists for him. He is thirty-five and it drives him close to the point of madness that he is not further along in his life. The liquor store would be his salvation. The money from the insurance policy would enable him to obtain his goal.

The son, Walter, Jr., is the only adult male in that household, the other male being his son Travis. The other family members are, beside his mother, his wife and his sister with whom he is in constant conflict: he

bullies his wife with verbal and psychological put-downs. (He is enraged at her partly because she is pregnant and another child will tie him down all the more. He is mainly enraged at her, however, because he is unable to be a better breadwinner for her, a fact which frustrates and demoralizes him which translates into the anger he then displaces onto her.) His sister, on the other hand, constantly verbally attacks him for being "one of those prophets" who would "lead us into the swamps."

She is almost correct.

He holds his own, however. No more do we have the smoldering inarticulate individual who can only absorb his hurts in shimmering silence or with violence. Now he can effectively give an account of himself.

Unfortunately for him, he shares a household with formidable women. His mother, Lena (Mama), the matriarch--clinging tenaciously to the Protestant ethic of Walter, Sr., and to her Baptist religiosity--struggles against the existentialist cynicism of her son just as she struggles against the liberated modernism of her daughter. She is a solid wall which he cannot get around; she, on the other hand, cannot get to him with the values she holds dear, which she wants both her children to have. There is a great paucity in generational communication here which frustrates everybody.

He is besieged by his sister, Beneatha, a somewhat flamboyant, early black nationalist college student (perhaps the representative of the

playwright herself). She does not think very much of black men like her brother, men of the street, who seem to have few prospects of rising above their station, who can only engage in impractical schemes and wild fantasies. She is caustic and reproachful in her attacks on him which force him either to be on the defensive or to retaliate with belittling attacks on her "militance," her naivete or her foolish romanticism. Their sibling rivalry seems to have no end and thus more often than desirable, his mother and/or his wife must act as referees.

Even his browbeaten wife, Ruth, has a quiet strength which enables her to withstand his fiercest verbal assaults. She is solid, nurturing, faithful and hard-working. Both she and Lena are willing to accept Walter, Jr. as he is and what he earns on his job as the best he can do under the circumstances, as something he can have pride in. The problem is, he cannot accept his state in life and cannot understand that they can. This frustrates and enrages him all the more. As a consequence, the pent up energy from this is directed toward the beleaguered Ruth.

Interestingly, Ruth has an excellent relationship with Lena and a fairly good relationship with Beneatha. It is with her husband that she has problems. She pitches in, doing various odd jobs, taking in washing, even contemplating doing a little domestic work. This activity, however, frustrates a Walter caught up in "The American Ideal" of what a male is supposed to accomplish, with regard to his family. Would Willie Loman

have permitted Linda to take in washing or do domestic work to help out? Willie reacted adversely to her merely darning socks. Would Biff or Happy have permitted it? That surrounding socioeconomic conditions engendered Walter's particular condition he never accepts as a possible balm on his tortured psyche.

Ruth even offers to get an abortion which Walter makes no effort to dissuade her from. Such a thing is totally against the value system of Mama and Walter, Sr., so in Mama's eyes her son's manhood is seriously in question. Her attitude, in turn, compounds the doubts that are already in his soul.

In a desperate effort to prevent her son from crumbling further, Mama commits an act that is at once one of supreme greatness and a major hamartia.

After making a down payment on the house in Clybourne Park, she gives Walter the rest of the insurance money to deposit in the bank for Beneatha's education and to hold onto (open up a checking account) for family needs. She hands this responsibility over to her oldest child, hoping in her deep love that this will enhance his manhood, certainly show him how much respect she has for him as the man of the house.

MAMA

...Walter....What you ain't never understood is that I ain't got nothing, don't own nothing, ain't never really wanted nothing that wasn't for you. There ain't nothing as precious to

MAMA (CONT'D)

me...There ain't worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else--if it means--if it means it's going to destroy my boy.

(She takes an envelope out of her handbag and puts it in front of him and he watches her without speaking or moving)

I paid the man thirty-five hundred dollars down on the house. That leaves sixty-five hundred dollars. Monday morning I want you to take this money and take three thousand dollars and put it in a savings account for Beneatha's medical schooling. The rest you put in a checking account--with your name on it. And from now on any penny that come out of it or that go in it is for you to look after. For you to decide.

(She drops her hands a little helplessly)
It ain't much, but it's all I got in the world and I'm putting it in your hands. I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be.⁴

He responds with his own hamartia.

He gives that money to Willie Harris.

Even here, upon learning this, Lena calls upon her faith:

MAMA

Oh, God...

(She looks up to Him)

Look down here--and show me the strength.⁵

Why would Walter give over such a large sum of money (his father's legacy) to a Willie Harris, a man of questionable character, even if cleverly concealed? Surely there had to be some sense, some instinct,

accumulated in the years in the mean streets of the disadvantaged neighborhoods of South Chicago, which would warn him. Some sense deep inside him must have picked up an inconsistency, an averted eye, a too glib answer to an uncomfortable question, a clearing of the throat, a calculated fuzziness in the presentation, a bold stare, a disingenuous ingenuousness, a proneness to flattery. Walter, Sr. had to have warned him against men like Willie Harris and indicated their proliferation on the streets. He had to have heard of the Kingfish from Amos'N Andy, Brer Fox or any number of the other tricksters from the surrounding folklore. Perhaps Walter, Jr. was Willie Harris himself at some brief time in his past.

Was he so desperate to indulge and apotheosize what were perceived with near panic to be a manhood, ego and pride at risk? Did he engage in instinct denial in choosing to take a chance on the dream which, at that point in time, was all he had? Does the misery of one's spirit make one grasp at the dream otherwise, in wiser, more acute moments, perceived as beyond practical reach? Is the euphoric anticipation of something great to come, some wonderful ego-satisfying achievement in the future--the regaining of a lost or demolished manhood (perhaps life energy), the "justification" for one's existence on this planet--worth the foolish gamble?

Perhaps in the answers to these questions lay the reasons why so many disadvantaged folk fall victim to the seductive preachings of fraudulent or disingenuous storefront preachers or the flattery of venal

con-artists. Perhaps this explains the major role fantasy plays in the consciousnesses of desperate black males. Perhaps it explains the often ill-conceived succumbing to impulse which subsequently brings great misfortune upon them.

The African American male is already too much besieged by negative reality, by discouraging and disheartening pragmatism, by the everpresent existentialism that wrack his soul every second of his life.

Adding to this are the reproaches, spoken or implied, by the women in his life. The man says, "I want to fly!" The woman says, "You can only exist on the ground. I will still love, respect and support you even if you crawl."

Even if she does as she states, it is not enough for him. Even if she speaks in the warmest, most nurturing tones, he feels put down. No matter what she does, his manhood and ego are brought under and ground into the dirt. His reaction can only be rage and desperation.

The theatregoing public, even those most liberal-thinking of them, had not seen this kind of character on the stage before. Anger they had seen. But that, combined with starvation for a dream, they had not. The electric performance of Sidney Poitier as Walter, followed by that of Ossie Davis, further intensified this effect.

A new African-American male character had entered the landscape. He could now express his anxieties, his wishes. He could overtly show his

unhappiness with the way things were, implying a severe criticism of the system. The United States of America was not perfect after all and maybe there was some legitimate reason for the pouting, surly, acrimonious African Americans who were now coming out into the open displaying the attitudes they did. Here he was, Walter, Jr., having now committed a major hamartia out of desperation for "a dream." He was now out in the open.

Presently, his agonized soul lurches onto a new idea, one containing in it a context for new infamy.

After Mama had made the initial payment on the house in the heretofore "lily-white" Clybourne Park, there was an immediate reaction on the part of their prospective neighbors. They sent Mr. Lindner, representing their organization, The Clybourne Park Neighborhood Improvement Association, to buy back the house at a profit to the Younger family. This offer, of course, was pridefully turned down by Walter.

Now the frenzied young man, his soul wracked, changes his mind. He calls Mr. Lindner back to the apartment. He will accept that offer.

The decision is fraught with a kind of internalized vengeful sleaze that also flies in the face of the intrinsic Younger pride that had been the credo of Walter, Sr.'s life. The son's rage and self-reproach blind him to the principles of the positive, prideful value system conveyed to both his sister and him by his mother and father and which they represent to him. He

will turn his deserved punishment onto himself by using himself as a weapon with which to flagellate his inner integrity (and by so doing, flagellate the evil world of which he is a part), taking this most racially humiliating and self-abnegating path: taking money from somebody as payment for accepting the fact that his race is not good enough to be juxtaposed to the other's race. He will degrade himself and his race by taking the money, pretending without conviction that this insidious move will make up for the money he lost to Willie Harris, that he will return evil for evil and thus balance out the scales of the moral universe.

The other side, however, stares him in the face and will not go away, no matter how he tries to duck around it. He is degrading himself, his family integrity, his race, in front of that very family, particularly his son. Travis, he knows, will have to deal with his own manhood problems in a few years. How will he, Walter, Jr., be in a moral position to be of fatherly help when this circumstance arises as his father had been to him? How will he affect Beneatha's future psychosexual life if he is to be set up as one of the models in her mental canvas? How is he ever again to be the man his wife Ruth needs and deserves? How will he be able to step into Walter, Sr.'s shoes and be the proper man/son to Lena, something even he himself desires in his inner self-conceptualization in relationship to her? Most important of all, how is he to recapture his own inner sense of himself as a man--if there is such a possibility for him ever again?

That, however, is far-reaching. There is the immediate problem to deal with--to fill in the gnawing gap created by the loss of that money to Willie Harris, the consequent "sting" to his ego, and the feeling of guilt from his venal and foolish betrayal of his mother's trust?

Beneatha, her future in medicine having been all but destroyed, understandably displays outrage at Walter's hamartia:

BENEATHA

He made an investment! With a man even Travis wouldn't have trusted with his most worn-out marbles.⁶

Responding to all this, he spews forth his bile, so much is it boiling to the rim, which takes the form of a hateful, grotesque Tom show, a grand guignol of racial self-hatred, self-parody and self-emasculation (read: self-castration)--which is perhaps the most violent act he commits in the play:

MAMA

You making something inside me cry, son.
Some awful pain inside me.

WALTER

Don't cry, Mama. Understand. That white man is going to walk in that door able to write checks for more money than we ever had. It's important to him and I'm going to help him...I'm going to put on the show, Mama.

MAMA

Son--I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers--but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor.

(Raising her eyes and looking at him)

We ain't never been that--dead inside.

BENEATHA

Well--we are dead now. All the talk about dreams and sunlight that goes on in this house. It's all dead now.

WALTER

What's the matter with you all! I didn't make this world! It was give to me this way! Hell, yes, I want me some yachts someday! Yes, I want to hang some real pearls 'round my wife's neck. Ain't she supposed to wear no pearls? Somebody tell me--tell me, who decides which women is suppose to wear pearls in this world. I tell you I am a man--and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world!

(This last line hangs a good while and WALTER begins to move about the room. The word "Man" has penetrated his consciousness; he mumbles it to himself repeatedly between strange agitated pauses as he moves about.)

MAMA

Baby, how you going to feel on the inside?

WALTER

Finel...Going to feel fine...a man...

MAMA

You won't have nothing left then, Walter Lee.

WALTER

(Coming to her)

I'm going to feel fine, Mama. I'm going to look that son-of-a-bitch in the eyes and say--

(He falters)

--and say, "All right, Mr. Lindner--

(He falters even more)

--that's your neighborhood out there! You got the right to have it like you want! Just write the check and--the house is yours." And--and I am going to say--

(His voice almost breaks)

"And you--you people just put the money in my hand and you won't have to live next to this bunch of stinking niggers!..."

(He straightens up and moves away from his mother, walking around the room)

And maybe--maybe I'll just get down on my black knees...

(He does so; RUTH and BENEATHA and MAMA watch him in frozen horror)

"Captain, Mistuh, Bossman--

(Groveling and grinning and wringing his hands in profoundly anguished imitation of the slow-witted movie stereotype)

A-hee-hee-hee! Oh, yassuh Boss! Yassssuh! Great White--

(Voice breaking, he forces himself to go on)

--Father, just gi'ussen de money, fo'God's sake, and we's--we's ain't gwine come out deh and dirty up yo' white folks neighborhood..."

(He breaks down completely)

And I'll feel fine! Fine! FINE!

(He gets up and goes into the bedroom)?

His mother, however, comes to his defense:

**MAMA
(To BENEATHA)**

There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing.

(Looking at her)

Have you cried for that boy today? I don't mean for yourself and for the family 'cause we lost the money. I mean for him: what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning--because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so! When you start measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is.⁶

Still, Mama has her own strategy for countering what Walter intends to do. She will thrust Travis onto this scene so that whatever Walter does, when Mr. Lindner arrives, he will have to do it in front of the boy. It is her hope that, in this desperate gamble of her own, there will be enough of Walter, Sr.'s value system in him to dissuade him from taking his intended course of action. He has to pass on Walter, Sr.'s values to Travis. This is what will take top priority.

Fortunately for Walter, Jr., and for the rest of the family, Walter, Jr. had a strong stalwart father image in Walter, Sr., and now he must see to it that is communicated to Travis. It is an unwritten, implicit family tradition which will have its way no matter what the circumstances and

despite Walter, Jr.'s embittered rantings. Even dead, the father, the senior male of the Younger family, generates his power. True, there is Mama as his agent and certainly with her his spirit prevails. But, without her, he would still be a prevailing force, another male figure in that household.

Thus, it is his labor-filled, deprived but dignified existence and the legacy it carries with it that holds sway--along with Travis's eyes fixed on Walter, Jr.--when the latter changes his mind at the climax of the play and decides once again not to sell the house in Clybourne Park, that the Youngers will move in.

The one to benefit most from this eventuality is Travis. He is the end point on the line of Younger males, the inheritor of all that both Walter, Sr. and Walter, Jr. represent in their existence, both implicit and explicit. His grandmother spoils him at times as she probably did Walter, Jr. Often, African-American men are spoiled by their mothers until they reach the age at which they are supposed to fulfill some perhaps unspoken requirement or standard which they have not or cannot attain to. That is when the almost Oedipal doting and indulgence by the mother turns into martinet-like acrimony.

Mixed in with this attitude is the consciously or unconsciously felt necessity to "reign the male child in," by subduing his natural aggression, and any tendency to get beside himself when thwarted. This action is to protect him from perceived and actual threatening and dangerous forces

outside the family's immediate environment--people who might consider his assertiveness an affront to them. Unfortunately, this psychosocial patterning stemming from the mother reverberates back from the male as he reaches and grows through puberty, shaping what his attitudes will be toward the females who will play roles in his life--his siblings, friends, co-workers, girlfriends, wife.

Thus, where at first there is Oedipal indulgence and "patience with his aggravating boy's ways" on the mother's part, she later becomes "that witch who won't give me any slack." This psychodynamic pattern results, internalized in the male, which later in life comes back out behaviorally in resentful, antisocial, nihilistic, misogynistic, almost schizophrenic forms: lying, volatility, indifference, cheating with other females, having multiple girlfriends (satyriasis), mood swings from doting romantic love to sadistic, often acrimonious grousing about this or that triviality which leads more often than not to negative nonproductive altercations; from gentle, good-humored social interaction to outright violence. On the other side of this coin there are obsessive-compulsive behavior patterns (sublimating rage), developing unrealistic obsessions about a given female, to passive-aggression, to cold detachment where the focus in a given relationship is only on the lust and not on the affection (except in bogus form).

Will Travis escape this?

We cannot answer that question because the scope of the play, its time and text (subtext included) will not and need not cover it. As mentioned earlier in this piece, Mama does spoil Travis as she probably did Walter Jr. when he was his son's age. Ruth is also somewhat indulgent to the boy but there is already creeping into her tone and pattern in relating to him a sternness and harshness which bodes ill for the future of their relationship. Still, the conflict between Mama and Ruth over the boy's upbringing is a friendly one, and the boy is never at any time unsure about the intensity of love felt for him by either his grandmother or his mother...even his aunt. On the other hand, Ruth is pregnant, which will engender an increased tension and a more stressful environment for them. The decision to move to the Clybourne Park house possibly has more merits than negatives.

He has a very good relationship with his father. Even in moments of great stress, Walter Jr. has time to play mime games with the boy. Furthermore, what is seen by the boy's eyes is very important to Walter. That in itself is proof positive of a good relationship.

We do not know what is to become of the Youngers in their Clybourne Park house. That is not within the scope of this play; it would have to be taken up in A Raisin in the Sun II if it could be written. (According to Robert Nemiroff--Hansberry's husband-literary executor-adaptor/producer of several of her works--Lorraine Hansberry had written a scene in which

the Younger family waits in their house as their hostile neighbors besiege it but she did not use it.)⁹

From the evidence presented to us in the play's text, Travis should probably turn out all right. There is a line of good father-son and son-father relationships running through the Younger family which serves as a source of a good part of its strength. Travis should be a beneficiary of that.

Ultimately, with all of the negatives in the surrounding air, his father, Walter, Jr., made the morally and psychologically correct decision at the play's conclusion, a decision which probably insured Travis being on the right road for a good part of the rest of his life.

CHAPTER SIX
THE DEATH OF THE WHITE LIBERAL
IN THE J'ACCUSE PLAY
BLUES FOR MR. CHARLIE BY JAMES BALDWIN

In 1964, the Civil Rights Movement was reaching an impasse. Jim Crow conditions were either not changing fast enough or not at all. New youth in the Civil Rights organizations lacked the patience of their elders. They wanted seemingly attainable goals reached faster but things were not happening at all. In fact, the surrounding power structure now seemed more intransigent. It was beginning to dawn on the Civil Rights crusaders that, despite all that had happened, little would change.

True, the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 had been signed by President Johnson on July 2nd. Nearly six million African Americans showed their endorsement of Johnson's War on Poverty--geared to improving the lot in life of the impoverished--by voting him to a second term. The 24th Amendment to the Constitution eliminated the poll tax requirement for voting in Federal elections. Arthur Ashe became the first African American named to the American Davis Cup Team. J. Raymond Jones was elected New York City Democratic leader. Martin Luther King, Jr. received the Nobel Prize for Peace.

There were still, however, too many negatives. Race riots continued to break out in cities all over the country, incurring huge losses of life and

property. (Roy Wilkins of the NAACP complained of "criminal elements" in the urban uprisings, signaling an inchoate split in the civil rights ranks.) In Mississippi, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, white civil rights workers, and James Chaney, an African American, were murdered by local whites.

The brutal racists had not relented. An assassinated United States President and other martyrs did not seem to have pricked the surrounding moral consciences enough. There would be shock, outrage, sadness and commiseration. A United States President and other martyrs did not seem to have pricked the surrounding moral consciences enough. There would be shock, outrage, sadness and commiseration, but when the smoke cleared, the social conditions seemed to remain as they were before.

Black poet-playwright LeRoi Jones--subsequently to become Amiri Imamu Baraka--wrote a powerful absurdist, mythically realistic one-act play entitled Dutchman. It was a parable showing how the white man--embodied by the character of a sexy white blonde, Lula--seduces and exploits the African American, both physically and psychologically. This theme reflected growing attitudes among the activist, militant black left. (Actually the resentment of whites in the movement had been there since the very beginning; blacks, in one way, resented the whites who helped them--the implication being that they could not do things for themselves; moreover, blacks felt that the whites could always escape to their

privileged middle and upper class world, something the blacks could not do, and therefore could never really know or understand the full meaning of the blacks' petition.) Jones then published his second collection of verse, The Dead Lecturer, his poetry now including racial themes and reflecting his increasingly anti-white philosophy.

Moreover, a new conflict was taking place in Southeast Asia--the Viet Nam War--which was diverting away from the Civil Rights conflict much of the attention and energy in the cities, towns and streets of America. The Movement, consequently, was losing its forward thrust--whatever that was--and coming to a halt.

Increasingly disaffected eyes began to turn from the enemy-- the "good old boy" establishment, fortified by an army of murderous racists dedicated to keeping "the nigras in their place"--to a longstanding ally who had been in this great crusade from the beginning, suffering outrages with their African-American colleagues, even dying: the white liberal. Then, shortly, he was no longer the ally; he was the enemy, the psychosocial saboteur, the force which held up progress with a too readily proffered conservatism, who seemed to be in too many important positions making too many important decisions affecting the lives of too many African Americans. Out of this grew a set of special stereotypes. At the meeting at which the NAACP was founded, one African American participant is said to have shouted, "They're betraying us again, these white friends of

ours!"¹

There is concealed somewhere inside the definition of liberalism the idea of ambivalence. Since the liberal will examine all sides of an argument, a dialectic, ambivalence is inevitable. The conditions of immediacy and crisis prevented the Civil Rights soldiers from having the time or the energy to appreciate the Hamlet-like ratiocination involved, thinking it time-wasting and weakening to the necessary inner resolve. Soon, ambivalence began to be looked upon as insincerity, as a kind of pusillanimity, as an individual not "having his whole heart in what the current issues, political or social, required of people coming up against their problems."

This resentment toward white liberals had been simmering a long time. That they had been helpful to black activists all along was undeniable, a given. That they had been close allies of African Americans since before the days of the abolitionist movement any historian could attest to.

For too long, though, white liberals had dominated the decision-making and leadership roles in these movements and most of them lived in neighborhoods which were little affected by the human rights issues dealt with. Moreover, the time was coming when black people had to make necessary moves which would obtain for them their "cultural manhood."

In 1942, Ralph Bunche had attacked this condition in the NAACP:

"The interracial make-up of the NAACP is an undoubted source of organizational weakness....These white sympathizers are, in the main, either cautious liberals or mawkish, missionary-minded sentimentalists on the race question. Their interest in the Negro problem is motivated either by a sense of 'fair play' and a desire to see the ideals of the Constitution lived up to, or an 'I love your people' attitude. Both attitudes are far from touching the realities of the problem....The liberal...recognizes and revolts against injustices but seeks to correct them with palliatives rather than solutions; for the solutions are harsh and forbidding and are not conducive to optimism and spiritual uplift."²

They were the cause of the plague of nonprogress. It was all their fault. Their credibility and integrity was now held in question. The need for restructuring and rethinking of the Civil Rights philosophy was at hand. To eliminate the plague, the white liberal had to be exorcised.

From this, the idea of African-American empowerment arose, black empowerment, black power. So, with the advent of the latter, there was the concomitant diminishment of the white liberal.

Some whites, hurt, fought bitterly to stay. Others cut their losses and, their tails between their legs, withdrew, many to become, at best, closet "liberals" longing for the good old Civil Rights days, with all their glory and pain, many to become new conservatives, many, even while partially understanding, to wither away in smoldering, though guilt-ridden, anti-black bitterness."³

All of this, of course, served only to prove even further how "the white liberal" could not be trusted; and to many liberals, perhaps the African-Americans were right. "I would rather deal with a redneck," would say many black powerites, "because with him you know who you're dealing with. With a white liberal up in your face smiling, you just don't know."⁴

It would not be long before this social condition, this attitude would find itself on the American stage.

Elia Kazan, the great stage and film director and proprietor of the Actors Studio, had approached novelist-essayist-playwright James Baldwin and asked him to write a play for them. Thinking of the theatre as being no more than a medium of trivial entertainments and empty frivolities--the negative critical response to his The Amen Corner still fresh in his mind--Baldwin at first balked at the idea.

He did not want to risk his morale, talent and life⁵ participating in such an undertaking which would only serve to exacerbate his already high level of frustration about the hopelessness of the state of American race relations.⁶ In the essay form--at which he was most effective--even in the prose sections of his novels and short stories, he could wax eloquent in his most characteristically hortatory tones and vent much of that frustration.

Could he do that in a play, however, with its special indigenous parameters? Could his ideas, best expressed in his complex Jamesian

periodic sentences be put into the mouths of characters, not as intellectual, articulate, complex or sensitive as he and express them effectively to an audience not always as tuned in to what he is trying to convey to them in dramatic rather than expository terms? Could he rise above his understandable righteous anger and craft a viable work for the stage? Paradoxically, the very passion which could work in his favor as a dramatist could, at the same time, work against him.

The murder of a young boy in Mississippi in 1955 had been on his mind for some time. The assassination of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers placed another layer of concern on him. He needed desperately to examine the dynamics surrounding the making and nature of the killers of African-Americans so it was inevitable that, despite his reservations, he would decide to write the play.

The two murders of concern to him were certainly among many that took place during this time. Baldwin, however, became obsessed with these two and rooted his play in them. One murder took place just as the Civil Rights Movement was about to start and the other, while the Civil Rights Movement was underway.

The first murder was that of a teenaged boy, Emmett Till, down from Chicago to Mississippi to visit his grandmother for the summer. He had given the blonde proprietress of a local store a wolf whistle, a form of "attention" barely noticeable in a northern metropolis--in fact, normal for

big city teenaged boys--but considered improper from a black male child in the rural world of Mississippi. Needless to say, the proprietor, her husband, took great offense, and, that night, the boy was taken from his home and dragged into the woods by a gang of men, beaten to death and then thrown into a nearby river. In court, the miscreants were cleared of any guilt for the crime.

in the other murder, Medgar Evers, a popular high-ranking NAACP official, was shot in the back while entering his driveway by an assailant hiding behind the bushes across the street. His assassin has outlived Baldwin.

Thus, it was from the outrage Baldwin felt at these two events and others, that he wrote the play Blues For Mr. Charlie.

While each came from a different time and therefore had roots in a set of social dynamics all its own, Baldwin chose to combine the two stories, put in his own fictional elements and place the resultant drama closer to his own time which was when the moral and philosophical thrust of the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to lose its energy. With the anti-Viet Nam War Movement appearing over the distant horizon, the Black Power Movement was about to start, concomitant with the falling into disfavor of the white liberal.

The particular time of the play itself is not clearly specified by the playwright--possibly somewhere around the beginnings of the Civil Rights

Movement--nor is the setting more than some general location somewhere in the South (Plaguetown, U.S.A., a kind of generic, allegorical name, hinting that the play moves closer to metaphor than to naturalistic photograph). Baldwin, through this nonspecification, is trying to emphasize the timelessness and universality of his story, that the events are part of an ongoing pattern everywhere in America and when his multiple setting comprises, in constructivist skeletal form, the African-American church in the first two acts and the courthouse in the last act, each being on opposite sides of a street or courthouse aisle, we are seeing the metaphorical visualization of his idea of an America divided.

The audience is prepared then for the portrayal of a certain kind of interpersonal dynamics among the play's characters.

Baldwin's conflated victim is a young man named Richard Henry. This is, incidentally, not the first time a Baldwin character named Richard--often an older brother like his own older stepbrother who had gone out of his life before he had gotten a chance to reap the benefits of having one, or his stepfather who had gone mad and then met an untimely end--loses his life or meets with disaster in some way or other. Sometimes the character's name is not Richard like, say, Luke in The Amen Corner who, though he is a father, seems more like an older brother. A doomed troubled man named Richard seems to be James Baldwin's objective correlative.

Richard has returned to his southern hometown after an ill-fortuned

sojourn in the North where, though free of the customary Southern constraints, he had met with other equally devastating pitfalls awaiting a black man at odds with himself. He had a series of brief, spiritually detrimental interracial affairs, had gotten involved in the world of drug abuse and had seen his great promise as a musician whither away to nothing.

He is thus embittered, angry (at himself mainly which he then displaces with anger toward those around him), cynical and is recoiling from the psychological devastation of the loss of a dream. Those closest to him--his father, grandmother, friends, himself, even his murderer--will therefore experience his acid tongue and sarcastic arrogant manner, the forms the expression of his bile will take.

Moreover, he finds it difficult to adjust to going from the relative liberality of life in the North to winding up in the constraining atmosphere of this Southern town, Plaguetown, his hometown. Having become unused to behaving in a way considered correct, he finds this adjustment to be a major psychological task, too strong and too fast for him to succeed in, if he is so inclined to make the effort.

We first meet Richard talking to his grandmother, Mother Henry. Here, his bitterness comes forth in full force. First, he addresses this matriarch of the family--granted that she probably spoiled him in earlier times--as "old lady." Ordinarily such a remark would get him a slap

across his face and he would be conditioned to expect that. That part of him, however, has faded and has been replaced. His bitterness now has rendered him irreverent toward all the values and institutions he grew up with in Plaguetown that he spews uncharacteristically disrespectful attitudes at her, showing profane, disparaging tendencies which are unacceptable to the immediate world around him. That she could slap him across his face is a possible consequence that does not seem to matter to him. One part of him would probably acknowledge that he deserved it.

Yet she is indulgent toward him, concerned with his welfare. She knows there is a malaise in his spirit and that she must tend to it but is not quite sure either what it is or what she can do about it.

It is obvious that she never had this kind of trouble with her son, Meridian, Richard's father. He has grown up "straight and proper," being one with the surrounding society, having, if begrudgingly, come to terms with the Plaguetown ways. Perhaps he is too much so. Perhaps when his wife, Richard's mother, was killed, Meridian should have been less "proper" in his response. His almost angelic nonresponse, however, set well with the surrounding community. It was acceptable.

It was not, however, with his son or himself. Therein is a large part of Richard's problem and why he can never again, now that he is back home from the North, be the Richard he was before he left for the North. He can never relate to his grandmother, his father or the townsfolk the way

he did before. He had not even been able to relate, in the relatively liberalized atmosphere of the North, to his co-participants in his new found freedom--the white ladies he had shared his beds with--in a positive, joyous way. No, his response had to be sneering, boastful, arrogant, indicative of a deep-seated unhappiness he could not escape. They were not lovely memories. They were merely bitter empty conquests, whether he was the conqueror or the conquered.

His grandmother indulges him, but he cannot accept that. He tells her that he does not deserve it; that he is unworthy. While he disparages himself, a kind of indignant hubris has evidenced itself. His is a world of closed doors, morbid fatalism and empty darkness. Not even his Aunt Edna in the "Promised Land" North had escaped this. She too is encircled with the other people and values held in contempt.

Perhaps, in the state he is in now, if she hits him, he might strike her back. Perhaps something deep inside her knows this and the knowledge holds her in check. He seems to have come to some sort of edge, dangerous edge. The discretion, the necessary inhibition, the self-check, are now not there. Or, if they are there, he does not desire to make use of them. He does not care anymore.

This attitude, for an African-American male, in a southern town like Plaquetown, holds the threat of oncoming misfortune. A black male, in such a town, must care, must not be casual about his safety and

well-being, if he is to survive.

This situation is the very point of conflict Richard is having with those close to him. Meridian also wants him to take it easy. Richard's response is that he cannot be like Meridian in the face of all that is happening around them. Meridian's behavior in the face of what had happened to his wife is the very model of what he, Richard, must not imitate.

Here we have an obvious contempt a son holds for his father who has been too "accommodating" to an unjust system. The unspoken issue of his mother which his grandmother and father seem to be covering up with rationalization and denial, which African Americans in the South must do for any outrages done them, in order to live with their psycho-social condition, burns like a pyre of rage at the center of their father-son relationship. Richard cannot do this and this character fault in him drives him to his hamartia--and eventual murder.

Why couldn't he control this impulse? Was his bitterness so much that the energy source needed to generate this self-control was stifled? Or was the plant already withered on the vine before he returned to the South? And why was that the case?

Surely other men have seen their dreams obliterated while they were still in their prime. Despite a little resultant bitterness, they managed to come to terms with some kind of life after. They raised families and served their communities. They stepped back and accepted a role in the

background or observed from the sidelines the events taking place before them. They watched the parade of life pass them by and managed a modicum of contentment with their lot. They went on with their lives.

What was in Richard Henry's craw which stopped him from doing the same? Perhaps the answers lie in his sojourn in the North which had happened before the play began. Needless to say, the ground had been laid during his early years in the South before he came North. That is a given.

He returns from the North, bitter, angry and violent from constant humiliation, not just from his past experiences in the South, whatever those may have been, but his experiences in that part of the country where humiliation had not been supposed to happen. His relationships with the white women in the North were probably degrading, minor pyrrhic victories which left him with feelings of sado-masochistic self-loathing rather than joyous remembrance or lusty triumph. (His braggadocio betrays dissatisfaction in recall.) All this would only serve to fuel the fires of his rage more.

The love that he desperately had needed itself needed a self-willed vulnerability which he could not allow to take hold of him. There was too much danger of injury and hurt. This knee-jerk response was to harden himself, to be devoid of affectivity of any kind, to be the Don Juan (the lover of many women who himself does not fall in love or allow himself to

be "gotten to," as opposed to his opposite, Casanova).

His were not the romances of the gentility-filled flower or a balmy breeze sifting through a nearby grove. His were the cold lusts of the asphalt pavements and cruel tenements, furtive and "kinky," cold, cruel and heartless.

At length, after having become virtually unreachable, he finds himself a befuddled rebel, determined, out to confront the white world and wring some recognition of his humanity--whatever is left of it--from his confrontation. But that humanity is eventually surrendered to hatred--the more profound because it has become self-contempt. The only recourse left to him, in the state of mind he is in now, is to flaunt his "affairs" in the very world where it is most indiscreet to do so, as a bitterly ironic kind of revenge against that surrounding world, against himself.

So his relationship with himself duplicates his relationships with those around him and causes their reactions to him. Because of this, he is doomed the second he sets foot on the soil of his home town.

The Reverend Meridian Henry (interestingly, Meridian is the name of the town where the "trial" of Medgar Evers' boastful killer was held and itself means a mid-line) becomes a living example of the traditional ineffectuality of the black man within the white power structure. At some point earlier in his life he had decided that it was dangerous for a black man in the South to assert his manhood, to promulgate his selfhood.

Realizing this, Richard has lost hope for correcting this legal imbalance within the system. He comes to envision revenge, then, as the only recourse for redress:

RICHARD

I just wish, that day that Mama died, he'd took a pistol and gone through that white man's hotel and shot every son of a bitch in the place. That's right, I wish he'd shot them dead.⁷

Frustrated by the miscarriage of social justice, he can only counsel the power of violence. This statement, of course, totally emasculates Meridian's position as his father, undermining his moral and paternal authority.

Deprived of the dignity of manhood in the secular world, he seeks this respect in the world of religion:

MERIDIAN

I've had to think--would I have been such a Christian if I hadn't been born black?"⁸

For him, dignity is defined in the simplest terms which any husband and father might require: the protection of his wife and son.

Why is it, then, that his concept of religion has resulted in the formulation of values that have been just as ineffectual as the religious convictions to which Reverend Phelps adheres? (Phelps is the white reverend of Plaguetown, Meridian's white doppelganger who is, accordingly, very conservative, very much in tune with the sentiments of

his parish.) First of all, Meridian uses religion as an escape mechanism to protect himself from the stark realities of life (like Sister Margaret in Baldwin's The Amen Corner), particularly life in a southern town.

Perhaps it is a sublimation of the rage, the will to vengeance, that must burn in him every waking second. Perhaps the concept of God and its accompanying value system becomes the spiritual environment to him as he had, in his private self-estimation, failed to be a man and a father to his son. Perhaps it is a reaction-formation, covering the urge toward violence deep in him which, to him, is completely unthinkable.

In strictly ostrich-like fashion, Meridian has stuck his head into the sand of religion, using the Bible as a shield and a solution to the multiplicity of real problems in a real world ruled not by the word of God but by the written and unwritten laws of men. He seeks to deal with the secular world strictly in accordance with Biblical precept, and he finds that this course of action is insufficient. His son and wife have been wantonly killed by a plague of hatred. Slowly, Meridian becomes aware that yesterday's ineffective solutions will not provide answers to the problems of today. Established values must be reexamined and new ones created in order to deal effectively with those issues. He acknowledges his role as a leader of his people. It is to him that generations yet unborn will turn for a sign and he does not know what that sign must be:

MERIDIAN

....Now, when the children come, my Lord, and ask which road to follow, my tongue stammers and my heart fails, I will not abandon the land--this strange land, which is my home. But can I ask the children forever to sustain the cruelty inflicted on them by those who have been their masters, and who are now, in very truth, their kinfolk, their brothers and their sisters and their parents? What hope is there for a people who deny their deeds and disown their kinsmen and who do so in the name of purity and love, in the name of Jesus Christ? What a light, my Lord, is needed to conquer so mighty a darkness! This darkness rules in us, and grows, in black and white alike. I have set my face against the darkness, I will not let it conquer me, even though it will, I know, one day, destroy this body. But, my Lord, what of the children? What shall I tell the children?⁹

Meridian begins to move toward these new values and in Act III we see on the witness stand a man whose faith has begun to falter under the oppressive forces exerted by a society that has been blinded by the plague of race hatred:

THE STATE

And you raised your son according to the precepts of the Christian church?

MERIDIAN

I tried. But both my son and I had profound reservations concerning the behavior of Christians. He wondered why they treated black people as they do. And I was unable to give him--a satisfactory answer.¹⁰

When the state litigators try to bait Meridian on the issue of social equality, the reverend responds with measured acuity:

THE STATE

Perhaps the difficulties your son had in accepting the Christian faith is due to your use of the pulpit as a forum for irresponsible notions concerning social equality, Reverend Henry. Perhaps the failure of the son is due to the failure of the father.

MERIDIAN

I am afraid that the gentleman flatters himself. I do not wish to see Negroes become the equal of their murderers. I wish us to become equal to ourselves. To become a people so free in themselves that they will have no need to--fear--others-- and have no need to murder others.

THE STATE

You are not in the pulpit now. I am suggesting that you are responsible--directly responsible!-- for your son's tragic fate.

MERIDIAN

I know more about that than you do. But you cannot consider my son's death to have been tragic. For you, it would have been tragic if he had lived.

THE STATE

With such a father, it is remarkable that the son lived as long as he did.

MERIDIAN

Remarkable, too, that the father lived!¹¹

Then the State tries a little interrogatory trickery on the wily but adamant pastor.

THE STATE

....It must have demanded great discipline-

MERIDIAN

To live among you? Yes.¹²

Litigational coercion is next, a tactic that would have worked on the conformist reverend of the past, but now does not.

THE STATE

Your Honor, will you instruct the witness that he is on the witness stand...and that he must answer the questions put to him!

MERIDIAN

The questions put to him! All right. Do you accept this answer? I am a man. A man! I tried to help my son become a man. But manhood is a dangerous pursuit here. And that pursuit undid him because of your guns, your hoses, your dogs, your judges, your law-makers, your folly, your pride, your cruelty, your cowardice, your money, your chain gangs, and your churches! Did you think it would endure forever? That we would pay for your ease forever?¹³

He comes boldly face to face with himself, gaining in spiritual strength much to the displeasure of the court.

MERIDIAN

Yes! I am responsible for the death of my son. I--hoped--I prayed--I struggled--so that the world would be different by the time he was a man than it had been when he was born. And I thought that--then--when he looked at me--he would think that I--his father--had helped to change it.¹⁴

Now the court tries psychological attack, using the old dodge of boxing the individual in with his personal self-image so that he cannot counterattack effectively. In the South, African-American men are made to know by white men what "truths" they should be holding dear, what value system they should be adhering to, and that, if they are not, there is something drastically wrong with them or, worse, they are to be "taught" a lesson, "straightened out," "put back in line":

THE STATE

Reverend Henry, you have made us all aware that your love for your son transcends your respect for the truth or your devotion to the church. But--luckily for the truth--it is a matter of public record that your son was so dangerously deranged that it was found necessary, for his own sake, to incarcerate him. It was at the end of that incarceration that he returned to this town. We know that his life in the North was riotous--he brought that riot into this town. The evidence is overwhelming. And yet, you, a Christian minister, dare to bring us this tissue of lies in defense of a known pimp, dope addict, and rapist! You are yourself so eaten up by race hatred that no word of yours can be believed.¹⁵

Before the change had been undergone in Meridian, he would have been easily bent to this standard. Now, he evinces a profound transformation:

MERIDIAN

Your judgment of myself and my motives cannot concern me at all. I have lived with that judgment far too long. The truth cannot be heard in this dreadful place. But I will tell you again what I know. I know why my son became a dope addict. I know better than you will ever know, even if I should explain it to you for all eternity, how I am responsible for that. But I know my son was not a pimp. He respected women far too much for that. And I know he was not a rapist. Rape is hard work--and, frankly, I don't think that the alleged object was my son's type at all!¹⁶

Parnell (the liberal), his white friend and the friend of Richard's killer, Lyle (the racist), must continue to be pulled in both directions, struggling to travel the middle of the road. In a way, Parnell reflects Meridian's former inner struggle, as the reverend is moving out of it. (Parnell is fixed at his psycho-socio-philosophical position of ambivalence.)

This ambivalence in Meridian had only exacerbated Richard's disapprobation because, in his bitter social canvas, one was either a friend or an enemy. There could be no in between. At this point, the young man no longer had the energy or will to wrestle with the labyrinthine complexities of attitudes that did not touch either extreme but which strained toward both. It had required great effort to wrestle with the

ambivalences and lack of certainty and conviction. It was far easier to cover over such considerations with contempt, a blanket dismissal of the individual concerned, even if he was an old family friend:

RICHARD

...I'm going to treat everyone of them as though they were responsible for all the crimes that ever happened in the history of the world--oh, yes! They're responsible for all the misery I've ever seen, and that's good enough for me. It's because my Daddy's got no power that my Mama's dead. And he ain't got no power because he's black. And the only way the black man's going to get any power is to drive all the white men into the sea.¹⁷

Le Roi Jones once said that any character created by a black writer, whether that character is black or white, is a black character. On that basis, I will discuss the white character Lyle Britten, Richard's killer, and Parnell James, the editor of the local newspaper and the white liberal of the play.

Lyle is full of the contradictions and psychic paradoxes of southern white characters, of white American males in particular, as envisioned by Baldwin. Doubtless, there is a good deal of projection and egomorphism in the creation of this character, helped by the social realities of life and death in the American South. First, he is on the extreme end of the social moral kaleidoscope. He commits acts which most of his fellow citizens

only think about, though not necessarily always surreptitiously. He has murdered a black woman and he has murdered Richard; he is full of loathing and fear of black males, particularly in regard to his wife Jo. Yet, he has had an affair with a black woman--an affair whose basis was not entirely lust. There is, mixed inside him, a real warm affection, envy and regard for black folks, for anyone, white or black, close to him whom he regards as possessing qualities he lacks. Still, he is ostensibly so anti-black he can easily take black lives without a moment's qualm.

Has Baldwin reflected a reality with which he has had a personal experience? Or, is he drawing upon people and dynamics he observed on his native East Harlem streets?--that is, black men doing great violence to each other with complete insouciance?--even when the belligerents had, at one time, some regard and affection for one another? (It is said that the African-American male has two enemies to watch out for in America--the white American male and the African-American male).

Here, the argument can go either way. In this instance, the white American male can show the black American male great affection and regard one second but the next, should a wrong note be struck in the tenuous human interactions of that moment, in the southern way of life, strike that male down precipitously. This behavior pattern, a legacy from the sociodynamics of the antebellum South (white master to black slave), was naturally adopted by the slaves, psychosocially internalized and

brought to the North by the great black migration where it became part of the interdynamics among its citizens. This pattern, Baldwin must have observed, experienced, learned of everyday of his young life. There were also his personal encounters with the white world--such as the incident in which he was abused by a white policeman in front of the Public Library on 42nd Street.¹⁸ Coupled with his wide reading on the subject of ante- and postbellum southern life and what it was like for African Americans, this must have enabled Baldwin to know Lyle well enough to create his character. One has only to change Lyle's race to black and see the same behavior patterns among young males on the streets of the black ghettos of America.

Does this imply a racism against the self as virulent as Lyle's? Partially so. There is the other side that demands survival. The Richards of the world somehow find ways to endure longer than the Richard of Blues for Mr. Charlie until death finally finds a way to overtake them. Thus, within most African- American males like Richard, there is a struggle going on between the Lyle part, the destroyer, and the part which survives, endures.

Baldwin used both parts within his creative subconscious when he created the final confrontation between Richard and his murderer:

RICHARD

I'm ready. Here I am. You asked me if I was ready, didn't you? What's on your mind, white man?

LYLE

Boy, I always treated you with respect. I don't know what's the matter with you, or what makes you act the way you do--but you owe me an apology and I come out here tonight to get it. I mean, I ain't going away without it.

RICHARD

I owe you an apology! That's a wild idea. What am I apologizing for?

LYLE

You know, you mighty lucky to still be walking around.

RICHARD

So are you. White man.

LYLE

I'd like you to apologize for your behavior in my store that day. Now, I think I'm being pretty reasonable, ain't I?

RICHARD

You got anything to write on? I'll write you an IOU.

LYLE

Keep it up. You going to be laughing out of the other side of your mouth pretty soon.

RICHARD

Why don't you go home? And let me go home? Do we need all this shit? Can't we live without it?

LYLE

Boy, are you drunk?

RICHARD

No, I ain't drunk. I'm just tired. Tired of all this fighting. What are you trying to prove? What am I trying to prove?

LYLE

I'm trying to give you a break. You too dumb to take it.

RICHARD

I'm hip. You been trying to give me a break for a great long time. But there's only one break I want. And you won't give me that.

LYLE

What kind of break do you want, boy?

RICHARD

For you to go home. And let me go home. I got things to do. I got--lots of things to do!

LYLE

I got things to do, too. I'd like to get home, too.

RICHARD

Then why are we standing here? Can't we walk?
Let me walk, white man! Let me walk!

LYLE

We can walk, just as soon as we got our business
settled.

RICHARD

It's settled. You a man and I'm a man. Let's walk.

LYLE

Nigger, you was born down here. Ain't you never
said sir to a white man?

RICHARD

No. The only person I ever said sir to was my
Daddy.

LYLE

Are you going to apologize to me?

RICHARD

No.

LYLE

Do you want to live?

RICHARD

Yes.

LYLE

Then you know what to do, then, don't you?

RICHARD

Go home. Go home.

LYLE

You facing my gun.

(Produces it)

Now, in just a minute, we can both go home.

RICHARD

You sick mother! Why can't you leave me alone?
 White man! I don't want nothing from you. You
 ain't got nothing to give me. You can't eat
 because none of your sad-assed chicks can cook.
 You can't talk because won't nobody talk to you.
 You can't dance because you've got nobody to
 dance with--don't you know I've watched you all
 my life? All my life! And I know your women,
 don't you think I don't--better than you!

(Lyle shoots, once.)¹⁹

Here we have two "brothers" on a collision course, a kind of sibling rivalry in which the two combatants jockey for positions of power and love to be bestowed upon them from some subliminal mother deep in the recesses of their subconscious sensibilities. They are linked in their mutual hatred of one another and each's desperate need to have an ego one-upmanship over the other. They are locked in a moral struggle, like two deer whose antlers have become locked in battle, which can only end with the more powerful belligerent destroying the other. There is no escape into the woods here by one male ruminant to seek out another herd of doe. The surrounding family--the implied threat to Jo, Lyle's wife, in Lyle's mind--and the unwritten behavioral laws of the South--will not permit it. Richard is doomed the moment he is alone and face to face with

Lyle. In a way, in Baldwin's scheme of things, so is Lyle.

Parnell, on the other hand, finally becomes the quintessential Baldwinian knee-jerk white liberal, the thematic linchpin of the play. He is Aesop's bat during the war between the birds and the beasts, a war he loses on each side. Since this Plaguetown war is ongoing, though few acknowledge that, and seems to have no end in sight, Parnell can only do his best to keep as much of the social peace as possible.

This means a splitting of himself into halves which renders him unable to be a whole man at any time. He is "other directed," fragmented. This is true of all of us in modern society. We wear multiple masks to be able to interact positively with the diversity and complexity of the world around us. This makes each of us "other directed."

Parnell, however, because he is caught in the middle of a particularly intense war, must work unusually hard to keep the various parts of him together. The result is he loses a part of his integrity and credulity everywhere he turns. He can never form solid ties in any direction--not with Meridian, not with Lyle, not with the black people of Plaguetown, not with the white people of the town.

When he testifies before the court, his ambivalence comes forth:

THE STATE

And [Lyle] did not tell you that Richard Henry
had attempted to assault his wife? [not true at all]
Come, Mr. James!

PARNELL

We were all very much upset. Perhaps he was not as coherent as he might have been--perhaps I failed to listen closely. It was my assumption that Mrs. Britten had misconstrued the boy's actions--he had been in the North a long time, his manner was very free and bold.

THE STATE

Mrs. Britten has testified that Richard Henry grabbed her and pulled her to him and tried to kiss her. How can those actions be misconstrued?

PARNELL

Those actions are--quite explicit.

THE STATE

Thank you, Mr. James. That is all.²⁰

This testimony can only bring one kind of reaction from the townsfolk.

BLACKTOWN

What do you think of our fine friend now? He didn't do it to us rough and hard. No, he was real gentle. I hardly felt a thing. Did you? You can't never go against the word of a white lady, man, not even if you're white. Can't be done. He was sad. Sad!

WHITETOWN

It took him long enough! He did his best not to say it--can you imagine! So her story was true--after all! I hope he's learned his lesson. We been trying to tell him--for years!²¹

Lyle, of course, is exonerated of the charge of murdering Richard.

At the end of the play, when Parnell offers to join a civil rights march

(the Civil Rights demonstrations are the background of the play), he is welcomed by Juanita (Richard's lover) but the questions about him in the surrounding air will always be: where is he? who is he? where does he belong? These questions will follow him to the grave:

PARNELL

Can I join you on the march, Juanita? Can I walk with you?

JUANITA

Well, we can walk in the same direction, Parnell. Come. Don't look like that. Let's go on.

(Exits.)

(After a moment, Parnell follows.)²²

Baldwin had to draw upon his own inner ambivalence toward whites and blacks to create the character of Parnell. His power has always come from this ambivalence which evokes the central source of energy for all of his writings and is at the center of the problematic mystery inside the psyche of the African-American male.

In Rachel and Big White Fog, the respective dramatists tended to present monochromatic characterizations of black male characters that generally leaned toward the ideal. With the sociohistoric circumstances for American blacks in each case being as bad as they were, playwrights wanting to make their points to mostly indifferent white theatre audiences, needed larger-than-life characterizations and, in many cases, extreme

presentations of their male characters' family dynamics.

When the characters tended toward the villainous, as in the case of Bigger Thomas in Native Son, they again were pushed by the dramatists to extremes of action and dynamics. In this case of the adaptation of a novel into a play, however, a theatrical piece that would go before a mostly white audience, the villainous character had to be softened, the acts of villainy placed within more mitigating contexts than those presented in the novel. Still, the dramatic representation was near the outer periphery of circumstances which made the dynamics seem less realistic and therefore more acceptable to an audience not ready to deal with black truths implicitly less than complimentary to the overall social fabric of the nation. Audiences were not ready to fathom the deeper complexities of the African American male psyche just yet.

Duality, ambivalence and deeper psychological and social complexity in black male characters began to appear in Take A Giant Step, The Amen Corner, A Raisin in the Sun and Blues for Mr. Charlie, all post-World War II dramas. America felt good about itself now and was therefore more receptive to reexamining its ideas about the surrounding world, its value system, itself. This new America could not comfortably peek underneath its layers of stereotyped images and gaze upon the bias shattering contradicting complexities, ironies, ambivalences and paradoxes imbedded in its race relations. Luke, "the devil" in James Baldwin's The Amen

Corner, turned out to be the agent of truth and light. Margaret, the protagonist, who espoused piety and good to compensate for a former life of lust, discovered at the play's resolution that she had really been the villain in the drama of Luke, her son Peter and her, Peter being driven away by her actions. Meridian, in Blues for Mr. Charlie, had been an Uncle Tom in his life in Plaguetown, even appearing not to have reacted to his wife's "murder." In the court scene, however, he turned on the State, and became a formidable witness for the prosecution. Spence, in Take A Giant Step, was at once, angry, indignant and confused. Still, through this, he grew to a new acceptance of his circumstances and himself.

It was now possible to have multi-faceted visions of black males' respective environments. Thus, when Walter reversed himself on Mr. Lindner in A Raisin in the Sun, Meridian thwarted the State and Richard faced down his murderer-to-be with rage, arrogance and finally tremulous intrepidity, it was clear that a new audience of all ethnicities had come to be in the theatre. This new audience was now open to experiencing new psychosocial facets of the black male sensibility.

CHAPTER SEVEN
 THE SLAVE WITHIN
THE SLAVE BY LEROI JONES

Outside sociohistorical circumstances in the early sixties brought into the creative and ideological matrix such "new" ideas as "real" freedom, a new enfranchisement, and revolution for the black community (civil) wars or, more specifically, racial war. For black authors, the outer constraints on exhibiting a black character's rage were removed to be replaced by self-effacing ambivalence and consequent neurosis. There were already hints of this in Raisin and Blues. Now it came forth in full force in LeRoi Jones' The Slave (1964) in the character of Walker Vessels (Denmark Vessey?), the ex-poet-intellectual-now-black- revolutionary leader of the black side of a racial war. It is raging outside of the setting of this play. Bombs, gunshots, general turmoil can be heard in the not-too-distant background and there is a sense of this struggle in Walker's almost threadbare aspect.

The Slave is an ironic title. The play, like its protagonist, wears the garments of a black militant, revolutionary tract--a protest play about a civil war between blacks and whites--but it is really an introspective play about discoveries of the self and those around the self, the nature of its relationships both to the inner being and the outer circles and how that

effects all other relationships. The play was first produced Off-Broadway at the St. Marks Playhouse December 16, 1964 and ran for one hundred and fifty-one performances. It received unfavorable reviews from some white critics and a few others walked out on the play without seeing it through. Nevertheless, to conclude that the play was written only for an African-American sensibility would be erroneous. It speaks to both whites and blacks alike.

During the tumultuous period of the sixties, the defense mechanism--reaction-formation (see Chapter 2, endnote #7)--manifested itself in many ways. Fear was prevalent. What would happen to one in that Southern town where the demonstration or voter registration were to take place? Would German shepherds be set upon Civil Rights marchers and protesters? Would there be beatings, cattle proddings, whippings, fires set, bombs planted? Would there be sniper shootings from behind trees? Would one survive?

Significantly, how would one react if caught in such a situation? Would one's final moment be one's "finest hour" or an embarrassment?

Then came the confusion, rage and panic of the Black Power movement. New directions in the movement were taken. Political enemies in the Movement suddenly found invisible fences between or among them becoming more visible--an enemy might become a supervisor or an administrative assistant. A person who was once an underling might now

be a leader. Loyalties and friendships became volatile or one's choice of friends or mere associates might be called into question. One began to reevaluate one's own values or sense of self-worth. Had the previous expenditure of energy and time been worth it or had it all been for nothing? Who was now liberal, right, left? Was the anti-establishment relevant any longer? Which was "in" now? What was to become of the Movement for what was right and proper? What was now to become de rigueur?

African Americans became Black Americans. Black became beautiful. The heretofore scorned Bantu features (beautiful only to the negritude-elite few) now became, to the general populace, acceptable representations of beauty, to be, more often than not, admired, adored. Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte now slipped into positions in the American psyche formerly occupied by the Van Johnsons and Tom Drakes of the entertainment world (or myth-making, icon constructing Hollywood/Madison Avenue Mandarins).

Along with this shift, it was no longer considered "outrageous," "revolutionary," "daring" or "sensational" for African-American males to take up with white females (Even in Plaquemine in Blues for Mr. Charlie, there was not really that much uproar when Richard showed his photos around). In fact, because it was no longer the novelty, black males were turning back to their "sisters." As an ironic consequence, any interracial

relationships that survived this new development had to have had more to them than purely surface "rebellion against one's own and against the enemy" (like Richard in Blues). Those interrelationships that were honest had to involve true affection, love and devotion and if there were any other problems the couple may have had--residual resentment from whites and/or blacks, personal unresolved psychological problems which precluded any successful relationships with another human being, no matter what ethnicity--that proved to be their undoing, "being in or out of style" was not one of them. (At the time of writing this play, LeRoi Jones was in the process of leaving his white wife and two children by her. Does this play then become a personal examination?)

It is therefore understandable that, amidst all the confusion, there would be many instances of reaction-formation. There would be the loud militant screaming, "Off all the ofays (whites)!" while going home to sleep with his white lover. There would be the liberal whites who would say: "They're right about this Black Power thing," while saying inside, "Those assholes will never make it without us. How dare they suggest otherwise?"

The outwardly dauntless radical militant might have been concealing inside him an uncertainty about himself and all the vicissitudes and dynamics he might run up against. If he were a leader or someone near that, he certainly could not show this fear. Ambivalence, thoughtfulness,

sensitivity are too often interpreted as weakness or vacillation by those who would be led (as is the case for liberals). Caution, discretion and circumspection would appear to undercut his resolve in their eyes and thus dilute the intensity with which they would follow his orders and directives. The young Turks in the organization would move in on him like Cape wild dogs besieging an old zebra. Any revolution led by him would therefore be doomed to failure.

As a consequence, all tendencies toward the cerebral had to be concealed, kept under control, and only those forms of cerebration which would impress his underlings with his thoughtfulness, cleverness, discreet caution and wisdom, would be allowed to surface. Only those tendencies which reinforced his strength as a leader would become extrinsic. All else would remain concealed from those following him. There could not be even a hint of weakness.

This posture would pose a problem to the African-American male leader. Though The Emancipation Proclamation had legally freed the black slaves in the nineteenth century--historically; in fact, psychologically, sociologically and economically, for many black males, slavery continues to exist today. Somewhere deep in the recesses of the psyche--whether it is in the ego, the superego, the unconscious--there exists the internalized "Negro slave" fed by decades, generations of subliminal and overt training by the surrounding primary (itself having been trained) and secondary

culture in which that individual had been nurtured. There are variations to how the individual reacts to this or functions under its effects--whether he becomes Bill Cosby, Jesse Jackson, Oprah Winfrey, Willie Horton or Walker Vessels--the central part of this "inner reality" is always there.

With this fact in mind, Jones begins his play, in the prologue, with an old slave named Walker coming out, presentationally, to address the audience. Is this what Walker Vessels, the protagonist of The Slave, has become? Or is it where he has come from? Is this a commentary on a truth about the African-American psyche? Is this character the real person inside the revolutionary protagonist, presented nakedly to the audience prior to the events of the play proper? Or is it the aftermath? Is he the universal metaphor for what exists inside every revolutionary, white or black? Have the western values so filled and confused him that it is necessary he become a militant monster to neutralize their effects? Was Joseph Stalin so monstrous because it was necessary for him to counterpoise the Christian-Judaic-Czarist value system made so much a part of him in the small Georgian town he grew up in (though he used much of it to implement his policies after he became dictator)? Accordingly, playwright Jones uses this play to examine the inner world and personal relationships of the imposing revolutionary leader. Walker Vessels, who is struggling with the fact that much of what he is revolting against is very much a valued part of him.

Therein is the dilemma. He is an erstwhile poet and intellectual. Many of the parameters, rules, figures of speech, metonymic choices, mythologies which he had used to express the very core of his anguished soul had their roots in the very value system which gave his soul its anguish, an anguish which drove him to become a revolutionary. The fire in him which must have been ignited, which catapulted him to the top of his organization and mesmerized the men around him (men who have followed him faithfully, whom he must love for being his men and for being the brave fighters they obviously are but whom he must also feel contempt for not being on his intellectual level, for not being as Eurocentrically oriented as he), comes partly from the very thing he hates enough to want to destroy. Such an ambivalence must have ripped him apart inside. Hence, the reaction-formation: the militant outside, the slave inside. Ironically, Victor Mason in Big White Fog can only talk wishfully of a much milder form of revolution which never comes (except in interracial form). Walker not only has his more efficacious revolution; he is winning it. Yet, he is more conflicted in his position than the fanatical Garveyite. Walker becomes two persons.

In the play's prologue, Walker, "dressed as an old field slave, balding, with white hair, and an old ragged vest....comes to the center of the stage slowly, and very deliberately, puffing on a pipe, and seemingly uncertain of the reaction any audience will give his speech."¹

WALKER

(Pauses to relight pipe)

I am much older than I look...or maybe much younger. Whatever I am or seem...²

Earlier in the monologue he says:

WALKER

Whatever the core of our lives. Whatever the deceit. We live where we are, and seek nothing but ourselves. We are liars, and we are murderers. We invent death for others. Stop their pulses publicly. Stone possible lovers with heavy worlds we think are ideas...and we know, even before these shapes are realized, that these worlds, these depths or heights we fly to smoothly, as in a dream, or slighter, when we stare dumbly into space, leaning our eyes just behind a last quick moving bird, then sometimes the place and twist of what we are will push and sting, and what the crust of our stance

WALKER (CONT'D)

has become will ring in our ears and shatter that piece that is never closed. An ignorance. A stupidity. A stupid longing not to know...which is romantically fulfilled. Automatically triumphs.

Automatically makes us killers or foot-dragging celebrities at the core of any filth. And it is a deadly filth that passes as whatever thing we feel is too righteous to question, too deeply felt to deny.³

Here, the tone is set for what follows. It is the revelation of that duality in man which is at the center of the play's protagonist and his dilemma, which engenders the irony of the play's title.

The play is in the realm of science fiction. It postulates that there is a

race war between the blacks and the whites which the blacks (ten percent of the population--though Fidel Castro's revolution was won with as small a following) are apparently winning. Moreover, although much of the dialogue is presented representationally, so much of it is so intellectual, ironic, hyperbolic and full of oxymoron that it flirts with presentationalism. Walker Vessels, armed, leaves the warring group he is so triumphantly leading to visit the home of his ex-wife Grace (who is white), the two children she bore him and her current college professor husband Easley who is white, a liberal and apparently a former acquaintance of Walker's. It is similar to a hostage, "desperate hours" type of situation but is really a desire on the part of Walker to step back into his past, "to come home," for a rigorous self-examination before he makes any major dramatic decisions about his movement. It is here where the revolution, although very much a presence in the play with its contrapuntal noise and violence, gets pushed into the background of concern, to be replaced by a reevaluation, more to the point, an Ibsenian philosophical "retrospective analysis" of their interpersonal (mainly Walker-centered) relationships.

Actually, all things considered, the play is static. True, there is conflict, both subterranean and overt. Certainly the action outside of the house is in full force. Inside of the house, however, the dynamics are at a standstill. What other way can things be? Walker has a gun. Easley is a college professor, not a caped crusader. He is not going to engage in

reckless heroics with his wife in the room with him and the two children upstairs. This is not a Hollywood suspense piece, with Gary Cooper lunging for the gun, disarming the intruder and saving the day, the whole story concerning itself with getting to that point. We have here three intellectuals, literary, philosophical, caught in a situation none of them really wants to be in--no matter what the surface reasons indicate--trying to work out some kind of moral and psychological negotiation with Walker in which truths are revealed, meanings are come to terms with, and nobody emerges harmed. The drama and theatricality are on the outside, offstage. The drama and theatricality on the immediate stage before the audience are in the words flying back and forth among the characters, mostly directed at Walker or with Walker either counterattacking or initiating the attack.

Though menace, threats and violence from Walker are present, they are mainly to make a point, often gratuitous, often a nonsequitur. They become almost a form of obligatory punctuation, nothing more, until the play's "climax" [quotation marks mine]. Grace and Easley almost react with faint fear as if they half do not believe he will do what he threatens, cannot do it because they share a personal history. The other part of them, of course, is wary, uneasy.

Anyone with the least familiarity with the work of LeRoi Jones or his later incarnation, Imamu Baraka, should know the inevitability of the play's

ending, implicit in the prologue.

In LeRoi Jones's play Dutchman the protagonist Clay is murdered by the white woman he encounters on the subway because of his "pretensions to bourgeois respectability," because he tries to be "white middle-class" in his demeanor. In this play, The Slave, Clay, in the form of Walker, gets his revenge. It is his turn now to murder the white woman and thus to murder the very same qualities in him mentioned above--intrinsic "whiteness," Eurocentric cultural enslavement--by, perhaps, murdering the children upstairs. He kills Grace by murdering her husband, by threatening to take the children away, by psychologically torturing her and, finally, by having his forces outside destroy the home, one of whose beams falls on her. (This, of course, is an inadvertent act, not deliberate.) To add fuel to the fire, before she dies he tells her that before she and her husband had arrived at home, he had murdered the children. (Why they had left the children alone, given the events on the outside, is puzzling. Whatever, it allows Walker to enter the house unopposed and do what he had wanted to do.)

To have committed such an extreme act--the murder of his own children--tells a poignant tale of the nature of the turmoil inside the militant protagonist. That he was friends with whites at one time and now is their besieger is one thing, whether the change in attitude is a pose or not. To murder his own children, however, because a part of them represents the

enemy, disregarding that other part of them that represents him, his blood, his flesh, his inner reality, his humanity, is an extreme act that undercuts the cogency of his will as a revolutionary. A revolutionary exudes a crazed fanaticism to achieve his revolutionary goals. The extremism is the energy generator which drives him over the many obstacles he must come up against in the course of carrying out his given mission.

There must be, however, an essential humanity which connects him to the community he is going up against the power structure for. It must be there for that community to be behind him in his efforts, or his mission is doomed to failure. The murder of anything that connects him to any humanity takes him out of that area in which rapport with the community and an assurance of their allegiance to him and his value system is possible. In the case of Walker, it may free him--in his mind--from any ties which would compromise his effectiveness but, in fact, it is those very children the revolution is for. The ultimate sincerity of his fervor and the steadfastness of his motivation are therefore questionable and finally so is the basis of the revolution. Even the dedicated soldiers under him would now have their doubts. If he had chosen instead to take the children with him to wherever the revolution is taking him and his army, that would be another matter. However, for all concerned, that would be too dangerous. Always there is his role as a leader, his other "enslavement." The question is which "enslavement" is the stronger, the more problematic.

When Grace and Easley first encounter Walker in the beginning of the play--just after the prologue, the professor and his wife become tense and watchful of the revolutionary:

EASLEY

(Handing GRACE a cigarette, then waiting to light it)

Well, what the hell do you want, hero?

(Drawn out and challenging)

WALKER

(With same challenge)

Nothing you have, fellah, not one thing.

EASLEY

Oh?

(Cynically)

Is that why you and your noble black brothers are killing what's left of this city?

(Suddenly broken)

I should say....what's left of this country...or world.⁴

A little later, Grace tries to stifle one of Walker's tirades:

GRACE

Walker, shut up, will you?

(Furious memory)

I had enough of your twisted logic in my day...you remember? I mean like your heroism. The same kind of memory. Or lie. Do you remember which? Huh?

(Starting to weep)

WALKER

(Starts to comfort her)

Grace...look...there's probably nothing I can say to make you understand me...now.

EASLEY

(Steps in front of WALKER as he moves toward GRACE...feigning a cold sophistication)

Uh...no, now come, Jefe, you're not going to make one of those embrace the weeping ex-wife dramas, are you? Well, once a bad poet always a bad poet...even in the disguise of a racist murderer!⁵

Here, Easley partly forgets the situation Grace and he are currently in and reverts back to the role of critic-analyst of Walker's creative work and of his thinking in general. Obviously, this man who has taken Walker's place in Grace's heart, in the family constellation, perhaps even in the children's consciousness, must once have been somewhat close to Walker, must have been a trusted colleague. Perhaps he was a mentor-- perhaps a teacher of the fledgling poet intellectual-- perhaps even the inadvertent Frankenstein who gave birth to the militant revolutionary with catalytic transfusions of Eurocentric history, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Now he is the man Walker must destroy, not because he has taken his place in his family but because he is the synecdoche of the force he is battling against.

To prepare for this, Walker must harden himself. He must not be as

vulnerable to Easley's barbs as he probably was at one time. Thus, in the current situation, he responds to Easley:

WALKER

(Not quite humbled)

Yeah.

(Bends head, then he brings it up quickly, forcing the joke)

Even disguised as a racist murderer...I remain a bad poet. Didn't St. Thomas say that? Once a bad poet always a bad poet...or was it Carl Sandburg, as some kind of confession?⁶

Easley, not to be put off, stays in the argument:

EASLEY

You're not still writing...now, are you? I should think the political, now military estates would be sufficient. And you always used to speak of the Renaissance as an evil time.

(Begins making two drinks)

And now you're certainly the gaudiest example of Renaissance man I've heard of.⁷

After regarding Walker for some time, Grace--hinting at a past tenderness between them--now interrupts the argument to express a note of concern for the artist's soul in her ex-husband (perhaps appropriate, perhaps not):

GRACE

(Looking toward WALKER even while EASLEY extends the drink toward her)

Walker...you are still writing, aren't you?⁸

Walker, wanting to maintain his hardness, can only respond to her softness with game-playing, self-effacing bitter irony:

WALKER

Oh, God, yes. Want to hear the first lines of my newest work?

(Drinks, does a theatrical shiver)

Uh, how's it go...? Oh, "Straddling each dolphin's back/And steadied by a fin,/ Those innocents relive their death,/Their wounds open again."⁹

Grace continues her soft concern:

GRACE

(Staring at him closely)

It's changed quite a bit.¹⁰

Walker must turn this into a game. He must maintain the upper hand in all areas, not just the physical one brought about by the fact that he is armed:

WALKER

Yeah...it's changed to Yeats.

(Laughs very loudly)

Yeah, Yeats...Hey, professor, anthologist, lecturer, loyal opposition, et cetera, et cetera, didn't you recognize those words as being Yeats's? Goddamn, I mean if you didn't recognize them...who the hell would? I thought you knew all kinds of shit.¹¹

Easley, also, is fighting for the upper hand while at the same time maintaining his composure:

EASLEY
(Calmly)
I knew they were Yeats'.¹²

Momentarily thwarted, Walker quickly turns his attention briefly to the bottle in his hand:

WALKER
(Tilting the bottle again quickly)
Oh yeah? What poem?¹³

Now Easley administers the coup de gras.

EASLEY
The second part of "News for the Delphic Oracle."¹⁴

Easley knows the poem and it is to be assumed that he knows the psychological dynamic behind Walker's choice of a poem to masquerade with. With all its symbolism and with Walker's obvious need to identify with a vital symbol like this to anchor his strength on, he has perhaps revealed more to his antagonist Easley about the state of his inner world than he had wanted to. This must put him on the defensive.

The dolphin, the symbolic benefactor of Mankind (in fact, this sea mammal, having no fear of Man, has been known to save drowning men in

the sea and take them to safety), the representative of the Apollonian ideal, the channel for all the freedom, wisdom and enlightenment from the Delphic Oracle, with its beauty of movement and aspect. Obviously, this expresses a covert wish-fulfillment on Walker's part, that this would symbolize him and all that he stands for in the ongoing revolution.

What is more, William Butler Yeats was himself a nationalistic as well as a late Romantic poet. (Many parallels can be drawn between the socio-political position of the Irish in relationship to the occupying British and the African American in relationship to the majority white American.) Very much a part of his oeuvres were mysticism, symbolism and imagism. He paralleled the age of fifth century Periclean Athens with the eleventh century Byzantine culture as the zenith of the Christian cycle. Walker's choice of this poet reveals much about his art, his concerns, the very core of his soul.

Also, that the belletristic knowledge seems to float between the two men renders Walker somewhat uneasy and possibly annoyed as Easley calmly accepts the message of this moment and its full connotation.

There is a brief moment of understanding between the two men which disarms Walker even more. Easley's role, for the remainder of the play, will be to undermine Walker in every possible way, to dilute the revolutionary's power as much as he can. He must keep Walker on the defensive both as a safety measure and to justify, in his own mind, his

position of having taken the black militant's place in this household.

Walker, of course, is fully aware of this and must quickly regroup:

WALKER

(Hurt)

"News for the Delphic Oracle." Yeah. That's right.

(To GRACE)

You know that, Grace? Your husband knows all about everything. The second part of "News for the Delphic Oracle."

(Rhetorically)

Intolerable music falls. Nymphs and satyrs copulate in the foam.¹⁵

The sub rosa altercation continues.

The issue of the children's fate comes up:

GRACE

You're not going to take the children, are you? You wouldn't just take them, would you? You wouldn't do that. You can't hate me so much that you'd do that.¹⁶

Grace draws on their personal history as man and wife and parents of the children to elicit from him the answer she wants to hear, that he would not do such a thing. That they were once a loving couple and good parents is evident in her plea. His taking them away from her is an unthinkable thing to her and her image of and respect for him is implicit in her voice and repetitive manner. As monstrous as he has become, those qualities in him that made her love him and happily bare children for him,

loving them for herself as well and not abandoning them, must still be inside him and would never let him do this. She is clinging to a past image of him--since there is nothing else she can do under the circumstances--that no longer is there.

He, accordingly, can only respond with cruel acrimony:

WALKER

I don't hate you at all, Grace. I hated you when I wanted you. I haven't wanted you for a long time. But I do want those children.¹⁷

Their relationship, what is left of it, can now only be discussed in love-hate terms, with particular emphasis on the latter as she strikes back at him:

GRACE

You're lying!

WALKER

No, I'm not lying...and I guess that's what's cutting you up...because you probably know I'm not lying, and you can't understand that. But I tell you now that I'm not lying, and that in spite of all the things I've done that have helped kill love in me, I still love those girls.

EASLEY

You mean, in spite of all the people you've killed.

WALKER

O.K., O.K., however you want it...however you want it, let it go at that. In spite of all the people I've killed. No, better, in spite

WALKER (CONT'D)

of the fact that I, Walker Vessels, single-handedly, and with no other adviser except my own ego, promoted a bloody situation where white and black people are killing each other; despite the fact that I know that this is at best a war that will only change, ha, the complexion of tyranny...

(Laughs sullenly)

in spite of the fact that I have killed for all times any creative impulse I will ever have by the depravity of my murderous philosophies... despite the fact that I am being killed in my head each day and by now have no soul or heart or warmth, even in my long killer fingers, despite the fact that I have no other thing in the universe that I love or trust, but myself... despite or in spite, the respite, my dears, my dears, hear me, O Olympus, O Mercury, God of thieves, O Damballah, chief of all the dead religions of pseudo-nigger patriots hoping to open big restaurants after de wah...har har... in spite, despite, the resistance in the large cities and the small towns, where we have taken, yes, dragged piles of darkies out of their beds and shot them for being in Rheingold ads, despite the fact that all of my officers are ignorant motherfuckers who have never read any book in their lives, despite the fact that I would rather argue politics, or literature, or boxing, or anything, with you, dear Easley, with you...

(Head slumps, weeping)

despite all these things and in spite of all the drunken noises I'm making, despite...in spite of...I want those girls, very, very, much. And I will take them out of here with me.¹⁸

Needless to say, this is a face he would dare not show to his soldiers

but it is very much there in him, just below the surface. Implicit in here is a titanic struggle he must engage in with himself every waking hour of his current life. This must put a terrible strain on him and this makes his judgements questionable.

The sad irony is tears are taken as a sign of weakness when they are really indicative of a terrible wound deep down inside.

Revolutions have been carried on by leaders with terrible wounds inside them. The wounds have not stopped the process. Sometimes they have energized it. Sometimes they have become the central hardening adhesive to the needed strength.

Grace, however, had lived with them and, in fact, had learned how to deal with them. She shows this now, as, beginning to sense what Walker's decision is, she lashes back at him:

GRACE

(Jumps up)

What? Is no one to reason with you? Isn't there any way something can exist without you having the final judgment on it? Is the whole world yours...to deal with or destroy? You're right! You feel! You have the only real vision of the world. You love! No one else exists in the world except you, and those who can help you. Everyone else is nothing or else they're something to be destroyed. I'm your enemy now...right? I'm wrong. You are the children's father...but I'm no longer their mother. Every one of your yesses or nos is intended by you to reshape the world after the image you have of it. They are my children!

GRACE (CONT'D)

I am their mother! But because somehow I've become your enemy, I suddenly no longer qualify. Forget you're their mother, Grace. Walker has decided that you're no longer to perform that function. So the whole business is erased as if it never existed. I'm not in your head, Walker. Neither are those kids. We are all flesh and blood and deserve to live...even unabstracted by what you think we ought to be in the general scheme of things. Even alien to it...¹⁹

Grace then brings out her ultimate weapon. She rehashes the terrible last years of their deteriorating relationship:

GRACE

....I left you...and took the girls because you'd gone crazy. You're crazy now. This stupid ugly killing you've started will never do anything for anybody. And you and all your people will be wiped out, you know that. And you'll have accomplished nothing. Do you want those two babies to be with you when you're killed so they can witness the death of a great man? So they can grow up and write articles for a magazine sponsored by the Walker Vessels Society?²⁰

Though much of the dialogue is presented with realism, representationally, so much of it is so intellectual, ironic, full of metaphysical gameplaying that its effect is to create a mise en scene that flirts with presentationalism. Like its protagonist and subject, the play suggests the myriad dichotomies that pervade the surrounding universe, that certainly pervaded their--Walker's and Grace's--marriage relationship.

Perhaps the intrinsic duality of Walker needs presentationalism to insure clear communication of its warring emotions to the audience.

Representationalism often conceals.

With the above regard, Grace, further along near the play's end, after Easley has been murdered by Walker, assumes his role of undermining the revolutionary. In Jones's pantheon, whites, even if they have shared intimacies with blacks, loved them, married them, bore their children, dealt with their foibles and idiosyncracies and shared their own, never lose that everpresent fence that separates the camps. Grace is, finally, the enemy.

How devastatingly this must compromise the intrinsic integrity, manhood and sense of reality of Walker:

GRACE

(Weeping, but then she stops and is quiet for a minute)

So what's supposed to happen then...I mean after you take the kids and leave me here alone? Huh? I know you've thought about that, too.

WALKER

I have. But you know what'll happen much better than I do. But maybe you don't. What do you think happened to me when you left? Did you ever think about that? You must have.

GRACE

You had your cause, friend. Your cause, remember. And thousands of people following you, hoping that shit you preached was right. I pitied you.

WALKER

I know that. It took me awhile, but then I finally understood that you did pity me. And that you were somewhere, going through whatever mediocre routine you and Easley called your lives...pitying me. I figured that, finally, you weren't really even shocked by what was happening...what had happened. You were so secure in the knowledge that you were good, and compassionate...and right, that most of all...you were certain, my God, so certain...emotionally and intellectually, that you were right, until the only idea you had about me was to pity me.

(He wheels around to face her squarely)

God, that pissed me off. You don't really know how furious that made me. You and that closet queen, respected, weak-as-water intellectual, pitying me. God. God!

(Forcing the humor)

Miss Easley, honey, I could have killed both of you every night of my life.

GRACE

Will you kill me now if I say right here that I still pity you?

WALKER

(A breathless, half-broken little laugh)

No. No, I won't kill you.

GRACE

Well, I pity you, Walker. I really do.

WALKER

Only until you start pitying yourself.²¹

Now aggrieved and livid, she scrambles around for something effective with which to retaliate:

GRACE

I wish I could call you something that would hurt you.

WALKER

So do I.

GRACE

(Wearily)

Nigger.

WALKER

So do I.²²

Earlier in the play, Grace and Walker have an exchange, in the presence of her current husband, which has as its center the crystallization of all that the play is about:

WALKER

...But those things I said...and would say now, pushed you away from me. I couldn't understand that.

GRACE

You couldn't understand it? What are you saying?

WALKER

No, I couldn't understand it. We'd been together a long time, before all that happened. What I said...what I thought I had to do... I knew you, if any white person in the world could, I knew you would understand. And then you didn't.

GRACE

You began to align yourself with the worst kind of racists and second-rate hack political thinkers.

WALKER

I've never aligned myself with anything or anyone I hadn't thought up first.

GRACE

You stopped telling me everything!

WALKER

I never stopped telling you I loved you... or that you were my wife!

GRACE

(Almost broken)

It wasn't enough, Walker. It wasn't enough.

WALKER

God, it should have been.

GRACE

Walker, you were preaching the murder of all white people. Walker, I was, am, white. What do you think was going through my mind every time you were at some rally or meeting whose sole purpose was to bring about the destruction of white people?

WALKER

Oh, goddamn it, Grace, are you so stupid? You were my wife...I loved you. You mean because I loved you and was married to you...had children by you, I wasn't supposed to say the things I felt. I was crying out against three hundred years of oppression; not against individuals.²³

It is Easley's response to that which frames the whole argument of the play:

EASLEY
But it's individuals who are dying.²⁴

Five months after the play's premiere, the playwright formed the Harlem Black Arts Repertory Theater and School. All whites were to be excluded from performances and all white roles in any plays produced here were to be played by black actors in whiteface.

Apparently, the one-time integrationist LeRoi Jones had travelled a distance toward Imamu Amiri Baraka.

CHAPTER EIGHT
BLACK POWER BEGINS TO RECEDE
CEREMONIES IN DARK OLD MEN
BY LONNE ELDER, III

As mentioned in the previous chapter, when LeRoi Jones's The Slave first opened at the St. Marks Playhouse on December 16, 1964, it received generally unfavorable reviews in the establishment press. Partly, this was because of a certain stridence, in the play's language--despite Jones's accustomed and generally acknowledged power with words. The beforementioned excesses which pushed the effect of the play from protest science fiction into semi-hysterical tirade put many critics off. More important, however, Watts and Harlem had just had riots (or inner city insurrections, if you will); Newark's and Detroit's were imminent. There were warnings in advance by many pundits including Jones, Baldwin, and a host of social scientists. Meanwhile, the liberal and right establishmentarians were practicing the desperate game of denial. They did not need The Slave to bring the point home to them, heightening the fright in their already apprehensive dreams.

Then came the other inner city catastrophes. The rise of groups like The Black Panther Party, The Deacons for Defense, and the Black Power Movement, as misinterpreted by the power structure to mean "life imitates art" (or The Slave, if you will), was an effect of the dying Civil

Rights Movement. In addition, feminism and the anti-Viet Nam War sentiments grew like new branches to say that things as they were, the status quo, were not right. People became very uneasy about the *undergirdings of our society*.

They needed the truth but put in a less threatening form than Jones's plays, Dutchman and The Slave, or less accusatorially (J'accuse) than Baldwin's Blues for Mr. Charlie. Beginning to sense that black power did not mean what they at first thought, they wanted to know more about what it really was, what it really meant--the economic and political empowerment of the disfranchised. They wanted to learn that black power had nothing to do with "kill whitey."

They were willing to accept the reality that, if the disfranchised were denied the opportunities to make their necessary contributions to the larger society as well as to themselves and their own communities, their drives to these ends (The American Dream) would find alternative outlets (something Black Power was supposed to make unnecessary). As a result of the conclusions of the Kerner-Lindsay U S. Riot Commission Report, Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968)¹, Michael Harrington's book, The Other America (1963)² and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's work (written in collaboration with Nathan Glazer), Beyond the Melting Pot (1963)³, the mood of the nation became one of concern about the everpresent problem of poverty. President Johnson put into

effect war on poverty programs involving the allotment of enormous sums of money to disadvantaged inner city neighborhoods.

The programs took some strange turns, however. The distribution of monies to the various programs was not monitored properly. Fathers often found that their children were earning more money than they, even after being on their respective nonpoverty program jobs for years. "Poverty Pimps" often took money for nonexistent programs or for programs which did little that had been promised in their project proposals. Sometimes the money went to support revolutionary groups, helping them to subsidize their antiestablishment undertakings.

Fortunately, these instances were in the minority (most of the poverty programs were of immense help) but there were enough of them, combined with the already existent negative effects of long years of economic and sociopolitical deprivation, to make the corrections at which the war on poverty was aimed nearly impossible. Its effects on the larger disadvantaged community were negligible at best.⁴

The public was now ready for a play which showed people involved in self-help, succeeding without government help, people somehow pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, even if the methods used were not completely on the up and up. The public wanted to see the "new" definition of black power in action.

It took a play like Lonne Elder III's Ceremonies in Dark Old Men (1965)

to fit the bill. After a series of readings by the New Dramatists Committee in 1965 and at Wagner College, Staten Island, New York in the mid-1960's, it was produced Off-Broadway by the Negro Ensemble Company at the St. Marks Playhouse, February 2, 1969, where it ran for forty performances. Reopening Off-Broadway for a second professional production at the Pocket Theatre April 19, 1969, it ran for three hundred and twenty performances. Ceremonies won both the Vernon Rice/Drama Desk Award and the Outer Critics' Circle Award and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. (It came in second to black playwright Charles Gordone's No Place To Be Somebody [another play about black power].)⁵

How does it feel for a man not to be able to support his family the way he would like? What must go on inside of him when, within a patriarchally oriented society, he sees his wife, or worse, his daughter or son, become the main breadwinner of the family? With an ego already considerably damaged by the constant bombardment from a rejecting job market, with the frustration from his family's and his life being tied to limited resources, something terrible must happen in his very soul every day of his life.

He can react in any number of ways. He can turn to drink, engage in abusive behavior against his family, or escape physically or psychologically (as many men do when faced with the reality that they cannot do for their families what they would like to do--what they have been trained to

believe they are supposed to do). Some men settle into menial, drudgery-filled, degrading jobs (if they can obtain them), turn off inside, become shells and put in their time, dying a little each working day. Others disconnect from their feelings entirely and/or repress them (which results in insusceptibility) until one day they have strokes or drop dead from heart attacks. Many are rationalization, denial and the aforementioned reaction-formation. There is also the escape into fantasy.

Many other men opt for permanent nonemployment. They would rather stay home than put in a day on some job they feel is beneath them or take orders from co-workers, bosses and supervisors for whom they feel more than usual contempt. In the case of African-American males, there is, added to this problem, the neverending sapping of energy, spirit and morale due to the onslaught of unconscious, covert and overt racism. When life circumstances do not give a male individual much for ego support, then all he has is his manhood, such as it is (as is particularly the case for African-American males). Anything that threatens to undermine that is to be avoided religiously. It is his last bastion.

For the African-American male like Russell Parker, the protagonist of Ceremonies in Dark Old Men, this jealous guarding of his manhood and sense of self becomes a particularly uncompromising rule of thumb. He has gone into business for himself as a barber at which he is, however, barely making a living.

His two sons, Theopholis and Bobby, do not have jobs for the abovementioned reasons. A permanent noninterest in employment acquisition has settled into their souls, bringing with it a host of accompanying rationalizations for their joblessness. Though he partly understands what demoralization an unreceptive job market can cause inside young black men, Russell is concerned that the streets will draw them more deeply into their nefarious ways. He already knows that the young men are engaging in unlawful activities.

The whole unhealthy income situation in the Parker household forces Russell's daughter, Adele, to be the breadwinner. Bills, after all, have to be paid, food put on the table. The barber shop and connecting house require that rent be paid. To Russell, this situation contains within it several unhealthy ramifications: one, what it is doing to his manhood and the manhood of his two sons--and it is a problem no matter how much they pretend on the surface it is not; two, how it is precluding any chances for Adele to become a wife and mother in her own family in the future or merely to have a happy normal life as a woman; three, how this situation is defeminizing her; four, how much rock solid bitterness may possibly have already seeped into her soul as a result of this inside-out arrangement; finally, the danger that she may already be following in the footsteps of her late mother who seems to have worked herself into an early grave because of this same situation:

ADELE

Me, Adele Eloise Parker, black, over twenty-one, and the only working person in this house!

(Pause.)

I am not going to let the three of you drive me into the grave the way you did Mama-- And if you really want to know how I feel about that, I'll tell you: Mama killed herself because there was no kind of order in this house--there was nothing but her old-fashion love for a bum like you, Theo--and this one--

(Points to BOBBY)

Who's got nothing better to do with his time but to shoplift every time he walks into a department store. And you, Daddy, you and those fanciful stories you're always ready to tell, and the talk of the good old days when you were the big vaudeville star, of hitting the numbers, big. How? How, Daddy?....The money you spent on the numbers you got from Mama-- In a way, you let Mama make a bum out of you--you let her kill herself!⁶

Although he protests, Russell, deep inside, concurs with everything she has said. This agreement does not prevent him from panicking when she threatens to lock him and his sons out of his shop and the house if the men of the family do not go out and secure employment immediately:

ADELE

Can't you understand, Father! I can't go on forever supporting three grown men! THAT AIN'T RIGHT!⁷

Reluctantly, they all agree to seek employment "downtown." Still, there is his male pride and the prospect of going through the humiliating ordeal of running the gauntlet of rejecting employment agencies or of "prostituting himself downtown." His sons are no less resistant. They are definitely not going to subject themselves to the "demeaning experience" of seeking employment from and working for "the man," "Mr. You Know Who."

As a result, Russell agrees to allow his shop to be a center for an illegal organization whose purpose is to compete with white exploitation of the ghetto. The organization's various "enterprises" will include selling bootleg whiskey made by Theo, running numbers, and betting on horses. Bobby contributes his great skill--burglarizing and shoplifting.

It works. The money flows in. All the financial problems of the Parker household are solved. Adele's life is made a little easier and there is even the possibility that she will have a life of her own.

There is, however, a problem. Russell is a fool. All those years of being a vaudeville comedian have seeped into his personality. His image of himself is of being somewhat of a clown, a buffoon. (It is said that many African-American males are clowns to mask the inveterate rage toward the surrounding world, as a kind of sublimation, just as the "Uncle Toms" bowed and scraped in earlier days.) He laughs and acts the fool to keep from crying. He responds to all of the problems life presents to him

with the foolish choices of a clown whose existence in the fantasy world of the circus or on a vaudeville stage allows him to escape the serious consequences of his folly, something the real world will not do.⁸

Because of his inability or refusal to face and deal with reality, the tragic part of this tragicomedy will inevitably emerge. Even the activity he enjoys so much, the ritual checkers game he plays with his buddy Mr. Jenkins, will be touched by tragedy. A game he always loses because he makes wrong decisions, it serves as the central metaphor of the play, the "ceremony."⁹ It is here that a frivolous prediction is made, though a tragic one: that the day he finally wins might be the unluckiest day of his life. This prediction Russell passes off lightly the way black American males do each other's conversation (as "talking trash") even when that conversation dwells in the area of the mystic or prophetic which play very significant roles in black conversation. This prediction comes true at the play's conclusion when he finally does win a game--Bobby is killed during a robbery. It is the kind of inverted ironic fatalism that tends to affect clowns, making Russell a sort of modern Pantaloon. Playwright Elder spares the audience the ordeal of watching Russell receive this devastating news, ending the play at the protagonist's inquiry about Bobby's whereabouts. As the audience is leaving the theatre, it is either thinking about or understands what true fatalism is and how strong a role it plays in black life.

Theo wants his dad to be the father of the house and a true patriarch of the family, a man in full control of his charges. That Adele seems to be filling this role disconcerts him, though, on the surface, he pretends he has come to terms with it. Even more important, this bright, streetwise, nihilistic young man harbors within him a strong desire to communicate, to touch someone outside of himself: ergo, his painting, his constant advising of his father and brother, his devising the plan for bringing income to the failing barbershop, his darting from one involvement to another, his hard work with bootleg corn liquor.

At some point in his early life, an anxious little boy was lost and buried beneath layers of acquired street hardness and cynicism. This metamorphosis is true of all men but there are certain individuals--dreamers perhaps (like Theo)--for whom it is an especially poignant reality. For more black American males than one would like to think, this becomes at once a source of pain and a reality. The disparity between the two, fortified by the beforementioned impassivity, constitutes the basic dichotomy of the black American male's sensibility.

For Bobby, it is no less true. In his case, the defense system takes strictly street-learned and dictated forms--existentialist attitudes toward his surroundings, menace and/or violence when he feels disrespected in any way ("Don't call me stupid!") or has food snatched from his mouth, which is another form of the same thing (whether it is territorial--one's food

represents one's entity ["Don't be snatching no food outa my mouth."] or one's money ["Don't be messing with my money, man."]).

Mr. Jenkins, Russell Parker's checkers-playing buddy, is the other old man of this piece. Their "ceremony" of the game in which Mr. Jenkins always wins is not only an activity the two men enjoy participating in together but serves as a ritual encapsulation which reaffirms their bond with each other as well as the nature of their lives as black men in America. These are two "brothers" vying for the love and subliminal approval of their always put-upon and distant abstract "mother." Of course, their existence in the outside world is always denying, emasculating, off-putting but, whatever happens, their game--their escape from this world--cannot be taken away from them.

Obviously, Mr. Jenkins is the more self secure of the two. He is more in control, does not need to lie to himself about the many problems in life besetting him. He takes things as they are and seems to have no need to change their nature (as they are perceived and/or experienced) the way Russell does. He may hold a painful truth within him and go about his business but one can rest assured that when it is time to let that truth out, he will do his utmost to assure that truth is unchanged, uncolored in any way. Even when he uses the circumlocutive ruse of allowing Russell to win at checkers finally on that day the ex-vaudevillian would consider his unluckiest, the truth he comes out with remains unchanged. If the telling

is a trifle "tricky" or Byzantine in method, the truth told is nevertheless straightforward.

His character makes him an excellent "doppelganger" to Russell. Granted, though they seem almost diametrical opposites in personality traits which makes each stand out in stark contrast to the other, they seem cut from the same cloth. The result is that their scenes together seem to fill the stage (or the page) with electric values and nuances. It is from these scenes that much can be learned about the relationships black men have with each other and with themselves.

Russell and Mr. Jenkins bicker with each other, compete at times with ferocity, even insult each other. Mr. Jenkins does not win the checkers games graciously; nor does Russell lose with grace. It is an ongoing sibling rivalry whose intensity not even Theo and Bobby equal. Watching them, one would be forced to shake one's head in amused impatience. Yet, when offered a money-making opportunity by Blue Haven, Russell insists that his friend Mr. Jenkins be let in on it.

Russell's ongoing frustration is his inability to beat his friend at checkers. It is, still, their escape from the outside world and one is not supposed to have to continue to lose in one's fantasy world. Wherever one escapes, one must experience victory, accomplishment, empowerment. In his dream barbershop, Russell does not cut enough hair to pay for a trip to the movies, much less the rent. Mr. Jenkins urges him

to give it up and face reality. He refuses. Someday soon, the luck on his barbershop will change and everything will be all right. Unfortunately, when these dream clouds finally clear, there is Adele with the ugly financial truth clutched in her angry frustrated hands.

Ironically, in an atmosphere of greater racial tolerance than that in Angelina Grimke's Rachel, Adele does not get to hold onto her femininity the way Ms. Grimke's title character does. As stated before, Rachel is surrounded by men who seem to have held onto their manhoods, to have retained their "strong centers." Civil to each other, they complement the beauty of Rachel's treatment of the various members of her family and the children with whom she comes in contact. This atmosphere makes for a seemingly tension-free home, given its stresses and worries, contrasting with the tension-full outside world.

Adele is seeped in tension--of a quite venomous kind--inside her home as well as outside in her workaday world. The men in her family are not only not fulfilling their manly responsibilities--by seeking and obtaining employment and helping to support the household--their personal inter-relationships are conflict-ridden, acrimonious and reproachful. In her eyes, they seem to have accepted their emasculation with an offhanded nonchalance which terrifies her.

They have given up any concern about whatever opportunities there may be "downtown." They have given up all hope and have come to

terms with their consequent definition of this "downtown" world and accepted and settled into their way of life accordingly. Thus, she has no chance of dissuading them from their apprehensions. This is the way life is and will be from now on.

Because these attitudes force her to set aside her femininity--or seems to in her eyes because she must take on the man's role in the family--she sees chances for her own life as a woman along with chances of realizing her own self-identity fading away. Moreover, she knows that this unnatural state of affairs must cause hostility toward her among her father and brothers and herself, even hatred for her. This possibility adds to her personal pain because she does truly love her family, despite the contempt she feels--for them, for herself--under these circumstances. She would dearly have loved to be the soft center of love and affection of the family (like Rachel's title character) rather than someone forced by circumstances to follow in her late mother's doomed footsteps: carrying the family on her overworked back as her husband Russell retreated from the world of "downtown" employment and the boys followed suit.

Consequently, to prevent her complete defeminization and their resultant effeminization, she threatens to "lock them out" of the house, by changing the locks on the doors. She also secretly salts away her hard-earned money in a bank, hoping for some future "miracle" in which her unknown savings would play some participatory role. Perhaps

someday she will meet a proper man and get married.

It is interesting to note that a major part of the representational setting of the play is a barbershop, a specialized mini-community within the larger community. Upstage center of this setting is a large barber chair called "the throne," a chair in which Russell often sits or which he works off.

The barbershop performs the role--in most communities and certainly in the African-American community--of centralized male socialization where men gather not only to get haircuts but to interact with each other and establish relationships, exchange points of view, communicate and comment on news of the immediate neighborhood as well as the world outside. Here, they sharpen their arts of male dominated conversation and their senses of humor. They develop and enhance their philosophies of life, learn of the doings of their women, shape, develop and refine their images of themselves as men. Above all, they establish roles of dominance and subordination, and compete at checkers. The setting of this play--with "the throne" as its centerpiece--becomes itself the determinant evocation of the idea and theme of manhood and its importance therein.

This design and arrangement would seem to be a paradox and a contradiction since the loss of manhood by the three men of the house is treated so nonchalantly in a setting where the concern about manhood is usually thought of as of the utmost importance. There is by now,

however, a multiplicity of definitions of what manhood is. To Russell and his sons, going "downtown" to the humiliations that await them there does not constitute manhood. Holding onto their positions in that barbershop-apartment does.

Thus, because Adele forces their hand with her ultimatum and generates a crisis for them, Theo comes up with the idea of using the barbershop as a center for criminal activity. This way, they would make the necessary money needed for them to stay in the barbershop and meet financial needs without having to "go downtown."

Into this realm of thought comes another idea to which "manhood" is inexorably tied: colonization. To the characters of Ceremonies as well as to many black militant figures of the sixties, the white power structure outside colonizes the black community by maintaining an "occupation force" (the police department) and draining from its citizenry as much of its income as possible which goes out of the black community to serve other, mainly white communities. Since nothing of the cash flow comes back into the black community to serve it, that community can only go down, conditions in it can only get worse, creating fiscal gaps and vacuums and thus providing opportunities for crime and other anti-social enterprises to surface and fill them in. Without money, there can be no empowerment and, without empowerment, there can be no manhood...as defined by the larger outside community. Thus, manhood, in order for the

males to maintain functional egos and survive, must take on new and more adoptive definitions.

Since crime and other illicit enterprises are among the few equal opportunity fields of endeavor in the community, particularly for the rejected black males, they somehow slide into the territory reserved for activities and dynamics that help to define manhood. Some street males believe firmly that one is not a man unless one has broken the law. In addition to this, if "they" do not let a black man be a man "downtown," then why not stay uptown and achieve his manhood there? The "occupation force" is not as concerned about protecting lives and personal property there as it would be downtown. Such is the thinking on the streets of Harlem, the location of the play.

At the point of this idea in the play (Act I, scene 2), after Adele has given her ultimatum, the character Blue Haven enters. Blue Haven, a somewhat mysterious character, thinks of himself as a "maverick entrepreneur." In fact, he is a gangster. He is the perfect example of the aforementioned insusceptible male: cold, objective, acute in his observations, honest in his perceptions and always self-controlled...even when livid with rage, though he was not always this way.

He will never be seen on television being brought into the local precinct, handcuffed behind him, bent over so that his face is almost between his knees. That experience is for his underlings. Blue Haven is

the man behind it all, who will never be caught, never miss a beat in his lifestyle. Bobby is killed during a robbery attempt--which Blue Haven is the engineer of--and the profits to the gangster continue uninterrupted. His system goes on.

There are Blue Havens throughout the Harlems of the world. They prey on their own communities with an insouciance that is ferocious. There is no need to "go downtown" to commit their crimes. His community "uptown" serves him perfectly with its needy dream-hungry citizens and their fragile money as a food supply for his predation.

The only way a Blue Haven would meet his end is if an underling or subordinate had doublecrossed him, an abused woman shot him or if he, in a rare desperate moment of self-revealed despair, put a bullet through his brain. Even here, he would be extremely careful. The thought of his being made a vegetable by a botched suicide attempt would fill him with greater dread than that of death.

Sometime long ago, in the life of this kind of man, something vital to his humanity--his affectivity, his sympathy, his empathy--was shut off permanently. He had decided that, if he were to survive in the hostile environment he was forced to grow up in, he would have to get along without this connectedness with the rest of humankind. For this reason, there is little likelihood that any of the above would happen to him. His controls are much too well maintained for that.

When the Blue Havens came into existence in the black community is not known for sure. Perhaps it happened when the black community became too crowded with powerless people to stem the tide of depersonalization. The more crunched together people were, the more distant from each other they became, allowing for rampant callousness in interpersonal attitudes. The Blue Havens certainly have become a major bugbear ever since, thanks to the very same forces that drove Russell, Theo and Bobby to their actions. Blue's reactions to these forces, however, were more calculated, deadly. Perhaps it can be safely surmised that he is probably Bigger Thomas encased in protective steel.

When he first enters the barbershop, he already evinces the coldness and mystery of his type of personage:

(A jet-black-complexioned YOUNG MAN, dressed in all blue, wearing sun glasses, and holding a gold-top cane in his right hand, enters. He is also carrying a large salesman's valise in his left hand...)¹⁰

Because he represents hope for improving their situation, the implied menace of his demeanor is ignored by Theo and Bobby as they welcome him. This is the man with the answers for them so they eagerly bring him in, taking his things and getting him a drink. Enthusiastically they show him the back room where the corn liquor will be produced. He will organize the proper revenge against the "colonizers" of the community.

When Russell meets him there ensues the usual males-feeling-each-other-out process: the probing for weakness, the establishment of positions of strength and power. It is another ceremony put-upon black males participate in with each other all the time, a ritual acted out over and over again, should the occasion call for it or the need for it arise.¹¹

THEO

Pop, you know who this is?

MR. PARKER

(Straining to see, peering.)

I can't see him...

THEO

This is Blue!

MR. PARKER

Blue who?

THEO

The man I was telling you about--
Mr. Blue Haven.

MR. PARKER

(Crosses to BLUE, extends his hand for a shake.)

Please to make your acquaintance, Mr. Haven...

BLUE

(Shaking MR. PARKER's hand.)

Same to you, Mr. Parker...

THEO

You sure you don't know who Blue
Haven is, Pop?

MR. PARKER

(Crossing to counter.)

I'm sorry, but I truly don't know you, Mr. Haven... If you're a celebrity, you must accept my apology. You see, since I got out of the business, I don't read the Variety anymore.

THEO

I'm not talking about a celebrity...

MR. PARKER

Oh no?

THEO

He's the leader!

MR. PARKER

OHHHHHH!

THEO

Right here in Harlem...

MR. PARKER

(Crosses upstage of throne.)

Where else he gon be but in Harlem? We got more leaders within ten square blocks of this barbershop than they got liars down in City Hall--That's why you dressed up that way, huh, boy? So people can pick you out of a crowded room!

THEO

Pop, this is serious!

MR. PARKER

All right, go on, don't get carried away--there are some things I don't catch on to right away, Mr. Blue--

THEO

(Crossing to MR. PARKER.)

Well, get on to this-- I got to thinking the other day when Adele busted in here shoving everybody around-- I was thinking about this barbershop, and I said to myself: Pop's gon lose this shop if he don't start making himself some money.

MR. PARKER

Now tell me something I don't know...

(Sits on throne.)

THEO

Here I go... What would you say, if I were to tell you that Blue here can make it possible for you to have a thriving business going on, right here in this shop for twenty-four hours a day?

MR. PARKER

What is he? Some kind of hair grower!

THEO

Even if you don't cut but one head of hair a week!

MR. PARKER

Do I look like a fool to you?

THEO

(Holds up his jug.)

SELLING THIS!

MR. PARKER

(Pause)

Well, well, well. I knew it was something like that--I didn't exactly know what it was, but I knew it was something, and I don't want to hear it!

THEO

(Puts bottle on table and crosses to MR. PARKER.)

Pop, you've always been a man to listen--even when you didn't agree, even when I was wrong, you listened! that's the kind of man you are! You-

MR. PARKER

Okay, okay, I'm listening!

THEO

(Pause)

Tell him who you are, Blue...

BLUE

(crosses to MR. PARKER)

I am the Prime Minister of the Harlem De-Colonization Association.

MR. PARKER

(Pause)

Some kind of organization?

BLUE

Yes...

MR. PARKER

(As an aside--almost under his breath.)

They got all kinds of committees in Harlem. What was that name again, "De"?

THEO

De-colo-ni-zation! Which means that Harlem is owned and operated by "Mr. You Know Who." Let me get this stuff--we gone show you something...

(Moves to the table to fetch BLUE's materials.)

BLUE

We're dead serious about this project, Mr. Parker....I'd like you to look at this chart.¹²

Blue, consistent with the color of his jacket and general demeanor, keeps his composure throughout this onslaught. He is all business and objectivity. He needs that back room and he will do nothing that will jeopardize his chances of getting it. Later in this scene, he calmly says to Russell:

BLUE

The only reason you've never heard of us is because we don't believe in picketing, demonstrating, rioting and all that stuff. We always look like we're doing something that we ain't doing, but we are doing something--and in that way, nobody gets hurt.... Now, you may think we're passive--to the contrary, we believe in direct action. We are doers, enterprisers, thinkers and most of all, we're business men! Our aim is to drive "Mr. You Know Who" out of Harlem.¹³

Russell continues to play games, to engage Blue Haven in his ceremony:

MR. PARKER

Who's this "Mr. You Know Who"?

THEO

(Crossing to MR. PARKER.)

Damn, Pop! The white man!

MR. PARKER
Oh, himmmmmmmmm!¹⁴

Blue will not give in to any annoyance he must feel,
confronted by this performance:

BLUE
We like to use that name for our members
in order to get away from the bad feelings
we have whenever we use the word, "white."
We want our members to always be objective
and in this way, we shall move forward.
Before we get through, there won't be a
single "Mr. You Know Who" left in this
part of town. We're going to capture the
imagination of the people of Harlem. And
that's never been done before, you know.¹⁵

Russell continues his surreptitious needling but fails to get to Blue
Haven who calmly maps out his program to him, finally convincing him to
accept the proposition. Of Russell's behavior, Theo later comments to
Blue:

THEO
(Steps toward him.)
He was playing with you! And when my
father holds something inside of him
and plays with a man, he's getting
meaner and more dangerous by the
minute.¹⁶

Blue's plan is to use the back room as a center from which to compete
with white exploitation of the ghetto by selling bootleg whiskey, running

numbers, and betting on horses. Theo will make the corn liquor and Bobby will do the burglary.

The plan works out. The money pours in. Ceremonies is, however, besides being a tragi-comedy, a morality play. It is therefore inevitable that things would go wrong. Russell begins to embezzle some of the funds. He desires the society of a soft young woman just one more time before he dies so he needs funds. Bobby sinks deeply into his street crime activities. Even Adele, desperate to hold onto what is left of her femininity, loses some of her controls and involves herself with one of the notorious street males who specialize in capturing the affections of and misusing women, the mini-Blues on the Avenue. All of this is despite Theo's warning and entreaties to the contrary.

It is only Mr. Jenkins who, once in it, thinks better of it and bows out. It is characteristic of him, being the wiser of the two "old men." Theo thinks of stopping but continues working at his indoor still, almost driving himself, a way of proving to himself or to some abstract superego figure--his father perhaps? Blue?--that he is much more capable of hard work than his lack of employment would indicate. For Bobby--himself a hard relentless worker--there is no tomorrow, no later, no after, no consequence of a deed; there is only the existential today, now and its palpable actuality. He is not stupid as one might think. His intelligence is merely directed through channels other than those accepted as indicative

of "intelligence." He would not do well on an SAT test but what he does to the merchants on One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street makes him almost a miraculous prestidigitator. Therefore, his sense of invincibility is too strong to make him aware of the chances of mishap or failure at the art of stealing, or danger...much less the possibility of death. The latter part of this attitude of invincibility, of course, is dangerous for a young man like Bobby to have.

At one point, Theo, trying to reach out and touch his somewhat estranged brother in some way, states his intention to quit this project and asks him to stop burglarizing the stores:

THEO

BOBBY!

(BOBBY comes downstairs.)

I want you to stay away from those store raids, Bobby.

BOBBY

Not as long as I can get myself some extra money...

(Moves close to him.)

You didn't say nothing to me before, when I was stealing every other day, and giving you half of everything I stole--you didn't think nothing that day you sent me for that typewriter!

THEO

I don't know what you're going to do from here on in because I'm calling the whole affair off with Blue-

BOBBY

That won't stop me and you know it!

THEO

What is it, Bobby--we used to be so close!

(BOBBY crosses to door.)

Bobby, don't get too far away from me!

BOBBY

(Heatedly)

What do you want me to do? Stick around

you all the time? Hell, I'm tired of you!

I stick by you and I don't know what to do!

I steal and that puts clothes on my back,
and money in my pockets! That's something

to do! But I sit here with you all day

just thinking about the next word I'm

going to say--I'm not stupid!

I sit here all day thinking what I'm going to

say to you. I stuck by you and I hoped for you

because whatever you became, I was gonna

become... I thought about that, and that

ain't shit!

(He exits.)¹⁷

Blue possesses the sense of danger or mishap and he, of all the characters, needs this sense the least. No situation ever gets out of his control.

There are some men in the black community--legatees of a long ever evolving form of social behavior--who have through the generations refined their reaction-formation manners to an acute level--the "cool facade." These men appear like ice, unflappable, dispassionate, always objective and in control. That the white hot rage is always there is somehow

evident despite its concealment. This fact makes his "cool" seem all the more dangerous and unpredictable. Malcolm X once said that the most dangerous man on earth is the young black male of the street--the ruthless, existentialist survivor (like the character Hawk in Robert Parker's *Spenser the private eye novels*).

Playwright Elder has presented such a male in *Blue Haven* whose every move is calculated and fastidious. This posture seems daunting even to Theo, the character most able to stand up to him as he is. At one point, when he discovers that Russell has been "dipping into the funds," his reaction naturally is deep anger. Only Theo is present at the time of the discovery and it is he who has been trying to conceal it. But Blue knows immediately. If there is any anger to be vented, Blue can vent it on Theo, a kindred spirit, a potential Blue of the future. This venting, on the other hand, is covered over with a refined, almost admirable kind of traditionalist maturity:

BLUE

(Pauses, then calmly and deliberately.)

The other day, I went up on the hill to see my little boy.... I took him out for a ride, and as we were moving along the streets, he asked me where all the people were coming from. I said:

(Leans on throne.)¹⁸

He takes this position at the throne to reestablish and fortify his regal position in this conversation and in this total dynamic. Theo will listen and

not be in any position to give backtalk or even to question. Blue is a master at usurping the psychological advantage:

BLUE

from work, going home, going to the store, and coming back from the store.... Then we went out to watch the river, and then he asked me about the water, the ships, the weeds--everything--that kid threw so many questions at me, I got dizzy--I wanted to hit him once to shut him up... He was just a little dark boy discovering for the first time that there are things in the world like stones and trees...It got late and dark--so I took him home and watched him fall asleep.¹⁹

Here, Blue is revealing his traditionalist side, the side which does the right thing, which follows the rules, something which makes his antisocial side all the more formidable. He is like the Mafia don who keeps his front lawn neat and clean and subsidizes block parties for the neighborhood children, who even attends church every Sunday he is available and contributes heavily to the collection plate. Still, always present is the dark side, the side few people care to address though they know it is there, the side always ready to spring forth and victimize someone, should the occasion call for it.

This dichotomous nature in a man (particularly in African-American men of the street) suggests extreme complexity and smoldering menace which confounds those around him and keeps them off balance. Thus his

power is always assured, a necessity in the neverending "sibling rivalry" plaguing black male life in America.

He goes on with his personal revelation to Theo, his captive audience-- emphasizing his incremental power over those people in his life. It is better to establish this power indirectly than to state it explicitly:

BLUE

Then I took his mother into my arms
and put her into bed-- I just laid
there for a while, listening to her
call me all kinds of dirty motherfuckers....
After she got that out of her system
I put my hands on her, and before long
our arms were locked at each other's
shoulders, and then my thighs moved
slowly down between her thighs, and
then we started that sweet rolling until
the both of us were screaming as if
the last piece of love was dying forever.
After that, we just laid there, talking
soft up into the air--I would tell her
she was the loveliest bitch that ever
lived and all of a sudden, she was no
longer calling me a dirty motherfucker,
she was calling me a sweet motherfucker.²⁰

Now he tries to persuade by implication and dramatic illustration that he is just as vulnerable, fallible, human, as the next guy which again hints at his power, intrepidity and menace. This scene sets up and prepares Theo for what is next and what is finally at the bottom of what Blue is

trying to say to him (his warning to Theo not to play fast and loose with his money). The dialogue is a form of rhetoric used by black men with each other when they are passionately engaged in oratory of any kind, raillery or menace. It is characteristically diapausic in tone, having its roots in the Baptist oratorical rhythms which themselves are partially rooted in the Elizabethan and Jacobean textures of language, the other parts having their roots even further back in the African storytelling, oral history traditions. All of these synthesize to form what has come to be known as the modern black street language and style, whether circumlocutive or straight, serious or frivolous:

BLUE

It get quiet. I sat up on the edge of the bed, with my head hanging long and deep, trying to push myself out of the room, and back into it at one and the same time. She looked up at me, and I got that same question all over again. Will you marry me and be the father of your son! I tried to move away from her, but she dug her fingernails into my shoulders-- I struck her once, twice, and again and again--with this hand!-- And her face was a bloody mess! And I felt real bad about that, I said:
I'll marry you, YES! YES! YES!

(Pause)

I put my clothes on and I walked out into the streets, trembling with the knowledge that now I have a little boy who I must walk through the park with every Sunday, who one day just

BLUE (CONT'D)

may blow my head off--and an abiding wife who on a given evening may get herself caught in the bed of some other man, and I could be sealed in a dungeon until dead! I was found lying in a well of blood on the day I was born! But I have been kind! I have kissed babies for the simple reason they were babies! I'm going to get married to some bitch and that gets me to shaking all over!

(He moves towards and stands close to THEO.)

The last time I trembled this way, I
KILLED A MAN!

(Quickly and rhythmically takes out a long shiny switchblade knife; it pops open just at THEO's neck. BLUE holds it there for a moment, then withdraws and closes it. Puts it away. Collects his belongings then calmly addresses THEO.)

Things are tight and cool on my end, Theo, and that's how you should keep it here--if not, everything gets messy and I find myself acting like a policeman, keeping order--I don't have the time for that kind of trick.

(He exits.)²¹

All this talk holds the threat to the Parkers. Blue emerges as an indirect villain who will never get his comeuppance except in some ill-defined future. Why should he? He is, after all, only leading the force which is helping the community, "doing good for all the Parkers of

Harlem." His ultimate evil effect is known by very few. Theo is one of them, though he continues to push himself in his "work."

In addition, Adele, in her frustrated quest for a kind of fulfillment in love, is driven into the arms of another Blue Haven on the street. Knowing her family is now "well-heeled," he probably had moved in on her (as is the unwritten law for the Blues on the street), captured her heart, taken her money and then proceeded to abuse her spiritually and finally physically when she caught him cheating on her (another rule). Like the others, she too becomes a kind of victim of Blue Haven, participating in the "great ceremony" which sometimes and, certainly in this case, leads to misfortune.

In the tragic end, it is Russell Parker who must bear the pain, be the shattered receptacle of everything that results and somehow survive.

Obviously, with the advent of black power, there was less of a need for black playwrights to write for the "white audiences" they knew would dominate the theaters they were aiming at. (Lonne Elder, III, himself turned down an offer to bring Ceremonies to Broadway; ultimately, however, he did settle for a television production.) Now, they aimed their work at the "black audiences" whose numbers were increasing in the theaters. This new audience allowed them to show more of black characters' faults, evils, follies, complexities and not have to "ingratiate" them to alien, unreceptive theatregoers. The irony is the characters still

emerged ingratiated, exalted.

The era of extrinsic protest drama seemed about over. The protest would still be there in the warp and woof of the play--it always would--but more important would be the revelation of new intrinsic truths about black life.

CHAPTER NINE
BENIGN NEGLECT AND THE
SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT OF
BLACK FATHERS
THE RIVER NIGER BY JOSEPH WALKER

By 1968-69, the black power movement was in decline. Moreover, it had proved to be other than what it was thought to be by the nation; at the same time, the energies of the Civil Rights Movement which spawned it were being diverted to other things--the advent of the contemporary feminist movement and the anti-Viet Nam War movement. Thus, the door was open for a renewal of the frontal assault on the black community. There had been the inner city eruptions; black crime was on the rise; teenage pregnancies were increasing in alarming numbers and the welfare rolls swelled (still dominated by whites but perceived by the public as dominated by blacks).¹

Public concern about the above forced the social microscope to be aimed at the primary culture in the black community--the family. Here, the picture was no less gloomy. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in his pamphlet, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (March 1965), had painted a picture of the black family in total disarray, dominated by black women and mainly without the presence of a father:

Almost every wretched thing that pops into
your mind when you think of the Negro ghetto

is traceable to the condition of the Negro family. I'm not talking about all Negro families, but only the poorest. Even after allowances are made for differences in socio-economic status, the crime rates among Negro males are twice those of whites. The conclusion of any number of researchers is that a principal reason is the early absence of the father in so many poor Negro families.²

Moyrihan suggested that the main reasons for social strife in the slums was the failure of fatherless youths to adjust maturely to authority and their need to demonstrate their manhood.³

In fact, the black father--mainly the one absent but even the one present in the household--began to come under severe attack on many fronts in the media, in discussions, in literature, and in the attitudes of the public. Ultimately, the finger was pointed at the denatured father figure as the main cause of many of the social ills in all society, certainly in the black community. The young black male, lacking a strong father image in the home or lacking any adult male to bond with--to take his value system from, to identify with--tended toward criminality or at least disrespectful, nihilistic, antisocial attitudes.

Thus, the major problem in the black community was seen as the absence or inadequacy of the black father in the family and the consequences of that. Further, because this perspective existed and seemed to be getting worse, the hope of bettering the station of

African-Americans dimmed and, with the advent of the Nixon Administration, there followed the discrediting of the "Great Society" anti-poverty programs of the sixties, and the whole social policy toward the African-American community (at the suggestion of Moynihan in a letter to President Nixon) descended to something called "benign neglect."⁴ During this time Joseph A. Walker's play The River Niger was first produced by the Negro Ensemble Company (December 5, 1972) at the St. Marks Playhouse. After one hundred and twenty performances, it was moved to Broadway, the Brooks Atkinson Theatre (March 27, 1973) where it ran for two hundred and eighty performances.

The father is the representative patriarchal metaphor of the community. When that representative is disrespected, rejected, frustrated in his efforts to fulfill even the most minimal requirements of his role, the surrounding culture, the very essence of the community is consequently downgraded. This patriarchal devaluing reverberates back negatively on every person in that social fabric, family member or not.

For the African-American father in white America, being unable to fulfill his proper role in the family becomes a particularly poignant problem.

Is it any wonder then that many men in these circumstances, certainly African-American men, fathers not being able to bear the reality of their impotence as a provider and protector, choose to leave, either physically and/or psychologically? Many black fathers accept their lowly status in

society with their attendant bad reputation and withdraw into themselves, watching helplessly as African-American life's disasters, problems, mishaps, dangers happen to his loved ones, his family, his children.

Socio-historically, this situation began on the slave plantation. Here, the father had to be very careful in his everyday interactions with the slavemasters. He had to contain his natural male assertiveness and aggressiveness. He dared not show any superiority in personal quality or manhood of any kind. If he did he would be punished in any of a number of ways--whipped, given the worst jobs to do, traded away from his family to another plantation, or killed. It continued after manumission and, in more subtle and complex forms, exists today. The result has been the gradual acquisition of the terrible reputation African-American fathers have today. The Dr. Huxtable of television is a decade off yet.

It was time for new images to appear, showing that not all African-American fathers were bad, that most were, in fact, good, did have good relationships with their wives and children. There were very subtle hints of this in Ceremonies in Dark Old Men, Teke a Giant Step and in A Raisin in the Sun. They were, however, too subtle to be apprehended with needed effectiveness and so the bad reputation persisted and deepened in the public eye.

Proud and effective fatherhood, in essence, is what Joseph A. Walker's play, The River Niger, is about. It is an exploration of the

relationships among three generations of a Harlem family--the father Johnny Williams and his wife Mattie, their son Jeff, and the wife's mother Grandma Wilhelmina Brown. It also examines the interrelationships among their friends and the members of the black militant group--which Jeff was formerly the leader of--who invade their home. Johnny--a painter by vocation and a poet by avocation--is frustrated. His problem stems from his inability to realize himself in a racist society. So he writes poetry, drinks too much and vicariously puts his hopes in his son Jeff to become an officer in the air force.⁵

Jeff, however, has his own problems with which he must cope. Everyone seems to have "a piece of his big toe," or their tentacles around him, even his father, so he feels put upon, choked, pressured. Under this condition he cannot fulfill himself intellectually or in his life endeavors. For one reason or another he fails his various flight tests. Finally, when he returns home without "his uniform," and informs his family that he has "washed out" of navigator school, an eruption results. His father, thrown into a spiritual crisis, walks out of the house the way Willie Loman did when his son Biff revealed unpleasant truths about their existence to him. The difference, however, is that Willie completely enveloped himself in the ultimate fantasy whereas Johnny went on a temporary "bender."

When Johnny returns the militant group is about to invade the house after a botched street action. This forces Johnny to sacrifice his life to

save his family, his son in particular, and bring about the recovery of his lost manhood, the poetry, "his battlefield," metaphoric realizations of this.

Johnny Williams, the father in the play and its protagonist, has a relationship with his son Jeff that contradicts much of the negative perception described above and gives witness to the existence of the lesser known African-American father and father-son relationship. He is an honest, affective, romantic, good man, if somewhat extravagant, who, as an artist, has sacrificed his ambitions in order to support his family.⁶ He is not an absentee parent. He is an active force from the beginning to the end of the play. His relationship with his wife Mattie is passionate and is one of equals. Their child, Jeff, because he has his parents as an example, does not fear his own sexuality.⁷

Jeff's girlfriend, Ann, has none of the fears and repressions that plague the characters of other earlier black plays. Having emerged from severe experiences in her native South Africa, she is on good terms with herself and with the life she must live in the Western World. She has no illusions about herself or her life, nor any illusions about her relationship with Jeff. Like Mattie, she is almost a superwoman.

Thus, her relationship with Jeff is a fortunate one, as is Mattie's with Johnny. Despite surface appearances, the son follows in the patterns of his father in matters of seeking a mate. She is the young doppelganger to Mattie, thus making Jeff Johnny's doppelganger. (It is not often in a play

that a character's son or daughter is also his or her doppelganger, but it happens. Though the psychological dynamic in the constellation of a family would dictate this, the demands of dramaturgy are such that it more often than not works out the other way. Drama is about an individual finding differences in similarities or similarities in differences, anticipated truths in the unexpected or unanticipated truths in the expected. Family situations do not always present these dynamics.)

The proposition does not always hold, however; Johnny does have a good friend in Dudley, his pal, neighbor and the family doctor. The same is not as true for Jeff in the case of his former friend Mo, a would-be black militant-revolutionary, fallen on bad times, whom time seems to have passed by--thus generating a different dynamic. Mo is associated with a group of young men of questionable character, though he too has a woman, Gail, not unlike Ann. In fact, all of the women in this play, including the always-critical harridan-like tipling Grandma, are, in one way or the other, strongly supportive of their men. There are no harpies here as there have been in other plays. They are strong "super bitches," as Johnny refers to his wife and Jeff refers to Ann.

For Mo, however, Gail is not enough to undo the damage done by his association with the other men--the sexually perverted Chips whose confusion does not stop him from being brutishly obnoxious, the closet homosexual Al, and Skeeter, the best of the three, but a dope addict.

Moreover, Jeff has been away to flight school and so the ongoing webbing of their relationship has not had the chance to "take" in the way that Johnny's and Dudley's has. By the time of the two young men's reunion in this play, they have already drifted far apart. They are now of two different worlds. Thus, any undertaking they collaborate on will be doomed to end in debacle.

Exploring the relationships among three generations of one Harlem family, the play focuses, though, on Johnny's frustrations. (In this case, as opposed to Willie Loman's relationship with his son Biff, Jeff is spared the latter's particular kind of rage and disillusionment. Still, he is deeply disconcerted. Both men must come to terms with the fact that their sons have been traveling down the wrong path and the imposition of Johnny's dream on Jeff has put his son at psychological risk.) The play also deals with their friends and the members of the inefficient, problem-ridden black militant group who invade the Williams home.

Complicating the situation further, Mattie has a medical problem: she has several malignant growths in her body which may or may not be operable. The location of the tumors prevents removal but radiation treatment is a possibility. Still, she is strong enough never to place pressure or blame on the shoulders of her husband, to delude herself about him or her relationship with him. She is also strong enough never to overprotect her son from the harsher realities of life or his personal

responsibilities.

All this, of course, weighs on Johnny's mind, making it all the more important that he attain his apotheosis, whatever form that takes, whether it is completion of his poem or "finding his battlefield." Early in the play he tries to explain to his friend Dudley:

JOHN

...To play a better game, fool. Just play the mother-fucker, that's all. And right now the game is free my people. Ya get that! And if you don't play it, you know what you are, nigger. You know what you are. Dr. Dudley Stanton? You're a goddamn spiritual vegetable. Thinking's for idiots--wise men act, thinking is all dribble anyhow and idiots can do a helluva damn better job at it than you can. My advice to you, Mr. Monkey Chaser,⁸ is fart, piss, screw, eat, fight, run, beat your meat, sympathize and criticize, but for God's sake stop thinking....⁹

Ironically, he gets his chance through unplanned contretemps. After Jeff reluctantly consents to help his friend Mo uncover the spy/agent provocateur in the organization Jeff had once been the leader of, which Mo now is, the situation gets out of control and, because of the tacky double dealing of Mo, backfires. (The central issue is the murder of an undercover narcotics officer named Buckley who himself had engaged in the unlawful possession and sale, mainly to children, of the narcotics he had commandeered.) As a result, the debacle is brought into the Williams home, the house is surrounded by the police and, in a melodramatic turn

of events, Johnny has a shootout with the culprit Al in which both are mortally wounded.

Before he dies, Johnny manipulates and rearranges the scene so that it would appear, when the police enter the house, that he had been the culprit of all wrongdoing all along and that the others in the house had been innocent bystanders. In doing so, he shows and that he had accepted all of Jeff's decisions (as Willie was never able to do for his son Biff) and has finally won his battlefield. Oddly enough, shortly before that, he had completed his poem, The River Niger so his final act becomes his transcendence, the crystallization of what his life has stood for, ultimately his apotheosis:

JOHN

Don't suffer long, honey. Just give up and take
my hand. The children--the children are on their
own now.

(Pause)

Look at Dr. Dudley Stanton down there. Trying
to save my life. Ain't that a bitch! See what
a big old fake you've been all along. Don't worry
Dudley--fighting Lady Ann--Jeff--ya got a fighting
lady to protect your flanks, Son--don't worry I
don't feel nothing now. Just sweetness--a sweet
sweetness.

DUDLEY

Your poems--I'll get 'em published.

JOHN

Fuck them poems--this is poetry, man--what
I feel right here and now. This sweetness.
Sing on, Grandma.
(Pause. He shivers.)
I found it, Dudley--I found it.

DUDLEY

What, Johnny?

JOHN

My battlefield--my battlefield, man! I was
a bitch too, ya monkey chaser. See my shit!
I got two for the price of one.

DUDLEY

Yeah, Chief.
(JOHNNY dies. Pause.)¹⁰

We finally have the African-American father who gives his life for the sake of his family, who is not killed or destroyed by his son for having values the son wants to destroy or for disapproving of his son's values. Johnny sacrifices his life in the style of the old romantic heroes but his motivations are more complex. He has an abstract, almost indefinable ideal to consecrate. He must give a good accounting of himself in his "battlefield." He must leave his final action as his treasured legacy to his loved ones. Then he can depart his life in peace.

Things are worsening again for African-Americans in these Nixonian, pre-Watergate years, so the romanticism of black characters on the stage returns though their complexity continues to grow. This cyclic return of

difficult socioeconomic times does not prevent these characters from being positive, admirable people, people with whom one would not mind spending an evening in the theater. The only really negative characters in this play are the would-be revolutionaries who seem to be the sad metaphors of the downfall of Black Power. (Actually, these characters represent the results of Black Power not having been achieved.)

Dudley, oddly enough, does supply a negative note of his own early in the play when he discusses his reluctance to be a father, establishing himself as the opposite of Johnny. In this moment, he and Johnny are having one of their frequent squabbles about "having somebody":

JOHN

The fact remains, monkey-chasing son-of-a-bitch, the fact remains that I got a son coming home from the air force tomorrow and you ain't got nobody-

(A loving afterthought.)

But me-

DUDLEY

You are a big fool, Johnny! Jessie wanted children. Every time she missed her period, I'd give her something to start it over again. Poor lovable bitch, 'til the day she died she never knew. But I knew--I knew it was a heinous crime to bring any more children into this pile of horse shit.¹¹

Dudley is the contrast to Johnny. A cultured man, a somewhat

conservatively dressed Jamaican, with a beautiful accent, he is cynical and nihilistic whereas Johnny, more rough-hewn, is romantic. Both men are very much tied to the realities of their existence in Harlem and the community of the world beyond, but Dudley is more so. They bicker with each other, jabbing and testing, frequently joke with each other, and Dudley attempts to pull Johnny down to earth whenever his friend threatens to lose sight of reality. How like Mr. Jenkins of Ceremonies he is, just as Johnny is like Russell Parker, in the roles they play with each other and within the scheme of the play itself--the friend, the *raisonneur*, the principal, the romantic adventurer. Nonetheless, true affection exists between them. The difference here, though, is that Dudley is more cynical and Johnny, having a strong, live supportive woman by his side is more sanguine and positive in his attitudes. Russell has large guilt to cope with--about the state of Adele's life and the possibility that he contributed to his late wife's death. Johnny has a greater self-assurance and strength of will and is not undermined by the sobering knowledge of Mattie's state of health. Possibly, Russell could have made the great sacrifice at the play's end that Johnny made if it could have saved Bobby's life but at that point of crisis in the play, Russell was more inside himself than Johnny.

In short, Russell's rationalizations play a stronger role in his existence and cause him to make more foolish decisions. Johnny's decisions are more reality-based, though pure folly is not beyond him.

At one point Johnny asks Dudley to lend him some money to replace funds he had foolishly spent earlier:

JOHN
...loan me one hundred and ninety dollars.

DUDLEY
What?

JOHN
A hundred and ninety dollars--shit. Don't I speak clearly? I had two years of college, you know.

DUDLEY
You drank all your money away?

JOHN
Hell yes.

DUDLEY
At the "Apple"?

JOHN
Right!

DUDLEY
Setting up everybody and his ma?

JOHN
Uh huh!

DUDLEY
Bragging like a nigger about how your First Lieutenant, Air Force, Strategic Air Command son is due tomorrow?

JOHN

Right!

DUDLEY

And they all smiled, patted you on your
back and ordered two more rounds of "Three
for One" bar slop?

JOHN

Right, nigger. Now do I get the bread or
not--shit, I ain't required to give you my
life story for a measly handout-

DUDLEY

Of a hundred and ninety dollars-

JOHN

Shit! Shit!

DUDLEY

You already owe me \$340.

JOHN

That much?

DUDLEY

(Takes out a small notebook.)

See for yourself-

JOHN

Well, a 190 more won't break you. Do I get
it or not?

(There is a knock on the front door.)

Come on, man, that's Mattie.

DUDLEY

Well, well, well, look at tne great warrior
now--about to get his ass kicked!

JOHN
Come on! Yes or no!

DUDLEY
But here's your battlefield, man. Start fighting!
I tell you one thing though, I'm putting my money
on Mattie, man.
(Again there is a knock on the front door.)

JOHN
See ya later.
(Starts for the back door.)

DUDLEY
Wait a minute! If it were Mattie she'd use
her key, right?

JOHN
(Comes back.)
Hey, yeah, that's right. Didn't think of that!

DUDLEY
You don't believe in thinking.¹²

Of their contentious relationship, Mattie later comments to Ann:

MATTIE
Sometimes they get to going at each other so
hard you think they're gonna come to blows.¹³

And in the same scene later she says:

MATTIE
Men can really love each other, and the funny
thing about it is don't nobody really know it.¹⁴

To this, Ann comments profoundly:

ANN

Women don't seem to be able to get along with each other that way--I mean that deep loving way. You know what I mean, Mrs. Williams?¹⁵

Mattie, much impressed by Ann's precocious wisdom, replies:

MATTIE

Of course, I do. It's all 'cause women don't trust one another....¹⁶

Given the truth of Mattie's statement, impassivity remains mainly a black male characteristic and nowhere is this more evident than in the young male revolutionaries led by Mo. Impassivity disconnects one from other people, prevents one from being touched deep down inside by the pain, misfortune, and untoward dynamics around him (almost a necessity, given the unhappy nature of his existence in this society). It shuts off all outward show of sensitivity, though inside could be a torrent of repressed sympathetic and empathic pain. Thus all subscription to the rules of society and all that represent it--its values, manners, proprieties, social amenities--is absent...except when an advantage is to be gained or as a defense.

The young male revolutionaries in the play fall perfectly into this pit. They seem to have come from another world, minus any family training at all. There had to have been some training long ago in each of their lives but somehow it got buried deep down beneath all the hardening hurtful internalization of black American life.

Chips is the first of these characters to enter the play. He is rude, crude. He does not even have the decency to behave himself while a guest, if unwelcome, in someone's home. Though kindnesses are proffered to him, he makes no effort to return them.

When he first comes to the door, Ann, alone downstairs, answers it:

(Ann crosses and opens the door. A tall rangy young man in his early twenties rudely pushes his way in. He looks around boldly. He has an air of "I'm a Bad Nigger" about him.)

CHIPS

Jeff here?

ANN

(Sarcastically.)

Come in!

CHIPS

I'm already in. Is Jeff home yet?

ANN

Are you a friend of Jeff's?

CHIPS

Could be. You a friend of Jeff's?

ANN

Yes.

CHIPS

(Looking her over lewdly.)

Not bad! As a matter of fact, you look pretty stacked up there.

ANN

Jeff's not at home.

CHIPS

Hey what kind of accent is that? You puttin' on airs or something-

(She opens the door.)

Yeah, yeah. I'm going. Tell him Chips came by. Big Mo wants to see him at headquarters as soon as possible. Like it's urgent, ya dig it?¹⁷

There is no interest whatsoever in ingratiating himself to the young lady. He is "macho" or tough, the only masks he will permit himself to wear. Mixed in is the disgust and jadedness that result from involving himself in a movement that has come to a dead end. Mainly, however, he is a fool, totally lacking in the basic social graces and not caring at all about this. One understands fully why Jeff has left the movement.

The other two of Mo's underlings are not much better. Al is duplicitous, untrustworthy and, despite a basic mystery about him, always unpleasant company. His homosexuality does not drive him to ingratiate himself at all, even with his associates, nor does the fact that he is a spy

for the police. Skeeter, a better person, has a drug abuse problem, the ultimate form of "bad manners."

The two vie for the approval of their "surrogate father," Mo, but he is too much a shadow of what a revolutionary leader should be. Certainly, he is a poor imitation of what Jeff must have been. Thus, with its center weak, the organization was bound to fall apart and degenerate. Its members can only make pretense at effective revolutionary activism. In actuality, they become the metaphor of the death of the black power movement of the sixties just as Mo, as a "father figure," is a drastic contrast to Johnny Williams (the true representative of black power in action, if flawed).

These young men have tossed aside the basic behavioral values which people take for granted because they come from and are an integral part of a world, a society, which has imprisoned them in their current position: a physical, social and psychological ghetto. The values, thought to be Eurocentric, Occidental, that of "the enemy," do not support and sustain them, they feel, so they will not subscribe to the values. That these "manners" might also have African roots or Asian or even African-American roots is never considered or dealt with. After a while, this attitude and this form of behavior set in, take on refinements and complexities, develop, are internalized, and finally become themselves a way of life. Crudity and rudeness of behavior become the style. (Contrast

this style with the behavior of the FOI [the Fruit of Islam] of the Black Muslims of America, another, more legitimate black activist group. Though implicitly menacing, it is always mannerly, even genteel.)

Impassivity manifests itself in other ways, shown early in the play.

When Ann first meets Mattie she asks the young woman how she came to know her son:

ANN

Well, I was nursing in Quebec when they brought him into the hospital. He had fractured his ankle skiing. Every time it started paining him he'd laugh-¹⁸

Ann goes on to say more about their first meeting:

ANN

Said his Dad had taught him to do that. The second night there were some minor complications and he was in so much pain until the doctor ordered me to give him a shot of morphine. Then he got to talking. Very dreamily at first, like he was drifting in a beautiful haze. He told me all about you and Mr. Williams and Grandma Wilhelmina Brown and Dr. Stanton. I almost lost my job--I kept hanging around his room so much, listening to one episode after another.¹⁹

There is strong affectivity in Ann as she talks about her life in South Africa and what had happened to her family, showing great love, affection and admiration for her father, mother and brothers. By implication, she also shows their strong family bonds, and the great spiritual strength of

her mother which manifests itself in her own behavior. Mattie asks her about her father:

MATTIE

Your father? Is he still in prison?

ANN

Yes ma'am. This is going on his ninth year.

MATTIE

Nine years in prison, my God! How does your mother take it?

ANN

Quietly. Ma takes everything quietly. Dad turned himself in to protect my two brothers. They were the ones operating the printing press. Dad was just as surprised as the rest of us when the police found the setup in an old chest of drawers in the attic. Before anyone could say a word, Dad was confessing to everything. This dirty old sergeant got mad and hit him in the stomach with his billy club. When Dad got back on his feet I could see it in his eyes, the decision, I mean. He turned and said, "Boas, if I said something offensive, please forgive an old black fool." And you know what that sergeant did? He hit him again. He hit him again, Mrs. Williams!

(Becomes overcome with rekindled grief.)

MATTIE

Oh, I sorry, Ann. I must write your mother.

ANN

She'd like that.

(Pause. She collects herself.)

My brothers escaped though--stole their way

ANN (CONT'D)

across the border. At first they wanted to turn themselves in for Dad, but Ma made 'em go. They live in England now and have families of their own. It wasn't long before the authorities found out that Dad was really innocent, but just because my brothers got away and are free and just to be plain mean they kept him in prison anyway. Nine years-- nine long years. Those bastards!²⁰

Implicit in this conversation is the reiterated theme of the strong father preserving his family and of the mother supporting him. It is a theme that is repeated at the conclusion of the play, after Johnny dies, when Mattie, donning the cloak of insusceptibility, is forced to take over:

CHIPS

(Whimpering.)

Oh, God, oh my God!

MATTIE

Shut up! And tell it like Johnny told ya. He ain't gonna die for nothing 'cause you ain't gonna let him! Jeff--open the door, Son! Tell 'em to come on in here!

(Jeff crosses to the door.)

And you better not fuck up!²¹

Mattie is partly responsible for her husband's failure to achieve his dreams which she readily admits. She had feared the risk for an African-American man in pursuing them and she is a powerful person who

is sure of her own values.²²

MATTIE

(Brooding with anger.)

My man is an alcoholic, the city's trying to condemn this firetrap we ain't even finished paying for yet and Flora's

[one of MATTIE's two leech-like sisters who had lived with the Williams family at one time at great expense to the latter] got a fancy house and a fancy lawn mower upstate. There were times, Ann, times when I wanted John to get mad--really mad--get a bull whip and whip 'em out--just whip 'em right on out. Johnny woulda done it, ya know. Started to several times, but I'd always manage to cool him down. I got nobody to blame but myself.

(Pause.)

Treasures in heaven--shit. A good man is a treasure. White folks proclaim that our men are no good and we go around like fools trying to prove them wrong. And I fell right into the same old dumb trap myself. That's why I can't get angry with that man no more. Oh, I pretend to be, but I'm not. Johnny ran a powerful race with a jockey on his back who weighed a ton. So now he's tired. Do you hear me? Tired--and he's put himself out to pasture--with his fifth a day, and I say good for Johnny.²³

It all really comes out at one point in Act III, when Johnny learns that everyone now knows about Mattie's health problems and that she is going into the hospital in a couple of days. He goes berserk, thrashing about, screaming at the top of his lungs, whipping some invisible enemy with an imaginary whip:

JOHNNY

Get out, get out you motherfuckers. Get out
of my father's house!

(He falls to the floor--somewhat exhausted,
looks up as if to heaven....)

You son-of-a-bitch, why do you keep fucking
with me? What do you want from me, you bastard?

MATTIE

Johnny, don't talk like that. That's blasphemy.

JOHNNY

He keeps fucking with me, Mattie. When I was
a kid, the bigger kids used to always pick on
me. I had to fight everyday. They said it was
because I was a smart Alec.

(To the heavens.)

Is that why, you bastard, 'cause I'm a smart Alec.?

MATTIE

You can't talk to him like that. He'll turn his
back on you.

JOHNNY

You know what I'm gonna do on judgment day? I'm
gonna grab that motherfucker by the throat and
squeeze and squeeze until I get an answer.

MATTIE

He doesn't have to give you an answer. I thought
you said, "Get thee behind me-" I thought you
took care a Satan!

JOHNNY

(Breaks into tears.)

I tried, Mattie. I tried--you don't know how fucking
hard I tried.

MATTIE

(Embraces him.)

I know baby. I see you every second.²⁴

Then their souls appear to move closer to each other, to a truth about their relationship:

JOHNNY

You shoulda let me whip 'em out, Mattie.
You shoulda let me whip out the bullshit.

MATTIE

We weren't made that way, baby.

JOHNNY

You shoulda let me whip out the money changers.
You deserve so much more than this nothing.
I wanted to do so much for you Mattie.

MATTIE

I got you, baby. I got the kindest sweetest
man in the world. I got the Rolls Royce,
baby.

JOHNNY

I coulda done it, Mattie. God knows I coulda
done it!

MATTIE

I know, baby. I put it on you. I stopped you
and I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Will you forgive
me, sweet baby? Please forgive me! I was selfish,
Johnny. I've been so goddamn happy! All I ever
cared about was seeing you walk, stumble, or
stagger through that door. I only complained
because I felt I should say something--but I
never meant it, Johnny, I never meant a word.

MATTIE (CONT'D)

You couldn't have given me nothing more baby.
I'd a just keeled over and died from too much
happiness. Just keeled over and died.²⁵

The differences in the male-female roles in Walker's play, however, far outweigh any similarities to other black plays in the past. As stated earlier, Johnny Williams is not a missing father--figure. He is an active force from the beginning to the end of the play. His relationship with Mattie is a passionate one and is one of equality. Therefore, his relationship with his family is a solid one, one of a strong commitment.²⁶

When Jeff comes home, Johnny is beside himself with joy:

(He picks her [GRANDMA] up and whirls her
around the room, laughing.)

JOHNNY

Grandma, you are the biggest fool in the world but
I sure do love me some Grandma Wilhelmina Geneva Brown.

GRANDMA

Stinking old wino.

JOHNNY

I love you too, Dudley--Dr. Dudley Stanton--even
if you do walk through life with a broomstick up
your ass.

(To Ann.)

And even though we just met, I loves me some Ann--
sweet fighting lady that you are. Jeff, ya got
yourself a mamma--a mamma who's gonna protect your
flanks--a sweet fighting lady.

JEFF

I know, Pop.

(GRANDMA grunts disapprovingly.)

JOHNNY

And me son I loves better than I love myself. My
big old big time United States Air Force Lt.
son....²⁷

Still there is a sour note floating around in the surrounding air:

JOHNNY

He's coming home today-

JEFF

I'm here, Pop.

JOHNNY

(Really annoyed.)

No you ain't--you ain't here. 'Cause if you were
you'd have on your uniform-

JEFF

I don't like to wear it, Daddy Johnny.

JOHNNY

Why not?

JEFF

Well I guess-

JOHNNY

Spit it out.

JEFF

I feel ashamed of it. I feel that it's a kinda
cop out, Pop--it makes me feel like a buffoon
every time I put it on. I should have burned
my commission, not shown up, made it to Canada

JEFF (CONT'D)

or something. I really don't believe in this country anymore.²⁸

This statement adds heat to this revelatory moment, to the burgeoning tension in the house. Dudley, of course, is on Jeff's side, as are Ann and Mattie, while Grandma, in an inebriated stupor, is fixed on the outer shell of this scene.

Still, Johnny will not let go. He talks about the "battlefield" to which everyone must go for his own particular war, his manhood, selfhood or apotheosis:

JOHNNY

Whoever dropped from a pretty black poontang has got to find his own battlefield and go to war. In his own way--his own private war.

DUDLEY

All hail to the philosopher--poet.

JOHNNY

(grabbing DUDLEY roughly on the collar and screaming....)

I'm a poet, ya hear me a poet! When this country--when this world, learns the meaning of poetry--Don't you see, Jeff, poetry is what the revolution's all about--never lose sight of the true purpose of the revolution, all revolutions--to restore poetry to the God-head! Poetry is religion, the alpha and the omega, the cement of the universe. The super eye under which every other eye is scrutinized, and it stretches from one to infinity, from bullshit to the beatific, the rocking horse of the human

JOHNNY (CONT'D)

spirit--God himself. God himself is pure distilled poetry.²⁹

His passion rising, he goes on:

JOHNNY

Preserve the Empire State Building--if you can.
'Cause it was built from over three hundred years
of black poetry. Kick out the money changers
and reclaim it. Ain't none of us gonna be free
until poetry rides a mercury-smooth silver stallion.

(Pause.)

Seeing you in your uniform with bars on your shoulders
and them navigator wings on your chest is a kinda-....
Poetry, Jeff. Black poetry.

JEFF

Pop, I didn't make it through navigator school- I
washed out--flunked out--whatever.

JOHNNY

(Furious.)

My son flunked out--you lie--go get that uniform!

JEFF

No, Daddy Johnny, no!

MATTIE

Leave him alone, Johnny.

JOHNNY

I'm the head of this house.

MATTIE

Ain't nobody disputing that.

JOHNNY

And when I ask my son--who I ain't seen but three or four times in three years to do me one simple favor-

ANN

But if it's against his principles, Mr. Williams-

JOHNNY

There goes the little fighting lady, protecting your flanks.³⁰

Neither side relents and so the conflict intensifies, grows out of control, spreading out and encompassing everybody. Jeff feels besieged now and has lost the initial joy of his homecoming:

JEFF

I'll leave, Pop. I'll leave now--tonight--ya dig that? 'Cause I've had me enough homecoming for a lifetime.

JOHNNY

Ain't nobody asking you to leave-

JEFF

Ya telling me what to do like I was sweet sixteen or something. Everybody 'round here wants to tell me what to do.

MATTIE

You didn't write to us about flunking out, Jeff.

JEFF

Ya want to know why I didn't write home about it, mamma?

MATTIE

Not unless you want to tell us, Son!

JEFF

'Cause every single letter I got from you or pop was telling me how proud you were of your navigator son.

JOHNNY

We thought you were doing all right.

JEFF

You thought that because that's what you wanted to think!

JOHNNY

What else could we think?

JEFF

About me, Daddy Johnny, about Jeff--damn your pride! You coulda thought about me.

(Strained pause.)

I hated navigation! You know how I hate figures, Pop.

JOHNNY

You never worked hard enough!

JEFF

So you say, Daddy Johnny--'cause that's what you want to believe. "Jeff Williams is my son, everybody! Just like me. Anything I can do he can do."

JOHNNY

You can! It's all in how you think of yourself-

JEFF

Right, Pop, right. As a matter of fact I may be able to do a few things you can't do. But not math, Pop. That's you, not me. Don't you dig that?

JOHNNY

No I don't.

JEFF

Ya'll had a piece of my big toe, Pop. Everybody had a piece of my nigger toe. Not just those white pig instructors who kept checking and rechecking my work, 'cause I was what they called a belligerent nigger. But also there were eight black officers in that school, only eight out of three hundred, and they kept telling me, "Man, you got to make it. You got to be a credit to your race."³¹

Johnny is slow to absorb the realities of his major anagnorisis, though his denial system is weakening. This brings more desperation to Jeff's voice:

JEFF

Don't you see the point, Pop? Everybody had a piece of my nigger toe...my fellow black brother officers--the pig instructors, you and Mamma, Pop--everybody had a piece--but me--Jeff Williams!

JOHNNY

Jeff Williams is Johnny Williams' son, goddamn it!

JEFF

You mean none of me belongs to me, Pop?

JOHNNY

I want to see you in your uniform! Now what is all this talk about?

JEFF

It's about you and me and the battlefields. About who is Jeff Williams, Pop.

JOHNNY

Then who in the hell is he?

JEFF

A dude who hated navigation to the point where he got migraines. Who wanted to throw up on every flight--motion sickness pills notwithstanding. Whos ears pained him from take-off to landing. Do you know what it feels like when your ears don't clear?

MATTIE

My baby!³²

The conversation ends with Johnny leaving the house in frustration and disgust. Thus ends Act Two of the play, setting up the events leading to the climax in Act Three. Johnny, now in the midst of a personal crisis which forces his decisions and actions at the play's crisis-climax, is not the same man when he appears in the third act that he was in the first two, so devastating has this news been to him. Oddly enough, it is because he and Mattie have done such a good job of bringing Jeff up--by example and by teaching--that the above scene was possible. It is obvious that Jeff had gotten the honesty, the ability to face an unpleasant truth about himself or someone else--which he had shown in the previous scene--from his mother. From his parents he had also gotten his open-mindedness. Despite her love and admiration for her husband, she

does not try to force her son to follow his example as Lena did in A Raisin in the Sun. The values Mattie tries to communicate to Jeff are of independence and love but, even more importantly, they are her own.³³ Unlike the mothers in the other plays, she does not lean on Johnny for spiritual and exemplary support. She does not invoke her husband's life as a positive or negative pattern for Jeff. Either would serve only to blind him to his own way, the very last result she would ever want. Her relationship to Johnny belongs to her and her spouse and should have nothing to do with her son's life. There is no shame or regret for what her life has been with Johnny, and nowhere in the play do we see her despair over what has been. We only see realism, honesty. This is what gives so eloquent a testimony to her love for Johnny, a testimony based on an acceptance of herself with all her errors and faults, as well as an acceptance of her husband.³⁴ There is strong justification for her stand in Johnny's last words to her and his friend Dudley just before dying (during this scene, Grandma, intoxicated, confuses Johnny with her late, much revered husband Ben Brown--from her, a rare compliment indeed for Johnny):

JOHNNY

Mattie, I got to get our children straight before I might die....Don't suffer long, Honey. Just give up and take my hand. The children--the children are on their own now.³⁵

Despite its conventionally melodramatic ending, the play was a new type to reach the stage, certainly the Broadway stage. There were great poetry, metaphysics and new interpersonal dynamics shown among the characters. Because the surrounding Nixonian social environment for African Americans was generally bad, though in some ways--because of legislation, because it was the Seventies and because the storm clouds of the turbulent Sixties had receded somewhat; there were advancements and a few other good features now existent for minorities. What appeared on the stage could be a mixture of melodrama and realism-naturalism. Characters like Johnny and Mattie did not need to be icons; they could show human foibles, could show true humanity.

True, Russell of Ceremonies in Dark Old Men no longer had a wife to hold him in check or to understand and tolerate his foibles as in the case of Johnny. He did have a grown breadwinner daughter who disapproved of his lifestyle which generated a different behavioral dynamic within the constellation of that family. Approval, admiration within a family, affects the everyday functioning of any of its members, especially if they are males, be they breadwinners or not. The family certainly understands what its males have to go through in the outside world, and even its females. If they fight the good fight--as in the case of Johnny or Walter, Sr. of A Raisin in the Sun, even if Johnny takes to drink as a result of

intrinsic frustrations--the family will still celebrate them for their struggles.

If they gripe and chase dreams, false or not, the family will try to support them, if grudgingly to a point--as in the case of Walter, Jr. of A Raisin in the Sun or Victor Mason of Big White Fog; unfortunately, African-American families do not have much time or energy for remote, impractical dreams. The challenges of a difficult life are too much upon them.

If they drop out from the system as Jeff did because of a muted kind of black pride or, as in the case of Theo or Bobby of Ceremonies in Dark Old Men, because they see no hope in the struggle and because they choose to chase false illegal dreams, there is less familial tolerance. There is, after all, the ultimate struggle of their forebears that they must always be measured against.

Because of these circumstances, the dramatic dynamics work out differently. Johnny sacrifices his own life for his son Jeff who he thinks still has potential for a good life. Russell, in contrast, loses one of his sons, his folly having gone too far. Walter, Jr., refuses to sacrifice his son Travis's soul for the sake of empty displaced revenge and expedience.

The black revolutionaries have gone from the romanticized images of Big White Fog to the enraged science fiction of Walker Vessel's troops in The Slave. After Black Power declines, the militance takes the form of criminality in Ceremonies in Dark Old Men and finally degenerates to the

dernoralized dementia of The River Niger. Each has reflected the socio-historical changes in the surrounding society.

Stereotyping, even in its new form, had moved to a new uncharted territory--the cinema. It was no longer welcome on the stage as in the old days.

CHAPTER TEN
AFFECTIVITY NOW AT WORK IN THE
POSTMODERN FORM
FIRST BREEZE OF SUMMER BY LESLIE LEE

In Washington, D.C., a black security guard named Frank Wills had discovered something irregular happening at a place called The Watergate Hotel and, through this discovery, had set off a chain of events which resulted in a group of high government officials going to jail and President Nixon resigning from office in 1974. The world, both inner and outer, would be forever changed after that. (Though the men involved, either directly or indirectly, in the Watergate burglary seemed not to have come off too badly, Wills, the initial hero, seems to have vanished into thin air.)

A draining full-scale war in the Far East was finally coming to an end, though a cease fire had already been in existence. The soldiers would soon be coming home to a nation already licking its wounds from the Watergate Affair and now having to come to terms with not having won the latest war. (This nation would not welcome these men with the cheering fanfare the World War II returning veterans had returned to; needless to say, the returning Viet Nam War veterans were stunned, confused and bitter.) Healing slowly, the nation now reeled through the Ford (who now had replaced Nixon as president) and then the Carter years (Reagan was on the not-too-distant horizon).

Concerns, of course, about the plight of African-Americans and other minorities had by now waned considerably. Admittedly, a large African-American middle class had emerged, having benefitted from the various War on Poverty programs and partly from new opportunities that had opened to them. The gap, however, between them and the people for whom the programs were really aimed--the majority underclass--was widening. The latter did not rise in their station and, in many cases, their situation actually worsened. The black middle class was then pushed into an isolated world of not being part of their primary community while not quite being accepted by the surrounding white middle- and upper-class community.¹ Still, the surrounding white community did not want to hear anymore. So what if unemployment rates were on the rise in these disadvantaged communities? There was progress. A black judge of the Federal District Court in Chicago had been named. There was a black, the secretary of transportation, holding a cabinet position. Washington, D.C. had its first elected black mayor in the twentieth century, to join a host of other black mayors of cities around the nation. An African-American man was managing a major league baseball team. The Congress now had more black members, including two who had a hand in recommending impeachment proceedings against the President. What more did Blacks want? The black middle class had been taken care of.

Thus, the feeling was that, though things were not as great as desired,

there was enough evidence of progress to turn all social energies to other national concerns. African-Americans who had missed the "War on Poverty" boat, now found themselves stuck on an island of ever-shrinking opportunities of economic advancement and worsening living conditions. There was no more room for white liberal magnanimity now. The overall economic situation in the nation was beginning to tighten. Everyone was hurting.

This condition the theater would now reflect.

With the consequent reduced receptiveness to guilt generating protest or militant revolutionary drama, African-American playwrights began to turn their glances inward to a closer, more sensitive look at the family and its attendant dynamics. No longer was the evocation of pity, guilt and fear on the part of the audience the aim. Greater understanding and sympathy were now the goals. The River Niger was a step in that direction.

The First Breeze of Summer (1975) by playwright Leslie Lee went further, discarding both the militancy of the former, as well as the traditional forms of modern drama. The time was ripe for a new, postmodern approach to black drama.

What is postmodernism?

Oscar Brockett, in his History of the Theatre, describes it:

...postmodernism suggested that words (and other artistic means) do not project precise statements about reality and consequently that there can be no single correct interpretation of any text or work of art. Furthermore, once a work is finished, its creator's statements about its meanings carry no more authority than any others, since perception of meaning depends upon complex systems of signs and codes which involve the entire cultural context, as well as an individual's own context within the cultural context. Thus, each observer of a performance recreates the play by processing the signs, codes, and associational patterns aroused within his or her consciousness; and this recreation will both resemble and differ from those recreated by other perceivers of the same performance. No recreation is necessarily more valid than others. Similarly, a director is free to give a script an interpretation at complete odds from the author's. Sometimes it is argued, well-known plays (especially the classics) have become so enshrined within accepted interpretations that we can see them afresh only after witnessing a radically different (even "blasphemous") reinterpretation. The questioning of clearcut meaning also led to the collapse of clearcut differentiations--among the sexes, the arts, cultures, dramatic forms, and performance styles, and of distinctions between criticism and art works and between text and performance. Much of postmodernist theatre is theatre about theatre--that is, it calls attention to itself or to how it is being made...there may be deliberate mixtures of style.... Almost all of the characteristic devices of postmodernism have the effect of calling attention to the art work itself (thus making it reflexive), and it does so through some disparity between text and performance--or through a gap between means and meaning--which creates a dialectic that places the ultimate responsibility for synthesizing the two disparate elements on the spectator's perception and perceptivity.²

The First Breeze of Summer was developed from an earlier one-act play written in the mid-sixties--Elegy to a Down Queen. The play was expanded to include the grandmother, now a speaking character rather than one offstage who is spoken about by other members of the family. This gave the playwright the chance to add layers to the play's values and deepen the complexities interwoven in its family dynamics. It was first produced Off-Broadway by the Negro Ensemble Company, in association with Woodie King, Jr. at the St. Marks Playhouse, March 2nd to April 27th 1975, where it won an Obie Award for the Best Play of 1974-1975. The play was then brought to Broadway, The Palace Theatre, June 10th to July 20th 1975, where it ran for 48 performances. It was made into a film by PBS on Channel 13's "Theatre in America" and was the winner of a Mississippi Educational TV Award for the best film adaptation in 1977.³

Playwright Leslie Lee uses the abovementioned options discussed by Oscar Brockett to great advantage in his The First Breeze of Summer which makes it a miraculous blending of the harshly naturalistic and the sublimely lyrical. He combines and even fuses disparate elements--both presentational and representational, tragic and gently comedic--which never seem to jar or clash but rather to complement and enhance each other. (The representational elements are given to us presentationally because half of them are from fond reminiscences by the main character.)

There are two main stories told here, each self-contained units in themselves but at the same time interconnected in a finely woven psychosocial webbing: one takes place in the past of one character while the other is in the present. Though the past is prologue and seems to work its subliminal influence on the events of the present, the present colors how the past is seen, giving that past its unique mise-en-scene as it is reflected by its protagonist.

The story is about Gremmar who comes to visit her son Milton's tri-generational family, of which she is the revered matriarch. The family consists of her son Milton, his wife Hattie and their two sons, Nate and Lou (an autobiographical character) whom she adores. Their interactions, passions and concerns send her back to her past relationships with three different men--two black, one white (none of whom she ever married); the first, Sam, is forced to leave her with her first child because he "had stepped out of line" in the surrounding white community; the second, Briton Woodward, who is white, is the other side of a dead end relationship for her; the third, Harper Edwards, because he is so much a stern moralist, leaves her when he learns of the others. Her remembrances are vivid and loving just as she holds this present family in deep loving regard. When amidst their interdynamics, an unpleasant truth about her past is revealed, about her relationships with these men, the family reaction causes her to have a heart attack which, as it does

Grandma in Take A Giant Step, costs her life.

Her son Milton--an uptight and very religious man very much like his father, Harper Edwards, a miner who had become a preacher--is a plasterer trying to pass his trade onto his two sons, only one of whom, Nate, seems to be interested; the other, Lou, wants to go to college and become a man of science. Each son has his own conflict with his father. Nate, the older and more worldly of the two, wants his father to stop being so easy and pliable when he does business with whites, accepting bids which undervalue their labor and time. He also wants a stronger role in the business dealings. Lou merely wants out.

Besides her son, there is also her daughter Edna, a high yellow lightskinned, heavy-set woman--Gremmar/Lucretia's daughter gotten by Briton who feels that Gremmar favors Milton because her father had been white while his had been black. The revelation by Edna of this fact near the end of the play causes a major upheaval in the household which leads to Gremmar's death and changes Lou forever. Perhaps this play is his great apology to her for his censorious reaction to the revelation about this woman who meant more to him than anybody (like Hallie's [Athol Fugard's] apology to his surrogate father, Sam, in the form of his play, Master Harold and the Boys⁴).

This woman--Gremmar/Lucretia in her past--is, as stated earlier, a kindly, warm, lovable lady: the grandmother we have all become

accustomed to on the stage, on television, in the movies or just in our homes. This time, however, we have a woman with a checkered past. She has had a child with each of three men in her life. Her first, Sam, Jr., had died early in his life. Her second, Edna, she had gotten by the adopted son of a well-to-do white family she had been working for as a domestic. Milton was her third.

Here we have a combination of disparate elements in a black character--a woman with a strongly sexual past who has become an archetypical kindly, highly revered matriarch of the family. It is interesting that each of the three males is somehow a reflection of the three men in her life in her past. Nate is like his grandfather Harper Edwards--accepting of his situation in life and capable of brutally hard work. Lou is also like his grandfather but another side of him--conflicted, torn between opposing forces (that of passion and puritanism), religious, judgmental and slightly idealistic. He is intensely desirous of attaining a higher level in his life. When he learns of the "terrible truth" about her, it is Lou who, like his grandfather, heaps unforgiving censure on her. For the grandfather, the censure was the death of Gremmar's relationship with him. For Lou, the censure leads to her death.

Milton, too, is a legatee of his father. Like his father, he is serious, reserved, somewhat puritanical, judgmental, sternly businesslike in his attitudes and disciplined. He also takes himself a little too seriously, with

his strong work ethic. Hattie, his wife, makes an observation about him:

HATTIE

Milton can tease but can't stand anybody to
tease him.⁵

In discussing an unreliable worker for him, he reveals who he is inside by widening his judgments to the attitudes of young people in general. When Hattie asks him about this worker, he is as sternly judgmental and condemnatory as his father from the past:

HATTIE

Well, did Tom show up today?

MILTON

Half drunk as usual....I'd just as soon do without
the man....been advertising for somebody for two
weeks now, and we haven't had one call--not one!

(MILTON rises, and crosses to GREMMAR
Stage Right between arm chair and piano.)

Can't get young people interested in plastering
today... Don't want to do a day's work--want
something for nothing--fast cars and loud radios!...
Haven't had one call!

(LOU rises, enters and stands at the door.)

Louis comes this summer, that'll be somebody at
least. Lord knows we need the help.

(LOU frowns, sighing heavily. HATTIE
looks at him)⁶

Lou, unfortunately, has other plans. When he announces what they are, an altercation erupts between him and his father.

LOU

(Sighing heavily again.)

I was...thinking about...about working some place else this summer.

(There is a moment of strained silence, and glances are exchanged by the others [GREMMAR, MILTON, HATTIE, EDNA]. HATTIE puts the glasses on the small side table up Left.)

MILTON

Somewhere else?--Where else?

LOU

(Shrugging, peeved.)

I don't know...just...somewhere...else, that's all...

MILTON

Lord knows, Louis, I certainly was depending on you. Nathan and I could use all the help we can get, for all Tom is worth.

LOU

For goodness sakes, do I have to plaster every summer?

HATTIE

(Steps to LOUIS.)

You don't have to do anything but die, Louis.

MILTON

Is there something wrong with the way I make my living?

LOU

I didn't say that!--

HATTIE

(As EDNA concurs.)

He certainly didn't, Milton, now don't start exaggerating-

GREMMAR

No he didn't now...he didn't....

LOU

It's...it's--all I said was--

MILTON

All the work we have--people call me up and me promising, and here I am trying to plan ahead-- can't get nobody to work for me and--

EDNA

Milton, if the child don't want to--

MILTON

It's not a question of wanting to--

LOU

Pop--

MILTON

His brother didn't want to drop outta school to help me, but he did. Louis is only in high school. It's not like I was asking him to sacrifice his education--

LOU

Well I'm not Nate--

GREMMAR

Louis, son--

MILTON

What's the matter, don't I treat you right?

LOU

Pop, I'd rather do something else--

MILTON

(Steps toward LOUIS.)

I can't help what you want to do. You're working with Nate and me this summer!

(Cutting him off as he starts to speak.)

I'm still the father of this house!

LOU

How can anybody forget it!

MILTON

Now that's enough back talk from you, young man!--that's enough! Here--here I ain sweating to put food on the table--providing--we need the help--you wanting me to help you with your college tuition next year and--

LOU

(Crosses Down Stage Center to dining table.)

All right, I'll pay for it then!--

GREMMAR

(Trying to lighten the atmosphere.)

Come on, you all. Let's not fight. Let's be happy--let's be happy now.

(She begins playing softly.)

LOU

Gremmar, I will pay for it!

MILTON

(Crossing Down Stage Center to LOUIS.)

I don't care what you do next summer--that's your business! This summer you're working for me and I don't want to hear another word about it!

(MILTON starts toward kitchen.)

Louis want to be the black sheep of the family--

LOUIS

(Starting for the porch.)

Oh for goodness sakes! Just because--

(LOU storms out, MILTON, EDNA and HATTIE
exit kitchen arguing about LOU.)

GREMMAR

Louis! Son?--Sam! Sam!?

This sets Gremmar/Lucretia off on a fond reminiscence from her past--her relationship with her first paramour, Sam. He has just given her a string of pearls which she at first balks at accepting because of their apparent expense but subsequently changes her mind when she learns they are false. From this, he confesses to her that he has lost his job as porter in a local railroad station. It seems that he had lost his temper at a white customer who had been abusing a fellow porter named Pop. This man, with his education and training, should have been a doctor, a person of higher status than a mere porter, certainly than the customer--and this outraged Sam even more.

Sam furiously explains to Lucretia what had happened:

SAM

....So that stupid, dumb, doctor-porter is taking all the cracker's crap! Taking it, talking to himself, reciting that stuff from his medical books!... Well, I couldn't take it! So I hightail it over to where they standing, and--and before I could catch myself, I'm telling this cracker off! I got my hand, my fist, my nose into his, and I'm screaming at him--yelling at him--calling him

SAM (CONT'D)

the names he's calling Pop. And that stupid Pop-- Doc--is pulling at me--yanking at me, because he knows, because he's made it all so simple! And he's struggling with me! And I'm yelling at the cracker: "This man's a doctor, goddammit! You oughta be carrying his bags, you sonofabitch! Don't you talk to Dr. Savage that way!" And Pop is crying almost, because I promised I wouldn't say nothing to nobody! That's what's getting him! He's begging me and half-crying for me to shut up! And then all of a sudden, he pulls out that damn piece of paper [diploma] and tears it into shreds--just rips it up!
(Pauses.)

Well...to make a long story short...that's it. I mean, that's it...I wasn't worth a good minute Right after that...Right on the spot...on the damn spot!
(Pauses.)

I turn around...on my way out...and there's Pop... doing penance for me...cleaning up that bastard's shit...smiling, apologizing...kissing ass! If he's mad, he's mad at me and not at the cracker--for messing up his goddamn, stupid world....⁸

Of course, with the combination of these reasons and the rage he now feels, he must leave the system. He will not be ground into the dirt by the forces which have now formed against him in that town. Doubtless, it means he must leave her as well, even though she is pregnant, a fact he is not aware of. He cannot drag her through all the hardship, deprivation and suffering he anticipates. What it means, though, is that he breaks away from the system the way Lou is doing now in the present. Thus the connection is made in her consciousness. It also could be the psycho-

dynamic result of certain similar subliminal, unconscious interactions that take place between both Sam and her and Lou and her. The association in her is too strong, overlaid by the normal affinity a grandmother has for her grandsons, the children of her child. Because her relationship with the young men lacks the burdens an immediate parent has, it can take on the benefits of romanticism.

Black grandmothers often have a very special relationship with their grandsons, sometimes going beyond that which they had with their own children. The relationship with the grandson becomes the third chance to relate to an important male in her life, to open up the world before him in a way she had not with her husband, her original love, or even with her child. She can uninhibitedly support her grandson, in any enterprise he chooses to involve himself in, dreams he holds close to his heart, or whatever position he takes on an issue. This is true even if she must go against her own child. We certainly saw similar reactions in Take A Giant Step, The River Niger and the beginnings of it in A Raisin in the Sun.

Finally, she can show a special kind of love for her grandson and expect the same to be returned to her--something certain impassivity-driven unwritten laws had prevented her from experiencing with her husband or son. By the time an African-American woman becomes a grandmother, certain indigenous ideas about how to turn a boy into a man in this society have transformed inside her to something more kindly,

indulging, nurturing, sensitive, less harsh. Here, warmth and affection are more encouraged. It may be the only area where they are.

Gremmar plays Scrabble with Lou. Here, they have a friendly argument about the use of the word "cilia" which, in effect, is an argument about life, "cilia" being important parts of a living cell. She encourages Lou to testify in church and backs him up enthusiastically when he does.

As a result, she becomes the sanctuary for the young man from an oppressive parent, a need he will be expected to grow out of very soon.

Much less is said about Nate's relationship with Gremmar, other than the usual grandmotherly familiarities--he pinches her cheek lightly early in the play as they pass each other on the porch steps to show his affection for her, putting him closer to the older members of the family.

Nate has, in a sense, bought into Milton's way of life, giving up his own dreams and personal ambitions. He has given up his education, perhaps to resume it at a later time. He will leave the gate open for his younger brother to escape through.

The two boys have a poignant conversation in which they discuss their dreams, concerns, wishes, deepest feelings and fears, something not often seen between insensitivity-smothered African-American male siblings:

LOU

You've given it all up for daddy haven't you,
Nate?⁹

Nate is cagey at first in the way anyone is when he finds himself in a conversation which, to him, threatens to strip him of psychological cover. This pattern is usually an element in conversations among African-American males:

NATE
(Stopping.)
Given what up?¹⁰

Emboldened by that response, Lou forges forward into territory that could possibly lead to angry confrontation but does not:

LOU
School. I thought you wanted to teach so much. That's what you said you wanted to do before.

NATE
I know what I said--I know it. The man needs help, Lou. So what am I supposed to do, huh? Yeah, I wanted to be one....So what the hell, everybody can't be one. Besides, they have enough people doing it without me.¹¹

Lou is uncomfortable with the consequent guilt he feels and so must create in his brother an equal amount of guilt. This equality would assuage his own. First, he must meet it head on:

LOU
(Shaking his head disconsolately.)
Gremmar told me about...about your dropping out of--quitting school because of me.

NATE

(Shrugging, sitting.)

Yeah, well, I figured as long as one of us went, what the hell's the difference. You were smarter than me...in the long run...had the best chance of making it so....

(Pause, wiping perspiration from his forehead.)

I suppose I was pissed-off at first. You know the way the old man can make you feel guilty--like if you don't help him you're going to be cast into the fiery furnace...you know... So, who knows, maybe I didn't have any other choice. What the hell, it's a...trade... It's honest...making my own living... not cheating anybody. I don't know, I might go back some day.

LOU

You've been saying that for three years now, Nate.

NATE

And I might be saying it for five more! I might go back--I might! I...I think about it... Anyway, it's not that important anymore...not like it used to be... You get out of school, and you see some things different... Those people don't make that much bread anyway. Oh who knows! I'm plastering--it's all right--it is... I'm outside a lot... Nobody but the old man standing over me, and...I can handle him... I'm better than he is anyway. He knows it. He may not admit it, but damned if he doesn't know it!... He knows it... So I'm no teacher... I'm a plasterer.¹²

With the conversation taking on this texture, Lou decides to do a little opening up of his own. He must stay with his brother during this moment.

LOU

(Softly, intensely.)

I...I could've gotten a job in the hospital this summer--in the lab maybe...an orderly or something... Instead I--I have to do what?-- plaster! I could be picking up some experience maybe--something that has to do with what I want to do in...college. But no...I have to fool around working for him--¹³

Then the everpresent impassivity intrudes:

NATE

That's between you and him, Lou. I-¹⁴

It is too late. Lou is already too caught up in the prevailing mood. He reveals some of his classist attitudes about his fellow blacks--the "dope" or "dumb nigger" as metaphor for this "reverse prejudice" and their ways of life which he feels considerable contempt for and wants to break away from:

LOU

(Rises)

Don't remind me!

(Softly, agitated.)

Riding in the back of that...truck...like some...
dope!¹⁵

Nate now becomes the protective older brother as Theo Parker is to Bobby in their moment of intimate conversation in Ceremonies:

NATE

So ride in the front--all right? I'll ride in
the damn back! I don't give a shit if people think
I'm a dope! Let 'em think what they please!¹⁶

Here, certainly, Nate shows his own class prejudice, probably
subliminally internalized from their father.

That Lou has inadvertently made a disparaging comment about his
brother and the quality of his existence makes the younger man
uncomfortable so he moves quickly to quell this potential flame:

LOU

Oh, it's--it's not just...that!
(Sighing heavily.)

Plaster...you get sores all over your hands...
stuff all in your eyes!... Damp...dirty!...
It's-¹⁷

Nate again moves to protect his younger brother and, at the same
time, convince him that the way of the plasterer's life is not all that bad,
does not have to be the disaster he has made it out to be:

NATE

Man, you can wear some gloves--and we have a pair
of goggles, if that's what's bothering you. I use
to wear 'em when I first started....It's not too
bad, Lou... Shit, I have a business... I'm
saving a little bread... Don't have the damn bill
collectors on my tail... I have enough threads and
all that.... It's no big deal...not worth all
that. Shit, you are what you are, you know?¹⁸

It would appear that Nate, having come to terms with his life and being the older sibling, is the stronger and more mature of the two and is probably the role model for his brother. That the two are very close is very much in evidence here--a rarity. When African-American brothers attempt a warm camaraderie, there is always an overlay of competition, of sibling rivalry, laced somewhat with mutual hostility.

Such rivalry, of course, is true in all ethnic groups. Because, however, of the specific psychosocial pressures and dynamics unique to African Americans coming out of the peculiar socio-history of slavery, the indigenous dynamics are different. The persistent low social status following emancipation, the everpresent skin color discrimination and the derogation of the African physiognomy that is inside even African Americans, there is a particular strain or edge to the males' sibling interrelationships. The strain comes down partly from the lifelong struggle for their beset mother's (parent figure's) attention and love which could only be allotted in sporadic, often arbitrary small doses, another legacy of slavery and economic oppression.

This is not to say that the above is totally absent in the relationship between Lou and Nate. It is to say that the above pressures play such a small role in their relationship that its ability to concentrate on other matters is unhampered.

There is further evidence of Lou's class prejudice later in the play when

he is talking to Gremmar after their Scrabble game together (another example of their strong relationship with each other.).

LOU

I mean, I want to be a doctor or scientist--right?
And you have to study hard--right?

GREMMAR

That's right. Oh yes!

LOU

I don't know... The colored kids at school...
most of 'em...they fool around. They don't care!
And just because I don't act silly as they do--
because I know what I want to do--they call me a
bookworm and really--I mean, really get jealous
because I study hard. I mean, they try to make me
feel guilty. You know what I mean?¹⁹

Of course, his grandmother completely understands him, agrees with him and supports him in any way she can. This is a good thing because he, in turn, worships the ground she walks on. He reveres her and he is in great earnest. She wields such inadvertent power over him she can literally set his destiny with her mere approval or even smile. As such, this dynamic is fraught with potential danger...for a woman with her past, having the kind of straightlaced men in her family that she has.

As previously mentioned, Milton is sternly religious and, though he still holds authority over his family, its destiny and its way of life, his personality does not seem to come through obtrusively. His is a quiet

authority and there is an unassuming blandness about him. Even his relationship with his mother, Gremmar, is nebulous, not clearly evocative, having no sharp edges or contours to it. That there are traces of his father in him there is no doubt. He is intransigent, stern, though relenting. He does not have to be a brutal black father, either physically or verbally, to have his way. It would seem that he is an advancement from Harper. There is an affection toward him from Gremmar, an immense prideful love. It is there, in the air between them though seldom outwardly demonstrated. She knows that her son has come to his adulthood, strong, dependable, manly, a good husband, a good provider and father. Her feelings toward him have served as a source of strength needed to build a business and support a family in a world where this is not too easy for an African-American male. Like his father, Harper Edwards, he is strongly religious, traditionalist and straitlaced at an age when many black males have given way to despair, drink and profligacy. As a mother, Gremmar has done good by him, as she has her other living child, Edna.

Her effectiveness as a mother is evidenced also by her daughter-in-law Hattie's apparent happiness and contentment and by the solid centers of her two grandsons. Though they do not escape the inevitable father-son conflicts and the spiritual briars of manly youth, they are still living in that house without the usual accompaniment of tensions and discomforts. This lady, with her checkered past, has generated as good a family around

her as any. The fulcrum of this accomplishment has been her son Milton, gotten with her beloved Harper. Through the dynamics between her son and her, we can infer that Harper had been the most important of her beaus.

Milton even puts her in mind of Sam who was not his father. In one scene, early in the play, a rock has been thrown through one of their windows. When the beleaguered patriarch learns from Nate that the miscreant was the malingerer Tom who worked for him, he becomes enraged and seems about to do something drastic in revenge.

Gremmar, remembering what had happened to her Sam in her past tries desperately to dissuade Milton.

GREMMAR

(Rising, moving after him, preceded
by HATTIE.)

Milton, there's no sense going down there and getting yourself in a lot of trouble over that man. It's not worth it son. Just because he wants to show his ignorance is no reason why you have to. Use your head now, Milton. Use your head.-- Don't leave with anger in your heart, son-- Don't go-- don't go--²⁰

This event sets her reminiscing mind back to a similar situation with Sam. Here, after the incident at the railroad station, Sam decides that his life in that town is finished and that it is time to move on. He does not know, however, that she is pregnant with Sam, Jr.:

(SAM appears at the door, Up Stage Right, a traveling bag in his hand. He stands with uncertainty before stepping into the room and setting down the bag.)

LUCRETIA
(Without looking up.)
Are you leaving now, Sam?

SAM
In--in a minute.

LUCRETIA
(Rises and crosses to dresser.)
I...I know... I know you'll be gone forever.²¹

It is to be a devastating loss for her and she will not suffer it again, with Milton. Added to all the other positive feelings she has for her son, this unwavering love--now with Milton as its object--is a source of strength for his center.

Still, there is his sense of reality which prevents him from succumbing to the feelings of hubris, which makes him adhere to his practical side. His cautious practicality naturally becomes a source of conflict between him and his son Nate. At the beginning of Act Two, Nate is criticizing his methods of business negotiation:

NATE
Pop, the bid is way too low, for Pete's sake!

MILTON
Nathan, you don't have to get greedy about it!

NATE

Who's getting greedy! Pop, the trouble with you is you always bid too low!

MILTON

Look, Nathan, I got it figured down right here! That's why I called you in here!

NATE

Pop, you don't have a thing here for--for profit--not a thing!....for time and aggravation!

MILTON

Nathan, that house isn't going to take anymore than two weeks!

NATE

Pop, by the time we buy material, pay everybody, what do we have left?

MILTON

(Giving the bid to NATE.)

Nathan, look at these figures down there again, will you?

NATE

I'm looking at them! All they're saying is that we're going to have to scramble and charge at the lumber yard for the next job, instead of charging what the job is worth....You always underbid because you're afraid of not getting the job!

MILTON

(Steps to NATE.)

I charge what the job is worth and that's what I've been doing all these years!--

NATE

And that's why we don't have any capital now!²²

Instead of suppressing his ambitious son, he whines a little, which acknowledges his son's coming into maturity and the fact that he is already showing signs of becoming a better businessman, with a wider vision. The role of the black patriarch in the family is already showing signs of evolving into a less oppressive but perhaps more successful one. His essential humanity is not smothered while his basic strength remains implicit. He has the ability to back down when he feels it is necessary to maintain a proper psychosocial balance without feeling that his manhood has been challenged:

MILTON

I've been able to provide for this family, haven't I? Nobody's in need of anything here, are they?

NATE

Pop, just tell me--why do we always have to submit the lowest bid, huh? No wonder we always get the job. They know they're going to get a first class job for the least amount of money. Those white contractors, they see us coming and they laugh all the way to the bank. As far as I'm concerned-

MILTON

(Grabbing the bid again and studying it.)
All right, all right, let me see the paper.
(Sits at desk and opens ledger, which is on desk.)

NATE

I'd rather risk not getting the job than to--Things are going up, and here we are charging the same thing we did last year....²³

Ordinarily, in African-American drama, the son, finding himself in the position of victor in an argument with his father, would go for the coup de grace, the Oedipal crushing blow. Here, the son backs down himself and becomes conciliatory.

This is testimony to the man of the household, the new kind of father on the African-American stage. However, now that he has been established in the psyches of the American theatregoing public, we could now afford to go back to the old archetype for another examination, for new insights--Troy Maxson, in August Wilson's play, Fences.

CHAPTER ELEVEN
REAGANISM AND THE "EVIL" BLACK FATHER--
LOOKING BACK TO JUST BEFORE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
FENCES BY AUGUST WILSON

The Reagan Era was upon the nation. The President affected many people negatively--the lower middle class, the working poor, for instance--but he was particularly devastating to the black and Latino community. He opposed affirmative action programs. His enactments set black progress back for years. His appointments to the Supreme Court threatened to undo much that the Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement had accomplished, particularly the Voting Rights Act. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall called him "one of the worst Presidents for Black Progress" in years.¹

Naturally, in this atmosphere, spurred by increasing joblessness for all, white hostility toward blacks had begun increasing again. Whatever widespread extrinsic and intrinsic public sanction of African-Americans acquired during the Civil Rights Days now was fading. In this atmosphere, Anti-Black groups began forming again in alarming numbers. White paramilitary groups were holding basic training for race warfare planned for some undisclosed time in the future. Skinhead groups, neonazis and Klaverns were spreading across the nation.

Carter's administration seemed weaker than it actually was. Its domestic--inflation going wild--and foreign policies, the paralyzing hostage crisis in Teheran, other forms of worldwide terrorism against Americans abroad led to the perception that the American empire was falling like a house of cards.

Reagan was to be the answer. Though his Stockman-trickle down policy did not trickle down enough to help those levels of society it was supposedly aimed at, the upper classes seemed greatly to benefit. His Great Communicator pronouncements and anti-affirmative action and anti-union positions curtailed further minority progress. He turned a tougher eye away from domestic problems, toward foreign relations, setting the multicultural have-not masses adrift. He strengthened the third estate. Consequently, the black community along with others of its class, despite the widening of the black middle class, basically went backwards.²

African-American playwrights, in this context, had discovered that the public was no longer interested in guilt-inducing plays about white oppression, with blacks as victims. So "white oppression" had to be pushed further into the background, always felt though not explicitly displayed. It would be put--as Henry James put it--"into solution," into the surrounding air, hidden, subliminal, something outside the matrix of the primary experience of the play.

Black playwrights would now look into the culture, the family, whether biological or environmental. They would examine more closely the psychodynamics, the family interrelationships, the psychological makeup of the characters, the various interactions in the immediate surroundings. African-American interrelating with African-American was to be of primary importance. White characters would begin appearing fewer and fewer times in black plays. Characters like Mr. Lindner, Parnell James, Grace Easley and Bradford Easley would now play increasingly peripheral roles in the landscapes of the plays, though they had not disappeared entirely. The greater concentration would now be on black-to-black socio-dynamics. It is from here that theatre audiences would now glean their messages.

Granted, Bill Cosby had presented a groundbreaking, highly popular television show and written a few books on fatherhood and how it should be.³ Masses of people, black and white, loved the family values in the books and the show but the negative image of the black father in the public eye persisted. Black crime was growing too rapidly--caused in part by Reagan economic policies and consequent demoralized, dysfunctional family situations--to convince people otherwise, and there were too many abandoned, struggling single mothers heading families. Or, there were too many families needing protection from frustrated, enraged African-American breadwinners. Troy Maxson--the protagonist in August Wilson's Fences--rang truer to most people than Dr. Huxtable--the

protagonist of the *Cosby* television show.

It was in this atmosphere that a new playwright, August Wilson, came to the public's attention with his play, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. It was first presented at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1984 before being moved to Broadway in October of that same year where it received critical acclaim and won the New York Drama Critics Circle, Drama Desk and Outer Circle Awards. These established him as a major new voice in the theatre and paved the way for the remarkable series of plays that have followed.

Bottom was to be the first in this cycle of plays dramatizing the complex interactive social and psychological dynamics of the African-American experience in each decade since manumission. Fences followed.

Fences was first presented at the Yale Repertory Theatre on April 30, 1985. On March 26, 1987, it too opened on Broadway to critical acclaim, winning a Tony Award for Best Play and a Pulitzer Prize for drama.

The play takes place in the pre-to-early-Civil Rights Fifties. Troy Maxson is a large tempestuous man with a forceful personality, full of a lust for life and those intense human foibles which make him both a man to be loved and one to be feared. His hands are large, suggesting a man of great strength and one who has worked long and hard at strenuous jobs.

On his own since the age of fourteen and needing to survive, he

became a thief for a while, which set him on a path leading to a fifteen year imprisonment for murder. During this imprisonment he discovered the ability to play excellent baseball, enough to make him a professional. His accomplishments were not, however, enough to get him into the major leagues. The experiment with Jackie Robinson was just barely reaching its completion, not yet at its final evaluation. Doors, though, were already opened to countless subsequent African-American stars like Campanella, Mays, Newcombe and Clemente. That Troy Maxson was not among them had to be a sore point with him.

Many of his fellow players like Josh Gibson never made it in--the Jackie Robinson phenomenon had happened too late for them. Others like Satchel Paige had barely made it in at the tail end of their careers when they were long past their prime. Troy, a great homerun hitter, had been in Josh Gibson's group.

He had swallowed this bitter pill, which festered in his soul for the rest of his life. It is this feeling which serves as the play's central motivating force, as the energy center of much of Troy's acrimony, cynicism, and misconduct. It is the center of his "evilness" (hostility, combativeness, anger). It is the center that makes him crush his son Cory's dream to play football.

He is epitome of what causes insusceptibility in black males. He is also the result of it. He is in the forefront of those elements in the black

community which have been trying to protect the young male from danger, contretemps or hurt since the days of slavery. The women, nevertheless, have borne the burden, mainly, because of their not being as threatening to the white power structure. This socio-historic condition has put power into their hands that the black man could not have and put them in a more favorable position. They have suppressed the young man's manhood cruelly or gently, as need be, and the passage of time enabled them to develop a wider, subtler range of devices to accomplish this crucial training.

The black father, in this position and because of the limitations of time and opportunity afforded to him, had at his disposal many fewer options and so had to go with the brutality he saw all around him. He had to prepare his male-child for a world he himself knew only too well--unloving, cruel, frustrating, unfeeling, unsympathetic, oppressive and very poisonous and dangerous: physically, psychologically, economically. This has been particularly true for the black male naive enough to hold onto a dream.

As stated before, the death of Troy's dream has left a deep bitterness in him which has colored his relationships with everyone he comes in contact with. Even when he is being affectionate and giving, congenial and somewhat positive, there is an acrimony reverberating behind it. Only with his friend and co-worker in sanitation, Bono, is his congeniality pure, if competitive.

In America, there are two kinds of dynamics surrounding the death of a dream. In white America, the reasons for a dream not being achieved by a white male can be internal, external or both. An ambitious white male who has the talent for reaching a certain goal [and thriving after that] but fails to do so, may have a personal, psychological problem which is his obstacle, one he cannot seem to overcome. Or, he may be of a certain ethnic group--Slavic Eastern European, Italian, Sicilian, Jewish from any country, a man with lower class or peasant stock--who, sub rosa, may be made to feel uncomfortable for striving toward certain ends.

In reaction, he may blame others. He may convince himself that "they had it in for him." Inside, however, he may know the real reasons for his lack of success and will have come to terms with that knowledge. He may or may not adjust to it and get on with his life, such as it is. He may or may not correct his problem. If he does so, good. If he is unable to, he will muddle through to some other endeavor and talk about his failure over a beer on Saturday night.

An African-American male may also have all of the above problems blocking him from success and acceptance and may or may not be cognizant of them. One thing he does know, however: that he has a problem no white American has--his color. No matter what he does with himself, he has limited opportunity. This thought is in the deepest part of his soul. He has been trained to this reality from the earliest time of his

life so that it has come to be a part of his bloodstream.

This given idea has become all the more reason for him to become embittered and enraged. There are certain openings, chances, that do exist. They are, however, hidden behind so many obstacles that one might as well say that the possibility is hopeless. Such a slim chance means no chance. This is the ultimate rub--to know that no matter what one does, no matter what amount of effort one puts forth, one will never get to certain goals that one aspires to.

Add to that the agonizing sting that there are certain African-American men who do manage to get through those obstacles and the rage goes deeper into his soul. Now, the failure begins to take on the air of something more personal. Not only is one's color one's obstacle but also something in one's character is holding one back. With all of the other misfortunes besetting him, this is a little too much to handle so it gets pushed back into the subconscious.

The white man's unjust system is a little easier to handle because it is a little more palpable. It can fight protests and expressed outrage, trying "feebly" to defend itself. Or it can be plainly overt. Whatever, it is less discomfoting.

Inner faults as the reason for failure are another matter. Because they speak deeply to the very essence of the individual and his worth, they become more terrifying to apprehend. This, the impassive, macho African-

American male will not address. There is a risk, here, of tearing his whole inner being apart. Facing a hostile outer world is bad enough. Thus he must find ways to defend what is left of his ego. He must become loud, bellicose, tempestuous, bullying, and philandering. There must always be the threat of violence just below the surface. He may even have gone so far as to murder someone.

This psychosocial condition, plus not having made it to the major leagues even after the success of the Jackie Robinson experiment, becomes a particular sore point with Troy Maxson.

Moreover, to make things worse for Troy, there is an outside chance that his son Cory may succeed in doing what he, Troy, could not. Things have changed even though Troy may not have fully realized it. Cory could possibly become the sports star in football, a goal denied Troy in baseball. It is a fact that threatens Troy's well-protected inner sanity and threatens to cause rabid jealousy to rise up and sweep him off his feet.

On the other hand, Cory could be headed for the hurt caused by same kind of rejection Troy had experienced. Is it not his father's duty to prevent that from happening? Is it not his father's duty to play God with Cory's life and kill his son's dream? Which is the motivation? If both are, which holds more weight in Troy's psyche? How much of a role does fear of his son play in Troy's motivations?

All of these questions reverberate inside this complex character making

him a driving force in the play and a tortured, conflicted, self-destructive man who rivets everyone's attention at all times. He is both pivotal character and hero, protagonist and antagonist to himself and all the others immediately around him whom he overtly or covertly holds dear; he is Man against Himself. He makes the story move along rapidly to its climax and, even after his death, his spirit haunts the human dynamics in his fenced-in yard.

He makes people love him, and want to reach out to him. His torments, however, will not let him accept that love. He finds a way, somehow, to push everyone's love away. It is a miracle that, before he destroys it, this family he has formed around him is so beautiful. He has given them little reason to be. Possibly, something sublimely right inside him has seeped through to touch all his loved ones. Rose, his betrayed wife, humiliated by his infidelity, manages to summon up enough strength to consent to take care of the child he has gotten by another younger woman who had died giving birth. Cory, after a nearly murderous physical confrontation with Troy to protect his mother from him, and after Troy had all but destroyed his one chance to meet a football scout who could have facilitated his career, simply goes away and joins the Marines. He does not turn to crime as his father had before him and, though his estrangement from Troy is final, he is still the warm loving older brother to Troy's well-mannered love-child Raynell. Also, after initially not

intending to go to Troy's funeral, he finally decides to. Love and respect for his father lay deeper than rancor.

Cory's older brother Lyons whom Troy had gotten by a previous wife, has the same problem. No matter how much he tries to "connect" to his father, he is rebuffed. He visits his father on payday, usually Friday, to borrow money, one of the symbolic accepted forms of jockeying for connectedness in the black community. The two play this ritual in which Troy tries to make his money unattainable or at least slow down the lending process. The scenes are almost comic in tone but there is, underneath them, a continuation of the struggle on the part of Lyons for his father's niggardly ways with love and warmth, with the money serving as the external metaphor for them.

In the first act, Troy and Bono have just arrived from work and, out of the exhilaration that usually comes along with facing a weekend, are "acting the fool" in front of the only entrance to the household. At this point, Lyons enters:

(LYONS enters the yard from the street. Thirty-four years old, TROY's son by a previous marriage, he sports a neatly trimmed goatee, sport coat, white shirt, tieless and buttoned at the collar. Though he fancies himself a musician, he is more caught up in the rituals and "idea" of being a musician than in the actual practice of the music. He has come to borrow money

from TROY, and while he knows he will be successful, he is uncertain as to what extent his lifestyle will be held up to scrutiny and ridicule.)

LYONS

Hey, Pop.

TROY

What you come "Hey, Popping" me for?

LYONS

How you doing, Rose?

(He kisses her.)

Mr. Bono. How you doing?

BONO

Hey, ~~Lyons~~, Lyons...how you been?

TROY

He must have been doing alright. I ain't seen him around here last week.

ROSE

Troy, leave your boy alone. He come by to see you and you wanna start all that nonsense.

TROY

I ain't bothering Lyons.

(Offers him the bottle.)

Here...get you a drink. We got an understanding. I know why he come by to see me and he know I know.

LYONS

Come on, Pop...I just stopped by to say hi...see how you was doing.

TROY

You ain't stopped by yesterday.

ROSE

You gonna stay for supper, Lyons? I got some chicken cooking in the oven.

LYONS

No, Rose...thanks. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by for a minute.

TROY

You was in the neighborhood alright, nigger. You telling the truth there. You was in the neighborhood cause it's my payday.

LYONS

Well, hell, since you mentioned it...let me have ten dollars.

TROY

I'll be damned! I'll die and go to hell and play blackjack with the devil before I give you ten dollars.⁴

The racial epithet, "nigger," since its introduction into the language of the white slaveholder, of pejoration, has taken on many different meanings...like many commonly used words. In the white mind contemplating the word, prior to use or not, it means a black person of low stature, someone whose quality is of the basest kind, who does not represent the black race well. In the black community's sensibility, it has come to mean, "someone who does not act right," who is mean and petty

in his attitudes, who is inappropriately loud and boisterous in public, whose misbehavior earns the disapproval of the surrounding community.

From that, it has come, in the black sensibility, to denote someone who is held dearly in one's heart, for whom one has developed fondness, warm feelings. It has been used to denote one's lover. Lately, it has even been used by a black person in referring to his close white friend. This too has its roots in the master-slave intercourse, the benevolent malevolent kind.

When Troy uses it to his sons Lyons and Cory, it can mean only one thing--that which cuts them down to the lowest level possible--coming from the overwhelming acrimony which wracks his soul. It is used as an angered white confronting a black would.

The game continues later in the same scene:

LYONS

....Pop...let me have that ten dollars. I'll give it back to you. Bonnie got a job working at the hospital.

TROY

What I tell you, Bono? The only time I see this nigger is when he wants something. That's the only time I see him.

LYONS

Come on, Pop, Mr. Bono don't want to hear all that. Let me have the ten dollars. I told you Bonnie working.

TROY

What that mean to me? "Bonnie working." I don't care if she working. Go ask her for the ten dollars if she working. Talking about "Bonnie working." Why ain't you working?

LYONS

Aw, Pop, you know I can't find no decent job. Where am I gonna get a job at? You know I can't get no job.

TROY

I told you I know some people down there. I can get you on the rubbish if you want to work. I told you that the last time you came by here asking me for something.

LYONS

Naw, Pop...thanks. That ain't for me. I don't wanna be carrying nobody's rubbish. I don't wanna be punching nobody's time clock.

TROY

What's the matter, you too good to carry people's rubbish? Where you think that ten dollars you talking about come from? I'm just supposed to haul people's rubbish and give my money to you cause you too lazy to work. You too lazy to work and wanna know why you ain't got what I got.⁵

Still later in the scene, Troy continues:

TROY

I ain't got nothing as it is. I give you that ten dollars and I got to eat beans the rest of the week. Naw...you ain't getting no ten dollars here.

LYONS

You ain't got to be eating no beans. I don't know why you wanna say that.

TROY

I ain't got no extra money. Gabe [Troy's brain damaged brother Gabriel] done moved over to Miss Pearl's paying her the rent and things done got tight around here. I can't afford to be giving you every payday.

LYONS

I ain't asked you to give me nothing. I asked you to loan me ten dollars. I know you got ten dollars.

TROY

Yeah, I got it. You know why I got it? Cause I don't throw my money away out there in the streets. You living the fast life...wanna be a musician... running around in them clubs and things...then, you learn to take care of yourself. You ain't gonna find me going and asking nobody for nothing. I done spent too many years without.

LYONS

You and me is two different people, Pop.

TROY

I done learned my mistake and learned to do what's right by it. You still trying to get something for nothing. Life don't owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself. Ask Bono. He'll tell you I'm right.

LYONS

You got your way of dealing with the world...I got mine. The only thing that matters to me is the music.

TROY

Yeah, I can see that! It don't matter how you gonna eat...where your next dollar is coming from. You telling the truth there.

LYONS

I know I got to eat. But I got to live too. I need something that gonna help me to get out of the bed in the morning. Make me feel like I belong in the world. I don't bother nobody. I just stay with my music cause that's the only way I can find to live in the world. Otherwise there ain't no telling what I might do. Now I don't come criticizing you and how you live. I just come by to ask you for ten dollars. I don't wanna hear all that about how I live.⁶

Then the game transforms itself into another, subtler, more circumlocutive form which, ironically, moves closer to what this ritual is really all about. Troy tries to belittle the force of Lyons' position but the ploy backfires:

TROY

Boy, your mama did a hell of a job raising you.

LYONS

You can't change me, Pop. I'm thirty-four years old. If you wanted to change me, you should have been there when I was growing up. I come by to see you...ask for ten dollars and you want to talk about how I was raised. You don't know nothing about how I was raised.

ROSE

Let the boy have ten dollars, Troy.

TROY

(To LYONS)

What the hell you looking at me for? I ain't got no ten dollars. You know what I do with my money.

TROY (CONT'D)

(To ROSE.)

Give him ten dollars if you want him to have it.

ROSE

I will. Just as soon you turn it loose.

TROY

(Handing ROSE the money.)

There it is. Seventy-six dollars and forty-two cents. You see this, Bono? Now I ain't gonna get but six of that back.

ROSE

You ought to stop telling that lie. Here, Lyons.
(She hands him the money.)

LYONS

Thanks, Rose. Look...I got to run...I'll see you later.

TROY

Wait a minute. You gonna say, "thanks, Rose" and ain't gonna look to see where she got that ten dollars from? See how they do me, Bono?

LYONS

I know she got it from you, Pop. Thanks. I'll give it back to you.

TROY

There he go telling another lie. Time I see that ten dollars...he'll be owing me thirty more.⁷

Of course, what is really going on here is the complex intermixture of emotions between heretofore-absent-father and son. Love is there, never

expressed, always hidden beneath bellicosity and suspicion, cleverness and craft. The ten dollars is the symbol of all the demonstrated love and affection that each, father and son, would like to have exist between them but which never will. The game is the closest they will come to a real father-son give and take.

Lyons loves his father but he can never move to the position where he can express it outwardly, without risk of hurt. He has already had to deal with the pain of never having had his father around during his upbringing, an agony he has buried beneath layers and layers of impassivity. He has learned the ways of the streets all too well, having acquired the needed defensive masks for his son-dealing-with-errant-father arsenal. Thus, this game with the ten dollars itself becomes a substitute for all they have missed between them in their lives together.

Admittedly, Troy Maxson has had a rough life. He is as complex and as tormented as black America itself. Having started life as a refugee from the south (He had fought with his father and left home at the age of fourteen), he became a thief in order to survive and even took a life for which he was sentenced to fifteen years in the penitentiary. While there, he was determined to reshape his life; he developed an excellent set of baseball skills which enabled him, after having served his sentence, to become a professional ballplayer. Failing to make the major leagues, thanks to continuing discriminatory practices on the part of the powers

that be, he became a garbage collector. Here, he had to fight his union to become the first black driver of a garbage truck. He seems to have fought to achieve everything he had in his life but he remains, in his soul, a man "fenced in" by the limitations imposed on him by the outer world.

Thus he has his "evil" disposition.

In Scene three of Act one, Troy and Cory are working on the fence. Troy had just finished "horsing around" with Rose but his playful mood had quickly been replaced with the serious one of concentrated work when Cory appeared:

TROY

You just now coming in here from leaving
this morning?

CORY

Yeah, I had to go to football practice.

TROY

Yeah, what?

CORY

Yessir.

TROY

I ain't but two seconds off you noway. The
garbage sitting out there overflowing...
you ain't done none of your chores...and you
come in here talking about "Yeah."

CORY

I was just getting ready to do my chores now, Pop...

TROY

Your first chore is to help me with this fence on Saturday. Everything else come after that. Now get that saw and cut them boards.

(CORY takes the saw and begins cutting the boards. TROY continues working. There is a long pause.)⁸

There is no civility in the tone of Troy's voice. There can only be boisterousness or muted acrimony. With his sons, it must always be the latter as was probably the case with his father before him.

Still, Cory makes the valiant attempt to move their interrelationship to a new, softer, gentler level:

CORY

Hey, Pop...why don't you buy a TV?

TROY

What I want with a TV? What I want one of them for?

CORY

Everybody got one. Earl, Ba Bra...Jesse!

TROY

I ain't asked you who had one. I say what I want with one?

CORY

So you can watch it. They got lots of things on TV. Baseball games and everything. We could watch the World Series.

TROY

Yeah...and how much this TV cost?

CORY

I don't know. They got them on sale for around two hundred dollars.

TROY

Two hundred dollars, huh?

CORY

That ain't that much, Pop.

TROY

Naw, it's just two hundred dollars. See that roof you got over your head at night? Let me tell you something about that roof. It's been over ten years since that roof was last tarred. See now...the snow come this winter and sit up there on that roof like it is...and it's gonna seep inside. It's just gonna be a little bit...ain't gonna hardly notice it. Then the next thing you know, it's gonna be leaking all over the house. Then the wood rot from all that water and you gonna need a whole new roof. Now, how much you think it cost to get that roof tarred?

CORY

I don't know.

TROY

Two hundred and sixty-four dollars...cash money. While you thinking about a TV, I got to be thinking about the roof...and whatever else go wrong around here. Now if you had two hundred dollars, what would you do...fix the roof or buy a TV?

CORY

I'd buy a TV. Then when the roof started to leak... when it needed fixing...I'd fix it.

TROY

Where you gonna get the money from? You done spent it for a TV. You gonna sit up and watch the water run all over your brand new TV.

CORY

Aw, Pop. You got money. I know you do.

TROY

Where I got it, huh?

CORY

You got it in the bank.

TROY

You wanna see my bankbook? You wanna see that seventy-three dollars and twenty-two cents I got sitting up in there.

CORY

You ain't got to pay for it all at one time. You can put a down payment on it and carry it on home with you.

TROY

Not me. I ain't gonna owe nobody nothing if I can help it. Miss a payment and they come and snatch it right out your house. Then what you got? Now, soon as I get two hundred dollars clear, then I'll buy a TV. Right now, as soon as I get two hundred and sixty-four dollars, I'm gonna have this roof tarred.

CORY
Aw...Pop!

TROY
You go on and get you two hundred dollars and buy one if ya want it. I got better things to do with my money.

CORY
I can't get no two hundred dollars. I ain't never seen two hundred dollars.

TROY
I'll tell you what...you get you a hundred dollars and I'll put the other hundred with it.

CORY
Alright, I'm gonna show you.

TROY
You gonna show me how you can cut them boards right now.⁹

Even here we get the same money game Troy had engaged in with Lyons earlier in the play. It must always be a game, a minor war. It is as if it is the only way he knows.

It is interesting to compare the above with the moments between Milton and Lou and Milton and Nate in The First Breeze of Summer. The aims and conclusion of the moments are the same. The tone, however, is different.

Here, even when Troy moves to a particularly delicate area of his

sensibility--his pain from not having made it to the major leagues--his tone does not change. When Cory tries to introduce the subject of baseball into the conversation, Troy identifies with one player who could have been in his boat and shows deep jealousy about another (perhaps foreshadowing what he will do to Cory later in the play):

CORY

The Pirates won today. That makes five in a row.

TROY

I ain't thinking about the Pirates. Got an all-white team. Got that boy...that Puerto Rican boy... Clemente. Don't even half-play him. That boy could be something if they give him a chance. Play him one day and sit him on the bench the next.

CORY

He gets a lot of chances to play.

TROY

I'm talking about playing regular. Playing every day so you can get your timing. That's what I'm talking about.

CORY

They got some white guys on the team that don't play every day. You can't play everybody at the same time.

TROY

If they got a white fellow sitting on the bench... you can bet your last dollar he can't play! The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. That's why I don't want you to get all tied up in them sports. Man

TROY (CONT'D)

on the team and what it get him? They got colored on the team and don't use them. Same as not having them. All them teams the same.

CORY

The Braves got Hank Aaron and Wes Covington. Hank Aaron hit two home runs today. That makes forty-three.

TROY

Hank Aaron ain't nobody. That's what you supposed to do. That's how you supposed to play the game. Ain't nothing to it. It's just a matter of timing...

TROY (CONT'D)

getting the right follow-through. Hell, I can hit forty-three home runs right now!

CORY

Not off no major-league pitching, you couldn't.

TROY

We had better pitching in the Negro leagues. I hit seven home runs off of Satchel Paige. You can't get no better than that!

CORY

Sandy Koufax. He's leading the league in strikeouts.

TROY

I ain't thinking of no Sandy Koufax.

CORY

You got Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette. I bet you couldn't hit no home runs off of Warren Spahn.

TROY

I'm through with it now. You go on and cut them boards.¹⁰

Troy, after a tense pause in which he tries to focus thoughtfully on the fence they are working on, decides to break the silence and get right to the central issue between them. He is not one to leave a burning issue in the air:

TROY

Your mama tell me you done got recruited by a college football team? Is that right?

CORY

Yeah. Coach Zellman say the recruiter gonna be coming by to talk to you. Get you to sign the permission papers.

TROY

I thought you supposed to be working down there at the A&P. Ain't you suppose to be working down there after school?

CORY

Mr. Stawicki say he gonna hold my job for me until after the football season. Say starting next week I can work weekends.

TROY

I thought we had an understanding about this football stuff? You suppose to keep up with your chores and hold that job down at the A&P. Ain't been around here all day on a Saturday. Ain't none of your chores done...and now you telling me you done quit your job.

CORY

I'm gonna be working weekends.

TROY

You damn right you are! And ain't no need for nobody coming around here to talk to me about signing nothing.¹¹

Part of Cory cannot believe that a father would stifle his son's chance to attain a dream. He is almost aghast. The other part of him, however, knows his father only too well. Still, he fights this reality:

CORY

Pop...you can't do that. He's coming all the way from North Carolina.

TROY

I don't care where he coming from. The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage.¹²

Opposing his son's ambitions, Troy even resorts to disparaging his own job to make his point. There are no holds barred here. He is saying, "Don't make my mistake and end up like me," while at the same time conveying the message, "I'm not going to allow you to outdo me in life. It is said that the father should help his son to surpass him. But that is not the impulse that arises from me."

Most African-American fathers want what is best for their children--

male and female. They want their offspring to do better in their lives than they had done. If there is any jealousy deep inside them, it is suppressed. Their children's self-fulfillment and happiness become more important. Thus they can vicariously enjoy that eventuality and accept that as the compensation for their "lost dream."

Doubtless, all these feelings are in Troy as well. The "evilness" in him, however, will not permit him to let them reign. Coming out of his tortured, hurt-filled past, his rage and frustration will only allow him to succumb to the more negative impulse. There has simply not been enough to thrust him in the opposite direction.

It all falls under the umbrella of impassivity, of course. This nonaffectivity prevents him from giving or accepting love, warmth, positivity in his love-warmth-filled household and immediate surroundings. This is the true tragedy of the piece--that he is surrounded by affection of all kinds and cannot bring himself to enjoy it. He is "locked up inside."

His only attempt to undo this syndrome is to externalize it, to project it in the form of the metaphor--the fence which he is building around his yard. Perhaps by affirming his locked-in-ness on the outside, physically, he will soften it on the inside, spiritually.

Unfortunately, too much is hardened in him for this to happen. Too much water has gone under the bridge. He had gone too far down the road less well-traveled.

Cory must have known this long ago in his life in that household but he must cling to his mission. He too, after all, is fighting for his dream, part of which is to please his father, make his father proud of him. So he pushes harder:

CORY

I get good grades, Pop. That's why the recruiter wants to talk with you. You got to keep up your grades to get recruited. This way I'll be going to college. I'll get a chance...

TROY

First you gonna get your butt down there to the A&P and get your job back.

CORY

Mr. Stawicki done already hired somebody else 'cause I told him I was playing football.

TROY

You a bigger fool than I thought...to let somebody take away your job so you can play some football. Where you gonna get your money to take out your girlfriend and whatnot? What kind of foolishness is that to let somebody take away your job?

CORY

I'm still gonna be working weekends.

TROY

Naw...naw. You getting your butt out of here and finding you another job.¹³

Here, we have a similarity in patterns to a moment in Leslie Lee's First Breeze of Summer, quoted earlier in this dissertation. When Lou tells his father Milton that he does not want to help him with his plastering, that he

wants to do something else with his life that summer, his father refuses him.¹⁴ In each case, the father resorts to authoritarianism, cutting off any further discussion with a dictator's command.

In the case of First Breeze, the moment is somehow softer, though no less firm. There is more affection here, more of the love of a father for his son evident. The father wants his son to be with him, needs his help. There is also respect for the son and his work.

In Troy, in this fence building scene, it is more hard-edged, less affective, more hostile, more "evil." Cory, however, increasingly manifesting his father's stubbornness and persistence, presses his father further:

CORY

Come on, Pop! I got to practice. I can't work after school and play football too. The team needs me. That's what Coach Zellman say...

TROY

I don't care what nobody else say. I'm the boss... you understand? I'm the boss around here. I do the only saying what counts.

CORY

Come on, Pop!

TROY

I asked you...did you understand?

CORY

Yeah...

TROY
What?!

CORY
Yessir.

TROY
You go on down there to that A&P and see if you can get your job back. If you can't do both...then you quit the football team. You've got to take the crooked with the straights.¹⁵

Finally, Cory, now desperate, asks his father a question whose answer cuts to the very core of his father's existence.

CORY
Can I ask you a question?

TROY
What the hell you wanna ask me? Mr. Stawicki the one you got the questions for.¹⁶

With his father's courage, he asks:

CORY
How come you ain't never liked me?¹⁷

This is a direct assault on Troy's soul, his very existence, but the beleaguered man will not engage. Impassivity is to remain, untouched. To answer this question is to render his impassivity vulnerable:

TROY

Liked you? Who the hell say I got to like you?
What law is there say I got to like you? Wanna
stand up in my face and ask a damn fool-ass
question like that. Talking about liking somebody.
Come here, boy, when I talk to you.

(CORY comes over to where TROY is working.

He stands slouched over and TROY shoves him
on his shoulder.)

Straighten up, goddammit! I asked you a question...
what law is there say I got to like you?

CORY

None.

TROY

Well, alright then! Don't you eat every day?

(Pause.)

Answer me when I talk to you! Don't you eat
every day?

CORY

Yeah.

TROY

Nigger, as long as you in my house, you put
that sir on the end of it when you talk to me!¹⁸

Then he softens in his approach, though he does not relent in his position:

TROY

You eat every day.

CORY

Yessir!

TROY
Got a roof over your head.

CORY
Yessir!

TROY
Got clothes on your back.¹⁹

Not one to assume victory and walk away, Troy delivers extra blows to the dead horse:

TROY
Why you think that is?

CORY
Cause of you.

TROY
Aw, hell I know it's 'cause of me...but why do you think that is?

CORY
(Hesitant.)
Cause you like me.

TROY
Like you? I go out of here every morning... burst my butt...putting up with them crackers every day...cause I like you? You about the biggest fool I ever saw...It's my job. It's my responsibility! You understand that? A man got to take care of his family. You live in my house...sleep you behind on my bedclothes... fill you belly with my food...cause you my son. You my flesh and blood. Not 'cause I like you! Cause it's my duty to take care of you. I owe a responsibility to you! Let's get this straight

TROY (CONT'D)

**right here...before it go along any further...
I ain't got to like you. Mr. Rand don't give me
my money come payday cause he likes me. He gives
me cause he owe me. I done give you everything
I had to give you. I gave you your life! Me and
your mama worked that out between us. And liking
your black ass wasn't part of the bargain. Don't
you try and go through life worrying about if somebody
like you or not. You best be making sure they doing
right by you. You understand what I'm saying, boy?**

CORY

Yessir.

TROY

**Then get the hell out of my face, and get on down to
that A&P.²⁰**

There is, of course, great wisdom in those words which it would do Cory well to take heed of. As a young black man about to go out into the world, little changed from Troy's salad days, though changed nevertheless, Cory must learn fast and early what the dangers are which lie hidden in his path. Cory, however, probably already partially knows this. Still, the impulse from which this wisdom arises, an impulse of rage, "evilness" and hostility, renders Cory not altogether readily receptive to it...particularly since it is used partly to help interfere with the attainment of his dream. This, despite its ostensive object, continues to fuel the conflict between the two characters and fans the flames of Cory's swelling drive to rebel against the father he initially had loved and admired

so much.

There is a mystical side to Troy also. It would seem that such a larger-than-life man, as complex and moody as he is, would have a mystical side. On the other hand, such a man would appear on the surface to be lacking in mystical traits.

In the oeuvre of August Wilson there is always an element of mysticism, just as there is in the black community. There are many black men like Troy Maxson, rough, loud, boisterous, who are capable, in their quietest moments, of the deepest mystical thinking.

Mysticism has become an important part of African-American life because the nature of this life demands it as a balm to the everpresent pain, misfortune and tragedy. Its impulse is one of the few parts of African culture that had survived, unconsciously, the "middle passage." As such, it has taken on its own nature, diversity, development and complexity.

One of the frequent forms black mythology takes--as it takes in African mythology--is personification. Coming out of the polytheistic nature of African religions, the African world view looks at the surrounding universe as a group of anthropocentric individuals, each in charge of and/or representing some part or function. Death, Love, Evil, Happiness, Plenty and a host of other parts of Life are represented by some mythological figure.

Because of the nature of African-American life, certain of these mythological figures have attained a more important status than others. Death and the Devil, for instance, play major roles in African-American mythology. Hunger, Trouble and Setback are others.

In a scene early in Act One--which foreshadows what will happen at the play's conclusion--Troy describes to his not completely credulous though slightly uncomfortable wife Rose and his friend Bono an encounter he had with Death:

TROY

...So don't you worry about me drinking myself to death. 'Cause I ain't worried about Death. I done seen him. I done wrestled with him.... Look here, Bono...I looked up one day and Death was marching straight at me. Like Soldiers on Parade! The Army of Death was marching straight at me. The middle of July, 1941. It got real cold just like it be winter. It seem like Death himself reached out and touched me on the shoulder. He touch me just like I touch you. I got cold as ice and Death standing there grinning at me.

ROSE

Troy, why don't you hush that talk.

TROY

I say...What you want, Mr. Death? You be wanting me? You done brought your army to be getting me? I looked him dead in the eye. I wasn't fearing nothing. I was ready to tangle. Just like I'm ready to tangle now. The Bible say be ever vigilant. That's why I don't get but so drunk. I got to keep watch.

ROSE

Troy was right down there in Mercy Hospital. You remember he had pneumonia? Laying there with a fever talking plumb out of his head.

TROY

Death standing there staring at me...carrying that sickle in his hand. Finally he say, "You want bound over for another year?" See, just like that... "You want bound over for another year?" I told him, "Bound over hell! Let's settle this now!" It seem like he kinda fell back when I said that, and all the cold went out of me. I reached down and grabbed that sickle and threw it just as far as I could throw it...and me and him commenced to wrestling.... We wrestled for three days and three nights. I can't say where I found the strength from. Every time it seemed like he was gonna get the best of me, I'd reach way down deep inside myself and find the strength to do him one better.

ROSE

Every time Troy tell that story he find different ways to tell it. Different things to make up about it.

TROY

I ain't making up nothing. I'm telling you the facts of what happened. I wrestled with Death for three days and three nights and I'm standing here to tell you about it....Alright. At the end of the third night we done weakened each other to where we can't hardly move. Death stood up, throwed on his robe...had him a white robe with a hood on it. He throwed on that robe and went off to look for his sickle. Say, "I'll be back." Just like that. "I'll be back." I told him, say,

TROY (CONT'D)

"Yeah, but...you gonna have to find me!" I wasn't no fool. I wasn't going looking for him. Death ain't nothing to play with. And I know he's gonna get me. I know I got to join his army...his camp followers. But as long as I keep my strength and see him coming...as long as I keep up my vigilance... he's gonna have to fight to get me. I ain't going easy.²¹

It is as if he has, with his characteristic straight-as-an-arrow insight into his life, glimpsed his future and come to terms with what he saw. There is, at once, inside the same man, the tendency to delude himself about certain uncomfortable truths in his life and the ability to turn around and be brutally honest about others.

In addition to this he has taken the "evil" he knows to be in his soul and externalized/projected it to form the Devil with whom he has also had encounters. Just as is the case with all personifications which have as their base and model some real life personage, such is the case with Troy's Devil:

TROY

....Come a knock on the door. Ain't been living here but three days. Who know I'm here? Open the door...devil standing there bigger than life. White fellow...got on good clothes and everything. Standing there with a clipboard in his hand. I ain't had to say nothing. First words come out of his mouth was..."I understand you need some furniture and can't get no credit." I liked to fell over. He say "I'll give you all the credit you want but you got to pay the

TROY (CONT'D)

interest on it." I told him, "Give me three rooms worth and charge whatever you want." Next day a truck pulled up here and two men unloaded them three rooms. Man what drove the truck give me a book. Say send ten dollars, first of every month to the address in the book and everything will be alright. Say if I miss a payment the devil was coming back and it'll be hell to pay. That was fifteen years ago. To this day...the first of the month I send my ten dollars. Rose'll tell you.²²

It is both tragic and idiosyncratic of Troy that he misuses the two most beautiful parts of him. His wife Rose he does right by as a proper breadwinner but he subsequently betrays her with another woman. His brain-damaged brother Gabriel (A veteran wounded during World War II) has come to believe he is the Angel Gabriel (El meaning God; Gabr meaning man: thus the name means El's man, "Man of God" or the speaker of God). This purity of soul blinds him to the fact that his brother Troy, though he cares for him and is concerned about him, exploits him by using Gabriel's government compensation to purchase a house.

There is often a character like Gabriel in Wilson's plays--the mentally challenged soul protected by the immediately surrounding community. He has become the objective correlative for Wilson--representing the "pure" state of the black community at that socio-historic point in time...a potential victim for the encroaching, corrupting and overpresent evils of the surrounding larger society.

The tragedy here is that Troy goes to his grave knowing only that he

has lost a good wife through betrayal, had his mistress die giving birth to the child they had conceived in adultery which his magnificent wife offers to raise, thrust away his two sons and exploited his needful, good-hearted brother. The fence he has built around him isolates him from the warm loving home he has gathered around him and supported through all the years just as the outside fence was to keep all troubles away from his family and all love and warmth inside it.

As it turned out, he himself became his own obstacle to this. He had been as much victimizer as victim.

The African-American male character has travelled far from Mr. Strong in Rachel to Troy Maxson. Whereas Mr. Strong was an icon, the very epitome of manhood, while times for African Americans were bad, Troy Maxson was a larger-than-life man, at war with himself, full of fears, neuroses and personal demons. Though Fences takes place in the fifties when times were relatively good for African Americans, Troy is an eighties character, a time when conditions for black people appear to be regressing. While, for Walter Lee Younger of A Raisin in the Sun, there was cause for optimism and perseverance, the play appearing just before the cresting of the Civil Rights Movement and the promise of the Kennedy years, for Troy, during the Reagan years, there is only--for his son--that job at the A&P and the avoidance of pursuing any dream that will only leave him in hurt.

Progressively improving times have allowed black playwrights new freedoms in portraying truths about black life. As times then began to worsen, they could not go back to Mr. Strong. They could only go to new revelations.

CHAPTER TWELVE CONCLUSION

Granted, white American males are subject to similar reactions to their surrounding social circumstances which are unfavorable to them--hostility, impassivity, bruised egos, feelings of rejection and inadequacy, and arrogance, though from different socio-historical causes and from a different ethnocentric context. Certainly there is enough evidence to support that. The plays analyzed in this work, however, show that the unique socio-historical circumstances and personal dynamics of the African-American male have and peculiar to him which have taken root, germinated, evolved into and resulted in the special sensibility that constitutes his soul. There is no getting away from the fact that his color, facial features, way of moving about, way of interrelating with those around him, way of seeing the world, his vocabulary and mythology, his personal inner symbolisms, his complexes, have caused him to create the kind of world he lives in which in turn has turned around to create him.

This seems like arguing in a circle but, in fact, that is precisely what it is describing--a perpetual process, circular in form, that is its own energy source which it feeds into and which keeps it going. That the white male is of the color and physiognomy that are generally approved of--even by blacks--which puts him in the privileged position of social, economic and

psychological power is no small fact to be dismissed. From those points everything else is affected.

For instance, the special dynamics between African-American mother and son (the most important and the initial part of male training), is revealed in Big White Fog, Native Son, Take A Giant Step, The Amen Corner, A Raisin in the Sun, The First Breeze of Summer and Fences. Here, they show that, aside from the universals that are true of males in all ethnicities, the particular vulnerability of the black male and his interdynamics with his mother generate in him a certain world view, a certain set of rhythms, certain special ways of reacting to events happening around him, certain emotions or ways of concealing those emotions (impassivity). The central theme of all this has to do with the mother's need, whether conscious or unconscious--certainly culturally ingrained--to prepare her male-child for a world which is not friendly to him. This condition exists for the black male-child all his life but it becomes particularly critical once that child enters puberty or "the rites of passage" periods of his life and the mother knows that all too well.

Aside from the particular ego vulnerability of the male and the everpresent danger he is in from his social surroundings, there are certain things the black mother must do to ensure whatever safety she can for her son. This had, of course, started in the days of slavery, had become internalized in the special ethnicity of the black American and had

generated the peculiar upbringing and relating patterns in black life. She is indulgent of him and tender with him while he is very young, making him a kind of temporary "mamma's boy." Then as he approaches or reaches adolescence or "near manhood," she begins to demand of him all those traits that are an integral part of manhood. He must learn these fast as the demands of manhood will be upon earlier than it will for most boys in other ethnic groups. She knows this only too well as he probably does also. It is a given. Sociohistory has demanded this condensed upbringing. It might almost have become a biological need.

Dilemmas appear. Should the mother encourage her son to dream, as all mothers do, knowing full well that the chances are very likely of that dream being crushed brutally? Should she herself crush it before it gets to the point in the young man's soul where its crushing can cause more than mere disappointment, where it could possibly cause mental degeneration or even the breakdown of health? Should Lena have just given Walter Lee the money and let him go ahead with his liquor store project, throwing her support his way, even if it meant going against her own private grain or the value system that her late husband stood for? Should Margaret not have stood in the way of the coming together of her husband and son? Could her God have told her to take her chances with that? Should Rose have stood up more for her son Cory when he was going up against her husband Troy in fighting for his dream?

The result of this schizophrenic acculturation causes the male to pull around him his cloak of insensitivity while at the same time generating a tendency toward rebelliousness and fantasy. This, internalized, also lays the groundwork for future difficulties in his relationships with his women. Walter Lee Younger, with all his other problems with frustration and neverending rage, must struggle with this syndrome each time he tries to relate to his mother Lena, his sister Beneatha, his wife Ruth. In the case of Bigger Thomas, with the murder of his father in the background of his total consciousness, his relationship with the remaining family, his friends and whoever tries to relate to him--is always truncated, limited. Mary Dalton who tries to connect with him, and his girlfriend Clara with her loyalty, become, through him, inadvertent victims of this syndrome. Troy Maxson pushes away from him a precious jewel in his life--his wife Rose--and compromises the other woman in his life by making her pregnant out of wedlock. Adele Parker seems hopelessly surrounded by men who only want to use her or, if necessary, to destroy her. What had her father Russell done to her mother in the past? What better example is there than that of Blue Haven?

The grandmother is a softer layer of sensitivity and sympathy behind the hardening importunities of the immediate parents. She is the sanctuary for the child, particularly the male child. She has to make up for the same often untoward hardening parenting she herself had given to her

own children. She has the opportunity now, a second chance. So she takes it and the grandchild benefits.

In the black male child, this is important in that it gives him a chance to allow to surface his already diminishing sensitivity, those soft parts of his sensibility, eventually to become all but extinct.

Thus, it is even more tragic when Spence's grandmother dies or when Lou harshly reproaches his grandmother when he learns of the nature of her past and her death quickly follows. When Lena smiles and makes up Travis's ill-made bed--over the protests of Ruth--she is as forgiving and indulgent of her grandson's shortcoming as she is unforgiving and disapproving of her son Walter when he fails to react as a proper husband and man when he learns of Ruth's pregnancy and intention to get an abortion. She fails to understand or come to terms with the agony wracking him from his inadequate economic and social circumstances.

Though many of these dilemmas appear in plays dealing with white mothers and their sons, they do not possess the same kind of nature and intensity as those of black mothers dealing with their sons. They are simply of different worlds. The sociohistorically-caused interdynamics imbedded in the dialogue of the various black plays is evidence of this.

Lena must deal with a Walter climbing out of his skin because he feels his life has come to nothing and that he is trapped there. She must contain him and yet soothe him. She must convince him somehow that

the family is still proud of him, though he remains unpersuaded. Still, she is fully aware of the reality he must face everyday of his life, a reality which continually demeans him, a reality over which she has little or no power.

In fact, the mother/frustrated-son syndrome has itself become a kind of icon, a synecdochic archetype. In Playwright George C. Wolfe's takeoff on many of the standard features of black history and theatre, The Colored Museum, there is one section entitled Big Mama On The Couch which pokes fun at A Raisin In The Sun, but whose satiric thrusts go well past its primary object. The stage has been reached in African-American cultural history where this psychosocial dynamic has become so established in Western sensibilities, has acquired so many inherent complexities, ramifications and levels of meaning, that it can easily withstand lampooning without having its underpinnings devastated in the process. The pattern has become cemented in the consciousness of black and white America.

Integral in this spoof is the perhaps paranoid idea that the whole dynamic is being patronized by the white and black public which has been watching plays containing these scenes down through the years. As such, it still can be open to all varieties of renditions and attitudes without risk of giving offense to any but the ultra-sensitive and extremely doctrinaire in the audience.

The Narrator begins by entering the stage, dressed in a black tuxedo (symbolizing the elitist white culture aspirations of the black bourgeoisie), proceeding through the audience to center stage. In his solemnly delivered introduction, he uses the phrase "yet another [underlines mine] Mama-on-the-Couch play, entitled The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play." The mood of risibility is immediately established. The sensibilities of the audience are keenly piqued, ready to pick up even the smallest barb and react to it. Mama, sitting on a revolving couch, stage left, with an oversized Bible on her lap which she is reading, contributes to generating the mood of risibility.

The Narrator then goes on to describe the usual standard setting for the kind of play this scene is lampooning--dreary, threadbare (a depressing sight which threatens to dilute the mood of risibility until the name Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie-Jones is heard which returns the mood. It is that of her son entering--which is also through the audience to show that he is of the people.). The somewhat hyperbolic statement: "His brow is heavy from three hundred years of oppression," further reestablishes and enhances this comic mode. In each case, an element with which we are all familiar is spoofed.

The scene proceeds not only to the dialogue but to the rhythms of the usual black mother/frustrated son exchange, taking off on a climactic moment in A Raisin in the Sun between Walter Lee and his mother Lena.

Mama-On-The-Couch has just asked **Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie-Jones** if he has wiped his feet.

SON

(An ever erupting volcano) [another cliché]
No, Mama, I didn't wipe my feet! Out there, every day, Mama, is the Man. The Man, Mama. Mr. Charlie! Mr. Boss Man! And he's wipin' his feet on me. On me, Mama, every damn day of my life. Ain't that enough for me to deal with? Ain't that enough?

MAMA

Son, wipe your feet.

SON

I wanna dream. I wanna be somebody. I wanna take charge of my life.

MAMA

You can do all of that, but first you got to wipe your feet.

SON

(As he crosses to the mat, mumbling and wiping his feet.)

Wipe my feet...wipe my feet...wipe my feet...

MAMA

That's a good boy.!

Awards are given to the characters each time they register a standard protest of some kind to the mother, to the audience, to both. The Son complains. The Mother commiserates and tries to reconcile her son to his

psychosocial condition, the scene peppered with the established cliches. Finally her son crosses to the window where he is shot and killed by people outside the building who are after him because he has been "overacting" (Perhaps this is the author's backhanded dig at the overreacting frustrated young black male figure as post Civil Rights icon).

Already, perhaps, it is time to look to new realities as subject matter for plays and stories and to new approaches. When an artistic piece, theme or subject, once universally revered, begins to be satirized, it is time to aim the camera lens in new directions. John Simon, of New York Magazine, said of The Colored Museum, "It is remarkably unafraid of lampooning black foibles, which is a sign of artistic maturity."²

Still, the intrinsic and extrinsic problems remain.

In Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, Linda Loman has a similar experience with her son Biff who also complains about his life having come to nothing but Biff does not face the outer obstacles Walter faces. His are inner. Thus, the mother-son dynamic is different. The outer circumstances dictate how a mother must deal with a son who is in agony because he has been deprived of self-realization. Thus Linda is harsher, less sympathetic to Biff and Happy, her other son. She concentrates more on shielding their father Willie from hurt.

In African-American drama, this pattern holds true also in the man-to-man relationships, particularly the brother-to-brother, father-to-son

and protagonist-to-best-friend/deuteragonist scenes.

In childhood, African-American males vie fiercely with each other for the attention and love of their overly beset mother. Somehow already being aware that they face stark cruel circumstances in the outside world, they strive all the more for the comfort of their mother to shore them up inside. Because the situation for their mother or for both parents demands so much time and energy from them, there is so little left for the children that each expression of it becomes a desperately valued jewel to be competed for with all their will.

This tendency toward strife is internalized and becomes more complex as they mature and eventually transforms into a competitiveness with all men in their lives. Added to this are their life circumstances and the need to satisfy their smarting male egos.

So, whenever there is a man-to-man relationship of any kind between African-Americans--whether it is with a relative or a friend--there is always the suspicion, the measured friendliness, the endless need to test, the hostility, the competitiveness. The parties are always on guard with each other.

This again is true of white males also. The different socio-historic circumstances give it a different color, however. The women had to nurture the male-child while toughening him. The outside adverse circumstances had been particularly tough and particularly dangerous for

him. Whatever tenderness and softness tendered toward him in developing his soft, sensitive, affective side often was undone by the necessity to prepare him for this world. Still, the other forms of parenting, interrelating, were enough to provide him with whatever inner resilience that was required to enable him to survive, with or without solid impassivity.

Earlier in this century, when times for the African-American were much tougher than they are today, there was, ironically, a more romantic approach to portraying African-American men in their family interrelationships. There was affectivity, though there was not a total absence of impassivity. Romanticism was needed. The playwright's psyche required it and so did those of his (her) black audiences and liberal white theatregoing comrades.

As historical time moved forward, however, and conditions for the African American improved, if in an up and down way, the problem of impassivity came out more in the plays and in the portrayals of their male characters, even when the plays took place in times earlier than those contemporary with the playwright. Even in a play like The First Breeze of Summer in which there was a strong resonance of Romantic lyricism, much like the earlier plays, insensitivity managed to show itself in the character of Lou, partly in his relationships with his grandmother and in her relationships with her beaux in the past. Greater freedom, such as it has

been, has brought a greater need for realism and truth, however much of it fails to ingratiate black male characters to contemporary theatregoers. Perhaps though, out of this will come greater understanding of the African-American male.

With this greater understanding of the black male psyche comes a concomitant greater willingness on the part of black dramatists to reveal those intricate inner idiosyncrasies of black male consciousness. Theatre-going audiences are wiser now, with increased understanding of the many social issues and dynamics surrounding us. Granted, the understanding of these psychological complexities is not complete. Perhaps it never will be. History, though, has forced greater understanding on both black and white audiences.

This mutual understanding has made for a more welcome theatre environment for black dramatists, less inhibition in them, to address those parts of the black male psyche and those parts of his life that, earlier on, were best left not touched upon.

African Americans, at the turn of the century, were too busy developing and maintaining the best survival methods in a society that was fiercely antagonistic to them. They were only slightly more than a generation away from slavery which, in the minds of many white Americans, was a bugbear in the history of the nation, and a cause of the Civil War and many of society's woes. Discrimination and segregation

were therefore rock solid entities in the social fabric. Moreover, rights, fairness and true justice make oppressed people appear to be equal with those for whom the above are a given. Very few white Americans, therefore, were willing to give these things to the newly emancipated African Americans, slaves only a brief time earlier. African Americans had to live with these realities and all the nefarious social dynamics that accrued.

Thus, when playwright Angelina Weld Grimke wrote her protest play Rachel, she could only deal with the larger social issues of Jim Crowism and lynching, and their effects on the hearts and souls of black Americans, their families, their communities. And, indeed, it was correct that she concentrated on those most critical problems for black Americans, particularly for the males who were at the vanguard of the besieged community.

The particular psychological intricacies and dynamics of black individuals would remain knowledge only within the community. Few black folks wanted "their business out in the street," particularly in such a hostile surrounding world.

With the advent of Marcus Garvey, the Roaring Twenties, the Depression Thirties and Hitler and his cohorts, and with the black American continuing to be "invisible," there continued only to be room for the black playwright to deal with issues, social problems and matters

concerning community survival. There was still no room for portraying individual character complexities. The white theatre audiences, even the most "progressive" or liberal, were not knowledgeable enough to understand them and/or respond properly to what was going on the stage. Also, there were not enough black audiences to support any play going into those issues.

So black characters and situations leaned toward the two dimensional in portrayal. They tended more toward being metaphors of a condition than three dimensional individual beings reacting to the surrounding social dynamics, though the artistic humanism of the playwright would cause some human complexity in the characters to seep through. When playwright Theodore Ward wrote Big White Fog, Garveyism, by then a phenomenon of the past, and its effects on a black family, became his focus. Characters represented conditions, positions, attitudes more than individual people. They were the fanatical Garveyite, the venal black capitalist, the young woman who takes to the street, the conservative, the would-be communist activist. Once these issues were understood by the public, black playwrights could then present more complex, psychologically individual dynamics.

With Native Son (first as a novel by Richard Wright and then as a play by him and Paul Green--Richard Wright looked over Paul Green's shoulder as the latter did the writing and was available at all times for any crucial

questions Green might have about the text.), the white American sensibility was slightly more ready to deal with black anger and paranoia. Jesse Owens had showed up Hitler's "master race" at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Dorie Miller, with no previous training, had shot down four Japanese planes during the Pearl Harbor attack and become the first hero of the not-yet begun World War II. Intolerance was waning and, though people were frightened by Hitler, by Generalissimo Franco's expressed wish to see the New York City skyline flattened by bombs, they were ready to bear witness to the rage of a Bigger Thomas being presented on the flesh and blood stage.

Still, though we were now beginning to see the intrinsic individuality of a black character, more than the idea he represented on the stage, the character Bigger Thomas worked only through horizons limited by white society--a point Richard Wright had emphasized in the novel--he still emerged as a more realized character which was still humanized even more on the stage.

The white sensibility was beginning to open up to the idea that beneath the facade of the black American, more to the point, a black American male, was a complex human being.

This left the door open for playwrights to deal more with family relationships as in Take A Giant Step and A Raisin in the Sun.

World War II was over. African Americans had conducted themselves

well in both Europe and Asia, many returning as heroes. The social issues were still there but it was no longer as necessary for black playwrights to concentrate on them. They could now go into the insides of the black psyche and the community. There was an audience out there now, black and white, ready to deal with both the admirable and the unpleasant aspects of African-American inner life. Their "visibility" now increased. Even religion could be shown now with all its intrinsic complexity, irony and ambiguity.

Protest was still there and it showed itself in The Slave, Blues for Mr. Charlie, Ceremonies in Dark Old Men and The River Niger. The characters in these plays, though, were now more fully developed, their interdynamics more complex.

With The Civil Rights Movement on their televisions every night and Malcolm X's, Roy Wilkins' and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s voices in their brains, audiences now understood more and were therefore more capable of handling the increasingly complex issues the above plays dealt with.

Now, in the Seventies and Eighties, having lived through Nixon, Watergate, Viet Nam, Ford, Carter, Teheran, Reagan and Bush, audiences had now grown to a greater knowledge and understanding of the condition of Man, more to the point, of the black community, if that knowledge and understanding was compromised, prejudiced by a racism that has never gone away. Disapprobation of blacks, particularly of black males, has

returned and seems to be on the increase. Black dramatists, however, have reached a point from which they cannot retreat. They have now entered the country of fully developed characters, complex sociodynamic situations, new metaphysics and an indigenous poetry (the special realm of August Wilson), where the points to be made in the issues are not really new or unknown. They--the dramatists--can only continue to evolve from where they are.

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3. Curtis Scott, "The Dramatization of Native Son, How 'Bigger' Was Reborn", The Journal of American Drama and Theatre, Fall 1992, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 5.

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7. Reaction-formation is defined in J. P. Chaplin's Dictionary of Psychology as the development of a personality trait which is the opposite of the original, unconscious, or repressed trait. For example, a young woman might show unusual solicitude for a crippled father for whom she must care when her real feelings express the unconscious wish that he would die so that she would be free to marry.

8. Hatch, op. cit., p. 403.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., p. 395.

11. Hatch, op. cit., p. 398.

12. The use of the epithet "nigger" among blacks, especially in America, came out of the fragility of a loved one's existence on the plantation which made him (her) all the more precious to the extended families of the surrounding slave community. At first, it was used ironically to mock the slaveholder, his foremen and their abusive language to the people in their charge. Eventually, the meaning of affection and regard took hold while the negative denotation remained on the dark side of black life. Much slave communication consisted of slavemaster language turned inside out to keep him socially outside the realm of the slave quarters. Unfortunately, with the advent of the twentieth century, with so many promises remaining unkept and with consequent frustration and rage worsening, the term has come again to take on its original negative intent.

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