REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FAMILY IN SOUTHERN DRAMA: BEFORE AND AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

by

ANNA MARIA FILIPPO

(Under the direction of Dr. Freda Scott Giles)

ABSTRACT

During the twentieth century, America not only developed a national drama, but as the country's regions became more distinct, it developed regional dramas as well. No region, however, has received more attention for its plays than the South. There is, perhaps, a mystique surrounding the American South that is manifested in its manners, rules, decorum, and role assignments, and with this comes its own set of expectations. How do we recognize a southern play? There are several markers of southern drama that have passed the test of time. This study will examine three: the southern woman, the black character, and the Southern Gothic. Because the family unit is an important element of southern culture and, indeed, plays a factor in the vast majority of southern plays, it is logical to use the family as an axis for this study. Finally, if we chronicle the history of southern drama in the twentieth century, we see how the social movements of the 1960s and '70s (the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement) have changed the way we interpret the traditional characteristics of this regional drama. After 1980, the southern family and the southern drama genre became represented somewhat differently. With thirty plus years having elapsed since the social turmoil of the '60s and '70s, we have the advantage of hindsight and the opportunity to reevaluate what constitutes contemporary southern drama.

INDEX WORDS: South, Drama, Civil Rights Movement, Women's Movement, Sexual Revolution, Lillian Hellman, Beth Henley, Paul Green, Pearl Cleage, Tennessee Williams, Harry Crews, Southern women, Black character, Southern Gothic, Grotesque, Family

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DEDICATION

For my husband, Todd--always.

They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called Cemetery, and ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Fields!

--Blanche DuBois, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

I seen the day you daddy'd git up before the daylight and walk five miles and plow another man's land all day and come back after dark with fifty cent in his hand. Then plow his own crop by the light of the moon.

--Mabel Boatwright, *Blood Issue*

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CHAPTER 1

THE SOUTH, THE FAMILY, THE PLAYWRIGHTS

> The good thing about southern writing is that everybody knows its qualities. "What's southern writing?" you say to your dry cleaners and, without missing a beat, they rattle off, "Great language, family, strong women, religion, the land, and the past." And, of course, they're right. Nobody, on the other hand, knows what southwestern or northeastern writing is. Try it. Southern writing wins out on definition every time. (Jory foreword page)

During the twentieth century, America, with its distinct history and culture, developed a national drama. Within that distinct culture there are regional cultures each defined by a unique aesthetic to include factors such as climate, food and music. There are also the instinctive elements of relationships between men and women, religion and a unique history. What makes the southern region, and therefore, southern drama, unique is that it is all of what forms the American drama, but with additional special characteristics. There is, perhaps, a mystique surrounding

the American South that is manifested in its manners, rules, decorum, role assignments, and with this comes its own set of expectations. How, then, do we recognize a southern play? Do we use the same test for earlier southern drama as we do for contemporary works? If drama about the South reflects the attitudes or psychology of its region, then how has the psychology changed over this hundred-year period?

In southern plays, there is a lasting nostalgia for the Old South with its genteel ways, its proud people, and strangely enough, a fixation on its devastating racial stigma. The drama of the early half of the twentieth century may have colored this "Old South portrait," which represents a south that had not yet felt the repercussions of social turmoil. With such vital revolutions as the Civil Rights and Women's Movements, the Old South is not necessarily an accurate picture of the drama of the South of the 1980s and '90s.

The landscape of the South has changed since the mid-century social movements, and this shift has most certainly affected the psychology, the culture, and the very essence of "southernness." If we agree with the numerous critics and scholars who declare that drama is a reflection of society, then it is time to reexamine the "traditional"

plays (c.1920-c.1960) and to examine the contemporary plays (c.1980-), in their separate contexts, to determine what has changed about the southern drama genre. The black characters of Paul Green's plays, for example, do not share the same concerns as Pearl Cleage's; and Beth Henley's women, unlike Lillian Hellman's, are clearly products of a shift in traditional gender roles.

A significant problem for scholars of southern drama is that the genre, which is so easily defined in the early part of the twentieth century by classically strong women, agricultural settings, and moral and interracial agendas, has, since at least 1980, been reeling from the effects of major social movements. In fact, the symbols and characteristics that once defined southern drama are now the very components that confuse us. The major question is, "What constitutes southern drama? What has southern drama become?" Or, perhaps, in extreme terms, the question becomes, "Is there still such a thing as a southern drama genre?" These questions have concerned, and continue to concern, southern scholars.

By examining the dynamics of fictional southern families in representative plays, and the influence of biography/family on those playwrights' works, I will test three markers of southern drama which are the strong woman,

the black character, and the Southern Gothic, in plays written both before and after the mid-century social movements. I hope to determine if these genre markers are still applicable; and if they are, how they may have shifted. I will also examine how these changes in the fictional family unit compare to changes in real southern families and whether or not we can conclude that the southern drama genre still stands as an entity.

If there is, indeed, a southern notion, a mystique, an aesthetic, but it is not what it was sixty years ago, then how do we process that? Perhaps the answer lies, in part, in the playwrights' approaches to identifying with the South. For example, while both Lillian Hellman and Beth Henley pen women pitting themselves against a patriarchy, Hellman's protagonist works the established patriarchal system of the early 1900s. Henley's post-Movement women, however, view the traditional patriarchy as less stable, and, therefore, find it difficult to react. There are comparisons and contrasts in both the traditional and contemporary playwrights' approaches to "southernness" and southern drama markers. By examining their techniques, I hope to establish a clearer understanding of the mutations in the southern drama aesthetic, especially as manifested in the family.

After the Movements reached their peaks in the 1960s and ‘70s, civil rights legislation overtook racial issues and, consequently, became less immediate for southern dramatists (Watson 192). Because drama is a reflection--however accurate--of its society, southern drama began paying less attention to interracial and political issues and more attention to the individual as a human emotional being. There were now different problems facing southerners. These issues arose in the representation of the family unit and affected the interpersonal dynamics, often drastically.

Since social change must begin at home, and the family is a microcosm of society (McCarthy 129), it is logical to trace this turn in southern drama using the family as an axis for this study. Charles Watson provides a summary of southern drama characteristics. Among them are the three “markers” previously identified: the presence of distinctive social types such as the southern lady or belle; the evolution of black characters, and the cultural element of violence as it manifests itself in the grotesque. Each chapter in this dissertation deals with a marker of southern drama, i.e., the southern lady, the black character, and the grotesque, which is also referred to as Southern Gothic. Chapter Two examines how the

Women's Movement changed the perspective on women's roles and how this change affected the southern family dynamic. Chapter Three deals with how black/black issues in addition to white/black racial tensions affected the African-American southern family, and Chapter Four reveals how the family is affected by the formerly taboo, yet now common and graphic, themes of sexual misconduct--one subtopic under the larger umbrella of Southern Gothic.

This is primarily a study in aesthetics and genre, unlike Watson's work, which is almost exclusively a historical account of drama in the South from its inception right up to today's writers. Watson states clearly that from the outset his intention has been to lay the groundwork for more intensive studies by providing an overall view and by including dramatists and plays ripe for further investigation (x).

By accepting that there has been a traditional genre of drama that has reflected the southern region, we can use this body of literature as a model for comparing and contrasting what southern playwrights are creating today. By using the traditional plays as models, perhaps we are already setting up expectations about the ways in which a play should be read which can be both productive and limiting: traditions provide both restraints and incentives

to the development of new genres. If we are able to recognize a genre, how does that recognition reduce the possibility of misinterpretation and maximize reinterpretation (Gerhart 7)? These are some of the issues at stake in this investigation of the traditional southern drama genre and its contemporary counterpart.

Watson argues that the southern drama genre can be characterized by certain markers, or characteristics. These markers, I argue, define southern drama before the Civil Rights and Women's Movements and heavily influence the southern aesthetic. Now these characteristics have been drastically reinterpreted by writers, scholars and younger-generation southerners, so does this signify the end of the genre as we know it? I will closely examine representative plays, via these markers, to identify common themes/patterns which reflect changes in society in the South. This study does not include all southern drama, for obvious reasons, nor does it intend to make sweeping generalizations about society. Instead, I will use plays that most clearly represent the three chosen characteristics and use the family--a microcosm of society--as an axis for the study.

Each chapter focuses on two playwrights--one pre-Movement writer and one contemporary--to prove that the two

social movements have changed the southern drama genre from one with easily defined, traditional characteristics, having its roots in the Civil War, to a body of literature that escapes the confining descriptors of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The South now has a different landscape, which, in turn, affects its psychology and is shown in dramatic depictions of southern women, the black experience, and Southern Gothicism (the three selected characteristics examined in the body of this dissertation).

Paramount to this examination is the analysis of characters, which will provide background for better understanding the psychological landscape of the South and also provide insights into the interpersonal dynamics of the family. This will be an examination of literary characters as “real” humans, thus tuning in to inner emotions and earlier experiences that shape the characters’ choices and give the reader clues as to their psychological makeup. There is the interior world--the character’s neuroses, for example--where we can learn what drives him and his concerns. It is how we discover the world in which the character lives. This means that the social climate--a product of, among other things, history and politics--that is reflected in the play cues us to the outside, or exterior, world.

As Charles Watson, John Griffin Jones, author of *Mississippi Writers Talking*; and all three contemporary playwrights in this study agree, biography and playwriting are inseparable components. Biography is an undeniable part of the definition of southern drama genre; there is a connection to writers, their experiences, and their work. As noted southern literary critic Fred Hobson claims, there is something that happens to the southern writer as the South changes, as conditions that gave rise to earlier writers seem not to be with us anymore (1). Southern writers most commonly write about being southern, but what does that mean? The answer lies in the very characteristics that mark the drama. Southern playwrights respond to the world in which they live, which changed from the times of Paul Green to those of Beth Henley. By including biography not as the primary focus, but as a device used merely to better understand the playwright's perspective of family, and therefore, society, we can also more clearly establish the parameters of the genre.

I will include excerpts from interviews I have conducted with the three contemporary authors who comprise the focus of this study: Beth Henley, Pearl Cleage and Harry Crews. I will also include previous biographical/interview material from the earlier writers on

the changing images of the southern family in their respective works and how social movements affected their visions of the contemporary southern family. Each contemporary playwright has his/her vision of the post-Civil Rights South and has determined to what degree the past figures in his/her writing.

While there will be exceptions, what I hope to prove is a trend toward the reshaping of the southern drama aesthetic. To support the traditional image of southern drama, I am using representative plays from southern playwrights with established reputations. In fact, I would be remiss to exclude a playwright such as Tennessee Williams. In the later plays, the playwrights are selected due to their treatments of specific southern drama characteristics: Beth Henley's use of the southern woman, Pearl Cleage's handling of the black experience, and Harry Crews' use of Southern Gothic.

While the southern drama characteristics of strong women, the black character and Southern Gothicism appear repeatedly in 1980s and '90s literature, the representation of these characteristics has changed. To understand how this "southern distinction" came about, it is important to place the drama in its cultural context. Cultural differences between the South and the rest of the country

evolved due to regional differences: the aftermath of the Civil War and racial tension. According to historian David Smiley:

> The reasons for the dichotomy in the national personality are complex and often obscure. At the same time that has served the purposes of American patriotism to sound a bold trumpet for a native civilization, it was politically advantageous to assent to the proposition that that civilization contained two “nations,” opposites in fundamental aspects. The subsequent defeat of one “nation” by the other had the effect, on both sides, of inspiring each to glamorize its superior civilization and to denigrate that of the other as alien, un-American, and lacking in enduring and essential values. Especially was this activity prevalent among Southerners [. . .]. (9-10)

Moreover, this production of culture gave birth to a regional genre of literature which projected images of the South (i.e., the plantation in full force, the preoccupation with class, the importance of the family unit, the strong southern woman, etc.).

Vanderbilt's men of letters, or the Fugitive Agrarians (1933-37), identified and standardized this southern cultural image which was years later projected through drama with Tennessee Williams' works as its primary examples. These particular images remained attached to the South for many years, and, in fact, are still used as a gauge for change today.

Since cultural context, historical framework, and political climate are important influences on this study, it is logical to introduce the roots of and the influential forces behind the modern formation of southern drama. The whole crux of the southern movement and agrarianism, which spawned the Southern Renaissance of 1930-1955, began with the men of letters at Vanderbilt University in the 1920s.

Dissatisfied with the direction the South was taking after World War I, the Fugitive Agrarians stimulated discussion about the impact of what they saw as industrialism's devastating impact on the South. The Vanderbilt Agrarians expressed great disdain at the South's inability to maintain its agricultural reputation and to generate economic growth via the land. Twelve Fugitive Agrarians--including famous names in literature and criticism such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren--eventually contributed to the essays in the

published manifesto, *I'll Take my Stand*, which was an intentional reference to the stanza from the southern tune, "Dixie." It was in this manifesto that the authors related their refusal to succumb to the industrialization of the American South to the homogenized version of their native land:

> Man, it is said, far from being a godlike genius of unlimited potentialities, is a fallible, finite creature, who functioned best in a society that took account of his limitations. In his zeal for the benefits of modern scientific civilization, he was placing so high a value on material gain that he ignored his own spiritual welfare and his moral obligations to society [. . .] Man was losing contact with the natural world, with aesthetic and religious reality; his machines were brutalizing and coarsening him, his quest for gain blinding him to all that made life worth living. The tenuous and frail spiritual insights of western civilization, achieved so arduously over the course of many centuries, were being sacrificed. The result, if unchecked, could only be dehumanization and chaos. (T. Young 607)

Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Donald Davidson became avid defenders of the South. Their coordinated efforts merged in the manifesto, which, combined with the rapidly changing economy, eventually led the way to a loosely organized Agrarian movement (Conkin 33). It was, as the Agrarians noted, a matter of southern pride--and so, the southern movement was born.

It was during the Agrarians' southern movement that the most memorable and productive period for southern literature occurred: the Southern Renaissance. From 1930 until 1955, the South experienced an outpouring of literature unlike anything in its history. At a time when the country was in the throes of The Great Depression, the American South was forming its own distinctive genre of literature. It was during this time that Paul Green, Lillian Hellman and later, Tennessee Williams wrote the plays that formed the earliest perspective of twentieth century southern drama. Much speculation followed the Renaissance phenomenon; some of the more popular and widely accepted theories included Allen Tate's "backward glance theory." It was Tate's philosophy that the South, after World War I, became more progressive, and that southern authors attempted to capture the changes while taking a "backward glance" at the South they left behind. Robert

Penn Warren's "parallel" theory explains the Renaissance as follows: Just as the Northeast changed after the Civil War, the South followed suit after World War I with its changes, in a parallel fashion. Finally, W. J. Cash claims that southern writers experienced a sense of defensiveness about the harsh criticism of their native land, hence, Cash's "defensive thesis."

However, given that the Civil War and World War I were already long over, it seems reasonable to question the timing of these hypotheses. The answer may lie in two parts: the "introspective evolution" (King 357) and H. L. Mencken. The 1920s provided fodder for an introspective revolution in the 1930s and '40s; World War I provided the first chance for young men to be heroes since the Civil War. Finally, they had the opportunity to emulate their patriarchal role models. The second part of the answer is in the stinging words of journalist H. L. Mencken's acerbic wit, in his "Sahara of the Bozart" (1917):

> But nowhere in the north is there such complete sterility, so depressing a lack of all civilized gesture and aspiration. One would find it difficult to unearth a second-rate city between the Ohio and the Pacific that isn't struggling to establish an orchestra, or setting up a little

> theater, or going in for an art gallery, or making some other effort to get in touch with civilization [. . .] [There is] the impulse to seek beauty and to experiment with ideas, and so to give the life of every day a certain dignity and purpose. You will find no such impulse in the south [. . .] The little theater movement has swept the whole country, enormously augmenting the public interest in sound plays, giving new dramatists their chance, forcing reforms upon the commercial theater. Everywhere else the wave rolls high--but along the line of the Potomac it breaks upon a rock-bound shore. There is no little theater beyond. There is no gallery of pictures. No artist ever gives exhibition. No one talks of such things. No one seems to be interested in such things. (Mencken 326)

Many southerners found Mencken's remarks incredibly offensive, and responded after a chance to contemplate Mencken's intent. The result was, for the most part, the outpouring of literature by southern writers known as the Southern Renaissance.

While the introspective revolution and H. L. Mencken may have been two contributing forces to the Southern

Renaissance, there is something else to consider: Progressivism. From 1900-1920, the southern upper classes took it upon themselves to reform the lower class whites and blacks. The agenda was over-enthusiastic and idealistic. Some major concerns were education, child labor, passing prohibition, women's suffrage, and health care improvements. A new middle class of white professionals emerged. Doctors, lawyers, ministers and nurses, and the church were spotlighted as the champion of moral guidance. Consequently, the relationship between reformers and the reformed became paternalistic, and the inequality was harshly felt by the underclass. Oddly enough, better working conditions at the textile mills and an end to cheap labor were not encouraged via Progressivism. With the South still overwhelmingly rural, it was labeled a periphery region in terms of industry, and the Northeast was labeled the core. The South, however, due to its slower industrial pace and more rural geography, had a business system that was more personal, more face-to-face with merchants, which distinguished it from the rest of the country.

While the Progressives' agenda may have been good-hearted, it was not entirely successful. In fact, the chasm between the lower class and the rest of the

population widened, leaving the planter class and merchants in even more powerful positions. All of these factors, then--the paternalistic upper class, the low wage earners in the mills, the power of the elite--combined to supply the ammunition for a clash of the classes. This conflict fueled the fire in many of the South's great writers.

Dramatic images of the South and southerners occurred earlier than the Southern Renaissance, but primarily in plays that never reached the stage and were quickly forgotten. Nevertheless, the beginnings of southern dramatic elements began to take form:

> The enthusiastic nationalist stand of early dramatists [. . .] made their plays much like other American plays in spirit. In the years of the sectional crisis before the Civil War, however, southern dramatists used some of the same history to present sectionalist arguments, directly opposed to those in the North. Politics rather than culture identified their works as above all southern plays. (Watson 74)

With increasing fervor, the South's politics became embedded in its culture: racial tensions, economy, agriculture, and tradition/customs. Concepts, characters, and motifs began creeping slowly into the drama of the

South and eventually became not only indigenous to but also landmarks of these regional plays. For example, in Clifton W. Tayleure's (1832-91) *Horse-Shoe Robinson* (c. 1857), a Revolutionary drama designed to strengthen southerners in their conflict with the North, the idea of allegiance and loyalty to the South is portrayed with particular vehemence. As Horse-Shoe makes plans to attack some British soldiers, a young Carolinian promises not to desert: "That's not a [S]outhern principle" (Watson 73).

Many early southern drama elements of what later formed the essential characteristics of these plays stemmed from the conflict and the mindset of the Civil War. For example, loyalty to the Confederacy topped the pyramid of values. It created a plethora of characters who, in turn, upheld the southern philosophy of allegiance to not only the Confederacy but also to family and the past. One such character was the loyal slave who spoke in a comical dialect and was a southern response to Uncle Tom. He was humble and kindly, but earnestly desired freedom. The southern Uncle Tom was happy down south, standing by his master and refusing freedom (Watson 84). Another character to come out of the rebel force was the heroine of Dixie, or the real woman who sacrificed and served bravely in the Confederate cause:

> These southern heroines interestingly anticipate such women in modern novels, as Melanie of *Gone with the Wind* [. . .] And such theatrical descendants as the spunky mother Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie* [. . .] The heroines of Confederate drama are not unworthy ancestors of the heroines of modern southern drama, whose combination of steely tenacity and feminine grace has created powerful roles that actresses have rendered convincingly. (Watson 84)

In fact, southerners' admiration for displaying loyalty to "the cause" translated into a myriad of southern allegiances. These included ties to the southern soil for which southerners fought (which relates to climate and the agrarian experience); loyalty within smaller units, such as the family; dedication to religion and the church; remembrance of those who fought in the War; and the importance of ancestors and the past. There was an unfortunate clinging to racial tension as a result of abolition, and even, perhaps, a response to the violence and atrocities of war in the form of the grotesque, or Southern Gothic, which is a literary device that is characterized by bizarre distortions and exaggerations of human features or behavior.

Tennessee Williams was pivotal in the move toward change. His plays captured a traditional southern mindset, yet injected taboo elements--albeit peripherally--of a sexual or violent nature. This crossover from the Fugitive Agrarians' South to a new South has launched much controversy. Most scholars agree that the South is not the agrarian-driven region it used to be, but southern scholars cannot agree on exactly what has changed and to what degree.

Perhaps the single most significant debate concerning southern historians is that of continuity vs. change. W. J. Cash in his landmark work, *The Mind of the South* argues: "So far from being modernized, in many ways, it [the South] has actually always marched away, as to this day it continues to do, from the present toward the past" (Cash 4). Yale University's C. Vann Woodward adamantly disagrees:

> Among the major monuments of broken continuity in the South are slavery and secession, independence and defeat, emancipation and military occupation, reconstruction and redemption. Southerners, unlike other Americans, repeatedly felt the solid ground of continuity give way under their feet. (Woodward 4)

The idea of continuity vs. change has sparked many a debate among southern scholars, and the debate is equally present in the South's drama.

From the 1920s until the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s through the late 1960s, southern drama maintained more of a continuity with the old South:

> After the great plays of [Tennessee] Williams and the vigorous civil rights drama written by blacks in the 1960s, southern drama entered a different phase. The former conflicts of blacks versus whites, Old versus New South, and gentry versus poor whites which had given southern drama much of its power had dissipated. Political issues attracted dramatists less, because with civil rights legislation the racial issue lost immediacy. Beginning with the works of Tennessee Williams, it became evident that southern drama was paying less attention to race questions and more to inner emotions. The southern play, no longer distinguished by its protest against racial injustice (as it had been since the days of Paul Green), shifted its focus to cultural subjects: the transition from country to urban

> life, generational disagreements--real questions troubling modern southerners. (Watson 192)

The Civil Rights and the Women's Movements created much tension in the "old South" mindset. Contemporary southern playwrights felt the reverberations of the movements, and their plays were touched by the changes incurred by the South. Today's writers not only grapple with tough issues, but they do so in a manner unlike their traditional counterparts: dialogue is more colloquial and direct, and the settings, while in southern regions, lack the plantation/agrarian feel of traditional southern dramas.

The Civil Rights Movement was preceded by much change in the country, especially in regard to economics. There were huge demographic changes which began just before World War I with large numbers of African-Americans migrating out of the South. With that came the disappearance of the rural South as a viable economic entity. The New Deal of the 1930s had attempted to turn the country around economically, and Eleanor Roosevelt became interested in promoting Civil Rights and gaining the black vote for the Democratic party. World War II servicemen returned with a different perspective: black men got the G. I. Bill, but their opportunities were not the same as those for whites. The United States was to change its racial politics, but

the political climate that had dominated the South for many years was not so easily altered. This very mindset formed the thesis for Swedish-American author Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). In his book, Myrdal claims that America is based on equal opportunity for all, but it is not that way in practice. *American Dilemma* became a defining work at a time of great transition.

Sensing the inequity surrounding him, A. Philip Randolph began to organize a massive march in Washington, D. C. Not wanting a march in the nation's capital, Roosevelt instituted the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practices in an attempt to help black citizens get jobs. Leading American cities in the South, Nashville and Atlanta were among the first to be affected by political intervention to handle racial tension, but these interventions were met with massive resistance by white citizens opposed to government imposed integration. In an attempt to play down the strong forces against integration and encourage economic growth in the South, Atlanta's Mayor, William B. Hartsfield, initiated the "too busy to hate" campaign (c. 1960) to focus on industries contemplating moving to the South. Eventually, after numerous riots, sit-ins, marches, and, of course, the painstaking efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil

Rights Act of 1964 resulted in a black voter registration movement, ended segregation in public places, gave the Justice Department power to withhold federal money from any institution not adhering to the Act, and allowed no form of discrimination in regard to race, gender, or ethnic origin.

While the whole country was changing its politics, the American South was remaining stagnant in its views toward black/white relations. In 1964 the South experienced incredible political change, but it would be years before it would change its philosophy.

Closely aligned to the Civil Rights Movement was the Women's Movement. Perhaps born as a response to Betty Friedan's cornerstone work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the Women's Movement strove to enable women to have equal rights in the workplace, thereby changing the home situation and incorporating new images of the family and the role of women. As Friedan noted while she was compiling research for her book, the 1950s idea of femininity and fulfillment via marriage and motherhood just wasn't holding together. The author herself remarked that she, too, had been caught in the plight of the American housewife: "I, like other women, thought there was something wrong with me because I didn't have an orgasm waxing the kitchen floor" (Friedan 5). After numerous

attempts to submit her thesis to women's magazines, Friedan decided to write a book. The two movements combined, transformed life in the South, but the women who benefited the most were middle and upper class, and primarily white.

Poor women, and especially poor black women, had previously been confined to domestic and other segregated, menial jobs. Economic opportunities broadened somewhat, and clerical and sales positions increased for women. Middle and upper class women found it easier to make their way into professions that required a college education, which many women possessed, but as home makers had not utilized.

> NOW articulated the clear dilemmas of professional women for whom continuing discrimination violated deeply held convictions about their rights to equal treatment and for whom traditional attitudes about family roles were obsolete. "It is no longer either necessary or possible," they argued in their founding statement, "for women to devote the greater part of their lives to childrearing." (Evans 277)

While feminism was breaking ground across the country, the South, again, changed its politics before it changed its philosophy. Yet at its own pace, the South yielded the

fruits of its women's efforts: female playwrights with a feminist perspective that included changes in the traditional nuclear families of the earlier South.

What then, exactly, is the history of the southern family? If we are using the traditional genre of southern drama as a model against which to weigh changes in the new plays, then it is sensible to establish a parallel dichotomy for the family model as well. From a sociological perspective, the demographics of the family have undergone considerable change from the first half of the twentieth century to the last two or three decades.

The Changing American Family: Sociological and Demographic Perspectives, proves, statistically, what we as a region, and even as a country, already know. From 1960 (the "split" between the "old South" and the "new" for our purposes) until 1990, the average number of people in an American household decreased from 3.3 to 2.6. Additionally, in basically the same time span, the crude birth rate declined from 24 to 16 percent for women aged fifteen and above (Bennett et al. 89). At the beginning of the twentieth century only one in 13 marriages ended in divorce; by the end of the century, one in 2 marriages had resulted in divorce or separation (Falk 49). Also interesting is that in the late nineteenth century, more

than a fifth of Americans were residing with their extended kin, and about a quarter were residing in households with non-relatives such as boarders, lodgers or servants. The 1980s represented the opposite extreme: Only 6 percent of households included extended kin, and the proportion of families with unrelated individuals was even lower. These statistics might lead us to believe that perhaps the nuclear household (husband, wife and children) was the dominant model, but this belief was incorrect; instead, the nuclear family model is on the decline. By 1983 nuclear households accounted for only 29 percent of all households. The change came through an increase in fragmentary households: married couples without children, unmarried couples, single-parent households, and people living alone (Ruggles and Goeken 15).

Numerous writers and observers in the South agree that some deep sea change has taken place. From the older generation of writers comes comments about the newer writers: “they don’t have the tragic feeling about the South that we had,” and “they value only the immediate past.” It also appears that newer writers’ interests have moved from the community to “little private things” (Stephens 171). These shifts are particularly relevant in the family dynamic.

In order to investigate or even redefine contemporary southern drama, it is logical to examine a representative body of plays by playwrights whose reputations rest almost exclusively on their being southern dramatists. Also, since these playwrights wrote in reaction to their worlds, their biographies--particularly their family lives--serve as a sort of exposition to the stories they pen. Biographical details more clearly establish the social and cultural contexts in which they write and often provide clues to characters' psychological makeup. In each chapter that follows, the treatment of one facet of the southern family by two playwrights (one earlier, one contemporary) will be analyzed. Undoubtedly, the three most significant, and indeed the earliest, playwrights who formed southern drama into a memorable genre were Paul Green, Lillian Hellman and Tennessee Williams. While they were basically contemporaries--their births occurring within a seventeen-year span, and their deaths within three--the earliest of them was Paul Green.

Green (1894-1981) made himself a voice for the southern black. As a young white boy, he worked with black field hands and had opportunities to socialize with them as they worked in his parents' fields. It is this experience that set Green apart from other dramatists who wrote about

“the plight of the Negro” with very little, if any, firsthand knowledge of their lifestyle. Green became a prolific writer of folk plays, many of which were produced by the Carolina Playmakers, a touring company whose goal was to explore the folk life of North Carolina and the South. Also, Paul Green’s black characters could not be categorized as easily as in previous southern dramas; his plays were frequently peopled with personalities closely based on what he observed as a youngster. This made Green’s black characters unique and complex to the early twentieth century audience. In fact, in a letter Green wrote to Edith J. R. Isaacs, one of the founders and the editor of *Theatre Arts*, he articulated his vision in one of his earlier dramas. “At the present time I am working on a negro play in six or seven scenes, entitled In Abraham’s Bosom. In it I am trying to embody a concrete illustration of the negro struggle towards freedom, real freedom” (Avery 107).

Green’s play established a very “Old South” tone--especially to a contemporary audience--with the use of the Black English Dialect as opposed to the minstrel-inspired stage dialect most white playwrights used. Even more interesting, however, was Green’s use of the effected dialect in his personal letters, especially those written

to his wife. Phrases such as “honey child,” “Old Gal,” and “I’m plumb wore out” (Avery 103, 104, 119) peppered the white dramatist’s vocabulary even when he was not writing in character.

In Green’s Pulitzer Prize winning play, *In Abraham’s Bosom* (1926, Abe McCranie is a mulatto who is granted the opportunity to open a school for the black children of the community. Much to Abe’s chagrin, however, he finds himself the target of many hard feelings from his own people. In the vein of the tragic mulatto, Abe also receives the unjust treatment of the time from whites, including his own father and half brother. The play ends with his being pursued by a lynch mob.

If *In Abraham’s Bosom* presents issues facing the black southern family in the traditional South, then Pearl Cleage’s *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (first published in *American Theatre* in 1996) presents the black family experience in a contemporary light. The “family” is not blood related, and the issues are not only black versus white but also blacks against blacks, with a prevalent theme of southern prejudice. These themes, and others, will be analyzed in Chapter Three, along with both white and black critics’ perspectives. Cleage and Green are a logical pair to study because they both attempt to provide

a voice for the African-American community and focus on the dynamics of the black family. What makes Green and Cleage an interesting match is that Green attempts to speak for the black community from his indirect experience. As a white male, Green's voice is only one of sympathy, not empathy, and his vision, limited, as confirmed by his black critics. Green's perspective is an outside view and may limit accuracy, particularly in the psychology of the black experience. Pearl Cleage, however, is a more direct voice. As an African-American, she provides a contemporary, and in some ways, more complex view of the multi-layered racism surrounding the black southern family.

Lillian Hellman (1906-84, although this birth year is disputed by Hellman herself) (Moody 13) cleared a path for southern women playwrights. The first to make a name for herself as such, Hellman was noted for her public disapproval of economic greed and its manifestation in capitalism. A Marxist at heart, she unapologetically chronicled this mindset in her plays, allowing for her villains' downfall to be directly or indirectly related to a greedy nature. As a native of New Orleans, Hellman--aligned with the Fugitive Agrarians--was concerned with the changes in the South due to industrialism and, on a certain level, capitalism. So, she made this her setting for one

of her most highly acclaimed plays, *The Little Foxes* (1939).

Set in the turn of the century South, Regina Giddons and her two brothers plan to sell the family business for a good sized profit. Regina, however, must have her husband's permission for the plan to work. Since Horace is unwilling to participate, Regina reciprocates the feeling of helplessness bestowed on her by her husband by standing still as he grasps at his heart medicine which is just out of reach.

Certainly Regina became a paradigm for the strong southern woman, a type that appeared again and again in a similar form in Hellman's plays, and in her contemporaries' dramas as well. Regina is a woman who is the victim of society's limitations, yet her aggressive personality, her need for power, and even her evil cunning enable her to manipulate people, including men, to adhere to her requests or to suffer the consequences. As we discover in *Another Part of the Forest*, the prequel to *Little Foxes*, pathology runs in the Hubbard family. Her father cheats the entire town during the nadir of the Civil War, leaving some people penniless while he makes tremendous financial gain. While Hellman constructs Regina to operate on the premise of gaining wealth, and therefore, power, Regina is in a

minority of traditional, southern, female characters whose strength is grounded primarily in selfishness and greed. It is the characteristic of strength that mutates as more contemporary women characters in southern drama fight different battles, and, of course, as these female characters' responsibilities to their families and their familial role fluctuates as the country's and the South's political and social framework is upset by social revolution.

Beth Henley, known both for her treatment of family and the southern woman in her plays, contrasted her contemporary heroines with Hellman's paradigmatic Regina. Henley juxtaposed Hellman nicely because while Hellman set up an image of a strong southern woman to be taken seriously, Henley nearly spoofed this image of the southern lady, as if to say, "this just isn't what we're about anymore." *Impossible Marriage* offers women characters who are struggling against the expectations their society formerly imposed upon them merely due to their gender. Henley, known for her use of the split image, utilized a postmodern irony to turn the very symbols that dictated the southern genre, especially its strong women, on their heads, which indicated that southern drama was changing personality so drastically, in this case anyway, that the

steely strength of women like Regina could no longer be used as a litmus test for southern drama.

Perhaps the South's greatest playwright, and certainly the best-known, is Tennessee Williams (1911-1983). Unlike Hellman and Green, Williams wrote three family dramas that specifically addressed several of the issues for examination, but *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) certainly offered the clearest sense of Williams' Southern Gothic style. Tennessee Williams, like Beth Henley, has been called a Southern Gothic writer (Betsko and Koenig 219), and a large part of the gothic includes a penchant for the grotesque. In fact, some critics use the terms synonymously.

Out of the three early southern playwrights, Williams was, in many ways, the most verbal and specific about the impact of his family life on his plays. In fact, his perception of his family and their interactions was the basis of numerous family relationships in his better-known dramas. Undoubtedly, Williams' flair for flamboyance attracted much attention from his pre-sexual revolution audiences. While Tennessee lived during the Women's Movement and the closely related sexual revolution, his prime playwriting took place in the 1940s and '50s which was hardly a time when overt sexuality was tolerated, and

movies were still operating under the film industry's Production Code of conduct, that sometimes influenced Williams to allow his language to be "softened" when his plays were adapted for the screen. Williams' screenplays and dramas often handled sexual themes elusively. The verbiage became ambiguous, as characters rarely used charged terminology. Frequently, Williams' female characters became his mouthpiece both psychologically and thematically, a more palatable vehicle, perhaps, than a man, for his romanticism and poetic style.

Undoubtedly, Williams' writing was influenced by his family life and childhood, and some of his best plays set a standard for the southern family. Unlike Paul Green and Lillian Hellman, Williams did not adhere to as many of the traditional motifs. It is with Williams' work that the zenith of "southernness" appeared.

> Tennessee Williams is an elegiac writer, a poet of nostalgia who laments the loss of a past idealized in the memory. As the leading dramatist of the Southern Renaissance in American letters, he draws on the myth of the Old South. (Boxhill 1, 2)

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and more specifically in Blanche, Tennessee Williams created an old south--a

mythical south--that was still predominantly soft and fragile, genteel and romantic. This old South appeared this way even more so because Williams nearly always juxtaposed his vision with scraps of a harsher, new south. Paul Green and Lillian Hellman certainly set a foundation for this technique, but it was Williams who consciously embeded the romantic soul in the unromantic world--accentuating the fragility of the human psyche, and beginning the trend of introspection as opposed to an almost entirely political agenda. Also, Williams was considered a poet of the theatre. His language was often stylized and laden with imagery. The two Souths may manifest themselves in the settings, characters, dialogue or action. *Glass Menagerie*'s old South is preserved in Amanda's memories of her early life on Blue Mountain, Tom's yearning to be a writer, and Laura's old-fashionedness and quiet frailty. The new South creeps in beyond the family core with the gentleman caller, the absent father, and the setting of a small apartment in the city of St. Louis.

The family in *Streetcar* is somewhat different in that it is not strictly a core unit (mother, father, children). Instead, there is the married couple, of which only the wife, Stella, is southern, and then Stella's sister, Blanche, who joins her sister and brother-in-law to form an

extended family. Blanche is, of course, the old South remnant while brother-in-law Stanley is the opposing new, and Stella is wavering somewhere in between. Unlike *Menagerie*, *Streetcar* introduces the element of the grotesque or Southern Gothic with Stanley's animal-like, brutish manner, the violent nature of the rape scene with Blanche's threat of the broken bottle and Stanley's overpowering her physically, and Blanche's uncontrollable episodes of flashbacks and insanity. Williams initiated this tradition of the grotesque or Southern Gothic, while contemporary playwrights inherited this trait and applied their personal idiosyncrasies.

In parallel fashion, Harry Crews relies on the horrific images and bizarre behavior of the Bass-Boatwright family in *Blood Issue* (1989), confirming the continued use of this literary device in southern drama. Williams' trademark of exploiting poetry-like language while steering away from visual realism seems almost to soften the Gothic effect until it becomes dreamy and ethereal. Crews' technique is very different; as a novelist and a playwright he centers the grotesqueries on graphically sexual elements in a style most of his critics label "gritty." Both playwrights, however, are prime examples of how the Southern Gothic has become a mainstay of southern drama.

While there is likely little debate that Green, Hellman, and Williams are three playwrights who shaped southern drama in its formative stages, there might be arguments for including other contemporary playwrights besides the three selected. What about Marsha Norman, Horton Foote, Preston Jones, and Romulus Linney? I have extracted Henley, Cleage and Crews from this playwriting pool specifically, as representative of a wide range of contemporary writers. Henley's treatment of female characters has captured the critics' attention for over twenty years. Her portraits of "new" southern women and her interest in non-realism distinguish her from Hellman, yet topically they share a vision. Pearl Cleage represents two voices that Paul Green could not: she is African-American and female. While both writers focus on civil rights, their methodologies and styles are quite distinct. While Harry Crews' reputation rests predominantly on his contributions as a novelist and writer of non-fiction, his trademark is his uncanny ability to incorporate the grotesque in remarkably violent and sexual states. Crews' writing is influenced by Tennessee Williams. The two were friends and contemporaries, sharing a keen interest in the South as a thing to be revered and scorned at once. Both Williams and Crews are continuously noted for their

proclivity for Southern Gothicism. Crews makes a good test case for this examination for another reason: As a “fringe” playwright, it is interesting to note how Crews’ handling of the genre markers may differ from the more seasoned playwrights. It may also be worth noting that all six of the selected playwrights have, to varying degrees, written in additional venues: biography, short stories, novels, screenplays, and poetry to name a few.

All three early southern playwrights--Green, Hellman and Williams--shaped the genre of southern drama. Green, Hellman, and Williams included motifs of strong women, the black experience, and Southern Gothicism in their family dramas. These motifs remained intact as part of the southern experience and, perhaps later, contemporary southern playwrights experienced a heightened sensitivity to these issues. That is, after the country experienced two major social movements, southern playwrights, along with others from all over the country, felt the repercussions of social turmoil and the benefits reaped by those movements. In turn, 1980s and ’90s southern dramatists introduced new images of southern drama, products of change from the upheaval.

The markers of southern drama have withstood intense protest, barrier breaking, and social revolutions since the

days of the earliest writers. Ideas about race, gender, and sexual conduct have affected thousands of southerners, and, consequently, the families to which they belong. Contemporary southern dramatists sketch families who often mirror the new South. There is a definite change in southern playwrights' concerns with new agendas: plays focus more now than ever on the psychological and emotional dimensions of being a southerner and how this coincides with the developments brought on by the two social revolutions. Now a profile of the contemporary southern family in drama is emerging. When we looked into the window of southern drama from the early twentieth century, we had a standing list of symbols that clearly represented a part of the South as we then knew it. There were strong women whose strength came from what they had to endure from their fathers, brothers, and husbands; a black community whose main concern was coping with and fighting against the black/white racial tensions and the unfairness so deeply manifested in segregation; and a proclivity for Gothicism both violent and sexual, yet these gothic images were often alluded to rather than graphically depicted.

But after the turbulence and enlightenment of the 1960s and '70s, these symbols hardly have the same impact today. No longer part of such a severe patriarchy, the

South's strong women are strong for different reasons and in different ways. The African-American southerner still grapples with racial issues, but now there is an even stronger concentration on intra- as well as interracial concerns. Also, as post-sexual revolution survivors, contemporary southern dramatists are not as hesitant to delve into one of the most sensitive areas of the individual--human sexuality--and to explore this highly charged topic with far more candor than their earlier counterparts.

In essence, then, the southern woman, the black southerner, and the grotesque which are all symbols of the genre, may still have an obvious place in southern drama but not nearly the same place they once had. What is more, these markers affect the family dynamic to such a degree that in some cases we can no longer distinguish southern drama by the traditional terminology. What, now, constitutes a family? What is the female's role in this new arrangement? How do reassigned roles restructure the family's hierarchy and its very representation? What follows is an analysis of the literature to discover where the "old" is peeking out and where the "new" lays its claim. Today's southern drama genre, in many ways, does not melodramatically preach an "Old South" agenda like the

Greens and Hellmans of the earlier days. In its stead, an examination of the individual--of human emotions--is in the forefront. The window we look into now serves to parody, or even oppose, the sacred symbols of the genre, to cast away the generalizations, and to present individuals complete with their eccentricities, redefining what makes southern drama southern.

CHAPTER 2

THE SOUTHERN WOMAN'S "PLACE" IN THE FAMILY

A great deal of scholarship has been devoted recently to the changes in the image of the southern lady--a phenomenon that challenges scholars of southern drama to neatly categorize, or even mythologize, the southern lady's traits. The "myth" of the southern woman stems from archaic notions of the woman's role in southern tradition and the "southern family romance" (Manning 8). While a popular notion is either to apply the myth unrelentingly or to dismiss it entirely, it may be more accurate first to examine the myth's components, then gradually to uncover any discrepancies between the myth and the representations of southern women characters in both earlier and later dramas.

In addition to comparing the representation of the southern woman in both traditional and contemporary venues, there are two literary devices that deserve attention: the playwrights' use of irony and realism/non-realism. There are two southern playwrights--each highly regarded in her generation--whose treatment of the southern woman, irony, and realism is not only representative of their eras, but

vastly different from one another as well. These dramatists are Lillian Hellman and Beth Henley.

According to Carol S. Manning, the contributions of the female characters to southern drama may have been simplified and even overlooked in the past by the very pillars of the southern literary community. Manning suggests that in Richard H. King's book *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South 1930-1955*, the overwhelming majority of his study focuses on the southern tradition through the paternal perspective.

> By defining the Southern family romance through the figures of the father and grandfather only, [Richard] King has ignored fully one half of the Southern family romance itself; for the Southern woman is as essential to that romance as the Southern man. And just as the male writer, and critic, might tend to be obsessed with the father and grandfather figures, so is it natural for the female writer to react particularly to the dominant female images--to the mother and the grandmother, yes, but especially to the Southern belle, the Southern lady, the enduring mammy--and to the society's expectations of Southern womanhood. (8)

Manning further suggests that by “demystifying” the southern family romance, that is, by centering hypotheses on the remaining half of the southern characters--the women--there is opportunity to expose a very different notion of women’s roles in the southern family, and hence, the southern tradition.

What this means in terms of this study is that it may be beneficial not only to examine the role of the southern woman in the family, but also the role that the family plays in the life of the southern woman. Joan Schulz, in her essay, “Orphaning as Resistance,” states that southern women have been defined almost exclusively by their role in the family (36). Furthermore, this role is oppressive because it centers solidly on marriage/family, with no other means for self-expression or identification. Contemporary southern women characters have, then, chosen to separate themselves--physically or psychologically--from the traditional family role in order to gain autonomy over their lives.

Set in the turn of the century South, the Hubbard brothers, Oscar and Ben, and their sister, Regina Giddens, make big plans to sell the family business, the cotton gin, while Regina’s husband, Horace, the third owner, is away at Johns Hopkins Medical Center, seriously ill. The plan

appears to be in place, except that Regina--acting in her husband's absence, and not on his behalf--manipulates her two brothers into getting a lesser share of the profits. Her hidden agenda to escape to Chicago is firmly in place. When Horace arrives home and discovers what has taken place while he has been in the hospital, he schemes against Regina so that she can gain nothing. Bound by the laws of the time, Regina realizes that she is helpless while Horace is able to make decisions, so when he reaches for his medicine bottle during an attack and it falls to the floor, she remains frozen, leaving him struggling, begging her for help, thus bringing her husband's life to an earlier end.

Drawing from her childhood and both sides of her family, the Newhouses of New York and the Hellmans of New Orleans, Lillian Hellman's characters often closely paralleled certain family members. The Newhouse matriarch, Sophie--undoubtedly a model for the no-nonsense Regina (Moody 14)--was an independent power whose severity and assurance commanded respect and obedience. She instilled a fear in her family except for her brother--Lillian's great-uncle, Jake Newhouse--who questioned her authority when he felt the need. Hellman's uncle provided the model for Ben Hubbard (Moody 14, 15); and Hellman's mother--in striking contrast to the rest of her family--gentle and innocent,

made way for the most sympathetic character: Birdie (Watson).

As a base for traditional representation of women in southern drama, Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* offers several types of southern women in Regina, Birdie and Alexandra. Regina represents a woman caught in the throes of the tradition of the South, and her non-traditional expectations of her role in the family. Shulz sums it up best:

> As women, they are condemned to hearing, accepting, and living by the self-destructive myths of the nature and role of women as passive, submissive, obedient, compliant, pious, and so on. They have enforced on them a role that is limited in action and activities, restrictive in behavior and conduct--that is, they must be beautiful, charming ornaments; must support the double standard of sexual conduct; must heed the imperatives of self-abnegation and duty to their families; and must limit their sphere of action to the home and family. (Manning 92, 93)

These qualities are the very basis for the mythical traditional southern woman. If, however, we consider what Freud tells us about how drives are repressed and find

satisfaction, and how sublimation creates culture (Vivas xi), then the different ways Regina and Birdie respond to their suppressed drives or ambitions become more clear. We will see passivity, submissiveness, and obedience from Birdie; we will see Regina engaging in her tactics because she is restricted to what is acceptable behavior. She is obliged to be the charming ornament, and if she were not limited to her sphere of home and family, much of her manipulation would be unnecessary.

Regina is a woman who does not mind playing the game at first, but if she does not reap her goal that way, then she is not adverse to stepping outside the parameters of her female label. In her dissertation, Beverly Lynn Alexander Johnston uses terms such as “covert power, strength or steely control over self or others” to describe Regina.

> Regina is iron-willed in her determination to control everyone in order to achieve her own ends. She is a steel magnolia in the worst possible sense of the word. In the final analysis she succeeds in controlling everyone except Alexandra. (115)

Richard Moody, theatre scholar and critic, in one of the first major books on Hellman and her works, comments,

“Regina is a magnificent embodiment of evil: cold, hard, determined, and beautiful, larger than life, yet grounded to the life that made her” (104). Regina manipulates her image, while Birdie is true to hers, and suffers for it.

Countering Regina’s bold and greedy style, Birdie offers another aspect of the “actual” southern lady myth. Birdie is not only genteel, but passive, hungry for attention, and a victim of domestic abuse. It is the passivity and violence that marginalize her from the central southern lady myth. Normally reserved for the lower class, violence isolates Birdie from fully upholding the myth. She has a passive nature and uneasiness with herself, and she has developed a fear of her husband and a fear of being found out. Her involuntary reaction is to hide Oscar’s brutality--to protect their image, their “relationship,” as she was taught to do. This is blatantly clear at the end of Act One when Birdie voices concern to Alexandra over the possibility of marriage to Leo; Oscar overhears and reacts:

> BIRDIE. Don’t you understand? They’ll make you. They’ll make you--
>
> ALEXANDRA. (*Takes Birdie’s hands, quietly, firmly*) That’s foolish, Aunt Birdie. I’m grown now. Nobody can make me do anything.

BIRDIE. ...I just couldn’t stand--

OSCAR. (*Sharply*) Birdie. (*Birdie looks up, draws quickly away from Alexandra. She stands rigid, frightened. Quietly*) Birdie, get your hat and coat...

ALEXANDRA. (*Softly, embracing Birdie*) Good night, Aunt Birdie. (*As she passes Oscar*) Good night, Uncle Oscar. (*Birdie begins to move slowly toward the door as Alexandra climbs the stairs. Alexandra is almost out of view when Birdie reaches Oscar in the doorway. As Birdie quickly attempts to pass him, he slaps her hard, across the face. On the cry, Alexandra turns, begins to run down the stairs*) Aunt Birdie! What happened? What happened? I--

BIRDIE. (*Softly, without turning*) Nothing, darling. Nothing happened. (*Quickly, as if anxious to keep Alexandra from coming close*) Now go to bed. (*Oscar exits*) Nothing happened. I only--I only twisted my ankle. (*She goes out. Alexandra stands on the stairs looking after her as if she were puzzled and frightened.*) (Hellman 173-174)

Birdie is quite taken by her niece; it is obvious that Birdie enjoys her “aunt” role. However, the majority of her family--both immediate and extended--thoughtlessly react to Birdie as a small child and they take revenge on her for being of the class they are pretending to be. Her family roles include mother, wife, aunt and sister-in-law, but rarely is she granted the opportunity to participate in adult decisions or even conversations. The role of family to her, then, is divided. For example, she appreciates Alexandra’s company, attention and love, but views the adults, except for Horace, as pseudo-parental figures--adults to be obeyed, adults who do not take her thoughts seriously, and in Oscar’s case, adults who go as far as to “discipline” or “control” her through physical means. Both Regina and Birdie uphold aspects of the southern lady myth, yet each is a different aspect of the myth.

Alexandra adds yet another dimension to the southern lady. She is the beginning of the new southern woman--neither a conniver who manipulates the image nor a victim of it. Because Alexandra predates the Women’s Movement, there is no talk of a profession, or work outside of marriage, but there is a definite part of her behavior that is unlike her elders’. The generational gap between her and her mother and aunt provides a notable contrast in her

less than traditional behavior. Certainly at the beginning of the play Alexandra obeys her mother, even when Regina tells her daughter to travel by herself to bring Horace home from Johns Hopkins--a suspicious command considering Regina has recently ruled out the possibility of Alexandra's traveling alone. Yet Alexandra does not fall victim to persuasion as easily as her more genteel Aunt Birdie, especially after witnessing more than one scathing argument between her parents, followed by her father's death and the unanswered question of the wheelchair on the steps.

The generational gap is interesting: Ben Hubbard refers to himself and his siblings, in so many words, as part of the New South--a term coined by journalist and activist Henry Grady. Ben states at the end of the play that, "After all this is just the beginning. There are hundreds of Hubbards sitting in rooms like this throughout the country. All their names aren't Hubbard, but they are all Hubbards and they will own this country some day [. . .]" (Hellman 222, 223). Ben accurately reflects the greedy sentiment that exists among himself, his siblings and even his nephew Leo. The children come by their selfishness honestly as their father, Marcus Hubbard, financially drains the entire community by selling salt for

outrageous prices during wartime. His community will remember him as a Civil War traitor. Marcus and his mistreatment of the family--except for his daughter Regina---are fully described in *Another Part of the Forest*, Hellman's prequel to *The Little Foxes*.

Alexandra, however, refuses to join the ranks of the greedy. Faced with both positive and negative role models in her family, the sensitive, yet sensible Alexandra chooses to side with those who neither eat the earth, nor with those who stand around and watch them do it. In fact, it is Alexandra--the possibility of a new South which combines the best of the old and new--who casts off the traditional southern lady type to engage in a face off with her already dominating mother, thereby widening the gap between generations. The new South that Alexandra represents is different from Ben's, and Hellman leads her audience to hope that it is Alexandra's new South that prevails.

> ALEXANDRA. You couldn't [make me stay], Mama, because I want to leave here. As I've never wanted anything in my life before. Because now I understand what Papa was trying to tell me. (*Pause*) All in one day: Addie said there were people who ate the earth and other people

> who stood around and watched them do it. And just now Uncle Ben said the same thing. Really, he said the same thing. (*Tensely*) Well, tell him for me, Mama, I'm not going to stand around and watch you do it. Tell him I'll be fighting as hard as he'll be fighting (*rises*) some place where people don't just stand around and watch [. . .] (*Takes a step toward her*) Are you afraid, Mama? (*Regina does not answer. She moves slowly out of sight. Addie comes to Alexandra, presses her arm.*) (Hellman 225)

As three very different models of southern ladies, Birdie, Regina and Alexandra each debunk the southern lady myth by neither entirely upholding it, nor canceling all of its facets. There are still other components of the myth that should be examined. According to Peggy Prenshaw, author of the essay, "Southern Ladies and the Southern Literary Renaissance," while subservience lies at the root of the southern lady myth, perhaps the most oppressive and damaging dimension of subservience is the code of silence (Manning 78). In order to preserve her delicate image and to continue to empower the men surrounding her, the southern lady is rendered voiceless. It is most important

that self-expression be kept to a minimum--at least when in the company of men--because it is the men who pass judgment on mouthy women. Conversely, it is in the company of other women when southern ladies feel more free to be opinionated. This entire process serves as a huge contradiction in living, however. For it is the uniqueness of the southern lady's voice, stemming from her restrictive circumstances, that scholars find so appealing. With that said, the myth also empowers the southern belle in a strange way, as a protected object and symbol.

In *The Little Foxes*, the female characters are each subjected to silence, but in different ways. Birdie, who is silenced in the harshest way, pays dearly for overstepping the boundaries of minimal conversation. She is verbally warned, then slapped by her husband, Oscar. Yet in the presence of Alexandra, Addie, and Horace (whose presence is not considered stifling by Birdie), Birdie feels free to speak frankly about her husband and his family's skewed values, which include killing animals for sport instead of food, and making money off of the poor.

Alexandra's silence is less motivated by fear than filial obedience, but the discovery of her mother's evil capabilities force Alexandra to break her silence and even turn the tables on her mother after her father's death.

Alexandra is silent when her mother tells her to bring back Horace by herself, but once Alexandra is aware of Regina's vengeance, she becomes quite vocal--even accusatory--in front of her uncles. Ironically enough, it is a newfound strength as a result of her father's death that pushes Alexandra to break her silence. (Her father was a man whose values were more closely aligned with Birdie's than with Regina's family.) In other words, it is a man who is the basis for her developing a voice, and not, as in the vein of the myth, responsible for her silence. Horace is a "true" southern gentleman, and Alexandra adopts his code.

While the image of the southern lady is something Hellman toys with in her play, it is not the only device she uses. Hellman is known for her intolerance of injustice; while she clearly uses *Little Foxes* to push an agenda, she does so with her use of irony, melodrama, and realism.

As Harold Clurman wrote about Hellman, "She avows herself a 'moral writer.' A facet of her morality is evident in her desire to write 'beyond' herself, about the world she has observed and thought about" (Moody xi). While Hellman took her time researching the American South at the turn of the twentieth century, studying its economics, its politics and its families--including her

own--she discovered that the greed from the cotton industry nearly devastated the South. Thus, the Hubbards were born.

Hellman's writing and the New York production of *Little Foxes* were both well received. The show ran for over 400 performances and Hellman, when compared to her contemporaries, both male and female, held her own. According to critic George Jean Nathan: "There are none among the 'whole kit and caboodle [referring to Susan Glaspell, Lulu Vollmer and Rachel Crothers], whose work shows so courageous and unflinching adherence to higher and better standards of drama'" (Moody 85). While Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* won the Pulitzer Prize, Odets, Saroyan, and Hellman were all in the running (Moody 85).

Hellman's agenda was easily pushed, in part, by her use of melodrama. A style still appreciated by mainstream audiences in the 1930s, Hellman carefully constructs her villains (Ben, Regina, Oscar) and heroes (Horace, Birdie, Alexandra) to sway the audience's sympathies and to appeal for justice. While the villains and heroes are clear, there is discrepancy among the villains, and this is what makes Hellman's use of melodrama slightly unconventional. For example, Regina and Ben, as opposed to their brother and nephew, are easier pills to swallow. At least they do not succumb to cowardice. Regina does not try to "sugar-

coat” her disproportionate proposal, and Ben frequently recognizes when she has the upper hand and laughs with her. Oscar and Leo, however, resort to wife beating and stealing from terminally ill family members. “Certainly,” claims scholar Katherine Lederer, “Hellman uses devices associated with melodrama--stolen bonds, threats, blackmail. But to what purpose” (40)? Lederer, as well as other critics, concur that Hellman employs conventional melodramatic elements, but crafts them in a slightly unconventional way, resulting in heroes and villains, who are slightly more complex than the archetypal flat characters.

Another literary device is worth mentioning in connection with Hellman’s work: the use of realism. There is a great deal that can be said about this, but since the focus of this chapter is on the representation of the southern lady, only a few observations are necessary.

While they are certainly not synonymous, it is not uncommon for a melodrama, or even a play that contains melodramatic elements, to fall under the umbrella of realism. Hellman is reflecting an actual way of life with a focus on external reality. As is well known, several characters in the play resemble or stem from Hellman’s family; Hellman even incorporated lines of dialogue from her family experiences into the play (Moody 15). The set

is described in detail by the playwright; it is the living room of the Giddens' house. There is no attempt to incorporate fantastic elements, visually or verbally.

While Regina represents the underside or perversion of the myth, and Birdie is the victim of it, the definition framed by the myth remains intact with these two women. It is in Alexandra, or the new generation, that we begin to see the strongest evidence of the transformation or mutation of the southern lady myth. If Alexandra's character--created in the late 1930s--represents the beginning of this mutation, then it is logical that we should trace this thread of the myth through a complete phase. In order to fully examine the southern lady myth, it is necessary to understand the political and psychological evolution of the southern woman and how she is currently represented by the South's foremost women playwrights.

In her 1963 milestone work *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan brought to light a confusing issue and spreading problem for women. There was a growing discontent with their singular role as housewives. In other words, women were questioning their worth and contributions to society from only a family perspective.

> I was next commissioned to do the article for *Ladies' Home Journal*. That time I took it back, because they rewrote it to say just the opposite of what, in fact, I was trying to say. I tried it again for *Redbook*. Each time I was interviewing more women, psychologists, sociologists, marriage counselors, and the like and getting more and more sure I was on the track of something. But what? I needed a name for whatever it was that kept us from using our rights, that made us feel guilty about anything we did not as our husband's wives, our children's mothers, but as people ourselves. I needed a name to describe that guilt. Unlike the guilt women used to feel about sexual needs, the guilt they felt now was about needs that didn't fit the sexual definition of women, the mystique of feminine fulfillment--the feminine mystique. (7)

What Friedan discovered--or rather, uncovered--about women was startling not only to the male population, but also to females. For the first time, Friedan articulated a growing disparity between society's expectations of women and their true contentment, or lack thereof, with reaching those expectations.

In retrospect, as this then-bizarre phenomenon swept the nation, we should not have been caught so off-guard by the unexpected reaction to the feminine mystique. Nearly simultaneously, two additional minorities confronted a dissatisfaction with their roles in society: the black and gay populations. Nonetheless, the “happy housewife syndrome” that had taken over American women in the ’50s proved ineffective in assuaging the needs of the women of the ’60s.

As Friedan established quite early in her research, the discontent arose from women of various educational backgrounds--from high school dropouts to Ph.D.s--and from those of equally varying incomes. The discontent did not appear to stem from a physical ailment, yet the effects of this psychological malaise manifested themselves in physical symptoms that left physicians puzzled. They resorted to prescribing tranquilizers and suggesting “daytime getaways” such as movie matinees in town. None of these “treatments” worked, of course, since overall dissatisfaction with one’s life cannot be overcome with tranquilizers and movies. It did not occur to men that what women needed was not a new prescription but a newly prescribed role. Women--for different reasons--could not

articulate the problem without resorting to feelings of shame or neuroses (19).

Friedan summarizes the plight nicely:

> If I am right, the problem that has no name stirring in the minds of so many American women today is not a matter of loss of femininity or too much education, or the demands of domesticity. It is far more important than anyone recognizes. It is the key to these and other new and old problems which have been torturing women and their husbands and children, and puzzling their doctors and educators for years. It may well be the key to our future as a nation and a culture. We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home." (32)

A few years later, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* absorbed the thesis of *The Feminine Mystique* and took it further. Greer, in the throes of the feminist movement, provided a harsh analysis of women's roles in society and in the family. Her call to action included a revolution--an awakening of the oppressed woman:

> The revolutionary woman must know her enemies, the doctors, psychiatrists, health visitors, priests, marriage counsellors [sic], policemen, magistrates and genteel reformers, all the authoritarians and dogmatists who flock about her with warnings and advice. She must know her friends, her sisters, and seek in their lineaments her own. With them she can discover co-operation, sympathy and love. (19, 20)

Greer also suggests a "withdrawal of labour," which, in a capitalist system, can certainly lead to chaos. Greer continues this thought by insisting that this alone may not solve the problem of oppression, but that

> unless the concepts of work and play and reward for work change absolutely, women must continue to provide cheap labor, and even more, free labour exacted of right by an employer possessed of a contract for life, made out in his favour. (22)

With the women's movement gaining ground in the 1960s and '70s, the changes in societal expectations, filial demands and career opportunities for women certainly modified the image of American femininity. While Hellman identified feminist issues, Freidan voiced them. Then, by

the 1980s, Beth Henley was able to show her audiences how the southern woman had reshaped her place in the family. The mythical lady of southern drama began to transform into female characters who had ignored or challenged, partially or radically, the myth of traditional southern womanhood in favor of an altered state of the southern woman. This new southern woman, who had experienced society's change in attitude toward women, kept up with a fast-paced world, and often found that her family played a different role than her traditional counterpart.

Beth Henley has chiseled out several memorable southern female characters: Babe Botrelle and Chick Boyle from *Crimes of the Heart*, Carnelle from *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, and Collard and Pixrose from *The Wake of Jamey Foster*. She has offered another such character study in one of her latest plays, *Impossible Marriage*. In an interview several years ago, Henley claimed that Anton Chekhov influenced her more than any other playwright. "[. . .] I [. . .] like how he doesn't judge people as much as just shows them in the comic and tragic parts of people" (Jones 182). "'Henley has been criticized,' says critic Sylvie Drake, 'for writing characters that are too kooky to be believed as real.' But 'my plays aren't realistic,' [Henley] counters" (V1 8), whereas Hellman's are.

Nonetheless, Henley concedes that her plays and the characters that populate them do reflect social oddities. It is, in fact, these oddities that give Henley

> [. . .] a distinctive voice of the American theater, one that could be described as modern Southern Gothic with a bit of wild comedy [. . .] Henley's most important contribution to the theater is her memorable gallery of women characters, which has kept her plays alive on stages across the country for two decades. (Luddy 91)

With that remark in mind, Henley makes a perfect accompaniment to Hellman in this study for several reasons: both Hellman and Henley are advocates of equal rights. Hellman uses the term "human rights" and Henley uses the contemporary term "feminist."

> People say, "Are you a feminist?" like I'm saying I'm a liberal or something: so I looked it up in the dictionary and it says that you believe women should have equal rights with men. No, I believe they should have less rights than men?
>
> Absolutely I'm a feminist, absolutely vehemently so. (Willer-Moul 120)

In fact, Beth Henley's characters are often fighting against their predetermined roles laid out by a south that has not fully come to grips with the Women's Movement. Her women's "quest for identity is hampered by the rigid shallow, stereotypical roles that define and confine them" (Harris 4), as are Hellman's women.

Henley's following remarks reflect her experience with the Women's Movement and its effect on her plays.

In a recent telephone interview, Henley responded adamantly to the effects of the Women's Movement:

> ANNA FILIPPO: Have the social movements of the 1960s and '70s affected you as a southerner, woman and playwright?
>
> BETH HENLEY: Yes, as part of culture changing, like Lillian Hellman's plays with servants and race.
>
> FILIPPO: Did or do you see the effects on the dynamics of your family?
>
> HENLEY: All of my plays are very feminist; women are struggling to be seen, like Carnelle taking the beauty contest route. I feel so enraged about the way women had it when I was growing up: women taking men's names, no power politically or financially, and stymied into the wife and mother

> roles. I was going to be a writer no matter what; it was the pure gift of the pill. (Interview)

Henley's representation of the southern woman, as well as her handling of irony and nonrealistic elements, strays much further from convention than does Hellman's.

So this would lead Henley's followers to believe she is agenda-driven, like her traditional counterpart, Hellman, but Henley claims the opposite. She states that her plays are just about people, that she does not necessarily write plays with the intent of their being categorized as women's plays or feminist plays. She simply "thinks of a story [she] would like to tell and whoever ends up being in the story, [she is] grateful" (Willer-Moul 120). Critics who are aware of the balance between what Henley says she does and what she appears to do, remark that "the heroines have absorbed some of the energies of the feminist movement, and in their own ways, they grope toward liberty" (Shepard 107). Henley, whose mother is a self-proclaimed feminist, understands that when a woman is no longer bound by such narrow terms as "wife" and "mother," it changes the whole family structure from decidedly patriarchal to one less so.

As a southern writer, does Henley's biography influence her plays? Absolutely. Whether it is geography, family, or a specific happening, Henley fully admits her work is a product of her life experiences.

> INTERVIEWER: How do you think your life in the South affected your writing?
>
> HENLEY: I'm from Jackson, Mississippi, which is the capital of Mississippi and is in the center of the state, and I think it had a very profound effect. My first play takes place in Hazlehurst, which is where my father's family is from; the second one takes place in Brookhaven, where my mother's family is from; the third one takes place in Canton, where I went to camp; the next one takes place in Hattiesburg, where my aunt and uncle and cousins live. It was a mysterious world, and it was the first world I was familiar with. (Willer-Moul 106, 107)

Henley's world, as we see in her plays, is comprised of stories that make up a major part of life in the South, including her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi:

> I get off the plane, and the stories are just incredible. All sorts of bizarre things are going on. It's in the air. Oh, Lord, the

> stories I hear about just who has died in town. There are dope fiends living next door. Hermits live over here. The police are out after people breaking windows. Somebody's drowned, and somebody's just shot themselves. [She pauses] And that's just the houses on my block. (McDonnell 96)

As we will see later in the chapter, the drowning and suicidal shooting in Jackson Mississippi were just two of the incidents that transferred to the Savannah setting of Henley's 1998 drama.

In *Impossible Marriage*, which opened in the Roundabout Theatre in New York in October 1998, Henley introduces a flurry of southern women characters ranging in age from 20 to mid 50s. *Impossible Marriage* takes place in mid-May, just outside Savannah, a southern landmark of scandalous notoriety since the popular *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Its three female characters are wildly different, and in each woman can be found a thread of the southern lady myth, to varying degrees. Also, unlike Henley's most recognized dramas, *Impossible Marriage* does capture a Chekhovian feel (Isherwood 84). There is more of the characters simply "being" than "doing," a characteristic foreign to the plot-driven Hellman dramas.

Pandora Kingsley is set to marry her much older groom, Edvard Lunt. The mother of the bride, Kandall, is all too unhappy about the upcoming ceremony. What will people think about such a marriage? Nevertheless, the wedding is on, despite protests from the groom's son, Sidney. He claims his mother will kill herself if Edvard remarries, and Sidney believes it is his job to stop the marriage whatever the cost. In the middle of the ceremony, Sidney pulls out a gun and aims toward his father, only to have the reverend--who has impregnated the bride's married sister, Floral--intervene, causing Sidney to shoot himself in the foot.

Henley's play is loaded with nonrealistic, even fantastic, elements which is a far cry from the realism of *Little Foxes*. Is there a reason for Henley's shying away from realism, melodrama, and the well-made play? There is the obvious: that as a contemporary playwright she has witnessed the experimental phases in American theatre and chooses to follow a post-modern trend. It is, perhaps, no coincidence, that as a feminist, Henley prefers non-realism. As Sue-Ellen Case points out, realism in theatre often does nothing for the feminist cause. The "well-made" relationship between the stage and social experience keeps the spectators glued to the traditional images, gender and

otherwise, and creates or upholds only one reality, one possibility. This petrification explains how the role of realism has become so fixed, so permanent, so lasting in the theatre, even in the seemingly resistant practice of socialist realism. No feminist wants any part of that (10).

The setting is the Kingsley manor, but most of the action takes place in the garden, or as characters exit to the woods. There is talk of mushrooms and fairies living under toadstools, and Pandora even wears blue diaphanous wings when she walks down the aisle. She claims, when Sidney threatens to shoot Edvard, that she will protect her husband-to-be with her wings. Characters engage in rolling down hills, and return, covered with dirt and grass. Pandora wants to dance under the stars and twirl until she is dizzy.

“Henley’s women often appear this way in her plays--breathless and impetuous, daring their fates. Orphaned by reason and good sense, they live by feeling alone” (Renner 19, 61). As Henley’s women will show us, the woman’s place in the southern family today does not have to be what it was in the earlier part of the century.

Pandora Kingsley, the 20-year-old bride; her

30-year-old sister, Floral Whitman; and their mother, Kandall Kingsley, are all southern women, but instead of playing into the southern lady myth, they play against it. Any mystery surrounding the genteel, silenced southern lady whose childbearing role in the family is of utmost importance is not to be found in Henley's new play. There is no complete Birdie who is easily controlled, no Regina who has to fight to become an equal to her brothers, and no Alexandra who finds her voice in the throes of family tragedy. But if we look closely, there are glimpses of what these women represent. The irony in *Little Foxes* is used, in part, to further Hellman's agenda, to raise social consciousness, to question a faulty ethical system, such as the play's final moment when Regina thinks she is finally in control of things, and Alexandra suggests differently. The irony in *Impossible Marriage* exists not to push an agenda--in fact, there is a convincing argument that Henley is not steeped in agenda, although one may be implied--but to shape characters who, as Henley puts it, "walk the edge between truth and humor" (Renner 19).

To begin with, there is Floral and Jonsey's marriage. He has the reputation of a womanizer; she is pregnant. They appear to be no strangers to sex. He treats her like a china doll, rubbing her feet with oils, but their

relationship is empty. The baby is not his. In fact, Jonsey is not interested in sex. Henley also mentions duplicitous actions as character flaws:

> I don't know if it's just in the South...but people give you things because they have such a desperate need to be liked [...] Something that appears to be a generous act--I'm trying to make myself look good by giving you something that I really don't like--the duplicity of that act, I think, reveals something later about [my characters]. (Willer-Moul 115)

There is irony in the names, Pandora being the most obvious. Edvard says, after their ceremony is interrupted by Sidney's shooting himself, "Pestilence and hope were in Pandora's box. Hope was the salvation. Or was it the final pestilence" (*Impossible Marriage*, unpublished play III-70)? Also, Kandall is not what her name (candle) might infer. She is, in many ways, the least enlightened of the women. She is the mother, and she stubbornly clings to her worries about family scandal while simultaneously attempting to protect her girls the only way she knows how--by covering up and hiding. Toward the end of the play Floral reminds her mother of how much in love Kandall and her husband were. To Floral's surprise, Kandall remarks

that they were never really in love, they just said they were so that their children would not get the wrong impression about marriage. After all, the daughters might have gotten it all wrong and Kandall “couldn’t let that happen.”

There is Kandall Kingsley--mother of the bride--a 50ish year-old woman who is caught between the inappropriateness of her younger daughter’s marriage to a man more than twice her age and the potential scandal the wedding could cause if cancelled. While Regina is driven to free herself from constraints and to realize her goals, Kandall’s concerns are more delicate: social scorn and scandal. Perhaps Kandall has learned to repress her drives and find satisfaction. After all, she does finally admit to Floral that she and her husband had a loveless marriage, and that they pretended so that the girls would hopefully find better relationships.

Floral and Pandora, like Alexandra, are free to marry against their mother’s wishes. Unlike Alexandra they have non-secretive extramarital affairs and change the very persona of southern womanhood. This seems even more drastic when compared to their mother Kandall’s more traditional ideas of what her daughters “should” be.

Kandall, obviously of a different generation than her daughters, upholds the myth of women's fragility and the man's responsibility to interact with women in the complementary chivalrous manner. Kandall reveals her traditional mindset within the first page of dialogue. As she enters the stage, she notices her older daughter, Floral, crying. She has been raking leaves and is "acutely pregnant." Jonsey, Floral's husband, fulfills and even exceeds his chivalrous role, doting over his wife excessively:

> KANDALL. The leaves, she raked them up. You should be ashamed letting your wife, in her condition, lift and tote like a day laborer. I'm surprised at you, Jonsey. You ought to have more sense.
>
> FLORAL. Don't blame him. He doesn't know any better.
>
> JONSEY. I apologize to everyone. Forgive me, forgive me. There now, it's settled. It's all settled. Here, I've brought you some chocolate wrapped in gold. (*He hands them to Floral.*) She eats all the time. She has such cravings. Now about these leaves, I'll sweep

> them up. (*Impossible Marriage*, unpublished play I-2)

Part of Kandall's fragile southern lady identity ties into the horrors of personal and family scandal. In fact, avoiding scandal almost seems to outweigh logic. This aspect of Kandall's character is far more developed in Henley's published version of the play. For example, when Kandall learns that Edvard's ex-wife and son will kill themselves should Pandora and Edvard marry, she is relieved to discover that the wedding will be called off. So, despite what would make Pandora happy, Kandall is not against canceling the wedding:

> PANDORA. What must we do?
>
> KANDALL. Pick up the wedding cake immediately. I refuse to have the whole town viewing it as an emblem of our impetuous hearts [. . .] I do not like scandal. I will not invite it into my home [. . .] We cannot have a scandal of this magnitude in my garden. (*Impossible Marriage, Collected Plays* 243, 253)

What Kandall does not know--or will not admit--is that there is plenty of scandal in her family already. While her younger daughter, Pandora, is marrying a much older man not of southern heritage, but of nebulous European stock,

Kandall's other daughter, Floral, is an inversion of the southern lady myth. Right in line with her signature split image, Henley creates both a character and a relationship that operate on the dichotomy of beautiful/grotesque. Henley has long acknowledged that she employs this technique. It is part of the southern grotesque for which she is noted.

> I've always been very attracted to split images. The grotesque combined with the innocent, a child walking with a cane, a kitten with a swollen head, a hunchback drinking a cup of fruit punch. Somehow these images are a metaphor for my view of life; they're colorful. Partly that is being brought up in the South; Southerners always bring out the grisly details in any event. (Betsko and Koenig 215-16)

Floral herself exhibits several split images. She is pregnant--carrying life--yet she is the one who suggests that Sidney shoot his father, Edvard, to prevent his marriage to Pandora. Floral also tells Sidney where to find her mother's pistol in the kitchen.

Along similar lines, there is more death imagery surrounding the supposedly maternal Floral in regard to her strange affair with the Reverend:

FLORAL. In bed you're so different.

REVEREND. I spark fires.

FLORAL. Yes.

REVEREND. It's all because of you. Only because of you. It would not be possible with anyone else.

FLORAL. Take me.

REVEREND. Where?

FLORAL. Wherever.

REVEREND. I have to go.

FLORAL. And I'll kill you.

REVEREND. Do. It would be a blessing.

FLORAL. How should I kill you?

REVEREND. However.

FLORAL. With my claws; my teeth; my body and soul.

REVEREND. Yes, yes, all that.

FLORAL. Until there is nothing. Nothing left but shreds, shreds, shreds. (*Impossible Marriage*, unpublished play II-52, 53)

Like Regina, Floral seems to possess a terrible, nearly uncontrollable hunger. She, too, is driven, and cannot seem to channel these drives. Floral, whose extramarital affair could be considered unclean by traditional

standards, echoes her “dirty” state in her physical appearance. Just before this confrontation with the Reverend, Floral has been “rolling down hills” and enters the scene from the woods “covered in dirt and grass and leaves. Her hair is wild,” perhaps representing the wildness of nature. She wants the Reverend to “tame” the wilderness and to “cleanse” her, but she goes about it in her own desperately strange way. After Floral’s declaration of violence toward her lover, her husband, Jonsey, enters, and Floral immediately captures the “cleanliness” of her marriage and the flip side of her split image:

> FLORAL. I have been rolling down hills. Won’t you bathe me, wash my hair, and soak me in fine scents? (*The Reverend exits to the woods.*) How I love you, my love. (*Impossible Marriage*, unpublished play II-53)

As if rolling down hills, being dirty both physically and morally, and suggesting that Sidney shoot his father are not enough, Henley gives her pregnant character warts, has her dancing around like a comic pig, and makes a strange comparison between Floral’s pregnancy and a huge circus tent. There is also the episode of premature cake-eating on Floral’s part--without utensils--at her sister’s

engagement party, again, exhibiting uncontrollable need, or desire, a reaction to her empty marriage. There is an interesting parallel between Floral and another Henley character, Elain, from *The Miss Firecracker Contest*. Scholar Lynn Hanson calls it passive sabotage (91)--although in Floral's case it is more passive-aggressive. Elain denies her cousin, Carnelle, access to the precious red dress for the beauty contest, because she is afraid Carnelle might win. Floral destroys Pandora's cake before the wedding, because she is afraid Pandora will have something Floral does not: a happy marriage.

It is almost as if everything that Kandall considers outside the realm of the southern lady is manifested in Floral. Indeed, her human garden does not seem to fare as well as her outdoor one. This could be viewed as Floral's passive-aggressive attempt to rebel against the proper image that her mother has insisted upon for so long, or it could spring from a desperate attempt by Floral to sustain a marriage, which pleases her mother, while corrupting the very core of her being. The affair she has with Reverend Larence is unbecoming not only for its own sake but in that Floral dares to invite the ultimate scandal with a man of the cloth. Furthermore, when that affair results in pregnancy, there is still no divorce. The huge difference

between Kandall and her daughter is blatant in the following exchange:

> KANDALL. Tradition cements our sanity.
>
> FLORAL. But if I wanted things to be different, would it all crumble? (*Impossible Marriage*, *Collected Plays* 266)

To gain a greater appreciation for the transformation of gender entailed in the new southern lady, Henley's men must be included. The men, while rarely examined as closely as the women characters, do serve as stimuli to which the women respond, and thus, they aid in the shaping of the females' personalities. Jonsey, Floral's husband, is a strange sort. While his behavior may appear chivalrous at first, it later takes a bizarre twist. By the end of Act I, Jonsey reveals to Sidney, under coarsely intimate auspices, that he has no father, and that, in fact, he watched his father drown in a boating accident. There is absolutely no prelude to Jonsey's admission, and the audience is left with the bare delivery--no response from Sidney, and an immediate blackout. This is, in part, the Chekovian element Henley mentioned in her interview: the idea of her characters "being," not "doing." Jonsey states a complex thought very simply. The incident certainly does not take place in front of the audience;

there is not even any description or detail. That type of scenario would be action-driven, or “doing” instead of the characters simply “being.”

What this means in regard to Jonsey and how this affects the women in the play, especially Floral, is that Jonsey has not and does not partake in active decision-making. He cannot think for himself and is reliant on others, specifically Floral, to call the shots in his marriage and in his life. He watched his father drown. Three lines before this heavyweight statement he declares to Sidney, “There were three cardinals in the grove. Bright red they were and in high spirits” (*Impossible Marriage*, *Collected Plays* 250). Jonsey is unable to function as the head of the household. The traditional husband and the provider contrasts with the earlier picture of a southern gentleman, such as with Hellman’s Hubbard brothers. While there is little to like about Oscar, he otherwise fits into his family as the head of the household. Ben, the oldest son, has more or less taken it upon himself to oversee the siblings’ affairs since the death of their father.

It appears that Jonsey--a contemporary southern man--is rather weak not only in comparison to his earlier male counterpart but also when compared to his wife. Henley

introduces this male weakness as a possible shift in traditional male roles, perhaps as a response to the different strength gained by some of her younger female characters.

But is this frail male character created in a vacuum, without regard to the change in relationship between him and his female companion? The answer is no. In fact, Henley blatantly positions Jonsey in an unusual context by employing her split image technique. While Jonsey is a handsome man--at least, if we take his word for it--he is a self-proclaimed asexual being. His wife is pregnant, and though the couple talks as if the baby is Jonsey's, both know that it is not. There are two reasons for their avoiding the topic: Floral's reputation and Jonsey's reputation. As Cynthia L. Allen notes, "Overt female sexual expression is 'slutty' and 'whorish.' Conversely, male sexual expression is regarded with pride; a proof of manhood (the 'stud') and a reason to boast" (91). So Floral's great sexual desire drives her to roll down hills, while Jonsey's lack of carnal desire makes him express himself through chocolates wrapped in gold and other essentially empty shows of affection.

As Jonsey converses with Edvard, the younger man reveals that his reputation as a cad and adulterer is

simply myth and illusion. He does flirt with other women to proliferate his false--and infinitely more manly--reputation. One might ask why he bothers to keep up such a façade. Clearly, there is still some merit to Jonsey's macho behavior. The game somehow wards off the fear of scandal, and while it is Kandall who is most concerned with eluding family scandal, Jonsey is concerned enough to continue his role-playing. The hard truths of a baby born out of wedlock and a handsome husband, disinterested in women, are enough to wreak havoc with Jonsey and Floral's marriage, not to mention their reputations.

While Jonsey represents a non-traditional image of a southern gentleman, one who does not embody the role of husband and father in an expected fashion, Edvard, Pandora's fiancé, has grown so far from his children that he does not even recognize his own son. A bizarre exchange takes place between Sidney and his father--a scene that attempts to but does not successfully explain Edvard's absence. The dialogue lacks any suggestion of joyful reunion. Instead, upon Edvard's recognizing his son, he states matter-of-factly that Sidney's voice has changed and his face is different. Sidney is particularly concerned with protecting his mother from harm, so much that he will stop his father's wedding at all costs. After all, it is

his mother who raised Sidney as a single parent, and his mother to whom Sidney feels devotion--even at her outlandish request of taking his father's life during the ceremony. When Sidney proclaims his deep, and almost Oedipal, love for his mother, Edvard despairs that he wished Sidney loved him the way he loves his mother. To this Sidney replies:

> SIDNEY. But all these years we've hardly spoken.
>
> EDVARD. I don't know what to say to children.
>
> SIDNEY. Of course, it's not your fault [. . .]
>
> (*Impossible Marriage*, unpublished play I-26)

While this entire exchange is seemingly outlandish, it is not within the world that Henley has created. Henley constructs a non-committal, almost flippant attitude between father and son. It reads and probably plays equally as desperate as a scene that might include more tearful reunion, simply because the characters are playing <u>against</u> the expected. We <u>expect</u> a closeness from a traditional southern family; however, Henley's families are anything but traditional, though tradition is what Kandall seems to hunger for, and their dialogue often allows a lot to go unsaid.

Many things about Edvard's character fall under the strange, distorted, and certainly the non-traditional. For

example, there are his continuous references to his barely escaping a hotel fire, and the fact that several important documents and his cat were burned. Is his sentiment indicative of a stronger emotional tie to his cat than his own son? Is his hurt toward his family, particularly his son and ex-wife, displaced? As if the content is not unusual enough, Edvard's delivery is deadpan. He does not scream, cry, or appear disturbed, yet it is these very life experiences that generally create trauma to the natural order. Edvard, however, seems to lack the extreme emotional context in which the retelling of these horrific circumstances often occurs. Is Edvard's atypical reaction a sign of a change in personality in the southern male prototype? In other words, does his disconnectedness shape a new male model? Perhaps it does in that Jonsey's reaction to the state of his own marriage seems aloof and empty of emotion, while Oscar, in contrast, is emotionally involved enough to strike Birdie. If this change occurs in southern males, then it is highly likely to affect the dynamic of southern females.

Theatre critic John Simon says of Henley's *Impossible Marriage* characters, "In word and action, they are all space cadets, nay, space generals or marshals" (83). He

claims that Henley's playwriting career is in its third phase: "bananas. Totally" (82).

Henley relentlessly reconfigures the traditional symbols of southernhood. The southern women in her plays--at least the younger generation--are not connected to the values of the older generation. Kandall's biggest nightmare is for Pandora's wedding to cause a scandal. Floral, on the other hand, has a baby with the reverend, and Pandora is marrying a man thirty years her senior. These women, Floral and Pandora, are simply not connected to the confines of societal expectations. They are women who long for fulfilling marriages, who are not afraid, as in Pandora's case, to reject the conventional idea of having children.

Impossible Marriage is not the first play in which Henley satirizes southern womanhood. Several of her other works offer females whose methods contrast, often sharply, with Hellman's women. As in Henley's Pulitzer-prize winning *Crimes of the Heart*, Babe finds herself in a similar situation as Birdie's. She is caught in a trap of domestic violence. Unlike Birdie, who turns to other family members for acceptance, Babe turns to a fifteen-year-old black boy for sexual fulfillment. Birdie's reactions fit within the role of the southern lady. Babe,

primarily out of naiveté, defies that role completely. She knows about the double taboo (age and race) she is breaking, but probably does not realize the enormity of possible repercussions, especially for Willie Jay.

In *The Miss Firecracker Contest* Elain Rutledge is in a marriage that does not suit her. Like Regina, she manipulates her husband, but in a very different way. Regina must be incredibly underhanded about it. Regina is struggling for power and a voice. Elain, on the other hand, states that her biggest struggle is leaving all of her clocks. She takes off on her own and leaves her husband, refusing to talk to him on the phone when he calls Carnelle's house. Elain's husband finally gives in, as does she, by sending her a bouquet of roses, and she decides to return to him. Regina feels as if the only way to her goal is to do away with a powerful obstacle: her husband. As products of the Women's Movement, Beth Henley's women have choices and female models that were unavailable to the women in Hellman's plays.

Lillian Hellman's concern with social consciousness and morality is not necessarily the primary concern for later playwrights such as Henley. While both writers may be considered feminists, it may be difficult for some feminists to consider *The Little Foxes* a piece of feminist

theatre simply because of its traditional structure. There are some feminist scholars who argue that a conventional structure automatically discounts a drama as speaking for women because the linear (read traditional) structure is male. Others claim it is the issues raised that comprise a feminist piece, regardless of structure. Patricia R. Schroeder asks, “cannot the more traditional dramatic forms also support feminist values by depicting the entrapment of female characters in an unyielding, traditional society” (156)? There is a veering from public issues and a tendency to explore the individual, although not entirely outside societal constraints. Relationships take on a new dynamic, a volatility, and the eccentricities of human behavior come to the forefront, rather than the obvious crafting of a plot. In fact, Henley even manages to circumvent the ideal myth of the southern lady in many of her female characters.

The contemporary image of the southern woman in drama may be a woman who is instrumental in decision-making, like Floral, or she may keep up the childlike helpless qualities, like Pandora. But she is not another Regina, depending on her brothers and husband to have a “voice.” She is not another Birdie, afraid of her husband and hiding her pain with alcohol. She may be like Alexandra, aware of

changing culture and the opportunities this change provides.

CHAPTER 3

THE BLACK FAMILY

As Charles Watson mentions in his *The History of Southern Drama*, one significant component of this genre is the evolution of the black character (3). Certainly the very earliest portrayals of black characters in American theatre were comical, such as in minstrel shows, but with the creation of the southern drama genre in the 1920s, the black character was not comical anymore. He became more sympathetic, as we began to see in *In Abraham's Bosom* and later in Alice Childress' *Wedding Band*. Perhaps as an attempt to appeal to the white population's guilt or sympathies, black personalities--especially those created by Paul Green--began more closely to resemble their predicament. In other words, an important influence on southern drama including the adverse circumstances surrounding the black man shaped the tragic figure.

With the abolishment of slavery, the African-American was a free man, but the definition of freedom was hardly one that compared to the white man's freedom. The end of slavery was merely the beginning of another struggle—the struggle for equality--and this struggle continued from the

end of the Civil War until the present. It was during the early part of the twentieth century that the now free black southerners were able to address issues other than their own survival. The black southerner was sometimes conceived of as a victim in some earlier dramas, such as in those of Paul Green, but after the effects of the Civil Rights Movement, some playwrights were able to shape more complex characters. Black southerners were still victims, but they were also agents with the ability to make life-changing decisions. With this strength came a new mindset for the black population, a changed perspective, which helped shape a different psychology.

If we consider the famous Maslow's hierarchy of needs, what happened to the black man is rational. The hierarchy, in simplest terms, states that human beings must take care of basic needs before they can concern themselves with principles, philosophies, or higher needs. At the hierarchy's most basic level, Maslow contends that we must fulfill needs such as food, water and physical safety. It is not until these needs are met that we can climb the hierarchy and eventually reach self-actualization. Of course, whether this can truly be attained has been debated for years. However, once slavery was no longer an issue, the most basic needs of those formerly enslaved could be

met, allowing them to “need” at the higher levels, which included obtaining goals and desires, though the end of slavery did not mean the end of economic struggle.

In his essay, “The Fundamental Cause of the Civil War: Egocentric Sectionalism,” Frank Lawrence Owsley definitively points to an almost certain cause of the war that divided this nation. According to Owsley, there is good sectionalism and destructive sectionalism. Good sectionalism occurs when differences in a nation are well-directed, appreciated, and understood by those outside the division, thusly preserving free institutions and maintaining vitality in all of a country’s segments. This, Owsley argues, provides for a stronger country in that it can deter political centralization and possible despotism (648).

There is, however, a destructive sectionalism that was the downfall of the United States in 1861: egocentric sectionalism. While Owsley mentions three phases of egocentric sectionalism, it is the third and most dangerous phase that applies to the racial tension experienced in the South and, in part, contributes to the psychological make up of black southerners. It occurs when there is an imbalance of power between sections and when “people in one section fail in their language and conduct to respect the

dignity and self-respect of the people in the other section" (649). For example, the abolitionists used bruising language to describe southerners. The shameless vocabulary was insulting to the South's women (implying that southern women were promiscuous), religion, and morality. Other verbal spars were against the children, labeling them not as children, but as monsters (650). These actions formed a code of conduct that ignored the principles of dignity and respect for those outside of one section. This was not only at the root of the Civil War, contends Owsley, but was a significant contributor to the Civil Rights Movement, causing the United States, and particularly the South, tremendous turmoil nearly one hundred years later. In fact, Owsley attributes egocentric sectionalism to the American Revolution, wondering why the Americans did not learn the lesson "the first time." While it seems simplistic to point to language as a cause for war (and by no means is this the sole or even primary cause), as a society we cannot ignore the power of words and how language and the attitudes that accompany it shape our culture.

What is interesting about the black man's plight as dramatized in early twentieth century southern plays is that a white author is the most prominent southern

playwright of this period to write about racial inequality. Paul Green, perhaps the earliest definitive southern dramatist in a modern sense, gave a voice--albeit from his limited perspective--to the black community.

His pleas to the white population did not fall on deaf ears. Many theatregoers were moved by Green's genuine character sketches of black persons. Paul Green had a great deal of contact with the black workers on his parents' land, often working the land side-by-side with the hired black workers and developing friendships with boys his age and older. Young Green interacted closely with the blacks and even incorporated signposts of the Black English dialect in his own vocabulary, as mentioned previously. Green, in his attempt to realistically and correctly recreate the Black English dialect, incorporated on paper what his ear heard, providing a challenge of interpretation to the contemporary ear (audience) and eye (reader).

But the dialect was far from the only challenge Green offered his audience. His Pulitzer-prize winning play, *In Abraham's Bosom*, is a call for the white race to see a black character portrayed sympathetically and atypically; atypically, at least, from the well-known comical minstrel type. Before and around the time of Green's play, several white playwrights began to explore American culture through

their perceptions of Black life, becoming most interested in the rural peasant and urban underclass. The Black middle class was considered too homogenized, i.e., uninteresting (Scott 429). Abe, the protagonist, unlike his working buddies, is determined to educate himself and rise above ignorance. In his fervent quest to be more than a field hand, he studies on his own time and tries his hand at educating the youngsters of his race. But even that is struck down when the black community forms an allegiance against him after he physically disciplines one of his students. This, however, is only part of the problem, as corporal punishment by a teacher was an accepted practice at this time. Green alienated Abe from his fellow blacks artificially, implying that the average black thought an education was futile. After years of poverty, Abe has an opportunity to be a voice for the "education of the Negro," but he ends up in a fatal fight with his white half-brother resulting in Abe's being pursued by a lynch mob. Abe's life ends tragically as his home is surrounded by angry white men.

Green's play is, perhaps, the dramatic realization of Lord James Bryce's insight into the South's race relations and the place of the "Negro:"

> If the Negro shares in the prosperity of the South, if he grows richer and enters the professions more largely, he will [. . .] be quicker to claim social inequality and be more resentful of its denial. What the whites deem his insolence will provoke reprisals from them. This will increase the tension between the two colours. And as the upper section of the negroes find that all their advances in knowledge and material well-being brings [sic] them socially no nearer the whites, their feelings will grow more bitter and the relations of the races more strained. (Clark 8)

Lord Bryce's 1888 commentary closely aligns with the initial 1886 setting of *In Abraham's Bosom*, making his statement--in the world of the play, anyway--all the more prophetic. It is this very mindset (to "keep a race in its place") that is at the core of Grier and Cobbs' *Black Rage*. In their 1968 study of African-American psychology, Drs. William Grier and Price Cobbs, psychiatrists, get to the crux of the matter in few words:

> GET OFF OUR BACKS!
>
> The problem will be so simply defined.
>
> What is the problem?

> *The white man has crushed all but the life from blacks from the time they came to these shores to this very day.*
>
> What is the solution?
>
> *Get off their backs.*
>
> How?
>
> *By simply doing it--now*. (202-3)

Another perspective of race relations explains how color becomes the defining line for status, disallowing an entire race of ever entering the upper class, regardless of education, money, or manners.

> It is important for the Best People of any society to know where to draw the line, and 'racism' [. . .] is essentially a pretentious way of saying that 'I' belong to the Best People [. . .] The South, in a very special sense, is that part of the nation which is race-bound: race is the chief axis around which southern life and thought has revolved for at least a hundred and fifty years. (Thompson 95-96)

This idea has great psychological impact. W.E.B. Du Bois was particularly sensitive to the inequity surrounding the black community, and, unlike his contemporary, Booker T. Washington, who advocated power through industry and

economics--Du Bois insisted that blacks not compromise on the right to vote, civic equality, or higher education. Du Bois claimed that compromising these basic human needs was belittling the race, and without dignity, a race could never progress (Du Bois, "*The Souls of Black Folks*" 98-99). With these restraints on the black race, it was certainly time for the black community to finally be given a voice, and in 1926, a white playwright did so.

In Abraham's Bosom is not only a call for understanding between races, but in its early, traditional style, it sets forth an image of the black family and sets in motion some interesting dynamics in both cultural and literary venues.

Because it is a white playwright who attempts to speak for the plight of the black man, not everyone sees the attempt as successful. While Paul Green's white audiences were generally moved by his drama, black activist and writer W.E.B. DuBois was not.

> Paul Green is a sympathetic author. He feels with his black folk. But he and his producers between them have presented the same defeatist genre of Negro art which is so common and at the present apparently inescapable. (Du Bois, "*In Abraham's Bosom*" 12)

Du Bois' complaint with Green's portrait of the black man was that Abe's blackness was the disability which crippled his efforts at self-actualization. Since race is permanent, Du Bois felt that Green was basically saying that a black man might never be able to reach the top of Maslow's hierarchy simply because of the "drawbacks" of his race. Many African-Americans, like Du Bois, asserted that their own voices were best to tell their own stories, which, of course, was a huge factor in the development of the Harlem Renaissance.

The theory of egocentric sectionalism, offered by Frank Owsley, is an integral part of the total functioning of Paul Green's play. The two main points in the theory--imbalance of power and disrespect for people of another section--reveal themselves repeatedly throughout the drama. Nearly every black character in Green's play except Abe has succumbed to the psychological premise of the black race's inferiority. They not only accept this warped attitude but defend it.

In the opening scene, three black woodcutters take a dinner break from the turpentine woods to establish a playful tone with one another while offering the audience necessary background on Abe, who is yet to be seen. Their conversation integrates Abe's philosophy of education, at

least to the degree they understand it, and generates a dialogue about race relations, involving the idea of egocentric sectionalism.

> BUD. Trouble ‘bout de nigger, wanter rise him up wid eddication--fact!
>
> PUNY. Hunh, rise him up to git a rope roun’ his neck. Git bried in he own graveyard, don’t mind out. Nigger’s place down de bottom.
>
> BUD. Raught on de bottom. . . Dat’s de nigger. White man on top.
>
> LIJE. You’s talking gospel. . .
>
> PUNY. Abe say he gwine climb. . .
>
> LIJE. Abe is bad mixed up inside.
>
> BUD. White and black make bad mixtry.
>
> LIJE. Do dat. [*Thumping on his chest.*] Nigger down heah. [*Thumping on his head.*] White mens up heah. (Green 658)

The three men clearly have a shared perspective of class structure in late 19th century North Carolina, and it would seem that they are not only aware of it but accept the given social conditions. Perhaps this is one illustration of Du Bois’ defeatist genre theory. Maybe Green is setting up Abe for failure and implying that blacks are complicit in their own subjugation. This also alludes to the tension

between darker skinned and lighter skinned blacks, as well as the idea prevalent in the white community that blacks of mixed blood are smarter than average blacks.

Applying Owsley's thoughts on imbalance of power to the above passage, there are several conclusions to draw. One is that these men have never experienced anything better than the conditions under which they now live (slavery was abolished over twenty years ago) and have grown to accept injustice. Another possibility is that Bud, Puny and Lije are simply scared of the horrific punishments doled out to "disrespectful blacks." They specifically mention telegram poles (lynching), shooting, and fire. The men know that doing their jobs and "keeping their mouths shut" is the safest way for the two races to coexist.

It is interesting how different Abe's view of racial relations is. Unlike his illiterate cronies, Abe envisions a south where blacks can have educational opportunities and equal rights. Abe is also so determined in his quest for equality that he takes great chances, often resulting in his being severely punished. For example, Bud, Puny and Lije recall an incident from two years ago when Charlie Sampson, a black man accused of attacking a white woman, was hung from a telephone pole and shot. Abe, in a

desperate attempt to offer a fellow man a dignified death, snuck out in the middle of the night and cut the dead man's rope and buried Charlie himself (Green 657). While his pals may respect--or more likely, fear--the imbalance of power, Abe defies it. According to Owsley, this is where conflict begins. Instead of a balance of power between the white and black populations, and there is certainly a need for balance since farming requires much of the southern population's participation, there is an imbalance created by the white majority.

Another interesting note on the imbalance of power is that since the concept has been so deeply ingrained, some of the black workers, the same ones who maintain that "niggers are on the bottom," take the power imbalance to the next level. During the three pals' discussion, Puny mentions that Colonel Mack, the land owner, might make Abe the woods boss over the rest of them. Bud responds vehemently, "Ain't no nigger gwine boss me, hoss-cake. Split his haid open wid my axe" (Green 659). Bud is accustomed to a white boss, one who "naturally" will tell him what to do, but the possibility of another black man being in charge throws things out of kilter for Bud's vision of the hierarchy. He has, in fact, fully digested

and accepted what he has been taught about the imbalance of power between the races.

What Bud, Puny and Lije represent, and what is at the core of Du Bois' commentary, is a black population that finds education not only uninteresting but dangerous. The defeatism and hopelessness is clear, and what is more, it is antithetical to American optimism--the "anything is possible if you try hard enough" motto.

A similar situation occurs in scene iii. We learn that Abe, who now teaches at the Negro school, disciplined an unruly boy using corporal punishment. Puny, who visits Abe at the school, plays messenger by telling Abe of the black community's decision to withhold their children from school. It seems, according to Puny, that the feeling is virtually unanimous. Black parents do not want a black teacher hitting their children. Ideologically, this scenario closely parallels Bud's reaction to a black boss. The bare fact is that Abe's peers view and accept the white population as powerful and authoritarian. They are unable to view a fellow black man in a position of authority. This would, as Puny stated earlier, be putting someone in charge of them whose "place in on the bottom." This might lead to a general observation of corporal punishment in schools. From my own experience, I can attest to its use

in southern schools as late as the 1980s. It may be that Paul Green took artistic license with this matter, because many blacks found this objectionable. There were black educators at this time--not everywhere, and fewer than there would be--but corporal punishment by those other than parents was accepted in the community. This may also be another reason for Du Bois' and other black men of letters' objections to the drama. It appears that in a misrepresented instance, the black community turns on its own, further validating the defeatist theme.

The second part of egocentric sectionalism maintains that there exists a disrespect for people of the other section. As mentioned previously, the lack of respect appears in both language and conduct and focuses on not honoring others' sense of dignity and self-respect. When this occurs, a great chasm is created which harbors resentment, and often rage, as outlined in Grier and Cobbs' observations of their clients.

This disrespect for those in the other section appears almost immediately in the play. Shortly after Abe enters to eat dinner with his coworkers, Colonel Mack and his son Lonnie appear. We discover in this scene that Abe is Colonel Mack's son as well, born from a master/slave

relationship, which makes the action that follows that much more difficult to bear.

In his enthusiasm and determination to educate the black race, Abe asks the Colonel--although Lonnie labels it sassing--over and over about the possibility of Abe teaching school. As tensions mount, and as Lonnie's patience runs short, the discussion becomes a headstrong exchange between Lonnie and Abe, resulting in Abe's throwing his half-brother into the briars, an almost involuntary reaction to being struck in the face with the whip. The situation worsens as Colonel Mack whips Abe for "striking a white man, for striking my son." The irony of the Colonel's words is almost too much for Abe to bear. Upon Lonnie's exit, we see Colonel Mack administering help to Abe's wounds, telling him to put some tar and honey on himself tonight and he'll be all right tomorrow (Green 664, 665). This scene is one of several to follow later involving an altercation between a white father and his mulatto son. While he is not a southern playwright, Langston Hughes portrays similar circumstances in *Mulatto* (1935), ending with the white father's death.

What occurs here is a blatant disrespect for another's dignity. It is Abe's dream to pull the black race out of illiteracy and to appeal to them to consider the injustices

against them. When the Colonel, who has the power to make a go of the school, hesitates to give Abe the chance, the Colonel is not respecting Abe's dignity. He does not support Abe's goal or respect his ability to achieve it. It is this very action that ends in such physical violence among three men, further illustrating egocentric sectionalism can, and has, led to war.

Another scene in which Abe lashes out at the disrespect shown him from Lonnie occurs toward the end of the play. Abe is already in a frantic stage, having been beaten by an angry mob that disagreed with his speech on equal rights to education. On his way back home Abe runs into Lonnie, and in their usual style, they begin to have verbal disagreements beginning with Abe's not showing "respect" for whites. (The quotes are intentional; Abe refers to the mob who beat him as "low-down white men" and Lonnie, in spite of what has just occurred, will not stand for the verbiage.) Lonnie, whose main concern is for his money-making crops, levees Abe's crop without notice, regardless of Abe's insistence that he only missed work when he was sick. The sell-out enrages Abe who fights, brother against brother, until he has choked Lonnie to death, and it is this "black rage" which leads to Abe's destruction.

Green's structure here is interesting. Why would a black man who has witnessed lynchings knowingly make an inflammatory speech before a white audience, putting his life in jeopardy, without any potential support from his own community (according to Green)? There are at least a couple of possibilities: Did Abe have a martyr complex? or was he inescapably bound for death, completing the portrait of the tragic figure?

Perhaps one of Paul Green's intents in writing *In Abraham's Bosom* was to form a black character who could serve as raisonneur by gaining the white audience's sympathies, thus packaging the theme of racial injustice more palatably. What Green does is more than that. He counters the black character--confused, struggling in vain--with white characters who "balance [. . .] the dramatic elements":

> The white people mean to be kind, but they are as lost in the midst of a race situation as the Negro is; they are moved now by human or affectionate impulse and now by a blind racial instinct and an arbitrary, desperate sense of self-preservation. (S. Young 814)

Stark Young's comment is interesting from our twenty-first century perspective. Being "lost" in a race

“situation” connotes a lack of control when it is the white population that created and perpetuated the “situation.” If this is a tragedy, then fate equals apartheid, making apartheid immutable. Therefore, Abe’s “tragedy” is his attempt to transcend his blackness. Politically, Green provides enough balance between the tragic and the sympathetic to extend a challenge to his audience: the challenge of unbiased thinking in regards to race. With Abe’s good intentions and Colonel Mack’s occasional willingness to go against mainstream thought, regardless of what others think, there exists a formula for a drama with a civil rights message that targets the white, early twentieth-century public.

To define Abe as a tragic figure is certainly accurate; to define him as a tragic hero may be more difficult. His intentions to further his race are noble; the means by which he attempts to attain them are not, at least in the eyes of most blacks, as portrayed by Green. In his book chapter entitled “Reaching for Africa: The Black Family Saga in the South,” Robert O. Stephens dually categorizes the black male image. There are the men who default in family influence and the men who dominate family memory and set family values; the latter are those which Stephens labels heroes (154).

By applying Stephens' definitions to the character of Abe McCranie, we find strong evidence of heroism, albeit to tragic ends. While Abe undoubtedly influences his family, dominates family memory and sets the family values by which they live, his influence does not reap the result Abe intended, especially in his relationship with his lazy son Douglass, a curious addition to a hard working, self-sacrificing family. What is so very tragic about Abe is that he has the best intentions, makes valiant efforts and has an unsinkable vision but is rendered impotent at every turn. Add to this a sometimes overwhelming pride, and it produces in a character the classic tragic flaw or *hamartia*.

As theorist Marvin Carlson asserts, the various interpretations of hamartia may be generally divided into two groups: those that emphasize the moral aspect of the flaw and those that emphasize the intellectual, making hamartia an error of judgment or a mistaken assumption (19). In Abe McCranie's case, it is the latter of these divisions that seems to occur throughout the drama. What Abe wants for his family, particularly his son, and for his people, is equality--hardly an immoral desire. The problem, then, is the means by which he attempts to attain his goal. Abe cannot accept that some members of his race

are not as concerned about education, or even racial injustice, as he is. He mistakenly assumes--hence, hamartia--that racial justice is not only his visio, but others' as well. This is an appealing thought for the white audience who might take comfort thinking most blacks were happy in their "place," which, of course, was not true. Abe's mistake gets in the way of his ability to allow for alternative philosophies and almost always leads to tragic consequences.

For example, tragedy surrounds Abe's relations with his family. To an extent, his relationship with Muh Mack--the older aunt who resides with the McCranies--deteriorates when he emphasizes education, books, and reading over providing for his family. Muh Mack does not hesitate to tell Abe in plain terms what she thinks of his beliefs: "[. . .] you fixing to bring mo' trouble on us wid yo' schooling and mess" (Green 691). This is not an altogether unbelievable response considering Muh Mack's own lack of formal education. When Abe practices his big speech in front of her, she "turns away from him, in disgust" then "turns her back to him." She continuously berates him for not allowing Douglass in the home--perhaps representative of the often idealized bond between grandparent figures and

children--reminding Abe of the importance of family but to no avail.

As little as Muh Mack believes in Abe's cause, he believes in hers. Their words fall on deaf ears, as when Muh Mack remarks after Abe's heartfelt speech, "Time you's learning dat white is white and black is black, and Gohd made de white to allus be bedder'n de black." Muh Mack's remark is affirmation of the white supremist point of view, which is interesting in that she speaks for the majority of the black characters in this play. This psychological phenomenon is closely akin to the Stockholm Syndrome; the black community, as other victims of abuse (i.e., kidnappings, domestic violence, parent-child relationships), has bought into its own inferiority. Not only that, but a bizarre bonding process takes place that serves as a coping mechanism for the abused. The Syndrome is marked by depression, low self-esteem, and the loss of sense of self. Often present is a dependence typified by the feeling that one cannot survive without the abuser's approval/love/acceptance (Graham et al. 79-80). Abe responds to what he views as Muh Mack's very dangerous complicity:

> I ain't a farmer. My business is with schools. [*Hotly.*] Can't you learn nothing? You dribbling

> old--, here for twenty years you've heard me talk the gospel and it ain't made no impression on you. [*He turns away, realizing the vanity of his own words to her.*] (Green 692-93)

Abe's misdirected passion takes its toll on his marriage as well; his wife, Goldie, who is the only one in Abe's family who never quite gives up the dream, suffers immense physical and emotional trauma. While Goldie is the last one to complain about the poverty, lack of food, and back breaking work, she is the first one to take on more than her share of household duties and do with less so that her family can have more. Even after an exhausting day of washing and ironing clothes for pay, she refuses to eat dinner maintaining that she does not want anything, although she just returned from a futile attempt to beg the grocer for some meat on credit. In a clash of wills with Muh Mack, Goldie recommits to both her husband and his vision.

> GOLDIE. [. . .] I gwine stick by him. [*Rising and turning to her work again.*] Dey ain't never done 'im right. Dey all been down on him f'om de fust.
>
> MUH MACK. [*Shrilly.*] And'll be till de last. Otheh niggers makes a living foh deir fambly.

> Why don’t he? Allus gut his eyes on sump’n’ else.
>
> GOLDIE. He gwine be a big man yit. Dem udder niggehs do de dirty work and take whut dey kin git. Dey de low-down trash. [*Her voice trembling.*] He gwine git him a big school some dese days. (Green 684)

Goldie’s remark that her husband is “gwine be a big man yit” could be interpreted as Abe’s hoping to gain status for himself rather than help his people. In the context of their relationship, however, there is a case for Goldie’s sentiment about her husband as being a big man in her eyes by helping his people. Certainly if Abe had said this himself, the possible egocentrism of the statement would be more prevalent.

As faithful as Goldie is to Abe and to his cause, there appears to be a lack of faith from their son. Douglass, ironically named after the famous black abolitionist spokesman Frederick Douglass, has a very different vision of life from his father’s. Still a young man in his late teens, Douglass’ interest in education--for himself or others--is almost nonexistent. His passion is not in a cause, but in his music. A gifted guitarist, he would rather skip the school, which he often does to be

with his friends and better his skills as a blues musician, which was not a very reputable profession at the time and also spoke to the “natural” musical gifts attributed to blacks.

Douglass’ disregard for a formal education, and love of music, bring him and his aunt together. In fact, it is Muh Mack who argues belligerently with Abe to allow Douglass back into their home. Aunt and nephew are more closely aligned than father and son, and it is this gap that expedites the downfall of the parent-child relationship as well as Abe’s fateful final moments. According to Grier and Cobbs, the reasons for Muh Mack’s wanting Douglass back at home could be rooted in “the family’s one primary purpose--the protection of the young; and while it [the family] serves other vital social purposes, none is more important than the function of protection” (81).

In one scene, Abe discovers that Douglass is not attending class and has been set back in reading. Alarmed that his only son may not be a leader for his race, Abe loses control and beats Douglass furiously. If this is any indication of how Abe treated the school children who slacked off, the parents’ outrage and refusal to return

their children to Abe's teaching methodology appears more understandable.

But what is behind Abe's actions? Is he so caught up in his agenda that he "sacrifices" his relationship with his son? What Abe may be doing is the second most important function of a family:

> providing an accurate interpretation of the world to its children. Children must above all be taught what the world is like, how it functions, and how they must function if they are to survive and eventually establish their families. If the family does not convey an accurate image of the world, the children will either succumb or fail to prosper sufficiently to allow them to start their own families. (Grier and Cobbs 85)

Perhaps it is not one single factor that upsets Abe's relationship with his son but is a string of events, including Abe's persistence to mold his son combined with Douglass' rebellion against the charge his father has for him. Whether it is cold-heartedness or complete naïveté, Douglass commits the ultimate sin against his own father. As Abe arrives at the schoolhouse to give his speech, he is met by white men who have been informed about Abe's speeches and calls to action. They beat him, cancel the

meeting, and tell him to leave town. To add to Abe's outrage and humiliation, he discovers that it is his own son who betrayed him, serving as informant to the white mob. When Douglass sees his father bruised and beaten, he swears he did not think the mob would beat and hunt him down at his own home, which could be viewed as incredible ignorance on Douglass' part, as the young man spent a good bit of time in the South.

In all of Abe's familial relationships, including those with his father and half-brother, Abe's heroic efforts are continuously thwarted by his erroneous judgment, his inability to handle his rage, and his often misdirected passion. His tragic flaw is not that he dreams big, but that he assumes all members of his race share the same dream, but as he finds out over the years, for whatever reason, there are many who do not.

In addition to the theories of egocentric sectionalism and hamartia, there is a third element at play in the traditional southern drama: melodrama. In Chapter Two we saw that when comparing Hellman's and Henley's styles, Hellman, the earlier playwright, utilized the well-made play structure and melodramatic elements in her drama, while Henley's voice was found in a post-modern structure with very little evidence of melodramatic influence.

Interestingly, we see a few trademarks of melodrama in Green's writing.

In his February 13, 1927 review of the Garrick Theatre's production of *In Abraham's Bosom*, southern-born critic Stark Young remarks on the play's "strong and bold climaxes." He continues, "I seem, as I think of it, to have been present at a full, passionate story, told by a poet" (814). Young also mentions the play's "curtain climaxes," or high tension moments created just as the curtain is closing on a particular scene.

Earlier drama critics emphasized melodrama's moral function. Charles Nodier, an early nineteenth-century critic at a time when melodrama was not yet in vogue and was considered by many to be an inferior genre--defended melodrama. Nodier asserted that melodrama's focus on "justice and humanity, its stimulation of virtue, its arousal of tender and generous sympathy" (Carlson 214) served as a form of moral instruction.

The question now becomes one of form. Paul Green's drama undoubtedly contains melodramatic elements, but which one? and to what degree do they coincide with Nodier's description? Green decidedly uses his drama as a plea for justice and humanity, specifically as it pertains to race, but in the end Abe and his family, members of the

mistreated race, experience anything but justice from the white mob. In the melodramatic world, good is rewarded and evil is punished. But the protagonist, whose life mission is to raise his brothers from ignorance and inequality, meets tragic consequences as a result of his attempt to "do good," ultimately creating a tragedy and engaging some audience members' sympathies.

Aligning with melodrama, Green relies on the evil forces and personalities to underscore the unfairness of racial relations. The only truly cruel character in the play is white. Lonnie, Abe's half-brother, is the first--and last--to engage in verbal and physical matches with Abe over issues related to racial differences. It is Lonnie, not the Colonel--although the Colonel is the one who created the situation, while Abe suffers all the consequences--who first becomes agitated by Abe's "impudence," and it is Lonnie who strikes the first blow in Scene One. To that end, it is Lonnie who sets Abe in his most horrific and final rage, resulting in the white brother's death. No other character in the play is as quick to engage in brutal conflict as is Lonnie. Simply put, he has no redeeming qualities. It is not as though he must protect his father or stand his ground for a noble cause; he acts out of haste and hate. He is,

unfortunately, caught in the trap of a white supremist attitude.

On a final note which ties together the two concepts of melodrama and the tragic hero in Green's play, we can apply Arthur Miller's ideas of conflict as related to melodrama and tragedy. The contemporary playwright states that any stage work must involve conflict, either external as in melodrama, or internal as in tragedy. He further distinguishes tragedy from merely the pathetic of which he says the latter can only arouse sadness, but the former will also enlighten us and show us the right way of living in the world through a negative example of characters. The tragic hero, then, has missed accomplishing his joy, but shows us that this joy is possible (Carlson 405).

By applying Miller's concept to *In Abraham's Bosom* we can see both the external conflict of melodrama and the internal conflict of tragic hero. Because of how Abe handles his internal conflict, he has external conflict. His frustration with his place in the world, and the opportunities not afforded him, channels into a hurtful dynamic with his family, both the one inside his household and the one outside. Twenty-first century scholars could label Green's approach as somewhat formulaic for the tragic mulatto, but in the 1920s white audiences did not appear to

view it as such. Abe's moments of joy are extreme but always short-lived, and when they die out, he is left in worse condition than before. After Colonel Mack gives Abe the deed to a small house and twenty-five acres of land, but most importantly, a chance to teach at the Negro schoolhouse, Abe's passion rises:

> ABE. [. . .] *he turns and stumbles into the room with shining face.*] I--I fohgives him all. I don't 'member dat beating by de spring no mo'....[*A sob chokes in his throat.*]
>
> GOLDIE. He a good man, de Colonel. He too good to us. Raise us up, help us.
>
> ABE. [*vaguely*] Up! Lift me up! Up! Up tow'd de sun! [*He glances at the calendar.*] Dat whup don't hurt no mo'. De 'membrance is passed away. [*Thumping on his breast.*] Ain't no mo' bitter gall in heah. Peace. It come all sudden over me. [*He suddenly falls on his knees by the bed in a sobbing burst of prayer.*] O God, God of de po' and of de sinful! (Green 674)

After this display of emotion, it would seem that Abe now has accomplished his joy, to use Miller's words, but instead this moment only serves to show that joy is

possible. For it is only a few months later that Abe fails miserably at the schoolhouse, proving his status as the tragic hero.

The melodramatic, or external conflict, ranges from the emotional to the extreme physical. Contingent upon Abe's relationship with the other family members, his internal conflict externalizes in various forms. The most physically severe conflicts are with Lonnie and Douglass. Whips, beatings, and of course, ultimately, Lonnie's deat, result. There is a one-sidedness to the physical conflict Abe has with his father. Since Abe views the Colonel as an authority figure and one who can and has taken up for him in the past, Abe is less hasty to come to physical blows, even when the Colonel resorts to it. This could also be explained by the fact that the Colonel is still a powerful authority figure who holds the power of life and death over Abe, as well as being his father. Abe's relationships with his wife and aunt are more in the vein of emotional conflict. Muh Mack does not hesitate to point out to Abe his faults as she sees them, and, consequently, Abe views Muh Mack as one of the most ignorant in his family--the one least likely to understand the need for change. Goldie, while she stands by Abe through extreme poverty, is still

the recipient of his harsh remarks when he misdirects his internal conflict.

At the time *In Abraham's Bosom* was written, Paul Green was taking a stand for basic human rights for the black race. Certainly slavery had been abolished for over sixty years, yet a mindset remained that held blacks in a different type of slavery. In the years following Green's play and the last two decades of the twentieth century, the black character in drama underwent change and development, but more so outside of the South. With the Harlem Renaissance and, later, the Black Arts Movement, African-American characters in drama dropped the traditional Black English dialect, examined issues such as assimilation vs. incorporation of African culture, and slowly turned from characters centered primarily in agrarian poverty to the unique problems of urbanization (*A Raisin in the Sun).* But the South's African-American characters seemed to transform even more slowly than the rest of the nation's.

By the time Atlanta playwright Pearl Cleage entered the scene with her *Blues for an Alabama Sky* in 1996, the Civil Rights Movement had seen its strongest waves thirty years earlier, but there remained a need for a voice for black people. Cleage stepped up to bat but for very

different reasons than her white predecessor of seventy years.

While Paul Green showed white audiences, in most horrific terms, the results of racial prejudice, Cleage had a less overt method of getting her messages across to her mixed-race contemporary audiences. In an interview with *American Theatre* writer Douglas Langworthy, Cleage was asked if she thought theatre had the power to help people change their minds. Her response: “Oh, I do. Theatre can be so productive because, if we do it right, it doesn’t beat people over the head and make them defensive” (22).

Cleage, unlike Green, sees the family unit in various forms. Instead of strictly blood relatives living under one roof, a married couple as head with children, Cleage envisions family as a support system of people, not necessarily relatives, living close together but not necessarily in one household. Cleage contests that during the Great Migration people were separated from their families because they had come north. Unable to rely on close kin, people formed new support systems, or families, with friends, more distant relatives, and neighbors. Is Cleage’s perception of extended family grounded in fact?

At the turn of the century, about 65 percent of whites aged sixty or older resided with their adult children or

extended kin. The proportion of elderly blacks with such living arrangements was slightly lower. By 1980, the situation had changed dramatically. Only a quarter of the elderly resided with extended family. Moreover, a substantial differential had emerged between elderly blacks and whites; blacks resided in extended family situations almost twice as frequently as did whites (Ruggles and Goeken 15, 16). What this means is that the trend toward smaller households did not apply similarly to African-American family units. With this in mind, it is not surprising to see that Cleage's play is comprised of an extended family household. Also, while her plays are not always set in the South, the South plays a significant role in them.

But the most obvious breakthrough with contemporary southern drama was that the black community now had more opportunity to draw from its own to have a voice. While considered by many as ahead of his time, Paul Green positioned himself with the black community. In our post-Civil Rights South, a white playwright is only one option. With diversity now a welcomed concept, ethnic playwrights have opportunities to tell their experiences, to showcase what has been overlooked in the past. In the South, then, a natural interest in the African-American playwright

occurs, lending authenticity to the voice for the black community.

While Cleage's play calls for an all black cast, this contemporary southern drama does not necessarily depict the opposite of earlier plays of this genre. Instead of an "us against them" motif, as frequently represented in Green's play, Cleage reveals the intra-racial tensions. The crimes in her play are not as much white against black as black against black. Cleage, with the Civil Rights Movement thirty years past its height, among other differences, is faced with new conditions and a different mindset. Although *Blues* is set in the 1930s, the playwright speaks from her post Civil Rights perspective.

> The violence in the play is black on black rather than between blacks and whites. I think that's because I live in an all-black neighborhood, Southwest Atlanta, which is 100 percent black [. . .] Walking through the park is not scary because I might run into the Klan--it's scary because I might run into young black crack addicts. Which means that as a writer my role is different, because then I'm not talking about something external. I'm not saying they need to

> stop preying on us, I'm saying we are doing these things, this is what we do. (Langworthy 22)

What Cleage has here is basically the same strategy as Paul Green, except the bases are slightly different. She is revisiting Frank Owsley's theory of egocentric sectionalism. Only this time the sections against each other are black and black, specifically the liberal-minded versus the conservative. The two groups are most clearly represented as the conservative South and the liberal North, i.e., Leland, the character from Alabama, and the other characters who now consider Harlem their home. At the heart of the north/south controversy is an issue that continues to make sparks fly: abortion. Leland, the sole pro-life thinker of the cast, allows this issue to not only dictate how he feels about Angel but to take over, resulting in the tragic shooting of Sam, the doctor who performs Angel's abortion.

Keep in mind that destructive egocentric sectionalism stems from an inability to show respect for the other section in either language or actions, or an untolerated imbalance of power. In the play Leland's lack of respect, or even tolerance, for those on the pro-choice side tears apart his relationship with Angel and ends a human life. Leland, like Abe McCrainie, is unable to understand the

other section. However, Abe is fighting for civil rights, something this country now attempts to extend to all races. Leland is on one side of an age-old issue that may never be resolved. Leland's situation creates more of a gray area for the contemporary southern audience. We know Abe is right; we are not so sure about Leland. Granted, because Leland's idea of family is much different from the new people he finds himself among, he may be perceived as a tragic figure trapped in his past--unable to overcome the death of his wife and child. That is why he reacts the way he does, but it does not necessarily excuse him.

Leland has suffered huge loss in his life and tries to replace the family he lost. He cannot see or accept Angel as she is, and she cannot see that she is pushing him over the edge. Also, he is paranoid, believes strictly in traditional male-female roles, and has several psychological "hang-ups." One of these is his obsession with not only making Angel his wife but making her "in the image of" his late wife and it is carried out to the point of delusion. Angel, the catalyst in all of this turmoil, is a woman so needy that she becomes predatory. Angel can only see her destiny in term of the economic and emotional support of a man, and she uses her body as the commodity

through which she will achieve this support (Giles, “Motion of Herstory” 2-3).

Another example of destructive egocentric sectionalism is when Guy becomes the victim of a hate crime. As an openly gay man, Guy is accepted by his liberal friends: Delia, Angel, and Sam. Guy’s sexual orientation, however, remains a source of misunderstanding and even disdain between Guy and Leland. Early in the play Guy describes a physical assault in the neighborhood involving two gay men who are walking, holding hands. The incident is not only a black on black crime but a gay bashing, again revealing a lack of respect for those in another section. Then later in the play Guy himself is attacked by “hoodlums” who “didn’t like the way he was dressed. [He] was a little too continental for their uncouth asses” (Cleage 36). Ironically, his attackers attend prayer meetings at the same church as Leland. Cleage’s depiction of black on black crime, and gay bashing, appears to stem mostly from egocentric sectionalism, and more specifically, via the concept of demonstrating disrespect. While her play is set in 1930, she, as a contemporary playwright, is dealing with contemporary issues.

While Paul Green utilizes hamartia in a traditional vein, his successor employs a more subtle technique. In

Blues for an Alabama Sky, only two characters are vehement enough to qualify for possessing a tragic flaw: Leland and Angel. As a strong advocate for conservative beliefs, Leland--the native Alabaman--allows his convictions to lead to tragedy. He, like Abe, erroneously assumes that other people, especially people of his race, have parallel viewpoints on even the most complex issues. Unlike Abe, however, Leland's beliefs--especially his pro-life stand--are not necessarily recognized as noble by the majority of a contemporary audience.

Furthermore, not only does Leland make an error in judgment, which is one aspect of hamartia, but the very fact that he stands where he does on abortion turns this into a moral issue, which is another interpretation of hamartia. In fact, it is the moral impact of Leland Cunningham's tragic flaw that defines him so strongly. The southern gentleman, naive to the liberal climate of Harlem, finds himself taking desperate action when he learns of his girlfriend's decision:

> ANGEL. I didn't lose the baby. I got rid of it.
>
> LELAND. You got rid of my son? How...(*A beat*)
>
> Dr. Thomas? You let Dr. Thomas take my son? (*He grabs her by the shoulders as if to shake her, but he stops himself and releases her*)

> LELAND. If you didn't have Anna's face, I'd kill you. (*He exits* [. . .] *Sam enters downstairs and meets Leland outside the house.*)
>
> LELAND. ...Angel told me what you did. (*A beat*)
>
> SAM. What did she tell you?
>
> LELAND. She told me that you killed my son!
>
> SAM. Go home, man. It's over. (*Sam turns and starts away. Leland pulls a gun from his belt and points it at Sam's back. There is an immediate blackout, followed by the sound of one gunshot* [. . .]) (Cleage 42)

Angel, whose tragic flaw revolves around her inability or will to take responsibility for her actions and her life, ends up hurting herself as she hurts others. She takes advantage of Guy's generosity, then gets left behind when he takes Delia to France with him. Angel teases Leland into thinking she would commit to a relationship, but then "pulls the rug out from under him" when she tells him about her abortion.

Angel previously told Leland that she miscarried; why, then, does Angel feel that she needs to tell Leland about something that she has already addressed, albeit untruthfully? In *Black Rage*, a complex theory explains black women as experiencing sex as an interplay between

narcissism and masochism. Briefly, a black woman, when entering the embrace of her black lover, finds it difficult to experience herself as a highly valued object. Historically, because of her mistreatment she sees herself as a depreciated, unwanted instrument of not inherent value to be used by men and society at their pleasure. Because of her lover's social "castration," instead of narcissistic enhancement, she experiences narcissistic depletion but also finds her own erotic feelings strengthened by the feelings of degradation (Grier and Cobbs 88-89). While a seemingly contradictory theory, when applied to Angel it explains a great deal of her behavior.

Other characters in *Blues*, while not tragic figures per se, have qualities of hamartia. Guy, for example, is open about his homosexuality. He discusses it with his friends, and he acknowledges that his method of dress makes him a target for anti-gay attacks. Guy's philosophy, to be himself, and have the right to be himself both in dress and speech, is admirable. He poses a threat to himself, however, by walking around certain parts of Harlem in his "continental" wardrobe. That is a risk that he is willing to take. Guy is comfortable with himself, and despite the near brawl he endures coming back from the store in broad daylight, he claims it is a temporary inconvenience until

he is able to move to Paris where the fashion industry will embrace his sense of style. So far, it is only fortune that prevents Guy from being a victim of a serious attack. Aside from the possibility of harm, Guy is the healthiest of the characters. He is who he is, and he meets his goal: to escape the U.S. for Europe.

To a lesser extent, Delia Patterson and Dr. Sam Thomas are caught up in aspects of hamartia. They both commit themselves to a cause they believe in, knowing full well the possible consequences of their choices. Since hamartia is, in part, contingent upon a sense of erroneous judgment, it is not so much an error but a dangerous choice they each make. Delia is a social worker on staff at the Margaret Sanger family planning clinic at a time when family planning was not nearly the common term it is today. Combining historical fact with dramatic myth, Cleage reexamines the conflict between feminist Margaret Sanger, who opened a birth control clinic in Harlem, and black nationalist Marcus Garvey, who viewed Sanger as an agent of racial genocide (Giles, “In Their Own Words” 30). Delia is particularly determined to educate her race about the choices they now have regarding pregnancy. Sam, a forty-year-old black doctor in Harlem, is one of the few doctors black women can see to end their pregnancies. Both Delia

and Sam devote their lives to educating their race on health matters; but with the opposing mindset, it is a dangerous profession, as Sam's death proves. To make Sam's death even more tragic, Delia and Sam have become interdependent. Delia has been repressed; Sam helps her embrace her sexuality, and she gives him the emotional relationship he has been searching for.

In the simplest of terms, the conflict experienced in *Blues* is framed by the contingencies of living in a racist society, though it is not as much between races as it is within a race. This alone implies an internal quality. On a deeper level, however, the characters in Cleage's play are dealing with unresolved issues and struggles within themselves. Angel, for example, came to Harlem to flee the suffocating mindset of the South. She and Guy escaped child prostitution together. Angel is badly damaged; she does not see a problem in surviving by any means necessary, including leading Leland on.

In the beginning she and Guy are family, and she is accepted by the extended family of friends. In the end she has betrayed them all and is left alone. Angel's dreams are limited to a man and a singing job. Ironically, Leland represents everything Angel worked hard to evade, and she falls for him almost immediately, proving she is unable to

break away from something that is not good for her. Leland wants to tie Angel to him, but she has commitment issues, and she wants to go to France with Guy. Leland is nothing more than a “port in a storm” to Angel, but he does not know that.

Throughout the play Angel slowly realizes that perhaps even Harlem is not where she can live her dreams. After an audition that turned out to be only an interview for a sexual encounter, Angel declares

> I’m tired of Negro dreams. All they ever do is break your heart [. . .] He didn’t want a singer anymore than you do. He wanted to keep a colored woman stashed up in Harlem so he could come by every now and then and rub her head for luck. (Cleage 35)

Yet in the same scene, Angel asks Leland as he is leaving, “Leland? You gonna be my lucky charm?” Apparently there still exists an internal conflict that causes Angel to make bad choices in both of her dreams.

Turning to another landmark of melodrama--flat characters, especially in terms of good and evil--there is some similarity between earlier southern drama and the drama of today. As discussed, Green confines many of his main characters to mostly good or mostly evil. They, in

turn, are at war with one another until the final climax. In Pearl Cleage's contemporary play, the personalities of the flat characters are not as much divided into good and evil as they are simply stereotypes. Cleage draws on typical characteristics to formulate two of her characters: Leland, a southern gentleman, and Guy, a gay man.

Leland Cunningham, the one character in the play who has only been in Harlem for six weeks, represents not only the observable characteristics in a southern stereotype. He also maintains a psychology that borders on grandeur, the romantic and fantasy-like thought which is a characteristic often found in certain southern types.

On the most superficial level, there are niceties that Leland embraces as part of his Alabama upbringing such as helping a lady "in distress," or, chivalry. In the first scene, Leland sees Guy trying to manage a drunken Angel, and he steps up to help escort her home. Guy describes Leland as "a mysterious gentleman who came to our aid and then melted back in to the Harlem night" (24). The next day Leland stops by outside her window to see if she is feeling better. To Angel's delight, he addresses her with the southern courtesy "ma'am," and makes a date for a stroll on the weekend. His charm is refreshing to Angel,

who has just been dumped by her boyfriend and is regularly hanging around a rough crowd.

Aside from his manners, Leland is programmed to take on a traditional role in a relationship. He considers it his responsibility to take care of a woman, as he tried to do with his wife, Anna, before she died in childbirth. When Leland hears about Angel losing her clothes in a supposed fire, he buys her a dress--one that is clearly too plain and conservative for Angel's taste, but a thoughtful gesture nonetheless. Leland also says to Angel how he wants to "protect, cherish and keep" her, and that he is "gonna be [her] man" (35).

A conservative sensibility and religious fervor round out Leland's southern character. Both go hand-in-hand in the dissolution of his and Angel's relationship and Sam's murder. Leland constantly reveals his narrow world to the more experienced crowd through statements like "I've never met a Negro doctor before" when introduced to Sam. Later when Leland returns to call on Angel, Guy offers Leland some champagne. "Is that liquor? [. . .] It's still prohibition, isn't it" (34)? Leland responds warily.

Fundamental religion separates Leland even further from the Harlem crowd. One of the first questions he asks Angel when they are alone is if she has a "church home." He

tells Angel that the church he visited in Harlem did not feel like church to him because the pastor was talking more about this world than he was the next one. Angel asks, “What should he be talking about?” Leland hesitates, then speaks urgently, “About sin and salvation. About the presence of hell fire” (33-34). When Delia, Sam and Leland briefly discuss birth control, Delia’s life work, Leland responds simply: “The cure for mothers who don’t want babies is fathers who do” (37).

It is not only Angel and her friends who notice the conservative/liberal gap between them and the southern gentleman, but Leland himself struggles with the different mindset between his home of Alabama and Harlem:

> LELAND. Excuse me. The men were looking at another man? [. . .] I just don’t think I understood you right. Did you say these men at your party were making [. . .] What did you mean when you said eyeballing?
>
> SAM. Maybe I can . . .
>
> GUY. Eyeballing. Admiring. Sizing up. Flirting.
>
> LELAND. Men flirting with men?
>
> GUY. They were homosexuals, for God’s sake. What’s wrong with you?

> LELAND. Don’t put God’s name in the stuff you’re talking about! I don’t know how sophisticated New York people feel about it, but in Alabama, there’s still such a thing as abomination! (37-38)

As the discussion becomes more and more heated, Leland leaves and Guy makes a remark that sums up the stereotype: “He’s exactly the kind of small-minded, ignorant, judgmental bastard I left Savannah to get away from” (38)!

Cleage’s final layer to the southern stereotype she creates in Leland involves his overwhelming notion of romanticism. This is not necessarily a component of Paul Green’s characters in *In Abraham’s Bosom*, although one could say that Abe’s dream appears romantic to Green and the tragic mulatto could be a romantic figure. The romantic southerner, however, is captured time and time again in other southern dramatists’ works, most vividly in some of Tennessee Williams’ famous leading ladies such as Blanche DuBois and Amanda Wingfield.

Perhaps Guy speaks for the southern romantic sensibility when he reminds Angel, “Just remember, Sweetie, Alabama isn’t just a state. It’s a state of mind” (32). It is this state of mind that drives Leland; unable to function comfortably in Harlem after six weeks, he resorts

to his past--a time of comfort--to make sense of this new world he has entered. After escorting Angel back to her apartment, Leland sees her scarf on the ground but decides against giving it back to her that night. Instead, he uses it as a reason to see her again, to return her scarf. Alone after the death of his wife and child, Leland seeks solace in Angel because she reminds him of his beautiful Anna. He is so anxious to "have" Anna and his son again that he moves his relationship with Angel to the point where he left off with his wife--pregnancy. Leland even assumes that the baby Angel was carrying was a boy because that is what Leland would have had if Anna and the baby had survived. Leland's delusions finally get the best of Angel when she blurts: "You want me to lie! That's all you ever wanted. Pretend I'm Anna. Pretend I love you. I'm through with it" (42)!

Leland Cunningham is not the only stereotype in Cleage's drama; aside from the southern gentleman, Cleage draws on seemingly common attributes to form Guy Jacobs, a gay stereotype. Guy, open about his sexual orientation from the beginning of the play, is a character Cleage wanted the audience to like in hopes of dealing with homophobia. In both language and actions, Cleage has Guy encompassing almost every homosexual stereotype in

existence: Guy calls Angel “girlfriend,” and immediately relates to Delia that Leland is “the finest young thing [he has] seen in ages” (24). Guy’s occupation falls under stereotyping as well. He is a costumer for drag shows. When he first got to Harlem, he

> specialized in gowns for discriminating gentlemen [. . .] You don’t think these six-foot queens buy off the rack, do you? [. . .] The first time I went to the Hamilton Lodge Drag Ball, I knew I was looking at a gold mine. (34)

Where Cleage veers away from stereotyping Guy is that his occupation, however stereotypical it may be, is tied into his dream: to design for Josephine Baker, and it is a dream he realizes.

As the southern black family goes, from the 1920s perspective of Paul Green to Pearl Cleage’s post-Civil Rights drama, the very meaning of the word “family” has changed. Formerly including only blood relatives, now the black family may consist of neighbors and close friends. Family may be as much geographical as it is genetic. While the increase of extended family is not solely a black phenomenon, statistics reveal that the trend is almost twice as strong in African-American households. The theory of egocentric sectionalism is still thriving from a

contemporary perspective, but instead of the sections pertaining exclusively to white and black, there is a new phenomenon of black on black crime. The intolerance, lack of respect, and imbalance of power continue to destruct the family.

The tragic hero, while abruptly evident in traditional drama, appears in slightly different form now. The causes for which Cleage's characters stand are not necessarily judged as being noble by a contemporary audience. What was a clear cut cry for civil rights now becomes a battle over personal values and matters of religion, as Cleage broadens the discussion of what constitutes a civil right. The cause is not as clear now for the tragic figure, more of an anti-hero in Angel's case, anyway. She is a survivor on the one hand; on the other, she is one who refuses to take responsibility for her own life. Also, the destructive effects of egocentric sectionalism continue to haunt the black southern family.

Melodramatic elements in black southern family dramas were prevalent in Green's writing and are still evident in Cleage's work, but they are manifested differently. The curtain climaxes and external conflict in *In Abraham's Bosom* are inherent in earlier drama, but they are not a product of contemporary writing. *Blues for an Alabama Sky*

focuses on internal conflict and characters who are not necessarily all good or all evil, although Green might say the same for his characters.

The true melodrama lies in the stereotyping of two characters. One of whom did not even enter pre-Civil Rights southern dramas in this fashion. With all her stereotyping, Cleage does at least manage to present a gay character in not only a likeable light but also as an openly gay man, a definite mark of changing times in southern drama.

So, now that black playwrights are able to speak for their community, what changes have occurred in the representation of the black character in southern drama? We now see African-American characters who do not have to "escape" their blackness in order to live their dreams. The tragic mulatto figure is no longer a focal point, and the traditional Black dialect is dropped.

Because Pearl Cleage writes from a feminist perspective, we also witness the black female experience and are privy to feminist issues affecting the black community: birth control and feelings of degradation manifested sexually, emotionally, and psychologically. Because Cleage is concerned with several minority groups' civil rights, she addresses more than racial issues and

more than feminist issues; she also speaks to gay rights. What this does for the black character and black family in southern drama is offer an equally diverse palette from which to paint character portraits. Abe is a tragic hero. Angel also is tragic; however, we are invited to share in much more of her psychology. We know about her sexual past. We are aware of her addictions.

With Abe, we see him fighting "the big struggle," but his subtleties are not revealed the way Angel's are. Also, with Cleage's play we have black characters who are well-educated (Sam and Delia), creative, and unshaken by others' bigoted opinions regarding sexual orientation (Guy). We also have characters who are desperately manipulative and who do not take responsibility for life choices (Angel)--a far cry from the less developed black family in Green's 1926 play. *Blues for an Alabama Sky* speaks to the southern drama genre in that its playwright is writing from her Atlanta perspective. She is interpreting intra-racial crime through her experiences in the South. However, Cleage herself is the most notable change in the black southern family scope. The biggest contribution from the Civil Rights Movement allows a black writer's voice to speak for her race and to add authenticity to the black experience in southern drama.

CHAPTER 4

THE FAMILY AND THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC

In the continuing examination of the evolution of the family in southern drama it would be a gross error to exclude one of the most evident and indigenous characteristics of southern drama: the grotesque, or as it is also called, Southern Gothic. While the grotesque is easily recognized, it is much harder to describe because the grotesque finds its way into southern drama--and most southern literature--in various forms. To complicate matters for the worse, a reader's interpretation of what is grotesque is as subjective as what the writer has penned.

In order to define the term, it is necessary to investigate its very roots. Some literary theorists point to the South's agrarian ties and the hardships endured by poor farmers as the bridge between dealing with grotesqueries in life and their images in literature:

> the old agricultural system of the South depleted the land and left an economically unstable and emotionally underdeveloped society [. . .] Poverty breeds abnormality; in many cases, people were living with a code that was no longer

> applicable, and this meant a detachment from reality and a loss of vitality. (Presley 37)

Theorist Lewis Lawson concurs with the heavy force of agriculture playing a significant role in the framing of the Southern Gothic:

> It is the larger frame of Southern philosophy, based upon Southern experience, that is pertinent. The South, more than any other section of the United States, it is generally accepted, has retained a provincial, insular, conservative culture. It is even today more agrarian minded than the remainder of the country. (175)

The poverty and conservatism the South experienced undoubtedly laid the groundwork for accepting the abnormal as normal--to perceive normalcy as simply what surrounds you.

A more direct connection between the grotesque and agriculture is in the physical exertion, pain, and suffering farmers and their families endured as part of life on the farm. In his autobiography, Georgia novelist and playwright Harry Crews recounts his first encounter with non-disfigured bodies and how that memory was permanently imprinted in his brain:

> I first became fascinated with the Sears catalogue because all the people in its pages were perfect. Nearly everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half-chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness from a glancing fence staple. And if they didn't have something missing, they were carrying scars from barbed wire, or knives, or fishhooks. But the people in the catalogue had no such hurts. They were not only whole, had all their arms and legs and toes and eyes on their unscarred bodies, but they were also beautiful. Their legs were straight and their heads were never bald and on their faces were looks of happiness, even joy, looks that I never saw much of in the faces of the people around me.
>
> Young as I was, though, I had known for a long time that it was all a lie. I knew that under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world. (Crews, *A Childhood* 58)

While physical disfigurement is an obvious use of the grotesque, there are yet other modes of Southern Gothic

that border on the psychological, emotional, sexual, and even moral planes.

Words such as “disfigurement, deformity, aberrant,” and “disorder” constitute a standard vocabulary for Southern Gothic; in other words, heading away from the norms, the average, the accepted is, in general, much of what Southern Gothic entails. In her famous comment about the grotesque in southern literature, Flannery O’Connor proclaims, “Whenever I’m asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one” (Presley 38).

With that said, there are at least five “disorders” that flesh out the grotesque, according to Lawson and Presley: (1) the sexual, (2) narcissism, (3) familial conflict, (4) dream-like confusion, and (5) a sense of mystery or the unexpected. The sexual refers to not merely sexual frankness but sexual aberrations, yet none of the descriptions is pornographic in the narrowest sense of the term because the writing does not excite desire (Lawson 172).

If Blanche DuBois is Tennessee Williams’ mouthpiece, then it is important to note their parallel romantic perspectives. It is well known that Williams’ father was

not at all happy with his son's writing talent. Cornelius Williams could not fathom a man making a living as a writer. Furthermore, it frustrated him that his older son had no male friends, and while sixteen-year-old Tennessee had a girlfriend, Hazel, the relationship, in Cornelius' eyes, was not based on romance:

> Even the relationship with Hazel was in Cornelius' view unmanly, in that they seemed to behave more like girlfriends [. . .] Furthermore, Tom's way with women was not the cavalier Williams way. It was one thing to be courtly while in hot pursuit of the ladies, in the true southern gentleman's tradition, quite another to be gentle and caring. Tom thoroughly empathized with their feelings, even identified with them; and as a result, Tennessee Williams' work would be characterized by an uncanny understanding and genuine liking of women: Amanda and Laura Wingfield, Blanche DuBois [. . .] Maggie Pollitt [. . .] (Leverich 82-83)

From the time he first referred to Tom as a "Miss Nancy," Cornelius was instrumental in creating the very thing in his son that he abhorred and feared most. It was a defense of his own masculinity as he wanted it manifest in his

son--a father's self-fulfilling prophecy that became fixed in the child's mind (Leverich 83). Only later in his life did Williams acknowledge that without the "devils" in his life, he would have never had his "little angels."

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams captures the sense of the Southern Gothic particularly well with his use of the dream-like state that creates an ambience for the entire play and the sense of mystery that surrounds its protagonist. There are remnants of familial conflict and gothic narcissism, but the sexual components of the play are, for the most part, designed to reveal a passion or at least a love interest between characters, with a few exceptions.

Certainly one technique that Williams uses expertly is the gradual exaggeration of a character's habits. What appears initially to be a fairly normal act becomes more and more exaggerated throughout the play until it reaches the mode of gothicism. This is especially evident with certain sexual behaviors. For example, Stanley's brutish quality begins as a heavy-handed playfulness with his wife. At the top of the play he comes home and throws a package of bloody meat at her for her to prepare for dinner. The Negro Woman and Eunice share a wink and a nudge over the

implications of Stanley's "throwing his meat around" and his wife being none the wiser.

This expression of masculinity and sexuality is revealed again during the famous card party scene when Stella and Blanche come home at nearly 2:30 a.m. from their dinner, show, and drinks, and the men are still playing poker. As Stella asks Stanley if they can call it quits after one more hand, and leans over to unmake Blanche's bed, Stanley whacks her on the backside in front of the whole card party. This may not appear at first to be a harmful gesture, but it has apparently happened before, much to Stella's chagrin:

> STELLA. That's not fun, Stanley! *(Angrily, she goes into the bedroom, closing curtains behind her. Pablo laughs, and men continue playing cards. To Blanche, crossing to dressing table to put down purse and gloves.)* It makes me so mad when he does that in front of people. (Williams 33)

What could be perceived as a playful innocence becomes more of a mean-spirited tease, specifically intended to make Stanley the momentary jokester but at Stella's expense.

Stanley's sexual advances build into the famous moment of brutality when he and Blanche are alone as Stella is at

the hospital in labor. Upon his entrance to the apartment, Stanley apprises Blanche's situation immediately. He knows that Mitch has just succumbed to the vicious stories about Blanche's reputation and left her after an ugly exchange. That incident combined with Blanche's delicate mental state makes her a particularly vulnerable target for Stanley's "unrefined ways." While Stanley's actions are inexcusable, they are, at first, slightly foreshadowed by the fact that earlier in the play it was Blanche who began a playful flirting relationship with her brother-in-law by asking him to button the back of her dress, asking for a drag on his cigarette, and playfully spraying him with her atomizer as she perfumes herself until he replies:

> STANLEY. *(Seizing her R. wrist.)* If I didn't know you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you. *(Releases her hands.)*
>
> BLANCHE. Such as what?
>
> STANLEY. *(Pushing her hand aside.)* Don't play so dumb. You know what! (27)

Nonetheless, as Stanley and Blanche's conversation proceeds upon his return from the hospital, Stanley is determined to call Blanche on every one of her illusions: Mitch's returning with roses and begging her forgiveness and Shep Huntleigh's invitation to the cruise in the Caribbean.

But Stanley does not stop there; he then begins the physical threats which force Blanche to break a bottle and hold it toward him in self-defense.

> STANLEY. What did you do that for?
>
> BLANCHE. So I could twist the broken end in your face!
>
> STANLEY. I bet you would do that!
>
> BLANCHE. I would! I will if--
>
> STANLEY. Oh, you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough-house! *(Springs towards her. She cries out. He seizes her hand holding bottle, twists it behind her.)* Tiger--tiger! Drop the bottle-top! Drop it! *(She drops bottle-top. He bends her to his will, picks her up in his arms.)* We've had this date with each other from the beginning! *(Starts towards bed with her.)* (94)

This final sexual rampage of Stanley's is what forces Stella to have Blanche institutionalized because Stella "couldn't believe [Blanche's] story and go on living with Stanley" (96)!

While the sexual component of *Streetcar* is widely recognized, the narcissistic disorder of the Southern Gothic is also present mainly through Blanche, though

perhaps not as strongly as the sexual element. The idea, however, of self love--because there is a lack of reciprocity from the "average" population--tends to focus on society's margins. This lack of reciprocity is a distorted love, and this distortion is categorized as gothic, according to Irving Malin, author of *New American Gothic*:

> Although it is easy to dismiss the cripples and homosexuals in new American gothic as sensational cardboard figures, they are frequently symbols of disfiguring, narcissistic love. They "work" as does Frankenstein. (5-6)

While Malin mentions both cripples and homosexuals as symbols of narcissistic love, it is the latter group that makes for a situation of gothic proportions for Blanche, although it is she who is eventually crippled. It is her husband who, after a very brief marriage, she finds with an older man. After Blanche's proclamation of disgust, her husband, ashamed and humiliated, shoots himself, leaving Blanche horrified and hurt. Allan's suicide leaves Blanche psychologically crippled, unable to maintain a normal romantic relationship and, due to the crippling nature of her mental state, a victim of narcissistic love. She frequents the shady Flamingo hotel, she is accused of

improper behavior toward a boy at her school, and she pathetically seduces the young newspaper collector into kissing her.

The grotesque as familial conflict appears in basic form among the three family members of the DuBois/Kowalski household. The friction between the private and the social worlds that Malin describes is especially applicable in *Streetcar*. In fact, it can be seen in the discrepancy between what Stella and Blanche learned as children was supposed to be private in a marriage and what Stella has accepted as Stanley's wife to be a normal part of social interaction. Perhaps the conflict begins within: Stella's own discomfort with her changed lifestyle since her marriage.

Williams posts signs all along the way from the very beginning. During Blanche and Stella's initial meeting, Stella's responses to her sister's borderline rude remarks betray her true feelings. Stella is embarrassed that their apartment has only two rooms, that she does not have a maid, and when Blanche asks if Stanley is "so--different" from boys they dated at home, Stella replies, "Yes. A different species" (12, 14). This lays the foundation for Blanche's later remarks about Stanley's "primitive" quality and ape-like behavior. It seems that the longer Blanche

visits, the more she is able to subtly remind Stella of the huge difference in their lifestyle growing up at Belle Reve and the rougher lifestyle that Stella has now chosen for herself in the French Quarters. As Stella is influenced by her sister and perhaps somewhat by her childhood, there is increased tension between Stella and Stanley.

Stanley's "different species" mentality involves a more liberal concept of what is tolerated as appropriate public behavior: from his physical displays of affection and sexuality to causing a scene by desperately calling her name after a fight. He is also less likely to succumb to social mores by hiding his continually mounting bad feelings toward Blanche and the truths he discovers about her. Stella, however, struggles with her private passionate relationship with her husband and the more restraining requirements of the society in which she was raised.

The dream-like facet of the Southern Gothic that involves chronological confusion and personal disengagement is absolutely paramount to the very nature of *Streetcar*. In fact, the "mental fog" that eventually claims Blanche is echoed by expressionistic elements throughout the play, such as the "Varsouviana" that plays each time Blanche alludes to her late husband, the image of the Mexican woman

vendor, and “Good Night Ladies” which is heard at the top of the rape scene. Certainly Blanche’s own state of mind deteriorates steadily, and she begins and ends the play in confusion. Gradually, the contributing factors to her delicate balance are revealed with their cumulative, snowball effect: her husband’s suicide, her improper conduct with a high school boy, the deaths of relatives, her losing Belle Reve, the break off with Mitch, and, of course, the rape by her brother-in-law.

Closely related to the gothic dream-like state is what Flannery O’Connor claims is essential to the grotesque: a sense of mystery and the unexpected. This includes unusual experiences not normally observed in the manners and customs of everyday existence (Presley 38). There are several examples of mystery and surprise throughout the play, ranging from small discrepancies to unidentifiable causes.

The mysterious circumstances surrounding Blanche’s teaching career, combined with several past incidences such as her husband’s homosexuality and suicide, each contributes to the psychological aura that envelops her. Proof of her mental fragility surfaces first with the cruel commentary toward Stella and slightly sexual interactions with Stanley. As illusion becomes more and more a distinct

part of Blanche's world, the mystery surrounding her becomes more apparent. Yet, it continues to manifest itself in unexpected ways.

The representation of the Southern Gothic or grotesque in *Streetcar* is closely aligned with its protagonist. There is an ethereal gothic quality that is undoubtedly present, but it is detected by allusions rather than directness. Williams' talent for poetic language touches on a non-realism that easily lends itself to the gothic dream-like state and the mysterious. As Blanche begins her exit and is in a state of complete confusion, she resorts to a speech of metaphor and grandeur:

> BLANCHE. *(Suddenly listening as she puts on hood, to a far-away sound, inhaling a far-off odor.)* I can smell the sea-air. My element is the earth--but it should have been the water--water--the blessedest thing that God created in those seven days. The rest of my days I'm going to spend on the sea. And when I die, I'm going to die on the sea [. . .] And I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard at noon--in the blaze of summer--and into an ocean as blue as--the blue of my first lover's eyes! (98, 99)

Williams' treatment of the grotesque in *Streetcar* reflects a very different south from the one to emerge forty years later. Between Williams and Crews, there was a dearth of southern playwrights who were able to utilize the Southern Gothic with similar effect. Beth Henley has often been classified as allowing Southern Gothicism to influence her works, but she is Crews' contemporary, and while she does employ the Gothic in her plays, it is almost always accompanied by a bizarre humor, which is something that is lacking in Williams' and Crews' dramas. While Horton Foote and Romulus Linney wrote several plays in between the time of *Streetcar* and the 1980s, Foote's use of the Gothic was sporadic and sometimes not even present. *The Young Man From Atlanta*, for which Foote won his only Pulitzer Prize in Drama (1996) moves into a sentimental realm and turns away from grotesque characters and situations which characterize Southern Gothic. Additionally, Romulus Linney experiments with the Gothic. Several of his plays deal with southerners and religion, spirits, ghosts, and snake-handling. While some of his plays involve situations of grotesque proportions, the examination of the "other world" takes center stage, classifying the majority of his plays as other than primarily Southern Gothic. Who, then,

represents the South and puts his gothic trademark stamp on nearly every work?

In 1989, Georgia novelist Harry Crews was commissioned to write a play for the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theatre of Louisville. As an "unseasoned" playwright, yet a writer whose Gothic sensibility permeates his personal life and his work, Crews is a fascinating test case for the southern drama genre. In line with his reputation, Crews writes about what he knows--the southern rural experience--and he insists on his way of doing it--as a storyteller. Crews is influenced by playwrights and novelists alike. His rural, "white trash" setting for *Blood Issue* (and many of his novels and non-fiction works) smack of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers (Lee 219) and Mary Hood. In Hood's collection of short stories, *And Venus Is Blue*, Hood, like Crews, is able to capture the essence of male sexuality and aggression in the lower class South.

Crews' use of grotesquerie in his fiction and non-fiction versus his drama is similar, but he admits that he felt he "didn't have the freedom to put on stage what could be accomplished in a novel" (Interview). With *Blood Issue* being his first play, he did not have the background to

structure a play other than in a mode with which he was comfortable: realism. He laughs,

> Hell, when they [Actors Theatre] called me about this project, I thought, “How do you write a play?” So, being an avid reader I went to the library and checked out books on how to write a play, and that’s, in part, how I tackled that. (Interview)

Crews handles the Gothic in his play more cautiously than in his prose. He limits his images to what can be staged, and the majority of the information stems from dialogue, with no allowance for a conventional narrative, as in prose. These are some of the ways Crews handles theatrical grotesques, which for him present interesting and unique problems.

His “stories,” like Tennessee Williams’ “stories,” are of a very personal nature. They are generally centered around his family, himself, and the people he knew growing up. Just as Williams had much in common with Blanche, Crews has much in common with Joe, a writer who writes about family--raising painful issues. Crews insists that he is most interested in plays that tell a story. As for the literature that does not (which, for the most part Crews is referring to postmodern drama with nonlinear

developments) he remarks, “I mean, what the hell IS that” (Interview)?! But for Crews to watch events of his childhood played out on stage is hard:

> So discomfiting was it for Harry Crews [. . .] to listen to an audience reacting to his first stab at theater that he ‘watched’ much of *Blood Issue* with his head bowed, his eyes clamped shut, and his straw cowboy hat pulled down in the neighborhood of his nose. (Sauve)

Harry Crews’ play, *Blood Issue*, richly illustrates the multi-faceted “grotesque” or Southern Gothic in all of the five previously identified dimensions: the sexual, narcissistic, family conflict, the dream-like state and the sense of mystery. There are differences in *Blood Issue*’s representation of the grotesque and Tennessee Williams’ representation of the grotesque in *Streetcar*. Some differences are more blatant than others, such as the dream-like quality that veils the characters in *Streetcar,* which is replaced by a gritty starkness in the more contemporary *Blood Issue*. As each of the five gothic dimensions in *Blood Issue* is compared and contrasted to *Streetcar*, there are emerging signs of a changing genre and representations of a different family dynamic.

One of the landmarks of the Women's Movement of the 1960s and '70s was perhaps, freedom from the sense of strictly defined, often stifling gender roles. While the Movement will be remembered as initiating equal pay for equal work and allowing women to break psychological barriers in order to enter the workplace and establish fulfilling careers, the Women's Movement will also be remembered as a time simultaneous to the Sexual Revolution. And for all its good and bad points, the Revolution and the Women's Movement facilitated a change in "acceptable" sexual practices as represented in media and literature. As the laws loosened about the sexual content of printed materials, writers took advantage of the new availability of formerly un-chartered territory. When asked if the social movements of the '60s and '70s affected his writing, Harry Crews responded, "Why, yes. There are definitely topics you can write about now that you couldn't then" (Interview). In fact, the sexual as grotesque is the overriding theme in Crews' play. Something that hasn't changed in the southern drama genre is the use of the sexual as grotesque. Both Williams and Crews are skilled writers in that regard. Each writer simply uses this component in his individual style. Williams uses it more poetically; Crews, more realistically.

As writer Joe Bass, the main character, returns to his hometown in rural, southern Georgia for a family reunion, it is obvious he is not there simply to see family. In fact, Joe's older brother George does not approve of Joe's lifestyle: straying from the family farm, drinking alcohol, and not returning for their stepfather's funeral. As Joe finds the chance to talk individually with certain family members, he slowly discovers that his hunch is not unprecedented. He has always been curious about the baby his mother had before George. The story, as Joe had been told, was that the baby was stillborn, buried immediately and without marking in hopes that his parents could move on more quickly from their tragedy. As Joe gradually gathers more information regarding his father's sexually crippling disease, he questions the circumstances surrounding his and his brother's births. Joe's late night conversation with his uncle confirms Joe's suspicions about his father's fertility:

> JOE. And did he lose a testicle like they say?
>
> PETE. Lose a testi*what*?
>
> JOE. A nut. Did he lose one of his balls?
>
> PETE. I don't think I want to git into this. It ain't seemly . . . That . . . that *trouble* you Daddy had, it happened before he ever met you

ma. He's dead and gone now, and no good can come of blamin the dead for anything.

JOE. I'm not *blaming* him, Uncle Pete. You ought to know that. With the life I've led, I'm the last one to point a finger. Besides, I know what clap could cost in them days.

PETE. Hell, it weren't his fault, young buck like he was, off down there in that swamp. He'd woulda never laid with that Seminole gal had he known she was tainted. But she was, she was tainted. Could of happened to any man.

JOE. Way I heard it, he was told he'd never have children.

PETE. That's doctors for you. You here ain't you?

JOE. Yeah, I'm here.

PETE. George, too.

JOE. George, too. (Crews, *Blood Issue* 44, 45)

Later the next morning as the whole family is together, Joe probes his mother, Mabel Boatwright, first casually, then deliberately, about the birth of her first son. In an attempt to avoid the pain of the past, Mabel at first acts like she does not quite understand, but quickly realizes that Joe knows more than he is letting on:

> MABEL. He . . . I held him. I just held . . . It weren't no more than minutes til . . . I held'm til he was dead. I weren't no more than a yearlin girl myself . . . it looked liked . . . It was like lookin at my own death. Frank, [her first husband] he . . . Frank was there . . . Miss Emily Johnson [the midwife], she tried to take it from me. She never wanted me to see. But I held it till it died lyin right agin me . . . and the birthin blood . . . its liver . . . the baby's . . . its little liver was on the outside . . . blue . . . but it never cried . . . once. (67)

Compared to Williams, Crews' syntax is gritty, more colloquial, and written in the southern vernacular, thus lacking the poetry that clearly marks Williams' work. Also, the grotesque manifests itself not only in the more graphic imagery that Crews utilizes, but in the handling of the subject matter.

For example, Williams leads the audience to (not through) a rape scene while the next scene picks up after the act is done, without ever using the actual word. In contrast, Crews has Joe and Uncle Pete referring, rather unpoetically, to the male anatomy and Mabel describes--in

gory detail--the tragic birth of her first son. Also, while Blanche playfully flirts with her brother-in-law, and Stanley and Stella refer to their lovemaking as “making noise in the night” and “getting the colored lights going,” Uncle Pete tells Aunt Ethel his “pencil needs sharpening”; and there is the frank explanation of Joe’s father getting venereal disease from a Seminole woman. Both playwrights share a strong sense of metaphor, and time has given Crews more linguistic freedom, but essentially the sexual component of the Southern Gothic is in tact in both plays.

While the sexual component of the grotesque nearly overshadows the play, Joe’s narcissism contributes to the play’s grotesqueness. Without Joe’s self-centeredness--at least that is how it appears to several family members--the story of the misshapen baby would not have been rediscovered. In some ways, the beginning of the play reminds us of Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child*: the dark secret that must be revealed. However, Joe’s wanting to know who his real father is, is a pragmatic quest. Bloodlines and paternity are major issues in this community, and Joe has not been able to shake his need to solve the mystery. Also, Joe seeks love and comfort not from other humans--after all, he and his wife divorced and Joe rarely visits his family--but from outside sources that allow him to

wallow in narcissistic love; namely, alcohol and his writing, yet not everyone in the family is ready to admit that the first college graduate in the family is an alcoholic.

> GEORGE. He has to have him a drink a whiskey.
>
> ETHEL. Oh, George, I don't think so.
>
> GEORGE. (Going after the cake in great gasping gulps.) He's been drinking all day. Don't see why he ain't fell down yet. I known him to be a drinker but I didn't know him to be the kind of drunk I seen today.
>
> ETHEL. Why, I didn't know he drinks. If he does like you say.
>
> GEORGE. He does. Believe you me.
>
> ETHEL. Seems like I heard sommers, or read sommers writers was bad to drink. Say they git to be drunks cause they writers.
>
> GEORGE. Writers git to be drunks just like everybody else. They drink too much.
>
> ETHEL. I caint believe that.
>
> GEORGE. I can. (36, 37)

Joe's drinking habit is not only a product of narcissism, but the gothic quality, as Presley points out, comes into

play by the way it “cripples” and “disfigures” Joe’s relationship with his family.

Because Presley insists that self-love begins at home, and that the gothic involves the family dramatizing the conflict between private and social worlds (38), it stands to reason that the source of tension between Joe and his family is each party’s very different perception of what is appropriately public, or social behavior. For example, upon Joe’s homecoming, he and brother George almost immediately engage in an argument about Joe’s life decisions. Joe writes for a “tits and ass magazine,” as George labels it-- a magazine that “ain’t even decent.” And to top it off, Joe wrote about family affairs that both George and Uncle Pete considered private.

> GEORGE. [. . .] Some things is better left alone.
>
> JOE. No doubt, George. But it can’t be done if you intend to write about it.
>
> GEORGE. You ain’t got to write about us, Joe. We doing just fine, thank you.
>
> JOE. Writing is what I do, George.
>
> GEORGE. Go on and ruin yourself if you want to, but don’t ruin you blood kin too, don’t drag us down with you.

In a late-night conversation, Uncle Pete agrees:

> PETE. [. . .] I shoulda said this to you a long time ago. Me or somebody else, because you caint see it you own self, understand how much pain you've caused everywhere you go. You come in the front door and trouble walks in with you. Ever kin you got loves you. But it's limits to what even blood can do, what blood can put up with [. . .] To have so much school learning, you blind in one eye and caint see out of the other. How about that car you wrecked the last time you was home? How about us finding out ever month or so you laid up in some hospital full of broke bones? How about opening them books of yours and finding ourselves on ever other page. The names in there--what you call them people--don't mean a God damn thing. They us all the same. For Christ sake, Joe, that ain't even decent. (30, 45)

Obviously, Uncle Pete and George have very different ideas of private and social worlds than Joe. Joe's social world is infinitely more inclusive than his brother's and uncle's. He is less likely to exclude information from the public realm--even to the extent of possibly frustrating

and hurting his family--and he explains it away as part of his job as a writer. His family, however, lives by a different code, because “stains on the family honor are harder to live down in the Deep South [. . .] than in the devil-may-care North” (Close 11C).

Harry Crews himself operates under similar auspices. In a recent interview, he shared vital information about his childhood, family, and personal weaknesses. He spontaneously covered his own rocky relationship with his brother, the death of his mother, his terrifying experience in the Marines, the loss of his son, and his infamous addiction to alcohol.

> [. . .] But her doctor told her [Crews’ mother], “Well, you’re going to die, but cancer won’t kill you.” And something else did; she had this massive stroke and a massive heart attack at the same time and went down like a shot, and that was it. And it was her living room [the set for *Blood Issue*], and that other guy [George] was my brother, and I was a drunk writer in the thing [the play]. At that time I’m a practicing alcoholic, and as I told you, I take Antabuse--only things that’s ever kept me sober. And I take it because if you’ll swallow that pill every

> morning you damn sure won't drink. You may go to the hospital, but you won't go drunk [. . .] I make a choice every morning: do I want to drink or not, and if I take that pill, well [. . .] You can't even use aftershave with alcohol, or salad dressing [with wine], the least little bit of alcohol into your bloodstream will make you wish you'd never seen a beer. (Interview)

Family themes run deep in Crews' work. They illustrate his beliefs in a strength that comes from only those who share genetics, and, according to the playwright, this allegiance--in sheer strength anyway--is best seen in the South.

> "Sure the play is about blood ties. Blood will go to the wall for you [. . .] Blood will remember you long after you are dead. Stories are passed down from father to son to daughter and father to son to daughter for 300 years and still can be remembered. You can get the truth from blood kin in a way you can't get it from anyone else." Crews went on to describe why blood runs thicker in the South than in other parts of the country. "Many Southerners are tied to the land in ways they aren't elsewhere," he said.

> “Many Southerners can still look out their windows and see the headstones that mark the family graveyard.” (Vaughan 1F)

The “chronological confusion” or dream-like state that Presley and Lawson include in the grotesque, and the sense of mystery and the unexpected to which Flannery O’Connor refers manifest themselves in Joe’s condition when he is drinking heavily and in the fogginess which occurs in the middle of the night. As Joe attempts to find the truth, he discovers that there are more and more players in the game of lies and that the truth “becomes” rather than “is.” For Joe the “truth” has been his father Frank dying at an early age, and Mabel remarrying to Lonny. For Joe as a writer, the truth is something that is almost always hidden and must be uncovered by good detective work and endurance. However, the closer Joe gets to the truth, the more he needs a crutch to help him withstand the blow. So, like Blanche, he resorts to drinking which, in turn, offers him muddled thoughts and a volatile emotional state.

Just as Joe “butts heads” with truth, resulting in confusion, there is a similar tension created by the clash of real and unreal--again as in Blanche’s case--from the bisociation of physical and psychic reality that forms the grotesque illusion (Lawson 170). It is not until Joe

finally pushes Mabel to reveal the origins of her sons' birth that the real and the unreal clash, and the chronological confusion is resolved:

> MABEL. [. . .] Frank wanted chirrun. He wanted a fambly. In that day and time it was about all a man could hope to have. Then he thought his tainted blood killed that poor baby, deformed it and killed it, and killed the only hope he had of a fambly [. . .] No, you wanted it said. So I'm here to say it for you. To tell it all. Frank asked would I?. . .He asked would I with Lonny. . .And then he asked Lonny. And Lonny said yes he would if that was what Frank wanted. And I said yes too. When Frank died, Lonny taken and married me and raised you boys. Everybody said we married before Frank was cold in the ground. They started talking and never stopped. (74)

So what mutations has the Southern Gothic or the grotesque undergone since the days of Tennessee Williams? Within the sexual element, there is an emphasis on the sexual behaviors of men and women--a focus on the coarseness of sexual tension. Williams uses everything from the allusion to the borderline barbaric to create this

tension between his male and female characters. The tossing of the meat from Stanley to Stella may even go unnoticed as an expression of sexuality. The reference to Blanche's finding her husband with another man is articulated vaguely, but certainly by the time the rape scene unfolds between Stanley and Blanche, this exhibition of brutality and sexually charged energy can no longer be denied. In *Blood Issue*, however, the sexual component is clearly present from the beginning. There is the direct reference to Frank Bass' genitalia, the explanation of why his genitalia were not functioning properly, which includes the story of Frank's sexual experience with an infected Seminole woman. Also at play here is Frank's guilt over contracting a venereal disease and his viewing of the deformed child as God's punishment. Due to Frank's strong belief in a man's duty to have children, he manufactures a solution--a surrogate father. This arrangement between the three adults, this "sharing" of Mabel by Frank and Lonny, might be construed as latent homosexuality, particularly from a psychosexual perspective. Lonny and Frank are inseparable friends, and after Frank and Mabel's marriage Lonny is with the newly married couple constantly. At one point, Lonny and Frank go away together for three years to work in Florida. When Frank and Mabel are married, Lonny

joins them the next morning for their first breakfast as husband and wife. Then, when Frank and Mabel's baby is born, Lonny is with them, and the three hold the dead, disfigured baby between them. Crews uses explicit sexual images within the grotesque. What Williams does with language and inference, Crews does graphically with his powerful story-telling creating near-visceral images.

In Williams' *Streetcar*, Blanche becomes a victim of narcissistic love in that she is rejected by the average population and becomes a member of the periphery. This happens due to a number of events. One is her husband's suicide, and in her reaction to his homosexuality, which she views as rejection. She disfigures not only herself but her relationships with other people. This rejection shatters her illusion of their relationship, and she protects herself with so many illusions that she becomes delusional. Interestingly enough, Blanche seems not to fit into the category of narcissistic love (other than as victim) quite as cleanly; she does engage in self-destructive behavior by staying at the shady Flamingo hotel. She picks up men and has sex as a substitute for love and because of low self-esteem. Also, her interactions with the young high school boy she teaches and

the narcissistic begin to evolve into an outreach in her other relationships i.e., the newspaper boy.

What Williams does with Blanche, and what Crews does not do with Joe, is capitalize on a certain amount of sympathy, regardless of her strange relationships and the narcissistic qualities that cause her to indulge in alcohol. However, what Williams is able to create is a character with whom we sympathize because she is viewed as a victim and not as a character who initiates any sort of extreme wrongdoing, unlike Joe who is viewed by his family as a traitor by writing about their secrets in magazines. So Blanche's narcissistic disorder manifests itself with the alcohol and also with her ability to become incredibly concerned with herself. This is illustrated in her concern for her outward appearance--that is with her baths, her perfume, clothing, furs, and jewelry--specifically at the end of the play when she has experienced a nervous breakdown. While in the bath she is most concerned with what she is going to wear; she assumes she will be with her former suitor, Shep Huntleigh. She asks Stella to find a specific jacket and a brooch with violets, etc. Again, due in part to societal rejection, she is forced into a self-love and the whole narcissistic quality. She retreats into the past--a complete rupture with reality. Her last

connection with Stella has been broken. Stella has chosen Stanley over Blanche.

To continue the comparison between Blanche and Joe, while Blanche is calculating at times, Williams never allows the narcissism to manifest itself in a cold, uncaring, or forceful way as Crews does with Joe in *Blood Issue*. Searching for the secret to his family and his roots, he becomes even more alienated. He becomes an outcast to his family and this turns him, even more than usual, to alcohol, which is the major link between Blanche and Joe. While both Blanche and Joe disrupt the family and engage in self-destructive activities, it is Joe who turns the gothic narcissism not into the self-destructive force that Blanche does but into a redirected energy that poisons and disrupts his entire family on a level very different from that in *Streetcar*. By the end of *Blood Issue,* after the dirty laundry is aired, the grandchildren rally around Mabel; they will glue the treasured ceramic panther back together. Now everyone knows where it came from and what happened, but that storm has passed. It is Joe's future that is uncertain. He, essentially, has no family and is still terribly alone and mired in alcoholism.

In the area of family conflict it is the clashing views of the private and the social worlds that raise the

most concern. In *Streetcar*, the conflict originates within--an internal conflict that Stella faces when her sister continually broaches the subject of Stella's current lifestyle. In *Streetcar*, the mystery is about Blanche's past; in *Blood Issue*, the mystery of the dead brother is a mystery of the family's past. Psychologically primed by Blanche's condescending remarks toward Stanley, Stella begins to react accordingly to Stanley's less private ways, laying the groundwork for intense family feuds. Williams crafts a slowly evolving epiphany through Stella. She becomes increasingly aware of the chasm between her childhood and her adult lifestyle. While no one is there to remind her of the more genteel side of her upbringing, she is satisfied to live the rougher life with Stanley, but when she is reminded of the difference, she becomes uncomfortable--an obvious sign that perhaps Stella has not come to terms completely with her marital situation.

Crews creates different circumstances for Joe in *Blood Issue*. Pushing aside the delicacies of good breeding and questionable marriages, Crews presents family conflict in all its rawness. In the very first scene, Joe and his older brother George--who, in their childhood, got along famously--cannot seem to communicate for longer than five minutes without arguing about what is to remain private.

George, having remained close to the family home, carries on his father's occupation of farming, oblivious to the advantages of an education in the 1980s. He instills these values in his two sons, farmers-in-training, who must survive during a time when the South is becoming less dependent on agriculture and offering more in higher education. Perhaps due to Joe's collegiate experience, or his more worldly endeavors, he has gained a very dissimilar attitude from his brother and uncle about family affairs. While Pete and George strongly insist that what occurs within the family should remain within the family, Joe views this not as a private family matter but as an idea--a truth--for a writer to explore.

> Other people allow scabs to heal over and scar up. Not me. Not people like me. We pick at the scabs, non-stop pickers, keep'm bleeding. The sight of issuing blood is our only joy. If we can make it bleed—whatever it is—we can stay alive. Jesus, Jesus. (*Blood Issue* 46)

For Joe "letting well enough alone" is not enough. He feels a sense of unrest, isolation, and numbness without the answer to a very important question. George, on the other hand, has been informed--directly or indirectly--that this topic is not to be broached, and that alone is good

enough for him. Also, the family's integrity, maintained in part by keeping this secret, is at stake, and George is not going to let his family's name be smeared if he can help it.

In comparison, Blanche and Stella--two sisters who do not always see eye to eye--are in a similar predicament to Joe's and George's. Blanche, the older sister, stayed in Mississippi with her family and clung to the traditions she learned in her childhood while Stella ventured out and married into a very different lifestyle. There is resentment on Blanche's part toward Stella for leaving Blanche with the family estate to settle. She takes this out on Stella with pointed remarks, and eventually Stella fights back. There are obvious similarities involving the older sibling remaining close to home to continue family traditions. The differences, however, are in line with each playwright's style. Blanche, a high school English teacher--citing an Elizabeth Barrett Browning sonnet as her favorite, nonetheless--and married, made these two life choices in line with her upbringing, in spite of their disappointing and tragic results. As with Williams, tragedy, poetry, and sensitivity surround Blanche. With Joe Bass, as with Harry Crews, his education transforms into something that nearly merits apology. It is others'

perceptions of higher education that create much of the family turmoil that Joe handles two ways: with alcohol and writing. Interestingly enough, however, neither Blanche's nor Joe's education has helped them overcome their neuroses.

The final elements of the Southern Gothic--the dream-like state and the sense of mystery--do not appear to have experienced as much change from pre- to post-Civil Rights southern drama. Both Williams and Crews create characters who indulge in alcohol, which significantly alters their state of mind and prompts the confusion that is integral to the dream-like state. But Crews sets Joe Bass in the center of an otherwise sober world--leaving the writer in his own confusion which highly contrasts with his family's more "streetsmart" world. Williams, conversely, crafts a world--a world that is shaped through Blanche's alcohol-soaked perspective--that teeters on the expressionistic, although "romantic" would fit just as easily. The entire play is enveloped in the same fog that pervades Blanche, creating a continued state of confusion not only with Blanche herself but also among the events of the play. Within the atmosphere of the plays--the revelations in the middle of the night, the liminal space between waking and sleep, between sobriety and drunkenness—a lot happens in

those liminal spaces. Each play explores a liminal space between past and present, myth and reality, that helps make them resonate with Southern Gothic atmosphere. Sigmund Freud identified a condition he named “repetition compulsion” when, in the mind’s eye, the past emerges in the present (Sander 281). At first glance it may seem like Williams, the earlier playwright, engages in a style more adventurous than Crews’, causing one to question Williams’ play as the traditional model. While there is room for that theory, we must also remember that Williams considered himself a “poet of the theatre,” and *Streetcar*’s language and imagery showcases this talent nicely. Crews not only acknowledges Williams’ poetic style as different from his own (Interview), but he also acknowledges that Crews’ world and Williams’ world are both rooted in the South and that each playwright utilizes a style that represents “his” South. In both plays an old South clashes violently with the “new.” In Williams’ play there is complete rupture. In Crews’ play, the grandchildren opt for continuity. As we can see, not only the historians debate continuity or change in the South, but playwrights echo that vacillating sentiment in their art form.

The sense of mystery in the grotesque is again handled similarly by both Williams and Crews. The concept of the

unexpected applies to *Streetcar* in the final scene of the play. We know that Stella has "agreed" to dismiss Blanche from their home, but it is not until halfway through the final scene that Williams reveals Stella's and Stanley's true plans for Blanche. Likewise, in *Blood Issue*, Harry Crews allows Mabel to tell the truth about Joe and George's father after several theories and suppositions of Joe's have been denied. In a very tense and dramatic moment, Mabel smashes the panther into bits--an object blatantly representative of the threesome's relationship--and shoots two rounds from the shotgun to further destroy the remnants of her past. As she tells the family, who comes running into the living room in the middle of this chaos, "It's time to break and bury" (73). Crews certainly provides the necessary mounting tension for the climactic final story, but he does not necessarily prepare his audience for the final twist: that it was Frank's request that Mabel and Lonny have a child that Frank and Mabel could raise. Because both Williams and Crews create the necessary dramatic tension, the sense of mystery is heightened by the toppling effect of the unexpected.

Southern Gothicism as a marker of the southern drama genre is very much alive. It is certainly the least-changed of the three markers examined. Playwrights' style

defines the particulars of how the various grotesque components converge, and undoubtedly society's threshold has been raised with regard to the handling of sexual topics in art. Therefore, Crews' linguistic and topical freedom follows the trend, as does Williams' less overt style, representing an earlier time.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FAMILY IN THE CHANGING SOUTHERN DRAMA

It appears that after a close examination of the southern aesthetic, the southern drama genre, and the characteristics that have traditionally shaped this body of literature since the 1920s, that there are a few conclusions to draw and many questions to ask. At the center of southern life and its drama is the important unit of the family, which also serves as a microcosm of society. Once an easily identifiable system, after the 1970s, the southern family has altered its members' roles to produce not only a changed interpersonal dynamic but even a different definition of "family."

We can agree that the 1960s and '70s brought tremendous change to our country's philosophy, policies, and ultimately, our psychology. In his book, *The Long March: How the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s Changed America*, Roger Kimball quotes social historian Arthur Marwick's 1998 study, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c.1958-1974*. Marwick found that The Sixties prominently featured

> black civil rights; youth culture and trend setting by young people; idealism, protest, and rebellion [. . .] massive changes in personal relationships and sexual behaviour; a general audacity and frankness in books and in the media, and in ordinary behaviour [. . .] all the statistical evidence suggests that permissive attitudes and permissive behaviour continued to spread at accelerating rates [. . .] single-parent families proliferated, the terms “husband” and “wife” became almost quaint, giving place to “lover” and “partner” [. . .] (Kimball 255-56, 259)

Because the South was one region of the U.S. that held tight to conventional social roles--regardless of fairness or morality--the South was deeply affected by both the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement. Both the black community and the South’s women had been marginalized for many years, and it took a social revolution to begin to undo the practices and mindset so firmly rooted in the South’s psychological landscape. The resistance to change provided more fodder for C. Vann Woodward’s and W. J. Cash’s famous “continuity vs. change” debate. Southern historians and writers frequently adopted one of these

perspectives in their work, setting the stage for the South as an insular region, protective of, and at the same time, oppressed by its social dictates. What this meant is that while laws were passed granting equal rights to formerly marginalized citizens, it took--and is still taking--time for attitudes to keep up with the law.

The argument of continuity versus change in the South is an old one. While the great minds of Woodward and Cash cannot concur on exactly how much the South has changed in the last few decades, it is reasonable to assume that there will be a similar ambiguity in the South's drama as well. Two Arkansas professors agree that the kind of change the South is experiencing is, indeed, difficult to identify:

> As time moves over the selvage of the millennium, America's South has had a life of some four centuries, and from the face of things--shining new cities, corporate fields, new social attitudes--the outside world may be thinking that the South is at last in the process of losing its identity as modernity imposes its will. Is the old sustaining, harrowing mythology about to give up the ghost? (Hall and Wood 12)

Hall and Wood continue, remarking that just because the South has incurred change does not mean there is no South.

The question remains: What does the southern drama genre look like now? While Charles Watson's *History of Southern Drama* outlines specific markers of southern drama and he admits the markers are still there for the most part, Watson does not clearly identify what we as readers of contemporary southern drama should be looking for in the markers. I have found that in all my research on the South, whether historical, cultural, psychological, literary, or a combination of any of the above, no single author is able to concretely and succinctly identify just what the modern South and southern drama have become. Nearly every literary scholar I have come across, and certainly all three of the living playwrights I have interviewed, concur that southern drama has changed, but the clarity stops there. My goal, then, is to attempt to articulate some of the transformations southern drama has made from the earlier part of the twentieth century to the '80s and '90s via six playwrights.

This study has its limitations. I do not examine all of the characteristics of southern drama offered by all of the writers I have been exposed to; instead, I pick up where Charles Watson left off. While he traces the chronology of southern drama from a historical perspective, I choose to select three of the characteristics/markers

that Watson classifies: the southern woman, the black character, and violence as manifested in the grotesque, or Southern Gothic. By using the family as an axis for this study, we can gain insight into its new dynamics and structure, making the changed psychology of the South and its drama more apparent. Most of the change to which I refer can be attributed to the social revolution in the 1960s and ’70s: the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Movement, and within the latter, the sexual revolution.

The southern woman is one definite marker in this genre that is a staple. What the southern woman was in Lillian Hellman’s dramas and what she becomes in Beth Henley’s plays are quite different, however. Referring to the myth of the southern woman, which fueled her image in the first half of the previous century, there are prescribed behaviors and societal expectations restricting her civil rights. Fictional southern women, however, gained a reputation as homemakers, silent fixtures in the core family unit, and possessed an odd disparity of extreme internal strength when necessary, with a delicate “cover” that persuaded the true southern gentleman to treat her with care. Parts of this myth have been exaggerated, perhaps, but the southern woman’s place in the family was

most definitely to defer to her husband and even her brothers.

As Hellman illustrates in *The Little Foxes*, both Regina and Birdie are subject to unequal treatment by the men in their lives, but each woman processes this treatment differently, as they are two very different women. Yet each upholds parts of the mythical image. While Birdie handles her husband's neglect and abuse passively, by turning to alcohol for comfort (the delicate part of the mythical equation), Regina, like her brothers and her father, reacts aggressively--to the point of murder--not to stave off abuse but to satisfy her greed (the strength of the equation, albeit a distorted strength). Hellman, a believer in human rights, also pens the character of Alexandra, a young woman who will not allow her mother to marry her off to her cousin, Leo, whose values are as skewed as Regina's. The end of the play foreshadows a life for Alexandra that is somewhat different from what Regina and Birdie endure. With this final scene, Hellman predicts a turn of events for the women of the South.

As authors such as Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer articulate, the frustration many women begin to feel in their subservient roles as homemakers, the Women's Movement brings with it opportunities for women never before

considered. Naturally, as more women entered the work force, their roles at home changed, and women were transforming the role of wife and mother. The South did not greet this change openly. In a region where tradition and convention are revered, many southerners--both male and female--were slow to incorporate and accept a possible new image for women.

While this hesitancy continues to pervade the southern population, there are, of course, those southern women who are delighted with what freedoms the Movement brought. Beth Henley is one such playwright; she makes her mark by fashioning her female characters not in line with tradition but almost one hundred percent against it. Her offbeat women still struggle against the restrictions of "lady-like" behavior that is often represented by their mothers, or women of older generations, but as they do, they create a new image for women in this region. The strength is generally still there, although it is often accompanied by stubbornnes, or extreme reactions to those forces they view as hindering.

Impossible Marriage sports such characters. Kandall is a woman in her 50s whose idea of complete chaos and ruin is family scandal. She cannot understand her daughters' actions. Her older daughter, Floral, is in a marriage

without intimacy and is pregnant with her pastor's child. Moreover, Floral's husband, a man with the false reputation of a womanizer, does not object. Pandora, the younger daughter, is about to marry a man more than twice her age and is dead-set on wearing blue wings as she walks down the aisle. Clearly, Kandall represents the traditional components of the southern woman while her daughters rebel against those same traditions, creating the quirkiness for which Henley is famous. The quiet role of the submissive wife is replaced, by women who are not satisfied with what their mother says they "should" want with something else. Both daughters desire something else--a truly love-filled marriage.

Another marker of southern drama is the portrayal of the black character, especially as related to racial conflicts. Without a doubt, racial discrimination has played a huge role in forming the many interpretations of the black community. It was not until one hundred years after the Civil War that southern blacks saw a legal end to segregation and the beginning of their civil rights. In the South, however, a land steeped in convention, women and the black community in the South were subject to mistreatment and misunderstanding.

Paul Green, a white playwright, attempted to “provide a voice for the Negro” in his 1926 play *In Abraham’s Bosom*. While there is much evidence indicating that Green befriended and worked alongside many of the blacks who were employed on his family’s farm, his capacity to speak for a section of society to which he ultimately did not belong or fully understand, is limited. According to W. E. B. Du Bois, Green’s play reinforced existing black stereotypes--the ignorant field hands, and the stubborn, narrow-minded old woman--to draw on pity from the almost exclusively white audiences who attended Green’s productions. While Green’s attempt may have been in good faith, there was a prejudicial mindset that enveloped many white southerners, perhaps without their even being conscious of it.

Paul Green’s illustration of a black family and interracial conflict sometimes moved audiences; sometimes it offended them. Abe, the father and head of the household can be viewed as a man whose vision of educating his people often conflicts with his roles as husband and father. Green’s play is one of the first by a major southern playwright to address the ugliness of black and white tensions in the South. Ironically, the voice speaks only with sympathy not empathy.

While it affected our entire country, undoubtedly, the Civil Rights Movement had the biggest impact on the South, where interracial tensions were at their harshest. After the peak of the Movement, the legal system changed to accommodate equal rights for all races, but change in the South's attitude took longer. Nonetheless, the benefits of the Movement began to appear. While black playwrights existed before the 1960s, it was not until years later when the black playwright's voice began to gain representation. After the peak of Civil Rights, however, there were additional concerns for the southern black community. While interracial tension was far from resolved, at least it had made strides. Now a number of black writers also began to address the strife within their race and how it facilitated the transformation of the family unit.

Pearl Cleage, an Atlanta dramatist, addresses these very issues in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. "I write for an audience, but I'm really dependent on myself to be honest, to figure out the truth and show a character going through whatever the arc is" (Fuentez 6F). Cleage's play examines social concerns, but interracial conflict is dealt with only in tangent with other issues facing her characters. There is the north-south cultural clash, which spirals into left and right wing philosophy, prejudice against gay

individuals, and the transformation of the black nuclear family to one that includes not only extended family members but close-knit friends. While *In Abraham's Bosom* centers around black-white tensions, *Blues* is indicative of the complexity and progression of concerns facing the black race. Like many southerners, regardless of race, once the Civil Rights Movement began to create positive change, the black community found itself changing its focus to include other concerns.

The third marker under examination is one that many writers and critics call southern drama's "claim to fame." It is, according to Charles Watson, the inclusion of violence as manifested in the grotesque, otherwise known as Southern Gothic. The impact of these grotesqueries affects the family unit in dark and often mysterious ways, and there is a sexual component that weaves its way into the plays' themes. Early on it is seductive, sultry, and suggestive; in later works, more stark, graphic, and gritty.

It is Tennessee Williams who, in the '40s and '50s, masterfully crafts his dramas with Southern Gothicism. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is loaded with sexual undertones, promiscuity, sexual violence, and images of darkness and mystery. Much of the sexual tension revolves around

Blanche, but certainly Stanley, Stella, and Mitch are pulled into Blanche's world. Williams' technique--his use of suggestion and the power of imagination--represent the level of discretion that was acceptable for his pre-sexual revolution writing. Blanche's past is ambiguously shady for most of the play; the scene where she recounts her husband's suicide, and the reason for it, is almost ethereal. The two major acts of violence, when Stanley slaps his pregnant wife and when he forces himself on Blanche, are not depicted onstage. We hear the slap, and we see Stanley carry Blanche toward the bedroom, then hear the results of the night's activity through Stella. The family unit is transformed from one of trust to one of distrust among all three members.

When Harry Crews wrote *Blood Issue*, he admitted he was writing about family--his family. Mabel Boatwright is his mother; George Bass, his brother; and Joe, himself. While the events in the plot are mostly fictional, the interpersonal dynamics, for the most part, are not. Crews is a bold example of a writer who not only incorporates Southern Gothicism but infuses the theme with the Gothic so drastically that it often becomes difficult to separate the two. Although Tennessee Williams and Harry Crews were friends and Crews is an admirer of Williams' work

(Interview), their use of the Southern Gothic is indicative of the different times in which they wrote. *Streetcar* is a product of the late 1940s; *Blood Issue* is the result of the sexual revolution. When Joe comes home for the family reunion, he does not hide his drinking the way Blanche does. He also admits openly that he wrote for a "tits and ass magazine" while Blanche never fully confesses to her dealings at the Flamingo Inn or her episode with the high school boy that resulted in her dismissal. When Joe and Uncle Pete have their late night discussion, they refer to a man's "balls" and the fact that Frank Bass slept with a "tainted Seminole woman" which interfered with his ability to conceive healthy children. Stanley and Stella refer to "getting the colored lights going" as their lovemaking. What drives the play, in Crews' case, is the sexual. Joe wants to uncover his true family roots and the mystery surrounding his dead baby brother. The Bass/Boatwright family is haunted by their dark, mysterious, sexual secrets. They are pulled apart, yet ultimately brought together, by their past.

In sum, what, then, do the southern family and the genre of southern drama look like now? What patterns can be identified? Statistically, the southern family, as the rest of the nation, can no longer pretend to be simply a

nuclear entity. While nuclear families certainly still exist, even the traditionally prescribed roles of husband, wife, son, and daughter are no longer strictly adhered to. There are many more options available to southern women now in addition to the role of wife and mother, and because of these choices, the contemporary southern woman seeks more fulfillment within and beyond the family unit. For Kandall, Birdie, and Regina the word scandal was congruent to “ruin;” domestic abuse was to be not only tolerated, but kept secret; and the governing of family finances was dictated by nothing more than gender. For Floral and Pandora, finding acceptance and happiness, hopefully in their marriages, becomes their desperate drive. These women have been able to step up on Maslow’s hierarchy past survival and physical safety and are continuing the journey, however treacherous, toward self-acceptance. Both Hellman’s and Henley’s female characters are pitting themselves against a patriarchy; however, Regina works the patriarchal system to benefit her, while Henley’s women find it difficult to react to the new, less stable patriarchy.

If the southern woman’s role affects the family, then the black family has, in some ways, experienced as much, or even more change. The makeup of the contemporary black

family is radically different from earlier in the twentieth century. While the trend in this country was toward smaller households, the black community, even as late as the 1980s, varied significantly from the white population's "downsizing." While overall, families were shrinking, extended black families were on the rise, including distant and non-relatives. The family unit was reinvented to serve its community's needs, which often included childcare for single parents and close friends forming living quarters for financial and emotional support. Black characters in early southern drama were drawn as having to work against their skin color, and they were often depicted in tragic, fateful circumstances. Later, black characters were given a voice by black playwrights and developed with more psychological complexity and different issues at stake. Interracial conflict is still a component, but it is no longer the guiding or absolute force present in every experience. What we see in Paul Green's play is a fairly strict dichotomy: black and white issues. Cleage still operates under a dichotomy, but expands on variant ideologies. She is dealing with race and how it impacts the individual, but includes issues common with a race or community, such as birth control versus genocide. Her

layering of themes involves not only interracial tensions, but intra-racial ones as well.

The family and Southern Gothic have remained a stable marker of the genre. Certainly with the freedoms granted us by the Sexual Revolution, we are able to approach topics formerly considered taboo, but the southern family's connection to violence and the sexual fast remains to southern drama. In *Streetcar*, Tennessee Williams creates an old south versus new south tension in the DuBois/Kowalski family unit. These opposing forces clash until the bitter end, with neither side able to stop the tumultuous emotional warfare until it is too late. The family suffers complete rupture, and is left to struggle, each on his or her own. In *Blood Issue*, however, one character is able to step outside of the tight family structure to question a past that has been so tightly sealed that even some family members are unaware of the enormity of the lies that shape the family's history. How Crews and Williams differ in technique, however, is that Crews allows one family member to deconstruct while remaining in the family structure. The end result is that the Bass/Boatwright family--save Joe perhaps--is left with a stronger sense of community and hope, unlike the *Streetcar* family whose future is bleak.

What does all of this mean for the genre itself? According to the critics and writers, the markers are still there. We can still point to specific characteristics that identify a play as southern; we have seen, however, the six playwrights' various approaches to identifying with the South and establishing an aesthetic. The markers, then, in the plays of the 1980s and '90s have transformed in some cases, and remained stable in others, reflecting the social and psychological developments of the post-Movement South.

Recent southern drama deserves recognition for its "maturity," says Watson--maturity being the "right term" to denote a sequence of playwriting arising out of a solid tradition, influenced by styles of earlier playwrights and fiction writers. Many recent southern plays, in cultivating the distinguishing traits of the southern play, increase their richness (211). Contemporary southern playwrights have demonstrated flexibility while having the wisdom to let tradition do its job because "they explore southern cultures past and present, which still identifies a play as southern" (Watson 211). Southern drama now allows for additional models of the southern woman, black characters, and even the family itself; these additions and changes to the drama parallel the social and cultural modifications of the southern aesthetic. There is still a

southern drama genre. It has developed much like its people: in some aspects, considerably; in other respects, not much at all. It is difficult to strictly define and categorize exactly what the South's drama will depict over the next several decades because much depends on its people, but

> [. . .] telling people in Dixie today that there is no South would be tantamount to having them believe they don't love their mothers or indeed don't have mothers to love [. . .] As travelers pass through any one of the many gateways into the South, they begin to encounter a flood of thoughts, ideas, passions, consciousness in no particular order [. . .] the true character of the Southern psyche [. . .] They won't have traveled far at all into the South before they discover firsthand that definitions are hard to come by. (Hall and Wood 12, 13)

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