PLOT and CHARACTER

Plot

A well-constructed plot must not only possess a certain order in the arrangement of its parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude. Beauty depends on size and order.

- Aristotle¹

The perfect play as we know it to be a truly European framework for European framework for European psychology cannot function efficiently for those of us from this hemisphere.

- Shange²

Character

Such goodness is possible in every type of person, even in a woman, or a slave, though the one is of course an inferior and the other a worthless being.

- Aristotle.³

She had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not childhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality, she may well have invented herself.

- Toni Morrison⁴.
Action, which is the first artistic necessity of a play, is exhibited through its development as a coherent series of events, standing in organic relation to one another and bound together by the law of cause and effect. Action also implies conflict, which is embedded in a linear structure of climaxes, recognitions and resolutions. This causally linked series of events is fully unfolded at the end of the play when it would reveal that the individual’s actions were pre-determined or impelled by order.

This phallocratic order has constructed itself in its own image, by differentiating itself from the ‘other’. While this dominant order impels the actions and thoughts of subjects who subscribe to this hierarchy, Black women, who are others’ other, have no claims on an identity or on the will and freedom to act. Thus, for purposes of liberation, these Black women playwrights dismantle those sites that negate or define them and create Black women characters who manifest their will through action. By taking control of their environment, they disrupt the processes that predetermine their destiny.

In the theatre, this feminist impulse is manifested in the way Black women playwrights construct the identity of the Black woman, through plot and characterization. Smith in Home Girls, A Black Anthology states,“[...] Black women’s ability to function with dignity, independence and imagination in the face of racial adversity that is, in the face of white America – points to an innate feminist potential” (xl).
This feminist potential is revealed in the way these Black women playwrights re-figure those spaces that frame them, by offering alternate possibilities that lie outside the dominant theatrical code. By re-situating the spectator outside the logic of desire, they effect changes in plot and character. The action in these plays is propelled by the agent's conflict with the issues of race, sex and class in a dominant order. In their dramaturgy, it is evident that themes are sacred, plots are not. Plots are only incidental to the character, as the objective of these Black women playwrights is to locate Blackness and femaleness in theatrical spaces. In these plays, plots are constructed to reveal the will of the Black woman in defying the pre-determined destiny that the dominant order has created for her. By claiming the subject position, they enunciate the complexities of their lives and re-define heroism from a Black female perspective.

These Black female heroes tell the story of the Black woman from slavery to the present. The expression of their social and spiritual quests is found in the telling of their stories. Western dramatic discourse relies on linearity, order, beauty and magnitude, whereas the Black female aesthetic relies on fluidity, flexibility, circularity, brevity and hybridity. This aesthetic derives from the oral narrative structure, which informs their writing. Ignoring 'magnitude' and the Western aesthetic of logic and coherence, they narrate with passion their responses to issues that affect their daily struggle against racism and sexism. By focusing on personal and public forms of oppression, they
illustrate their themes through the conflicts that their characters face. Minor irritations become major irritants in their everyday confrontations and experiences. This cumulative effect points to their 'heroic' struggle against the magnitude of the

The plots of these plays arise from their special circumstances, and the environmental and experiential forces that shape their destinies as Black women. They are thus often loose, episodic and have no obvious plot. Plots are arranged to reveal the protagonist's transformation rather than end in tidy, well-defined resolutions that re-establish social codes. The interiority that characterizes their lives is reflected in the emphasis on inner transformation as a means to outer confrontation. By interrogating pre-given notions of cause and effect, they challenge the notion of an irrevocable destiny. The protagonist wills herself to act like a subject in control of her context rather than an object to be acted on.

Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange traverse worlds that lie between the ideal and the real, the dream and the reality. In the process, they defy logic and linearity, or disrupt conventional plots with radical gestures. The plays investigated here reveal how these Black women playwrights alter perceptions of Black women, enabling them to disrupt order and construct new mythic structures that affirm them as real people. In these structures, there are, most often, no hierarchies in characterization or plot. The unified subject who links and propels the action and development of the play is displaced as there are many voices. Thus the complexity of
the character is often revealed through a subject who is shifting and hidden. The endings of these plays attest to the choices accessible to Black women. Historically and culturally these playwrights validate Black women’s position in the theatre and outside. Bonner chooses revolution, Childress reformation, Hansberry resistance, Kennedy madness and death and Shange chooses rituals of communion and healing.

This spectrum of forms, modes, tones and textures create a rich vitality that is distinct in the theatre. The history of Black theatre in America reveals that these Black women playwrights have journeyed literally and metaphorically to their own autonomous positions in the theatre. Their innovations in the tonal and textural aspects that determine drama have made them responsible for initiating at every turn in Black American theatre history a new phase that has unleashed fresh perspectives and new horizons. Their own journeys become a metaphor for the journey of Black women from slavery to self-hood. Their narratives thus become a mode of discourse, which enables a critical perspective of the past, the present and an emerging future. Each of these playwrights becomes a crucial link in the evolution of not only Black women’s theatre but also Black theatre in America.

Bonner, is the first revolutionary playwright whose works in the twenties were considered radical. She belonged to a period, in which Black women playwrights wrote prolifically contributing to the Crisis and Opportunity magazines. They participated in and won prizes for their one – act plays in the Krigwa Play Writing Competitions. Bonner’s The Purple Flower was a prize – winner. In fact, Mckay states that “had she
written nothing else, her drama, *The Purple Flower*, which [...] uses expressionist techniques would have earned her a place of recognition among all American playwrights who were experimenting with this form in the 1920’s” (*What Were They Saying* 142). Bonner made an important break-through in the form in which she expressed her sentiments. Advocating violence, she boldly articulated her indictment of White domination over peoples of colour. Both the plays chosen for analysis also reflect her boldness in extending her vision beyond the traditional forms and techniques of her day. Bonner's political horizon extended into the militant sixties and seventies, making her a visionary and a pioneer.

Childress too was an innovator who responded uniquely to her time. Though she was a traditionalist, her sensitive portrayal of her times makes her a front runner. Her variation of themes and the re-arrangement of structure correspond to the political and artistic phases of the Black theatre in America. Her drama is a historical document of the evolving Black woman from the fifties to the seventies. Each of her heroines documents a resistance to conventional responses and carves out greater spaces for Black women to exercise their right and articulate their experiences. While Wiletta in *Trouble in Mind* asks Blacks to dismantle images in the theatre, Tommy in *Wine in the Wilderness* challenges Black men’s views of Black women. Thus each of the Black female heroes are in a sense antagonists as they subvert the expectations of the times they live in. Childress writes in “A Candle in a Gale Wind”, “I acquired a measure of self-discipline to make myself write against my will in the face of a limited market”(115). This statement reflects the choices available to her, the purpose
of her plays and the tremendous influence she had in the Black theatre of her time. Writing prolifically for three decades, she has become a serious innovator and significant contributor to the evolution of not only Black theatre but also more particularly, Black women’s theatre in America.

Hansberry was inspired and influenced by Childress’ uncompromising version in portraying the heroic struggle and survival of everyday ordinary Black people. Taking her cue from the realistic portrayal of the racial struggle against oppressions, she too created a stir in the American theatre with *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry’s revolutionary spirit is seen in her portrayal of the epic magnitude of Black people’s continuous struggle beginning with Hannibal in *The Drinking Gourd* to Walter in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry brought Black drama to Broadway, which became an inspiration to the others like Shange who followed. With this act, Black women playwrights claimed their place on the American stage.

While Hansberry believed in “the” truth of art” and” the art of truth” to convey the anguish of her people (Brown–Guillory *Their Place* 65), Kennedy too created radical new vehicles for self – expression like Hansberry and Childress who chose distinct ways to portray this conflict. Kennedy wrote plays that were disturbing, Blau calls her “the most original black writer of her generation” (531). Her plays *Funnvhouse of a Negro* and *A Rat’s Mass* reveal her anxiety and courage in baring the psyche of a Black woman. While her idiosyncratic expressions of horror and
anguish resist definition and have created a new direction in the contemporary theatre (Blau 537).

Shange, like the others before her, is also radical in her improvisations. Her major contribution to the theatre is her new form – the choreopoem. This plotless narrative structure that defines conventional structures makes her a revolutionary in the theatre. Shange’s political intentions are clear in her plays For Colored Girls and Spell # 7, which indict racism and sexism. For Colored Girls… is a landmark theatrical presentation as it ushered in a new era on Broadway. Her all- Black girl cast was the first its kind in the American theatre. Shange continues to authenticate and validate Black women’s presence in the American theatre by constantly expressing her views in arresting forms.

From Bonner to Shange, one finds bold attempts to enliven, re- define and assert Black women’s engagement in the political and social processes that shape revolutionary theatre. While manifesting their shared experiences through these plays, they have also created for themselves distinct places as pioneers, developers and contributors to the evolution of Black women’s theatre in America. Through their disparate yet distinct expressions and treatment of forms and themes, they have all been responsible in deconstructing the received stereotypical images of Black women and constructing new identities and mythologies for them. This development and evolution from slavery to the present is evident in their plots and characters.
The stereotyping of Black women results as a complex web of political and economic relationships and the images perpetrated through cultural discourse have culminated in negative images of the Black woman. These images, which were created during slavery, continue to define the Black woman as Black mammy, the emasculating matriarch, ‘Sapphire’ and the tragic mulatta. These images which are exclusive to Black women are used to retain the Black woman as the denominator of social strata.

For Black women playwrights, the single most pertinent objective is to dismantle these images and construct the Black woman’s real identity. Characterization thus becomes a subversive gesture, as Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange re-vision the ways Black women are perceived. The plots become the means to trace the journey from image to identity, from stereotype to reality and from enslavement to empowerment.

Bonner’s The Purple Flower, stages the conflict between Blacks and Whites, specifically between the ‘Colored Us’s and the Sundry White Devils. The conflict is also intra – racial and generational as the Us’s debate on strategies to obtain the purple flower. Bonner structures her play in a conventional fashion by stating the ‘Argument’, time and description of the characters and the setting. This ‘Argument’ serves as an exposition to the central idea “The Us’s live in the valley that lies between Nowhere and Somewhere and spend their time trying to devise means of
getting up the hill. The White Devils live all over the sides of the hill and try every trick, known and unknown, to keep the Us’s from getting to the hill. For if the Us’s get up the hill, the flower – of life – at its fullest will shed some of its perfume and then there they will be Somewhere with the White Devils” (TPF 192).

The one act play stages time spent by the Us’s in devising “means of getting up the hill”. The five episodes occur between sunrise and nightfall of a single day. The debate ends in the Old Man’s solution to create a New Man who will get the purple flower for the Us’s. This leads to the quest for blood, which is a vital ingredient in the creation of ‘New Man’. The anticipation of the narrative fulfillment would traditionally end in the Us’s getting the purple flower. Here the play ends in the search for blood. This ending thus subverts not only the tradition of the morality play by advocating blood shed, but also strains the plot by its looseness. Bonner’s interrogation of this ending suggests that revolution is a means to an end. The first episode shows the White Devils singing “you stay where you are” (192). The Us’s, who are having a siesta, react to this. These reactions reveal the history of racism which has cost them “two hundred years of slavery” (193). It also presents differences of opinions between the Us’s, that grow in the second episode.

This episode brings in four important characters - Cornerstone and her son Finest Blood, and Average with his daughter Sweet. They join the discussion and get involved in the debate on whether it is worth while talking rather than acting. This is in response to Old Lady’s news that the elders had called for a meeting the same
The third episode shows a community gathering, very much like the slave gatherings, characterized by drums and dance. A disagreement between the Old Us’s and the Young Us’s ends when Sweet rushes in to announce that she was pinched by “a White Devil sitting in the bushes in the dark” (195). The fourth episode gains momentum with the appearance of a ‘New Comer’ who brings in “bags full of gold” that the white Devils had refused (196). This leads to Old Man’s call for “red blood, dust and gold”, in the last episode and Finest Blood’s quest for the blood of the White Devil in the bushes (197). “White Devils ... you have taken blood; there can be no other way. You will have to give blood! Blood!” cries Finest Blood as he exits (199).

This ending symbolizes “Time” as Bonner describes it as” The Middle- of- Things – as- They – Are (which means the End- of- Things for some of the characters and the Beginning – of- Things for others)” (191). The ending also emphasizes a new beginning as Old Man states “A New Man must be of born for the New Day” (198). The significance of ‘New Day’ and ‘New Man’ is crucial to the establishment of a new order. Bonner’s message is clear as she pointedly addresses the need for Black people old or young, average or the finest, to resolve their differences and begin a revolution.

The plot structure of The Purple Flower is simple and episodic. It shifts to several subjects ranging from history, to topical issues, exploitation, work, and denial of rights in education, work and entertainment. Though the action lies in the search for a means to get the purple flower. It ends in Old Man’s call for the creation of a
New Man, created from the blood of White Devils. The action is complicated by Sweet’s announcement, but it also accelerates it to its violent ending. There are no reversals or recognition scenes. The call for revolution subverts the conventional didacticism of morality or allegorical plays. The subversion of a pre-determined destiny and an interrogation of it rupture the anticipation of the narrative fulfillment.

Though this is a race play, Bonner complicates it by portraying sexism and how for Black women racism also influences sexism. The objectification of Black women is seen in the incident that Sweet reports. She cries, “there’s a White Devil sittings in the bushes over in the dark! And when I walked by he pinched me”(TPF195). However while Bonner presents the reality of such oppression, she also portrays how Black women protest, resist and fight racism and sexism within and without the community.

In the play The Purple Flower Bonner portrays three generations of Black women. Although this is a morality play and the characters seem flat; she creates authentic spaces for these characters to live in, by giving them distinct roles. Old Lady, Old Woman, Cornerstone and Sweet represent an evolutionary process. Old Lady is a ‘foremother;’ she “has worked hard to get somewhere [...]” (193) and as a slave from ‘Nowhere’, she “has washed the shirt of everyone of them White Devils backs” (193). This is the only work ethic she has lived by all her life. She admonishes the Young Us’s who are enjoying a siesta to “be up and working before the White
Old Lady and Old Woman are two different characters, yet they represent the wisdom of yore, of shamans and priestesses. They believe in rituals that are ancient and mysterious. Old Woman “throws back her head and shakes her cane in the air and laugh so that the entire valley echoes” (196). This picture captures the essence of the African prophetess, medicine woman and mystic whose word was feared. Despite her age, her participation is vital as she represents the old ways of Africa, its folklore and culture. She rejoices that she can still contribute to the community. She enthusiastically responds to Old Man’s call, “Thanking God I could do something if it was nothing but make a handful of dust” (196). This handful of dust goes into the making of New Man, a symbolic accommodation of African cultures and beliefs. Old Woman has implicit faith in Old Man’s vision. She is the first to support him with her affirmative “I believe you” (197). However, she is not a gullible follower but asks Old Man pertinent questions “What God told you to do? “Why does he want blood?” (197). Old Woman and Old Lady present the Black woman’s participation in the history of the resistance movement from its beginnings.

While these characters are personifications of mysticism and wisdom, Cornerstone, the middle-aged woman is a rationalist and practical in her perspectives. Among the characters in the play, it is Cornerstone who is the most significant. In her naming, Bonner claims a prominent place for Black women. Her words are respected
n the community and her leadership accepted. Old Man says "Cornerstone we cannot stand without you" (197). Bonner affirms the position of Black women in the community, as they are responsible for its continuity and consolidation. Cornerstone always moderating disputes between people. She is a peacemaker, a teacher, a leader and a troubleshooter who provides solutions with diplomacy and authority. When Average criticizes leaders who talk and do nothing more, Cornerstone explains: "But that is not their fault! If one of them gets up and says, "Do this, one of the Us will sneak up behind him and knock him down and stand up and holler, "Do that" and then he himself gets knocked down and we will sit in the valley and knock down and drag out" (193). However she also reminds Average that talking is "Better than not asking somebody might say something after a while" (193).

Cornerstone nurtures and protects her community, like a matriarch. She encourages African rituals of dancing and music. When Average criticizes these expressions, she stoutly responds "they dance well!" well! "(194). She is a supporter of the old and weak, a strong compassionate woman who asks a tired and weary old man to lean on her (194). Her resourcefulness and foresight are evident when Newcomer expresses disappointment at being refused by the White Devils. Newcomer had saved the gold and had hoped it would get him Somewhere, but "they refused" to sell him "Even a spoonful of dirt from Somewhere" (196). Cornerstone encourages him to have faith. "Don't be through! The gold counts for something. It must", she tells him (196). Her faith is rewarded as the gold is used to in the creation of New Man.
Bonner adds new dimensions to a morality ‘type’ by humanizing Cornerstone. When Finest Blood volunteers to go find the White Devil, who pinched Sweet, she prevents him “Don’t go after him son! They will kill you if you hurt him!” (195). However when Old Man tells him that it is “God’s desire”, she lets him go (198). Cornerstone’s instinctive reactions as a mother are similar to Wiletta’s in Trouble in Mind and Rissa in The Drinking Gourd. Though these women are willing to sacrifice their sons for the cause of the liberation of their race; they refuse to sacrifice their sons to a white man for anything less. Cornerstone is the matriarch of Black history on whose pain, suffering and endurance, a people were built and a race was uplifted. Cornerstone truly exemplifies her name.

Sweet, the young Black girl in the play, would have turned out a stereotype, as she typifies the image of a sexual object, beautiful and available. She is described as “beautiful as a browned peach”(193). Sweet does not use this attribute to get ‘Somewhere’ instead she denounces it. She addresses the issues of sexism with her outrage and initiates a new development in the play. Sweet, is not the proverbial Sapphire, she articulates her desire to participate in discussions. She tells Cornerstone and Average, “I want to talk too” (193). When Average, her father, belittles her with ‘What can you talk about?”, she retorts, “Things! Something, father” (193). Bonner subverts the myth of the illiterate unintelligent Black woman who is a seductress and
This one-act play has three episodes. The sermon forms the first, Lucinda's reactions and her decision to leave forms the next and the last episode stages the confrontation, recognition and catastrophe. The plot is equally poised between the narrative models, which dominate the first episode, and the dramatic action, which follows the sermon that stages the conflict, confrontation and climax. The first episode thus serves as an exposition as it establishes the tensions between Elias and his wife, between the Jacksons and Lucinda, and also makes obvious the affair between Lucinda and Lew. Before Elias begins his sermon there is a significant moment when "Lew goes to Lucinda's side and sits down at once (5). They "get involved in an amused crossing of glances" (6). Lucinda "Sees Lew", but ignores her husband (6). It is obvious from their interactions that Elias and Lucinda have serious problems. The sermon thus becomes an allegory, which illustrates the tale of Lucinda, Lew and Elias.

The second episode begins at the end of the sermon. Lucinda knows Elias' intention in preaching the sermon. She is angered at his self-righteousness and decides to leave. A confrontation with the Jacksons leads to one between Elias and Lucinda. The episode reveals that Elias is controlled by his parents and this aggravates the strain in his marital life. Lucinda feels trapped in this situation and

The last episode is introduced with whistling sounds from outside. This leads Elias confronting Lucinda about his suspicions. This altercation is interrupted by
sounds of someone falling into the old well behind the house. Lucinda is in a bind as she suspects it is Lew. While Lucinda struggles to go his help, Elias hopes Lew will drown. Lucinda runs out and there is a second splash. This convicts Elias of his ‘crack’. He runs out to makes amends and there is a third splash. In the ominous silence that follows, the only witness is a swinging door. The play ends on a note of suspense “You stare through the door. Waiting. Expecting to see Elias stagger in with Lucinda in his arms perhaps. But the door swings vacant” (10). Catharsis is thus avoided.

The Pot Maker is a classic realist play as it follows a linear progression of cause and effect, confrontation, climax and recognition. The woman becomes the scourge to be punished and transformed by the male. He upholds the moral order and is the saviour of morality. However one sees Bonner’s feminist impulse as she challenges this phallocratic expectation. Bonner ruptures the order by making the Lawgiver a victim of his own laws; thereby interrogating the very premises of the order and the structure of cause and effect. The narrative promise does not bring Lucinda to her knees, it is Elias who recognizes his spiritual pride. Bonner does not condone Lucinda’s affair since all three are punished for their follies. Any conventional reading of this ‘Play to be Read’, is ruptured by Bonner’s portrayal of the antagonist, Lucinda. Lucinda challenges the conventional expectations of a Black woman character who is poor and illiterate. Though Bonner was an educated urban career woman, her women characters are usually voiceless and powerless. Through the fictional voice she articulates and presents the conditions and contexts that control
women like Lucinda. These women, according to Musser, are "not independently strong, not individualized and not triumphant" and her "attempt to portray the African American woman's life stems not from patriotism or conformity to a fashionable prejudice, however, but from intense personal conviction" (83). Bonner confronts social prejudices that attempt to define women's roles in a white patriarchal society.

Lucinda is radically different, "For at once you can see she is a woman who must have sat down in the mud. It has crept into her eyes. They are dirty. It has filtered through – filtered through her. Her speech is smudged. Every inch of her body, from the twitch of her eyebrow to the twitch of muscles lower down in her body is soiled" (5). Lucinda is earthly and sensual, resentful and uncouth in her manner. She flaunts her affair with Lew, defies her in- laws and confronts her husband. She is an anti-hero who defies the cult of womanhood, prevalent in the twenties. Through Lucinda, Bonner challenges those conventions that do not accommodate the harsh realities that ordinary Black women have to contend with.

Lucinda's defiance is due to her feelings of entrapment within a marriage in which the husband does not play his role. He cannot hold a job, is controlled by his mother, and supported in his hare-brained schemes by his parents who live with them. Lucinda cannot respect him as he fails to recognize and fulfill her needs. Elias expects Lucinda to support him without taking cognizance of her emotional and material needs. She therefore takes a lover to goad Elias into action, but even there he tries to be the righteous hero.
Lucinda confronts Elias about his inability to act. "Oh, for god sake, shut up! You and your "taint whilst to’s" make me suck"[...] stand here and stare at me like some pop eyed owl. You ain’t got sense enough to do anything else" (8). The crux of the matter is revealed in the heat of the moment when Lucinda challenges him “No you ain’t got sense to do anything else! Ain’t even got sense enough to keep a job! Get a job paying good money! (8). She tells him “If you was any kind of man you’d get a decent job and hold it and hold your mouth shut and move me into my own house” (9).

Bonner contrasts the two male characters, which makes Lucinda’s choice of lover questionable. Elias is “ruggedly ugly and invites sympathy you want to ... give both hands to him” (5). Lew, on the other hand, as Bonner writes, “is the wrong character for the part” of a lover (5). He is also described as “on over, over – fat, over-facetious, over- fair, over- bearing, over– pleasant, over- confident creature ... A woman would have to be a base fool to love such a man” (5)

Bonner’s authorial comments elicit probing into the circumstances that drive Lucinda from Elias to Lew. Bonner posits this question in the gaps of un-narrated silence and focuses on the factors leading to such a choice. Lucinda chooses Lew because he affirms her as a woman and also to make Elias think about the causes rather than judge the effects. Lucinda’s choice seems proportional to her frustration
and desperation. She refuses to comply with the moral standards that ignore women’s needs and desires and deprives women of choices within a patriarchal order. While Bonner does not condone the affair, she definitely investigates the system, which creates such anomalies.

Bonner’s portrayal of female bonding is different from other playwrights as she shows the two women characters engaged in a power struggle. Nettie Jackson disapproves of her daughter – in – law. This animosity is portrayed in Bonner’s description, “There are no words that can tell you how she looks at her mother in-law. Words cannot do so much” (8). Lucinda resents Nettie’s presence in her home and her constant nagging. Nettie over – rules her husband and Elias’ request for understanding and sympathy. She tells Elias “you ain’t got sense enough to see that she would jam you down the devil’s throat if she got a chance” (8). Lucinda’s total alienation adds to her vulnerability and reveals the various oppressions that she has to fight. While Lucinda’s stance is a feminist stance, Bonner seems to advocate mutuality and equality within the family and the community.

Bonner subverts the gaze with her subversion of the myth of the superwoman, as she provides spaces for women such as Lucinda and Sweet to express their outrage and feelings of powerlessness. Though she sacrifices plot for theme and character, the brevity and textural details make it truly a play to be read. Bonner’s three plays, The Purple Flower, The Pot Maker and Exit: An Illusion (1929) have never been produced. This attests to the racism and sexism prevalent in her time and the lack of

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opportunity for women playwrights even during the Protest Era and the Harlem Renaissance. As an innovator, radical in her thought and gestures, she has earned her place in Black women’s drama.

Childress, like Bonner, had to fight racism and sexism in the theatre, in her early playwriting career. An actress, who was also the founder of the American Negro Theatre, she had gained experience in the theatre to write plays that have been produced and have won many awards. The lack of response that did not deter Bonner inspired Childress to be persistent in her efforts, as they were also acts of resistance. In an interview with the New York Times, she declared, “Time is up, I’ve a play to write that may never be seen by any audience anywhere, but I do my thing. He who has ears to hear, hear... all others, later.”

Childress experiments with forms and plots, and seeks new structures and textures that present, the simultaneity of Black women’s oppression authentically. Hay infers that Childress adopts her dramatic structure according to whether it is a Black or white person who causes the hurt (A Candle 119). Trouble in Mind is an inter-racial play about racism and sexism within the theatre while Wine in the Wilderness is an inter-racial play about sexism in the Black community. Childress experiments with the classic structures, introducing subversive gestures within them. Hay also suggests that Childress substitutes theme for character and that this theme is revealed through argumentation rather than characterization (119). However it is also evident that Childress is concerned with ordinary men and women who become
heroes in their contexts. She states "Black writers cannot afford to abuse or neglect
the so-called ordinary characters who represent a part of ourselves. The self twice –
denied, first by racism and then by class difference" (Brown-Guillory Their Place
53). The Black women characters in her plays are unforgettable as they inspire and
motivate just causes.

In Trouble in Mind, Childress uses the play within – the play structure, which
ruptures the realist text by making apparent, ironies that are not obvious or visible in
the main plot. The plot reveals the conflict between Black and white in the theatre.
The play "Chaos in Belleville", which is being rehearsed brings out racial conflicts
with its treatment of the subject of lynching. This conflict leads to a climax when
Wiletta confronts the white director, Bill Manners. This confrontation leads to a
realization in the Black characters, who unlike Wiletta, do not manifest this change
overtly. There is no recognition or change by the protagonist but she changes the
tactics she employed. This is seen in her reversal of the advice she had given John, at
the beginning of the play. She had encouraged him to 'do the Tom' that is, "to laugh
at everything they say" to make whites feel superior" (139). After her confrontation
with Manners, she admits to John, "I told you every thing wrong 'cause I didn't know
better... You right, don't make sense to be bowin' and scrapin' and tommin' no, don't
pay no attention to what I said" (167). At the end of the play, the protagonist gets
nothing for her trouble. She suffers alienation and the probable loss of her job but she
does not for an instant weaken resolve and in turn inspires John in his struggle.
This "comedy in two Acts" has seventeen episodes, each act beginning and ending with a chorus episode between Wiletta and Henry, the Irish doorman. The middle of this linear progression has the episodes arranged to reveal the growing discomfort of the protagonist, leading to the complication about the script, the confrontation with Manners and the climax. The middle of the play carries the argumentation, which reveals the theme through cause and effect. The climax of the play – within – the play and the outer reality of the play is in a single dramatic moment which dissolves the lines between fiction and reality, thus showing how the gaze determines the real and imagined lives of Black people, in life and in art. The last three episodes stage Manners exit, the cast's resolutions and the ending of the rehearsal.

Not only race, but class is also a major issue in the play. Manners tries to gain the empathy of the Black actors by describing his own struggle in a hierarchical society. This amasses support from the cast as they too exist in the same political class structures. Wiletta however exposes this easy generalization by asking Manners, "Would you send your son to be murdered?" (171). Manners racist out burst proves that in the matter of superiority race matters. He answers, "Don't compare yourself to me! What goes for my son doesn't necessarily go for yours! [...] they've got nothing in common"( 171).
Wiletta, Childress' middle-aged protagonist has spent twenty-five years struggling to hold her own in the theatre. She has been a victim of race, sex and class but has learned to cope with these oppressions. Thus her interactions with Manners is no longer accommodation until his insistence that she go against her convictions and instincts. That is when she surfaces and becomes a spokeswoman for her race, sex and class, exposing the hypocrisies within the theatre.

Childress portrays the journey from margin to centre, from the shadows to the spotlight. She thus traces the emergence of a Black female hero, who may never get to play the part of one in the theatre, but who is one in real life. Childress describes Wiletta as “middle aged”; “attractive and expansive in personality”(137). Wiletta's long history in the theatre has earned her recognition from people like Henry who on seeing her enter, exclaims “you ... you are Wiletta Mayer ... more than twenty years ago, in the old Galy Theater... you was singin' a number, with the lights changin’ color all around you...” (137).

Wiletta's general nature and charm endear her to people like Henry and John, the new aspiring actor. She makes John feel welcome, giving him good advice and inspires him with her courage and spirit. Though she is easy - going, she is not complacent and has no illusions about her place in the theatre. She tells John “Show business, it's just a business. Colored folks ain’t in no theatre” (139). For twenty-five years Wiletta has had to play darkie roles which included singing, dancing, praying and grinning. This stereotyping is made apparent in Manners perceptions and
directions of “Chaos in Belleville”. Lynching is seen from a white perspective, reducing Black families to powerlessness and enslavement. Millie reveals that in the last show she had acted in, all she had done “was shout ‘Lord, have mercy’ for all most two hours” (141). These ‘colored shows’ subject Black people to further humiliation as they participate in their own subjugation.

Wiletta always aimed to please her directors by acting according to their expectations. Manners tells Wiletta, “Darling, don’t think. Your great until you start thinking. I don’t expect you to” (157). Wiletta reveals her own frustration, when she admits, “I don’t like to think ... makes me fightin’ mad” (153). When Manners goads her she explodes, “You been askin’ me what I think and where things come from and how come I thought it and all that. Where is this coming from? Tell me, why this boy’s people turned against him? Why we sendin’ him out into the teeth of a lynch mob? I m his mother and I’m sendin’ him to his death. This is a lie” (169).

Wiletta’s explosion comes at the end of a grueling session in which Manners tries to force her to think like a white person who thinks frightened Blacks will give in. Wiletta has survived humiliation in the theatre, but here, the play opens up historical wounds that she will not allow to deepen with her acquiescence. Her endurance comes to an end when it challenges her instinct as a Black woman. At the end of Act One Wiletta reveals, “Every damn body pushin’ me off the face of the earth! I want to be an actress ... hell, I’m gonna be one, you hear me? (154). At the
end of Act Two Wiletta knows she will lose her job, but she is triumphant, as she did not.

Wiletta attempts to dismantle the images constructed by whites for Blacks, especially the stereotype of the Black mammy. The mammy was often a housekeeper in white homes, whose gratitude and loyalty to the whites was unshakeable. She was expected to betray her race, her family and her integrity. The script demands such a portrayal, Wiletta however, resists this depiction at every stage, till she exposes Manners' racism. She tells the cast "The writer wants the damn white man to be the hero - and I'm the villain" (169). Wiletta, through her courage sets the historical record straight.

Childress also exposes sexism in the theatre, which affects both Black and white, though Black women are shown as being far inferior to white women. Wiletta reveals "I always say its the man's play, the man's money and the man's theatre..." (141). This is the experience of all the women in the play. Judy, the white girl receives special attention from Manners. The stage directions read he "looks down at her hair and neck which is perched right under his nostrils. Judy can feel his breath on her hair" (143). A little later, Manners shows Judy how to walk downstage; he takes "Judy by the shoulders and speedily leads her around the stage" (145). The women in the cast notice this but Sheldon's perspectives are different and decidedly male. He remarks, "He wasn't gonna attack her" (143)
However, where sex is considered, race is also a crucial signifier in determining social positioning. When Manners throws down a piece of paper, Judy bends to pick it up, but he orders “Hold your position! Wiletta pick up the paper!”, Wiletta angrily retorts, “Well, hell I ain’t the damn janitor” (146). Manners is embarrassed by her outburst and covers up by calling it training. One sees similar discrimination when Sheldon crawls over Millie “to hand” Judy “coffee” like the proverbial Tom (153). Yet he does no such favours for the Black women in the cast. Instead he remarks “Colored women wake up in the mornin’ with their fist’s balled up ... ready to fight” (153). Childress reveals how and sexism affects Black women within and without the community. This feeling is similar to Walter Younger’s outburst in A Raisin in the Sun (89).

Racism and sexism are also evident in the roles that Black and white women play. While Judy is the Southerner’s daughter, Millie plays Petunia and Wiletta, Ruby. They play servants in Mr. Ed Turners house. Earlier in the play Millie, announces that she is always dressed up like a mammy with “baggy cotton dresses” and “a bandana” (141). Black women’s roles are so predictable that Sheldon without consulting the script can predict what they will do, that is, dusting and cleaning (146). Wiletta says of Millie “she’s played every flower in the garden ... Gardenia ... Magnolia ... Chrysanthemum was another”. Millie joins the banter reminding Wiletta “and you’ve done all the jewels ... Crystal, Pearl, Opal” (141). This observation is
concretized when Wiletta plays Ruby and Millie, Petunia in yet another ‘colored show’.

Childress exposes sexism more thoroughly in her award – winning play Wine in the Wilderness, where the conflict is drawn around sex and class. This plot differs structurally from Trouble in Mind. While in the inter-racial play, the middle serves as an argument for the theme; in this intra-racial play, the middle serves as an exposition that reveals the difference of perspectives that are responsible for the ways they relate to the reality of race, sex and class. History and politics serve as the indices that describe their responses. Bill, the protagonist, is a Black painter who has assimilated white culture, alienating himself from the realities of Black life. Tomorrow Marie, is the apparent antagonist, who disrupts this illusion with her ‘grass-roots’ ways. In transforming and restoring him to an affirmative Black identity Childress subverts the order, making Tommy, the real hero.

The one-act play has ten episodes that are arranged to reveal the character of Tommy and the transformation of Bill. The artist in the first two episodes establishes the setting. There are race riots in the background and Bill Jameson is shown painting a triptych on Black womanhood. He reveals two completed pictures to Old Timer, one of Black girlhood and the other ‘Wine in the Wilderness’. He is now looking for a model to paint his picture of a of messed-up chick. He says “She’s gonna be the kinda chick that is grass roots... no not grassroots ... I mean she’s underneath the grassroots. The lost woman, ... what the society has made out of our women. She’s as
far from my African queen as a woman can get and still be a female” (129). When Tommy enters, her manners and mannerisms seem to make her an ideal model with “all the elements” of ‘a messed-up chick’ (129).

The next three episodes reveal Tommy’s growing fascination for Bill, whom she considers, husband material. “I have a dream too”, she confides in Cynthia. Mine is to find a man who’ll treat me just half—way decent [...] just to meet me half—way” (133). It is evident however that Bill views Tommy as an amusement. The plot thickens in episode six, when Tommy and Bill are left alone and the differences between them are made obvious through the dialogue. This difference between Tommy’s expectations and Bill’s intentions reaches a climax when Tommy overhears his description of his ideal woman in episode seven. Tommy mistakes it to be a description of her and gives herself up to Bill for a night of love. The next episode shows a Tommy who feels loved and accepted, however this happiness is short lived as Old Timer reveals the truth in episode nine. The last episode shows Tommy’s confrontation with Bill, Sonny—man and Cynthia, exposing their hypocrisies and their devaluation of Black women. Her spirit and courage causes a recognition and transformation in Bill who elevates Tommy to her true position as ‘Wine in the Wilderness’. Tommy thus subverts the male gaze by re-visioning the way Black women are constructed.
This plot structure differs from her inter-racial play in significant ways. The apparent protagonist is a Black male whose position is subverted in the play through the plot. In a similar fashion Tommy, who is introduced as an antagonist, becomes the protagonist. She disrupts this phallocratic order to transform the apparent protagonist, Bill. The middle also serves as an exposition. Tommy is introduced only in the second episode, whereas the chorus episodes in the first play reveal details about Wiletta that are not evident in the development of the play. This strategy increases the intensity of the reversal when Bill becomes the object to be transformed by Tommy. The middle also reinforces that while Tommy may not know Black heroes like “Frederick Douglas, Elias Lovejoy or Monroe Trotter”, she is aware of grass root revolutions that have been initiated and sustained by ordinary people (137-142). This confirms Childress’ views on heroism. This strategy of placing a people’s history and polic as a middle, is significant, as it explores the processes that have shaped the personal and political history of ordinary Black people, like Tommy.

The recognition and reversal are in the last episode; this gives time for Tommy to rise to her position. Tommy’s argument leads to Bill’s realization. His transformation is evident when he admits he was wrong in his evaluation of Black woman hood. When he asks Tommy to take her rightful place as ‘Wine in the Wilderness’, he says ”Look at Tomorrow. She came throughout the biggest riot of all, somethin’ called Slavery, and she’s even comin’, through the ‘now scene’” (149). The resolution is also a reversal of cause and effect. Bill begins with the intention of teaching Black women like Tommy “what a woman oughta be” (126).
After his transformation, he tells Tommy, “Wine In The Wilderness; you gotta let me put it down so all the little boys and girls can look up and see you on the wall, and you know what their gonna say? Hey, don’t she looks like somebody we know?”[…]
“And they’ll be right, you’re somebody they know…”(149).

Childress’ plots are innovative and are adapted to themes and contexts she wishes to address. In both these plays the plots are constructed to subvert the gaze that has framed Black women. Childress deconstructs those indices that have led to her framing, by showing how over-determination of oppressed peoples has led to gross misrepresentations in society. This struggle to posit the real self is staged in these plays.

Childress’ greatest concern has been the establishment of a political basis for centralizing a Black woman in the theatre. In an essay she quotes, “The Negro woman will attain her rightful place in American literature when those of us, who care about truth, justice and a better life will tell her story, with the full knowledge and appreciation of her constant, unrelenting struggle against racism for human rights”(qtd in Lester 278). Childress realizes this dream in her telling of Black women’s stories. Tommy exemplifies the ‘constant unrelenting struggle’ of Black women even as she epitomizes the emergent Black woman.
Bill presents a negative picture of the Black woman that he encounters everyday. He describes her as “ignorant”, “unfeminine”, “coarse”, “rude”, “vulgar” and “a poor dumb chick” (126). Tommy appears in the next episode and everything about her, seems to be in conjunction with Bill’s description of ‘the lost woman’, ‘the messed – up chick’, ‘the underneath the grass root’s woman’. Yet Tommy’s uninhibited response, her spontaneity, courage and vitality foreground the lifeless sophistication of Bill, Sonny – man and Cynthia. She puts the three of them to shame by exposing their lack of sensitivity towards Old Timer. Their ignorance of his name and background makes Tommy seem humane and warm by comparison. She reveals how inconspicuous Black people like Old Timer have become even to their own. He has become invisible under the name because “that’s what everybody calls him”, Old Timer (127). In this she resembles Wiletta’s concern for the old man Henry and Cornerstone’s compassion for a weary old Us.

Tommy looks different in her “mis- matched shirt and sweater, wearing a wig that is not comical, but is wiggly” (127). Though she is initially self-conscious about her dress sense, she quickly integrates herself in the group. She is unaffected by her lack of sophistication and reveals a keen interest in learning new things. When Bill checks Tommy about her flippant use of “nigger”, she makes an effort to use the politically correct term ‘Afro – American’ (129). In a later scene with Bill, she admits her ignorance of Black history, and tells him “[...] Don’t put me through no test, Billy. This room is full – a things I don’ know nothin’ about. How’l I get to know [...] Teach me things” (138). This lack of affectation reveals her humility and
confidence. Though she has lost her "transistor ... and a brand new pair – a shoes"[...] and her "my- on- ase jar with forty one dollars", yet she can boast of always having some place to go (129). Tommy exclaims, "The riot done wipe me out and I’m sittin’ here ballin’" (131).

It is this confidence which makes her feel as good as the rest of them. When she confesses to Cynthia that she likes Bill, Tommy’s dreams and hopes alarm Cynthia. When she tries to dissuade her, Tommy pointedly tells her "You tryin’ to tell me I’m aimin’ too high by lookin’ at Bill" (133). Tommy then discloses the struggle she’s been through and that she’s proud to be who she is. She is not embarrassed by her lack of education, wealth, stature or sophistication. When Cynthia admits that Tommy is "too brash" and "too used to looking after herself", she replies "If I don’t, who’s gonna do for me?!"(134). Tommy is proud of her heritage and is not ashamed of being ‘a grass – roots’ woman. She tells her personal story to Bill without any pretence of apology or shame. Tommy’s confidence in herself is what makes her believe all the praise that Bill has for his ‘Wine in the Wilderness’. She believes it is she, he’s talking about. He describes his ideal woman on the phone as “Wine in the Wilderness"... the memory of Africa... The now of things ... but best of all and most important... She’s tomorrow”(141). His most telling statement “she has come through everything that has been put on her...” is what leads Tommy to believe that he is describing her and so she gives herself up to him in love and faith (140).
Tommy is transformed by Bill’s love, she feels wanted and accepted for the first time. This is reflected in the way she “removes her wig and fluffs up her hair”. “We see her taller, more relaxed and sure of herself”, Childress notes (141). Tommy believes that ‘Black is Beautiful’, but for Bill, the phrase is just a political cliche made popular by the political climate of the sixties. However his actions seem contradictory to his words. Earlier, he had expressed to Tommy his views of Black women, like herself, “who don’t know a damn thing ‘bout bein’ feminine, about being “determined not to ever be beautiful” (139). This scene reveals the unreal expectations that Black men have of Black women and their denigration of them. Tommy shows that Black women will be beautiful only if Black men can accept their beauty.

Tommy, despite her love for Bill, is unwilling to be made a victim of prejudice and sexism. She refuses to become “a poor dumb chick that had her behind kicked until its numb” (126). Her assertiveness and refusal to adopt or measure herself against Bill’s expectations causes Bill and the others to see her in a different light. Bill realizes that he had constructed false identities “outa the junk room” of his mind (130). He sees the values that inform Tommy’s self- esteem and belief that ‘Black is beautiful’. Tommy points to his pre- occupation with “accessories” while the “real thing is takin’ place on the inside…” (130). Tommy rests her case when Bill decides to paint Tommy as she is, wig placed on her lap, because he realizes she is “somebody” that little boys and girls “know” (130).
Childress' attempts to celebrate the heroic struggles of Black women have resulted in realistic images of Black women in the theatre and outside. Wiletta and Tomorrow are willing to lose the security of a job or a husband for something far more valuable and precious – the belief in their uniqueness. Experimenting with forms and structures, Childress too finds unique ways through plot and characterization to locate the Black woman in her rightful place.

Hansberry, like Childress, shows how Black women have the ability to transform context and communities they live in. Like Childress, her plays also study the confrontations between Black and white and its causes and effects. She wanted a world where Blacks could be free to be themselves without having to constantly pay the prices for being Black in America. In her Autobiography "To be Young, Gifted and Black", she says, “I am sick of poverty, lynching, stupid wars and the universal maltreatment of my people and obsessed with a rather desperate desire for new world for me and my brothers” (222). This obsession is written large in the ways, Hansberry creates spaces in her plays for Black people to live their lives, on their terms. For the Younger family it is their dream home, for Hannibal it is to dream about freedom and know it. Freedom as Hansberry notes comes with a heavy price, but she emphasizes through the play that there is no price too heavy to pay for the freedom of the human spirit.
Though *A Raisin in the Sun* became an American classic for its depiction of an American family's pursuit of the American Dream, it is pertinent to note that Hansberry's idea of the universal includes the specifics of race, sex and class. Her rootedness in her past and innate belief in humanness result in a vision of solidarity and reconstruction of Black communities. These themes are embedded in her plots and characterization. Her plots are arranged in a linear fashion to reveal the protagonist's growth from slavery to selfhood. Her characters resist racism and claim humanity in the process.

*A Raisin in the Sun* is a three-act play with six episodes that follow a structure with a beginning, middle and end. Act One, forms the exposition of the Younger family, who lives in the ghettos of Chicago's South Side. It reveals the conditions they have to endure because they seem to belong to wrong race and class. Yet they are not without their dreams for a better future. The exposition each of these dreams involves money, Lena Younger's insurance money, which is expected to arrive soon. The conflict is within the family, as each of them has to make a choice that entails sacrifice on the part of the other. In scene one, the complication develops as Walter Younger wants Mama's ten thousand dollars to invest in a liquor store. Ruth, Beneatha and Lena refuse to hear of it. Ruth's fainting at the end of the scene adds to the complication. Scene two establishes Ruth's pregnancy and a growing romance between Beneatha and Asagai, with George complicating it, the Act ends with the arrival of the much awaited cheque.
Act Two further complicates the situation as Lena discloses that she has put down money for a house in Clybourne Park. Walter is distraught and angry that his dreams have been deferred. Scene two reveals Lena trying to mollify her son by giving him sixty five hundred dollars, to be shared between Beneatha and him. This temporary lull leads to another conflict in the guise of Karl Lindner, who attempts to dissuade the Youngers from moving into their dream house in a white neighborhood. Scene three reveals a crisis as Walter discloses he has lost all the money in a deal with Willy. The thought of losing Mama’s house causes Walter’s recognition and reversal in Act Three. Walter’s pride as a Black man makes him assume control of the situation even as he asserts himself by refusing Lindner’s offer of money. The resolution is in the movement of the Younger family from the ghettos to their new home in Clybourne Park.

The classic plot structures the development of the apparent antagonist Walter from being selfish and weak – willed to taking his place as a responsible head of the family as a Black man. The complex plot with its various conflicts and many complications progresses logically to its resolution in a carefully arranged sequence of cause and effect. The resolution reveals the agent’s will to change and avert an irrevocable destiny. While all the elements point to a universal theme, yet the particularities which these heroes face are unique to people who suffer deprivation and oppression on account of race, sex and class. Hansberry also points to the
significant role that Black women play in causing Walters transformation. The three
women, in three different roles and capacities reveal Black women’s abilities to create
change. Hansberry deconstructs through the plot and characterization, the
stereotypical images imposed on Black women.

Hansberry’s achievement lies in her characterization of the Black mother and
matriarch of the Younger family – Lena, who is addressed as ‘Mama’. The received
image of the matriarch has been a negative construction of the Black mother as
autocratic, cunning, selfish and most significantly, an emasculating woman. This
image was constructed during slavery, when slave men rarely stayed long enough to
head their families. This absence led to the Black woman’s position as head of
households with no prominent male head. Black women’s control and influence over
these families was a threat to slave holders who constructed the myth of the Black
matriarch. This image continues to be perpetuated through the popular media.

Lena Younger is described as “a woman in her early sixties, full bodied and
strong”. “Her dark brown face is surrounded by the total whiteness of her hair”. Her
face is ‘full of strength’, she has “a certain grace and beauty” that she wears
“unobtrusively”. Her speech is soft, careless yet quite. Hansberry links her beauty to
“that of the Herero women” of Africa (47 – 48). The familiar image of the Black
matriarch is completed, when Lena fixes a bandana on her head and starts fussing
over her home and family. She immediately establishes herself as a caretaker and
home – maker. She fusses over Beneatha not being warm enough, over Ruth looking peaked and over Travis’s eating habits. Lena has worked hard all her life, her struggle alongside her husband Walter Sr. is story of Black women’s struggle to give their children dreams. Her husband believed that “God didn’t seen fit to give Black man nothing but dreams – but he did give us children to make their dreams seem worthwhile” (52). This reverie is significant, as Lena believes that her insurance money could help Walter and Beneatha actualize their personal dreams. However, Walter does not seem the kind of child, Walter Sr. had in mind, who could ‘make their dreams seem worth while’.

As a mother, Lena is an awesome figure who rules her home with as much love as discipline. Integrity, strength of character and the fear of God, love of discipline, faith in one’s ability and pride in the race are priorities she inculcates in her children, by example and rule. Her children think that she is not progressive and is old fashioned in her thinking. Walter does not see further than the tip of his nose, so he resents his mother’s cautious nature. This leads to many altercations between the children and their mother. Lena comments on these differences to Ruth reveal her anxiety. She confides “[...] there’s something come down between me and them that don’t let us understand each other and I don’t know what it is” (56). Ruth replies “You just got strong – willed children and it takes a strong woman like you to keep em in hand”(56).
This aspect is seen when Beneatha irritated by her mother’s implicit faith in God’s will, stoutly denies the reality of a God in a material world. Mama is shocked by her outburst and asserts firmly. “There are some ideas we ain’t going to have in this house. Not long as I am still head of his family” (55). Beneatha replies “I also see that everybody thinks its all right for Mama to be a tyrant” (56). However despite all her misgivings, Beneatha is a loyal believer in Mama’s goodness. She tells Walter not to touch Mama’s hard-earned money. “That money belongs to Mama, Walter, and it’s for her to decide how she wants to use it. I don’t care if she wants to buy a house or a rocket ship or just nail it up somewhere and look at it – its hers. Not ours – hers” (45).

Lena shares a special relationship with Beneatha, like she does with Ruth. This special bonding helps Beneatha to confide in her mother about her feelings for Asagai or George. Lena understands woman talk better than talk about money. In fact, Lena shares her dreams, her past, and her fears and doubts with her daughter – in – law. Her keen sense of observation helps her to smell trouble. She recognizes Ruth’s frustration, empathizes with her about her pregnancy and inspires her to fight her feelings of hopelessness. Above all she gives Ruth a dream to hold on to. The three women also share the same sense of frustration about Walter’s irresponsible ways.

When Mama puts down money for a house with a garden in Clybourne Park she surprises the family with her independent actions. Walter’s insensitivity to her gift hurts her and she remarks, “I – I just seen my family falling apart today – just falling
to piece in front of my eyes— we couldn’t ‘f gone on like we was today. We was going backwards ‘stead of forwards— talking ‘bout killing babies and wishing each other dead— when it gets like that in life— you just got to do something different, push on out and do something bigger— I wish you say something son— I wish you’d say how deep inside you think I done the right thing” (87).

When Walter does say his piece, he takes the bottom out of her world. He responds “You the head of this family. You run our lives like you want to. It was your money and you did what you wanted with it... so you butchered up a dream of mine— you - who always talking ‘bout your children’s dreams” (57). Mama apologizes to Walter when she realizes that Walter’s spirit is dying with the denial of opportunities. He has become bitter, angry and frustrated because the world won’t let him have his dreams. This humility to accept her faults and to learn is a trait rarely associated with Black matriarchs. Hansberry includes this facet in a poignant scene between mother and son.

Mama: I’ve helped do it to you, haven’t I, son? Walter, I been
Walter: Now – you ain’t never been wrong about nothing, mama.
Mama: Listen to me now. I say I been wrong, son. That I been doing to you what the rest of the world been doing to you. Walter – what you ain’t never understood is that I ain’t got nothing, don’t own nothing, ain’t never really wanted nothing that wasn’t for you. There ain’t nothing as precious to me – there ain’t nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else if it means – if it means its going to destroy my boy” (91-92).

With this declaration, she gives Walter sixty five hundred dollars. She tells Walter “It ain’t much, but its all I got in the world and I’m putting it in your hands.
I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be"[...] “I ain’t never stop trusting you. Like I ain’t never stop loving you” (92). That love and trust take a beating when Walter loses all of the money through his foolish investments. Mama sees not only the loss of her money, but also a lifetime of suffering by her husband and herself to give her children dreams. She doesn’t say much to reprimand Walter, she just prays for “strength” (104).

This strength of Mama’s which has seen all of her hopes come to naught, all her struggle and hard work gone in a day, is the secret of her survival against all odds and which inspires her son to hold on to his dignity in the face of dire loss. She knows the depth of Walter’s suffering and believes that “there is always something left to love” (116). Walter realizes this strength and love and leans on it. Lena tells Beneatha not to be hard on Walter and asks her “to measure him right” and to “make sure” she takes “into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is” (116). Walter turns out right in the end. He is transformed by the strength of his mother’s love and her hopes for him.

Walter thinks that he can regain his mother’s money by accepting Lindner’s offer but Lena reminds him not to lose his pride for money. She tells him “Son— I come from five generations of people who was slaves and share croppers — but ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay ‘em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth. We ain’t never been that poor. We ain’t never been
that dead inside” (115). This pride in the race and its history of dignified endurance ignites a spark in Walter, who asserts himself and claims his place as head of the family.

Lena graciously accepts his headship and she tells Mr. Lindner when he appeals to her “My son said we was going to move and there ain’t nothing left for me to say” (119). This act re-visions the role of the matriarch. Hansberry implies that in a community where men are not accountable or responsible, a woman has to save the pride, as Lena does. Once Walter proves he is a man of character, Lena resigns her place happily. She feels she has accomplished her purpose as ‘mother’. Mama sees this transformation and likens it to “a rainbow after the rain” (120). It is Lena Younger, the Black matriarch, who facilitates Walter’s fiery rite of passage to manhood, familial responsibility and pride in his race and history.

Hansberry not only pays tribute to the matriarchs, but also the women of the present and the future. A Raisin in the Sun reads like a history of the Black woman and her evolution from matriarch to the emergent modern woman. Her portrayal of Ruth and Beneatha outlines the roles that Black women play, the relationships they are in and the experiences they face. Their marital status, age and experience provided a spectrum of the life of a Black woman before marriage, after marriage and in widowhood.
Ruth Younger, like Lena, works hard for a living. Hansberry describes Ruth as being about thirty, "once a pretty girl, she now looks tired and resigned" (35). Ruth and Walter are going through a difficult patch in their marriage. Walter vents his frustration on Ruth, who feels trapped in the ghetto and a difficult work routine. She feels physically and emotionally fatigued, as she has no spaces to be herself. She feels trapped in the cramped little tenement, the rush and bustle of two jobs as a domestic worker and the burden of raising a family and running a home. This is besides having an insensitive and unsympathetic husband who is constantly berating her lack of confidence in him.

Despite the everyday burdens, she is a gentle caring woman, and indulgent mother and a concerned wife. In scene one of the play, she is constantly nagging and fussing over Travis, her son. "If you don't take this comb and fix this head you better!" "And get your jacket too. Looks chilly in morning". "Get your carfare and milk money – and not a single penny for no caps, you hear me? (38- 39). She knows she is hard on him but Travis is appeased with a warm embrace and "utter gentleness" (39).

Walter by comparison is not so accommodating. Ruth is constantly badgered about her lack of faith in him. He complains "[...]so tired - moaning and groaning all the time but you wouldn’t do anything to help would you. You couldn’t be on my side that long for nothing, could you?" (41). He even goes so far as to state "We one group
group of men tied to a race of women with small minds”. Ruth resents Walter’s contemptuous remark, she retorts “well, being a colored woman I guess I can’t help myself none” (43). This statement implies that Black women do not have too many choices about the way they live. It also points to their disappointment in having to tolerate the immaturity and insensitivity of Black men. This is evident in Walter’s lack of knowledge or sympathy for Ruth and her dilemma about bringing one more child into poverty. He has no words of support to give her, even when he learns from his mother that Ruth is considering abortion. He consoles himself that Ruth will do no such thing but he has grossly underestimated his wife’s feelings. Mama warns him “when the world gets ugly enough a woman will do anything for her family. The part that’s already living” (72). Yet Ruth takes control of her life by taking control over her body and the choices that affect her as a woman. It is Lena’s gift of a new house that causes Ruth to retract her decision and hope for a decent lifestyle.

While Ruth is gentle and quiet, she is also wise and patient, making her a peacemaker and troubleshooter in the family. She creates spaces for mutual understanding between Walter and Lena, Lena and Beneatha, and between George and the family. When Beneatha accuses Ruth of taking sides, she tells her “Bennie, you think you a woman- but you still a little girl. What you did was childish – so you got treated like a child” (55). She puts Walter firmly in his place. This is illustrated in scene one of the play when Walter tries to set her up to influence Lena to lend him the money. When she avoids the discussion, he accuses her of not listening. Ruth replies,
“Honey, you never say nothing new. I listen to you everyday - every night and every morning and you never say nothing new” (43). She diplomatically handles Lena’s indulgences with Travis and can remind Beneatha that she is too pushy and naive about certain things.

Love and hope transform Ruth. When Walter treats her like a lady, she blossoms and enjoys the romance of going to the movies and holding hands, and dancing and giggling together. This is diametrically opposite to a picture of a tired and weary Ruth in Act One. When Lena informs the family of her latest acquisition, Ruth is the first one to react, “the radiation spreading from cheek to cheek”. She cries:

Well – WELL- all I can say is – if this is my time in life- MY TIME – to say goodbye – to these God-damned cracking walls! – and these marching roaches!- and this cramped little closet which ain’t now or never was no kitchen ;-then I say it loud and good, HALLELUYAH! AND GOODBYE, MISERY I DON’T NEVER WANT TO SEE YOUR UGLY FACE AGAIN!” (86). She becomes “aware for the first time that the life”, she carries “pulses with happiness and not despair” (57). Ruth clings to this dream and hope tenaciously. Even when Walter threatens that dream by losing all the money, Ruth is optimistic. In desperation to hold on to the dream she tells Lena, “I’ll work, I’ll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago – I’ll strap my baby on my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to – but we got to move - we got get of here”(112). In fact, as soon as Walter dismisses Lindner’s offer and
Though Ruth is portrayed as delicate and docile, yet she also has a quiet strength and determination to work towards a respectable life of dignity for herself and her family. In fact, she works herself to the bone to make ends meet and is willing to work harder if it means a better life for her family. Though she is gentle, she is assertive and can hold her own and is like her mother-in-law, tenacious and resilient. Hansberry here places on record the quiet gritty determination of ordinary Black working women.

In sharp contrast to Ruth, Beneatha is vital, assertive and adventurous. “She is about twenty, as slim and intensive as her brother. She is not as pretty as her sister-in-law, but her lean, almost intellectual face has a handsome ness of its own”(43). Beneatha is a strong, confident and determined young woman. She is different in her speech and manners, on account of her college education. She has a mind of her own and cannot be easily persuaded to change her mind.

Beneatha’s sense of adventure and enthusiasm is reflected in the range of interests that she is involved in – guitar lessons, horse riding and play-acting. In fact Mama accuses her of flitting from one thing to another. Yet, she is single minded in her ambition to become a doctor. Walter tells her “If you so crazy ‘bout messing
round with sick people – then go be a nurse like other women or just get married and be quiet.” (45). Walter of course is bitter as he thinks his mother will fund Beneatha’s dream and not his. Beneatha asserts her independence. “I have never asked anyone around here to do anything for me! What do you want from me, brother – that I quit school or just drop dead, which!” (45).

She is not afraid to speak her mind. She tells Walter, “But the insurance money belongs to Mama. Picking on me is not going to make her give it you to invest in any liquor stores. And I for one say, God bless Mama for that!” (46). When Walter loses everything and along with it her dreams, she is disgusted and castigates him with her “monologue of insult” (11). And yet when he offers to beg Lindner for the money, Negro style, she is ashamed of him and says, “That is not a man that is nothing but a toothless rat” (116).

She puts George and Asagai, in their places when the need arises. When Asagai hints at a sexual relationship, she stops him with, “I know and by itself it won’t do. I can find that anywhere” [...]. I m not interested in being someone’s little episode in America or one of them” (64). Although Beneatha is dating George Murchison, she resents his uppity ways and his contempt for African history and culture. Beneatha pointedly tells him “ [...] I hate assimilationist Negroes” (76). She goes on to explain, to Ruth, in the presence of George what the term means. “It means”, she explains, “someone who is willing to give up - his own culture and
himself completely in the dominant and in this case oppressive culture”

(76).

Beneatha is a political activist in her own way, a fact that George, the assimilationist resents and one that Asagai, the African revolutionary admires. Asagai shares Beneatha views, he satisfies her curiosity of and about Africa and its culture. Like her, he dreams of a better world for African people. He understands her and proposes to her, inviting her to share his world with her. Beneatha is confused, as she loves him, but she is also level headed and so asks for space and time. She explains, “Too many things- too many things have happened here today. I don’t know what I feel about anything right this minute. I’m just going to sit down and think”(111).

Beneatha does not wish to compromise her ambition for love; she bargains for the right to have both and she does. Beneatha represents the modern, educated Black woman who is able to balance her career and romance successfully she represents the endurance and moral strength of her foremother and the ambition and assertiveness of the modern woman. The evolution of the history of Black women in America comes of age with Beneatha.

Hansberry’s depiction of these brave women who face all the odds that life stacks against them, is a tribute to the unsung heroines of Black women’s history. This saga continues in the play The Drinking Gourd, in which Hansberry again subverts the myth and romance of the Southern Black mammy of the white plantation house, and the matriarch of the slave quarters. This play too, stages the conflict between Black and White, more specifically it explores the system of slavery set
around the time of the Civil War. The plot traces the journey of a slave to freedom and a master's spiritual quest. Hansberry's premise for the play rests on the fact that the peculiar institution of slavery grew out of the economic policy of America. The play dramatizes the devastating psychological and physical impact of the slave and the master. It revolves around three groups of people who constitute the institution of slavery- the master, the slave and the poor white farmer. Each of them is a victim of his own economic reality.

The three-act play has a complex plot, which delineates a clear divide in black and white realities. The play begins and ends with a chorus-episode in which the narrator/Soldier, presents an objective account of the system that makes some men masters of others. The narrator is a soldier whose "imposed generality is to be a symbolic American specificity, his voice is markedly free identifiable regionalism and his soldiers clothes do not in any way point to rank or particular army"(714). The soldiers monologue traces the history of slavery, from the idea to the institution. He states "You see, this seed and this earth- only have meaning - potency if you add a third force. The third force is labor"(714). The narrator points to slaves singing and working and comments, "It is a time, therefore when some men can believe and proclaim to the world that this system is the highest form of civilization in the world" (716).
The three-act play covers all the angles that provide the total picture of slavery. The action reveals the economic and social constraints imposed by it. The plot also reveals how race, sex, and class are causative factors that determine who will be master, servant, and slave. Act One of the play serves as the dramatic exposition, as it introduces the two groups in conflict—Rissa’s family and Hiram’s family. It also establishes Hannibal’s revolutionary spirit and yearning for freedom. He tells Sarah “Whatever you hear Master say ‘bout slavery. You believe the opposite” (718). He also asserts “way I look at it, ever’ slave ought to run off ‘fore he die” (718). This scene also adds the romantic interest through the subplot of Hannibal and Sarah’s courtship.

The second episode presents the conflict in the Sweet household. Hiram Sweet, is a sick man, who has worked hard to make the cotton plantation one of the richest in the South. He has a romantic view of land, cotton, and his slaves. Everett does not embrace his father’s vision of Southern life. He is aided by Dr. Macon Bullet and encouraged by his mother Maria.

The third episode reveals the close relationship that master and slave share. The episode reveals that they have shared a history together and that Hiram appreciates Rissa’s loyalty by giving in to her requests. This also reveals the tension between Hiram and Maria over Rissa. Hiram asserts within their hearing “there are some men born into this world who make their own destiny. Men who do not tolerate the rules of other men or other forces” (723). Act One presents the two tragic
both of epic stature and vision. They are both as big as their dreams and both victims of an economy that inhibits realization of their potential. They are both engaged in fighting a system that is larger than them.

Act Two introduces the complication. Hiram’s attack encourages Maria to ask Everett to take over the management of the plantation, knowing that a sick Hiram is powerless to act or know. She advises Everett, “You must take over the running of the plantation ... and you must make him believe no such thing ... you will be master then. But he will think that he is still, which is terribly important”(724). Everett’s worldview is in contradiction to his father’s, and this is made evident in the next episode when he hires a small farmer Zeb Dudley who is struggling with corn, in a cotton belt. His growing family and the poverty force him to accept Everett’s offer to be his slave driver and overseer.

The following episode brings the three groups into direct contact, aggravating the tension and leading to the climax. Coffin discovers Hannibal escapades and warns Zeb, who makes an example of him by whipping him. Everett is upset, as he knows his father will hear of this through Rissa. The next episode shows Hannibal in his clearing, learning to read from Tommy, Hiram’s youngest son. Coffin, Zeb and Everett discover them and Hannibal pays dearly for the crime of having learned to read. Everett shouts “You have used your master’s son to commit a crime against you
The Act ends with the sounds of "the tortured screams of an antagonized human being" (732). A reluctant and horrified Zeb gouges out Hannibal's eyes. He is forced into an inhumane act. As a servant of a rich, white man, he is forced to punish a poor slave. The pertinent issue of how race and class operate within this economy is illustrated through this incident.

Act Three reveals a dying hero who castigates Everett for his inhuman action. He tries to take control of a world he doesn't know anymore. He fires Zeb and rushes to Rissa who ignores his plea for understanding. She asks him pointedly, "How can a man be master of some men and not at all others?" (734). She turns her back on him and an alienated Hiram dies alone even as the lights in the slave cabins go out one by one, in support of Rissa. The death of Hiram also symbolizes the end of an era. The next episode reveals Everett in uniform ready to fight and preserve the way of the South and slavery, while on the other side, Rissa sends Hannibal to his freedom and

This well crafted play is tightly knit with an economy of short scenes that shift rapidly to simultaneously reveal the action on both sides. The plot accelerates to the climax and catastrophe. The linear arrangement of exposition, climax and catastrophe is staged logically in the three-act play. Hansberry uses a conventional structure and yet ruptures anticipation of the narrative promise by varying the way Blacks and whites understand causes and effects. Hannibal's blinding reverses the
situates and leads to Rissa’s alienation from her master, which in turn leads to his death. While the master’s plot ends with Hiram’s death and symbolizes the end of an era and way of life, the slave narrative discloses the journey from enslavement to emancipation. The master’s discourse is the language of ‘control’, while the slave narrative encloses the poetry of resistance and freedom. These contrasts are highlighted through the actions and narratives of the characters. Hiram historicizes the master’s perspective of slavery, while Rissa, ‘herstorizizes’ the Black woman’s role in the liberation of her people.

These contrasts also highlight Hansberry’s skills in characterization. Rissa, is delineated as “a woman of late years with an expression of indifference that has already passed resignation” (716) Rissa had slaved away on the Sweet plantation for thirty-five long years. She sowed the seeds out of which the plantation grew. Her long service and loyalty has earned her the respect and admiration of her master. Her status has been elevated to that of a housekeeper in the Sweet mansion. Though Rissa has a “look that has passed resignation”, yet she participates in the goings-on of the slave quarters and the Sweet household.

Rissa shares a relationship with her master Hiram, on equal terms. She cajoles him, criticizes him but is also concerned about him. The following excerpts demonstrate the complexity of this relationship. Rissa tells Hiram, “I don’t have to listen to no other folk’s conversations to see h’ you ailin’. You sittin’ there, there
now, white as cotton, sweatin’ like you see the horse man comin’, (she stands behind him and forces him to sit back in the chair with comforting gestures) “Lord you one stubborn man, I never come across” (722). Rissa’s love and action express her concern, authority and intimacy.

Maria, Hiram’s wife resents this intimacy and the influence Rissa has over Hiram. She is disturbed by the relationship that causes him to even go against her wishes and agrees to oblige Rissa by making Hannibal, a house slave. Hiram constantly asserts his position as master, not only over his slaves but also his household. When she confronts Hiram at the end of the play about his inability to control the actions of other men, he realizes that he has betrayed his loyal slave and is confronted by his own insignificance in the larger scheme of things.

Rissa’s relationship with her son is an interesting blend of pretended indifference, which points to a love so deep that it allows her to let him follow his heart. At the beginning of the play she feigns indifference about Hannibal’s mysterious disappearances. Though she tells Sarah, “If he ain’t got sense enough to come for his supper, it ain’t no care of mine” yet she asks Sarah to find him and quietly sends him his share of supper (716). Rissa wants an easier life for Hannibal than working in the sun “nine and a half hours a day” (721). She constantly asks Hiram to oblige her request to make Hannibal a house boy, though Maria objects. Hannibal hates the idea of being a fancy house boy. Rissa tries to pacify his anger and
frustration, she says, "Things jes ain't that bad here. Lord, child, I been in some places when I was a young girl which was made up by the devil. I known Marsters in my time what come from hell." She adds "He's your Master, and long as he is, got the right, I reckon" (728). Hannibal resists and argues but Rissa has the final word "you do your work and do like you tol' and you be all right" (728).

Rissa constantly fears for Hannibal's safety and tries to protect the only child she has left, after Isaiah escaped to his freedom. Though she is proud that her son can read the Bible, her "joy and wonder are transformed to stark fear" (729). She looks for a place to hide the Bible. She even goes down on her knees and warns him of his fate. Hannibal is disappointed in his mother's reaction he tells her "Mama, I wish to God I could believe you that much on my side", "I thought you would be proud. But it's too late for you Mama you ain't fit for nothing' but slavery thinking no more" (729).

Rissa reverses this notion, when she confronts the effects of slavery face to face. Looking at the festering eyes of her son, she realizes that she has "done see all there was worth see' in this world and it didn't mount to much" (734). When she turns her back on Hiram, she turns her back on the only world she has known. She realizes that Hiram and she belonged to another world, but it was time for change. Her action inspires a community ritual of support and a new era of freedom for Hannibal, Sarah and Joshua. Rissa subverts the myth of the faithful Black mammy and with it the
that the institution of slavery was “the highest form of civilization in the world” (716).

Maria, is a foil to Rissa, as literally as white is to black. These polarities describe the positioning of white women over and in opposition to, Black women. By Jefferson’s time, the woman; signified ‘white’, ‘free’, ‘upper class’ and this idealization was possible by the nexus of the Black slave woman. Ironically, both are victims of patriarchy, both are mothers who love their sons and dream of happiness and a better status for them. Rissa’s long association with Hiram threatens Maria who tries to over rule Rissa’s wishes, at every turn in order to demonstrate her power as a white mistress. Though she is mistress of her house, it is Rissa who runs it. Though Maria is portrayed as fragile and feminine, yet her private moments reveal her capacity for deceit, power and ambition. She desires a consolidation of her position through her son. She tells Everett, when he questions her honesty. “Under the circumstances, Everett, I consider that to be the question of a weak boy when I have clearly asked you to be a very strong man. Which in the only kind I have ever been able to truly love” (724).

Maria, is the white ideal who has to be protected, confronted and loved. By contrast, Rissa is alone, threatened and independent and she is principled, loyal and honest. While Maria is only mistress of household, Rissa is the Cornerstone of her community, a matriarch. She is respected by young and old; even Coffin, the slave driver is careful with her. Everett fears her power over Hiram like Maria. She is a
formidable woman who is supported by her community. Both Maria and Rissa lose their sons to different causes. Everett chooses to fight a war to preserve the Southern way of life and slavery, while Hannibal chooses the road, the Drinking Gourd, to freedom. One chooses to preserve his way to life, the other to change it.

Rissa, like Lena, wonders at the rebellious spirit of her sons, she remarks “How come mine all come here this way lord?” (728). Isaiah, her oldest has already escaped to freedom and Hannibal dreams of nothing else, but freedom. Coffin remarks, “them was some wild boys you birthed woman”(727). This has a striking resemblance to Ruth’s remarks to Lena, “you just got strong – willed children and it takes a strong woman like you to keep’ em in hand” (Raisin 56). Bonner’s Cornerstone is also the mother of a spirited son, Finest Blood who initiates revolution. Wiletta in Trouble in Mind plays the part of Ruby, whose son Job incites a white mob. These Black women exhibit similarities that attest to the history they have been enjoined to share. They become models for future characters such as Beneatha, Tommy and Shange’s ‘Colored girls’.

The characterization of Bonner, Childress and Hansberry has had an impact on contemporary Black women playwrights, Kennedy and Shange. These two playwrights have evolved distinct structures and techniques to portray the processes that have resulted in the images of Black women. These playwrights have made their plays lyrical quests. They disrupt theatrical conventions with their experimental
forms, which resist definition. Kennedy and Shange succeed in exploring the inner and outer realities that Black women inhabit.

The challenge of trying to posit and define the Black female consciousness in the language of domination finds dramatic expression in the surreal world of Kennedy’s plays. The irreconcilable distinctions between black and white are represented in a bizarre merging in the symbolic image of the mulatta, herself a bastard of black and white. In Kennedy’s “lyrical quest for roots” (Blau 531), whiteness is engrailed and Black defined as evil as it is this signifier that causes her alienation, reflection and suffering. Kennedy’s distorting critique of these polarities reveal the illusions that theatre perpetuates through classic realism. Her plays are therefore radical gestures that deconstruct development, coherence and order. These dream settings or nightmares stage “an ontological argument in which nothing is certain except the mutable resisting image before us” (Bryant Jackson 53). Within these crises, her protagonists are haunted by several ‘selves,’ that they need to reconcile in order to define ‘self’.

Funnyhouse of a Negro won an Obie for “most distinguished play”. It reflects the fourteen months that Kennedy spent in Europe, Ghana and Nigeria. It also reflects haunting memories of her childhood in Cleveland, Ohio, where she used to visit a funny house in an amusement park. The action in the play occurs when the myths of Black and white resist each other. This essential self exists somewhere where the
vertices of race, sex, class history and culture intersect. The metamorphosis of images reveals the dysfunctional and bizarre world of a Black woman's psyche under duress.

This one-act play has no plot or linear progression. There is no visible action, only an illogical sequence of monologic incantations, in which characters merge or resist each other. These choral incantations exhibit repetition and circularity. Characters or 'selves' repeat each other's speeches, revealing this dysfunction. Sarah explains this in her exposition "I try to give myself a logical relationship but that two is a lie" (7).

There are five scenes in the play; each scene is fixed in a specific setting. The characters are not fixed in these spaces but connect and disconnect from their different selves. The first and third scene take place in Queen Victoria's chamber; the second in Funny man 'Raymond's room; the fourth in the Duchess of Haspsburg's places and the last in the jungle which is superimposed on all the other spaces. Blackouts or spotlights indicate shifts in scenes. Since Kennedy's plays are plotless, an analysis of scenes is necessary to attempt a logical union of ideas as time and space are fragmented or telescoped.

The first scene reveals Queen Victoria and the Duchess who are portrayed as identical mulattas. They reveal their phobia of the Black man who is coming through the jungle to find them. A Black man had raped their 'Mother' and this fact is
revealed before Sarah- Negro appears. In a long exposition, Sarah Negro attempts a logical connection between her ‘selves’. She admits to having “bludgeoned” her “father’s head with an ebony mask” (6). Sarah’s landlady Mrs. Conrad, states that Sarah’s father hanged himself in a “Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered” (8).

In scene two, the Duchess tells Funny man Raymond that her father “is an African who lives in the jungle... Yes, he is a nigger who is an African who is missionary teacher and is now dedicating his life to the erection of a Christian mission in the middle of the jungle” (9). Duchess reveals her mother is a white woman who is “in the asylum” (11). The scene ends with a “Man” carrying a mask, who is also Sarah- Negro. Scene three reveals that the “Man” is Patrice Lumumba. His speech is a repetition of Sarah Negro’s expository speech. There is an attempt to provide a background for Sarah Negro’s father who is also Patrice Lumumba, who also wanted to be Jesus Christ and save the race. He wanted the Black man “to make a pure statement” and rise from colonialism (14). Sarah – Man reveals that he is guilty of sending Sarah’s mother to an asylum, and for having created “a yellow child” who hates him. So he tried to hang himself in a Harlem hotel (14–15).

The fourth scene in the Duchess’s place reveals the yellow hunch – backed and dwarfed Jesus in conversation with the Duchess. The two of them, in unison, confirm that their father is a Black man. “Our father isn’t going to let us alone, our
father is the darkest of them all. He is the darkest of them all. He is a black man” (17).
The landlady discloses that Sarah’s father hanged himself because she wouldn’t forgive him for being Black. The next episode shows Jesus and the Duchess sitting in a trance. Jesus decides to go to Africa to kill Patrice Lumumba because all his life he “believed Holy father to be God” but now he realizes that his father “is a black man” (19).

The last scene in the jungle shows a procession of Sarah’s selves with “mimbuses atop their heads in a manner to suggest that they are saviours” (20). They all chant together their obsession with their black father, “who is dead,” “and he keeps returning”, yet he is dead, but dead he comes knocking at my door” (21). Sarah is attacked by her father and the lights reveal that she has hanged herself. Landlady and Funny man Raymond reveal that Sarah hanged herself. Raymond’s final words establish that Sarah “was a funny little liar” whose Black father was a doctor married to “a white whore and” lives in the city”, “among white possessions” (23).

Funnyhouse of Negro resists definition like Kennedy’s other plays. It has no plot, linearity or coherence. The characters are distorted selves, shifting and unstable, there is very little dramatic action except for processions and the attacks and hanging of Sarah. The interiority of the action and its symbolic staging is an attempt to rationalize the various images. Sarah- Negro thus becomes a site of enactment of the various forces that have created her.
Sarah’s depiction as a mulatta, is in itself symbolic, as it attests to the colonizing of Black territories, especially the mind, by white history, religion and culture. Sarah’s hunger for escape from blackness assumes nightmarish proportions, even as she searches for escape into whiteness. She surrounds herself in whiteness, white objects, white friends for as she says “I need them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro” (6). As an educated woman, who has majored in literature, her worldview embraces whiteness. As a poetess she is concerned with inscribing the Black figure on a white page (6).

Tragic mulattas have been romanticized as beautiful women who were milable as sexual objects. Their bastard status made them pariahs in both worlds. These mulattas longed for love and acceptance and often aspired for a special status owing to their white blood and pale skins. The stereotypical mulatta usually ends her life tragically, alone and unloved, used and abused. Sarah claims she is “good looking in a boring way; no glaring Negroid features, medium nose, medium mouth and a pale yellow skin.”. Her one “defect” is her “frizzy hair”, “unmistakable Negro kinky hair” which becomes an obsession that haunts her (6). The falling of hair is symbolic as it suggests the loss of one’s identity and of powerlessness.

Sarah is obsessed with the white history that has bastardized the dream. She calls herself by the archaic term “Negro”, as the white society she lives in, makes her
The distortion of history and religion attest to the ways the Black psyche has been colonized. Jesus is a dwarf, yellow-skinned mulatta, who is worshipped as God. The rape of Sarah – Queen Victoria – Duchess – Mother is symptomatic of the deflowering of the consciousness of the mulatta. Father – God raped this mulatta, whose Victorian values and fear of sexuality were imposed on the primitives of the jungle by a white colonizer. The jungle thus becomes a metaphor for the primal self that has been civilized by white religion and history.

Sarah’s narrative reveals a death wish; the repetitive circularity of these narratives show there is no way out, except madness and death. Kennedy thus reifies the racial and sexual politics in Sarah – Negro. She traces the colonization of the Black mind and through expressionism reveals the divided consciousness of a Black woman in a white world.

**A Rats Mass** uses similar techniques and themes. The play stages a layering of oppressions, racial, sexual, religious, social and cultural. The very brief one-act play has no scenes or even episodes. The narrative is a long exposition of Brother and Sister Rat’s incestuous act inspired by Rosemary, who refuses to pardon them. They degenerate into rodents who are beheaded and shot down by the Nazis. The siblings are caught and alienated by the white Christian ethos, which works like a rat trap. There is no dramatic action in the play except for the ending, which presents the shooting down of siblings, and provides the closure. However, physical movements by the religious procession and Rosemary and other stage moves made by Brother and
Sister Rat such as kneeling, standing, falling and kissing punctuate the incantatory dialogue. Each movement adds a new development or disclosure and accelerates the tempo of the narrative. Past, present and the future telescope creating a flux of time. There is no linear progression and cause and effect do not follow a logical sequence.

When the play begins, the procession of religious icons – Jesus, Joseph, Mary, Two Wise Men and a Shepherd are placed at the end of the red aisle. Brother and Sister Rat kneel and confess that he sees “A dying baby”, “gray cats “and “Rosemary is atop the slide exalted” (56). This prophetic vision is followed by the disclosure that they have sworn on “Rosemary’s Holy Communion book” to keep the secret (56). Sister Rat also reveals that she is in “Georgia”, where she says “I hide under the house, my rats belly growing all day long I eat sunflowers petals, I sit in the garden Blake and hang three gray cats”(57). Kay is pregnant; she feels suicidal, has suffered madness and so is in an asylum in Georgia, from where she sends her brother, sunflower petals.

When the religions procession marches across, Brother and Sister Rat identify them as Nazis and predict that they will be killed by them. The procession marches to the centre of the aisle, this sets off a reverie, which describes their association with Rosemary. They reveal “Rosemary was the first girl we ever fell in love with”. She was the prettiest girl in our school. Rosemary always went to Catechism and wore Holy Communion dresses (55). They also add “Rosemary was our best friend and taught us Latin and told us stories of Italy. O Rosemary songs” (59).
Brother Rat sees Rosemary, at the end of the aisle. This triggers off the confession that Rosemary incited Blake to commit the incestuous act on the slide, while she watched, exalted on top of the slide. Rosemary walks down the aisle, issuing them a warning of death. The siblings pray for deliverance and Rosemary refuses. The siblings now retreat into the past, to their childhood before their sin and the blood. Their lives have now become “a rats mass” (62). From this juncture, they gradually look more rat-like and their voices become like gnawing sounds. Blake kisses Rosemary and kneels while she declares, “My greatest grief was your life together”(64-65). The procession appears and shoots, they fall, “only Rosemary remains”(65).

A Rats Mass, like Funnyhouse is an obsessional narrative which also expresses a death wish. The play resists definition as there is no plot, linearity or coherence. Kennedy’s play reiterates the theme of the bastardization of the dream. The Euro-Christian ethos that beguiled and trapped these pale Negro children now alienates them. This alienation is like death — they metamorphose into non-human beings. Kennedy’s characters assume images as part of fragmentation and alienation; they are in the process of evolving and surviving. These images reveal the terrifying world of the unconscious.

Brother and Sister Rat, Blake and Kay, represent dual halves of the incomplete gender. Black has “a rats head, a human body, a tail” while Kay has “a rats belly, a
human head, a tail” (55). The symbolic discourse points to a pro- lapsarian time of innocence and holiness before the fall or the slide. Sister Rat says “Remember... We lived in a holy chapel with parents and Jesus, Joseph, Mary our Wise Men and our Shepherd. People said we were the holiest children” (56, 57). After their incestuous act, the world is seen as stained, desecrated and grotesque. Sister Rat says “Now there will always be rat blood on the rat walls of our rat house just like the blood that came onto the slide” (62). Brother Rat says “Now there are rats in the church books behind every face in the congregation. They all have been on the slide. Every sister bleeds and every brother has made her bleed. The communion wine” (55). The fragmentation of their worldviews is seen in the confusion symbols. Yet these new meanings are indices to the unconscious; the deconstruction of incest myths and religious symbols point to a world gone awry.

Blake’s obsession with Rosemary is revealed in the construction of her as a monolithic white ideal. She is the transcendental signifier. He confesses “God I think of Rosemary all the time. I love her ... Yet I told Kay I am her keeper yet I told Rosemary I love her. It is the secret of my battlefield” (63- 64). Rosemary sets the rules and Brother and Sister Rat acknowledge her apparent authority. They sing her “O Rosemary songs”, listen to her romantic stories, and are in awe of her ancestry. Rosemary claims to be a “descendent of the Pope and Julius Caesar and the Virgin Mary”; in short she is a Roman Catholic. By this rule of inclusion, the sibling rats are disqualified and alienated. Rosemary states “Colored people are not Catholics” (55).
Brother and Sister Rat long for inclusion and acceptance and chant together “We wish we were descendants of this Caesar, we said how holy you are how holy and beautiful” (59). This echoes Sarah’s haunting cry for reconciliation to the white ideal.

Rosemary is the idealized white woman on the pedestal of patriarchy who is revered and deified by Blake and Kay. She is represented as holy and pure, dressed in her white Holy Communion dresses, always going to Catechism; yet she has worms in her hair, symbolizing the rot or danger of her hidden thoughts. She seems like a Medusa with her fatal gaze. Rosemary is devious, a femme fatale, who exploits Blake’s obsession with her to vicariously expunge her lust in Kay’s body. Miscegenation is implied in this act. Blake reveals to Kay “After you lay down on the slide so innocently Rosemary said if I loved her I would do what she said” (59). Rosemary speaks of “our wedding” with Blake, implying the sexless worship of her white body forever (64). Brother and Sister Rat chorus, “When we come to our playground Rosemary will forever be atop the slide exalted with worms in her hair” (64).

The denigration of Kay as Rosemary’s ‘other’ attests to the sexual objectification of Black women. Rosemary remains pure while Kay is the receptacle of her unfulfilled lust for Blake. Black men like Blake, with their exaltation of white ladyhood as the ideal of beauty and femininity cause the denigration and deprivation of Black sisters. The Black woman, like Kay, is the fallen one who is subject to shame,
madness and death. Kennedy’s distorting critique thus clarifies issues that Black people confront. The seduction of Black people by the Euro-Christian gaze and their subsequent alienation leads to the death of the spirit and the degeneration of the body. Religion, which affirms and saves white people, haunts and persecutes coloured people. Kennedy through plot and characterization reveals the effects of white patriarchy and the Euro-Christian ethos on coloured minds and bodies.

Bryant-Jackson states that it is impossible to situate Kennedy in any dramatic tradition as to classify her would “act reductively and minimizes the struggles of Kennedy’s characters and limits them within traditional gazes”(55). Her total disregard for conventional staging disrupts theatrical codes. The plays illustrate the ‘magnitude’ not of heroic action, but of racial and sexual oppression. The terrible beauty born out of this context reveals the extent of the effects of racism and sexism on Black psyches.

While Kennedy posits whiteness subversively, Shange stages and celebrate blackness and femaleness, while Kennedy’s plays are obsessive, Shange’s are liberating as alienation is overcome by female bonding and sisterhood. Shange’s characters look for rainbows and new life when suicide and death seem like the only alternatives. Despite these differences in staging their contexts, they offer complementary visions. Both explore issues that affect the contemporary urban working woman. Above all, Kennedy and Shange are responsible for initiating new
and exciting innovations in the theatre and for sustaining the Black female tradition therein.

A poet in the theatre, Shange uses the narrative rather than the dramatic mode, poetry rather than prose dialogue, many voices instead of one protagonist and a range of cultural expressions, like music, dance and spectacle. Rejecting "European psychology" and "the perfect play" (Foreword 67). She showcases the ancient rhythms of her foremothers to capture the complex nuances and history of Black women's lived experiences. Critics are at a loss to define Shange's play as she consistently defies categories, They accept her as "a poet but she is not [...] a dramatist" (Lester 14). Shange's choreopoems affirm her political, aesthetic and cultural ideals. She presents 'moments' that represent ideas and issues. She believes that "theater is an all encompassing moment... the opportunity to make something happen" (Three Pieces iv). So instead of linearity, she presents 'moments', instead of a plot she places a series of poems by individuals who are not distinctive, but flexible and changing. Improvisation is a strategy that disrupts the illusionism and seamlessness of plot.

For Colored Girls... is a choral composition which consists of poems that trace a Black woman's experiential journey from adolescence to adulthood. The play begins with a crisis of formation and ends with individuation and affiliation. The very naming of the oppressors and the oppression is an act of subversion. Each piece is preceded and followed by choral conversations that are interactive and simulate spontaneity and
immediacy. There is impersonality and intimacy in these disclosures. This cumulative effect reaches its climax in the sorority ritual that transforms them and unites them. The play begins with a prelude by the ‘lady in brown’ who describes the Black girl as “dark phrases of womanhood”, “half notes scattered” and so appeals to the audience to “let her be born & handled warmly” (3-5). It ends with a ‘whole’ song celebrating the holiness within them. The structure is built on the song motif, the various “half – notes” and “dark phrases’ combine to create “a righteous gospel” (5).

For Colored Girls... may be divided into four sections that trace the adolescent coloured girl’s sexual awakening and her youthful pre–occupations; the second presents her sexual and emotional growth to maturity; the third exposes the oppressions that Black women face. The fourth section is different as it stages Black women’s fight for survival and wholeness against the forces that denigrate her. These four sections are pre -ceded and concluded with chorus – episodes, the prelude and the episodes that gather the whole theatrical piece giving it the coherence of cause and effect.

After the prelude, the lady in yellow opens the first section with her poem “graduation nite,” in which she describes her sexual initiation. The next poem “ & poem is my thankyou for music” reveals a young coloured girl’s infatuation with Willie Colon, a Black singer and her experience at a “36 hour marathon dance” (11). This section celebrates a young coloured girl’s love for music and dance, which
expresses her identity. The next poem is a young girl’s experience with love and consequent disillusionment. The poem begins with her affair. She narrates:

without any assistance or no guidance from you
i have loved you assiduously for 8 months 2 weeks & a day”.

without no further assistar
& no guidance from you  I am ending this affair (14).

This first section presents significant moments and memories of a teenager, a girl - woman. It ends with a choral round of singing and dancing. A sudden light change ends this carefree time and introduces the dangers and experience young coloured women may encounter. The first poem begins with a spontaneous construction of a rapist and a discussion of how rapists can be friends and acquaintances “who” are suffering from latest rapist – bravado / & we are left wit the scars” (19). This leads to a confession by the ‘lady in blue’ about her abortion experience and the risks of unwanted pregnancies. She quotes “ & nobody came / cuz nobody knew / once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself” (23).

The next poem ‘sechita’ is narrated by the ‘lady in purple’, who quotes her as an example of survival in a sordid world. This spirited dancer who “ made her face like nefertiti / approaching her tomb /” dances the night away pretending to be “sechita / egypt / goddess / harmony / “kicked viciously thru the nite / catching stars ‘tween her oes” (25). The next piece mirrors a similar experience, where fantasy helps to ward off reality. The ‘lady in brown’ traces her escape to the fantastic world of romance and history with the Haitian rebel, Touissant L’ Overture. The limited choice of real Black
heroes makes girls like her settle for name sakes “Touissant Jones waznt too different from TOUSSANT L’OUVERTURE / cept the old one waz in haiti / & this one wid me speak in English & eatin apples” (30). Shange however warns coloured girls that infatuation, which becomes obsessive, can cause alienation.

The next poem by the ‘lady in orange’ narrates the story of “the passionflower of south west los angeles” who “wanted to be a memory/a wound to every man arrogant enough to want her.” and was “delighted she was desired”(33). Yet after she “allowed those especially schemin/tactful suitors to experience her body & spirit” (33), she “cried herself to sleep” (35). The last poem in this section is a black girls everyday experience in the black neighborhood of ‘Harlem’ which is “just a set up” of threats and dangers (39).

The third section of the play focuses on the treatment meted out to coloured women by Black men, particularly. The first piece is a choral construction by three friends who narrate how they were betrayed by the infidelity of a promiscuous Black man. Their individual experiences with the same man make them realize that their friendship is dearer than any man’s love, “each understanding how much love stood between them […] love like sisters” (42). This experience causes the ladies in orange, purple, blue and yellow to examine the pressures of being a ‘Colored girl’. This is a poignant section as it exposes the inner most fears and longings of the average coloured girl.
The ‘lady in orange’ shares: “ever since i realized there waz someone callt / a colored girl an evil woman a bitch or a nag / i been tryin not to be that” [... i cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time / its so redundant in the modern world” (43). The lady in purple pleads, “Lemme love you just like i am / a colored girl/ im finally being real” (44). She ends her piece with a cry for understanding “i need to be loved / & haven’t the audacity to say where are you / & don’t know who to say it to” (45). The ‘lady in yellow’ changes this self-abnegation by stating “[...] bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma /i havent conquered yet /[...] my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender”(45). This confident posture, inspires the others who realize their love is “too delicate”, “too beautiful, “too sanctified”, “to magic”, “too Saturday nite”, “too complicated”, “too music” to have thrown back on their faces (48). They dance together to celebrate this discovery and begin the next section which contains expressions of resistance and strategies for survival.

The first piece is by the ‘lady in green’ played by “Ntozake”, “she who comes with her own things”. She confesses how “somebody almost run off wit alla my stuff [...] / waz a man.” (50). She challenges the man, “why dont ya find yr own things / & leave this package of me for my destiny /”(51). The ‘lady in blue’ concludes the choral section on black men with her poem “slavery” which states, “I am simply tired of collectin ‘sorryes'” (52 – 54). The last piece in this section is by the ‘lady in red’ who
narrates the abuse—ridden story of ‘beau willie’ and ‘crystal’—and then claims it as her
own. This intimate disclosure binds the women with the tie of shared experiences.
They ignore the world of men that causes their objectification and oppression and
create a world of beauty, healing and holiness among themselves. The ‘lady in orange’
in the epilogue reminds coloured girls who are moving to the ends of their rainbows,
that it is possible to do so, as they have witnessed through the play the evolution of the
seven “Colored girls” who have moved to the ends of their own rainbows.

For Colored Girls... constructs realities of being Black and female and creates
spaces for “Colored girls” to express themselves. In these culture spaces, the women
discover their strength and spirit and celebrate God in themselves. Being born black
and female means being born with limitations. Shange stages this limitation caused by
racism and sexism and creates characters that transcend them while accepting and
loving the unique individuals they are. The seven women collectively construct the
identity of a ‘Colored girl’, revealing in the process the factors that affect her and
creating her complex and unique identity.

Shange’s strategy of employing seven nameless characters is itself a significant
gesture as there are no hierarchies, or a single vision or voice. The seven women are
flexible and shifting, allowing them to assume a variety of personas to create an
authentic and whole character that is Black and female. All these varied expressions
and experiences are unified into a single identity, which is not definite but
representative, and in a state of evolution. The anonymity of these characters accommodates greater identification and also encourages collective responses. This explains the use of the rainbow symbol. Shange quotes “A colored girl, by my definition, is a girl of many colors. But she can only see her overall beauty if she can see all the colors of herself” (qtd. in Lester 26). All the seven women, who come from “outside” American metropolises, compose this song of a black girl’s “infinite beauty” (4).

Shange’s use of the term ‘lady’ subverts several norms. ‘Lady’ was a term associated only with free, white, upper class women. Shange appropriates the term for “colored girls”, as they are deserving of gentleness, warmth, protection and love. However in appropriating the white idealization of womanhood she adds her own distinct characteristics. Ladyhood by white social standards implied modesty, genteel behavior and femininity. Shange’s girls are wild women who are uninhibited in their responses, who dare to bare their intimate secrets and who are not ashamed to speak the language of the street and ghettos. This defiance of white cultural norms is a subversive gesture to reject conformity and generalization, which leads to, stereotypes. These women are original, unconventional and complex characters.

Black women’s sexuality has been commodified and objectified since slavery and perpetuated as a myth. The indices that signify acceptance in a dominant order devalue Black women’s bodies, minds and spirit. This position has resulted in negative
images that Black women struggle to subvert and deny. Shange’s women have to deal with this denigration of sexuality, which frame her as a sign of cheap pleasure and easy seduction. A majority of Black women have absorbed these stultifying images and have been subjected as a result, to pain and suffering, humiliation and abuse. These characters share these experiences; “passion flower” is an example of this. The ‘lady is red’ describes her as “hot / a deliberate coquette who never did without what she wanted, she wanted to be unforgettable” (32). By contrast, “sechita” hates her job as a dancer; forced into it, she survives by pretending she is an Egyptian queen or goddess and not a cheap dancer.

Shange also points out through the play that this objectification of Black women makes them vulnerable to sexual crimes, violence and abuse. Rape, abortion, physical violence are all experiences that are common to Black women. These women reveal the physical pain and emotional suffering they endure by this betrayal. The story of abortion reveals the black girl’s fear and her loneliness and the poem on rape shows that “women relinquish all personal rights / in the presence of a man / who apparently could be considered a rapist” (20).

Significant in this play is the expose on Black men who join the oppressors in denigrating Black women. The hurt and rejection they suffer is told in the pain-filled narratives in section three. The ‘lady in orange’ says “so this is not a love poem / cuz there are only memorial albums available... so this is a requiem for myself / cuz I have
died in a real way... / cuz I don’t know anymore / how to avoid my own face wet with my tears /” (43). The characters also show how Black men are not willing to accept them the way they are but wish to change them, restrict them, abuse them and then leave them. The lady in green, Ntozake’s piece, reveals the systematic robbing of a Black girl’s individuality by a Black man and his exploitation of her subsequently. She says “& it wasnt a spirit took my stuff / waz a man whose ego walked round like Rodan’s shadow / waz a man faster n my innocence / waz a lover / i made too much room for / almost run off wit all my stuff”(51).

Shange’s women despite their experiences, their failures and mistakes are women of great fortitude and resilience. They are survivors who have learned to say ‘no’ to being gullible and weak. This fighting spirit to conquer the circumstances that threaten to vanquish them is seen in the fourth section. The lady in blue says “one thing i don’t need / is any more apologies”[...] & i m not even sorry bout you been sorry/ you can carry all the guilt grime ya wanna / just don’t give it to me / i can’t use another sorry”(54). Black men think that Black women are so desperate and low that they will always be there to forgive them their philandering and callous behavior. This piece shows that Black women can survive without such men.

The story of Beau Willie and Crystal is a case study of gender relations in downtown Black suburbs. It reveals the extent of abuse and neglect that Black women endure. Beau Willie returns from Vietnam “crazy as hell”(55). The pattern of abuse
that Crystal draws reveals the vulnerability of Black women. He refuses to accept his firstborn as his child, believing that it “waz some no counts bastard”(55). When Crystal becomes pregnant again, “beau most beat her to death when she tol him”(56). Beau takes out his frustration of being unable to find a job on Crystal. He nearly kills her with his violent and abusive acts. In the final act, he violates a stay order on visitation rights, barging into her apartment, seizing the two children and threatening to throw them out of the window. While he rants and raves about marrying her, Crystal stares in horror. Beau Willie does not hear her whispered acceptance of his threat and calmly drops the two screaming children from the fifth story window. Shange traverses all the violence that Black women constantly face from Black men in this one narrative. Beau robs her of her girlhood, womanhood and motherhood and ultimately the totality of being human.

Shange’s characterization establishes the ground in which Black women exist and through their experiences she solicits our attention to the lives of Black women. She presents physical, mental, emotional, sexual and spiritual sides in order to embrace a Black woman’s complex world. Tracing this journey to selfhood, Shange recognizes the different strategies that Black women employ to tackle their oppressors. The journey from adolescence to adulthood is filled with legitimate experiences that are common to Black girls everywhere. Through the lives of these seven women she invites “colored girls who have considered suicide” to learn to love themselves and join the movement towards self-hood and autonomy.
The choreopoem lends itself to this kind of depiction with its variety and flexibility. The plot revolves around the evolution of Black women and the narratives cover the range of experiences that they share. Plot and characterization thus becomes vehicles for Shange’s themes, which are addressing the realities of racism and sexism, transcending them by journeying to a spiritual plane of love and communion and celebrating blackness as an image of God.

In Spell # 7, Shange seeks the empowerment of Black men and women through the choreopoem. However there are variations in the structure of the play as Shange uses metadrama to explore the hyper reality of the theatre and its transformative power. It also becomes a forum to discuss racism and sexism in the theatre. Like Childress in Trouble in Mind, Shange also uses the play-within-the-play structure to comment on discrimination in the theatre. In her foreword to the play entitled “unrecovered losses/ black theatre traditions”, Shange expresses her pain at “selling ourselves and our legacy quite cheaply”. Her intent is clearly to subvert “somebody else’s idea of what theatre is”. She does this by presenting “the most human & revealing moments from lives spent in non-verbal activity”(67). Shange uses an interlocutor / narrator from the minstrel tradition to uncover the Black faces of minstrelsy and set Black actors free to be themselves. The play has no plot, or linear progression; there are no complications or catastrophes, only ‘moments’ in which the Black actors reveal their true selves. Like
the previous play, this two-act play begins and ends with a choral episode, it begins with the individual and restores him to community.

Lou’s exposition reveals his reasons for casting “Spell # 7”. He explains “this friend a mine / from the third grade / asked to be made white on the spot” (71) and “cuz colored chirren believin in magic / waz becomin politically dangerous for the race /” (72). His objective is clear: “this is blk magic you lookin at / & i’m fixin you up good / fixin you up good & colored / & yr gonna be colored all yr life / & you gonna love it / bein colored / all year life” (72). A “colored show” or “coon show” traces the history of minstrelsy in America. This entertainment is rudely interrupted by Lou’s interjection “why don’t cha c’mon & live my life for me / since the dreams ain’t enuf / go on & live my life for me” (43). He tags a minstrel in black face called Alec, and the play-within the-play begins.

Alec’s narration of the lynching incident, shows how Black people have to “suck up their” shadows, and become invisible (75). This is the cue to move to Eli’s bar where they can be “free to be themselves, to reveal secrets, fantasize, nightmare or hope” (77). The next episode is an improvisation by Ross and Maxine of the story of Fay. This improvisation de-mystifies the character of Sapphire – the sultry, sensuous and seductive Black whore. They reveal a human side to Fay. The improvisation ends when Maxine says “aw ross / when am i gonna get a chance to feel something like that / i got into business cuz i wanted to feel things all the time / & all they want me to do is
to put my leg in my face / smile & [...]. Bettina cuts in “& at least yr not playing a whore” (87). The improvisation points out that there is no difference between the fictional Fay and the real Maxine, as both are forced to play such roles on account of their race, sex and class. This leads to a narrative of fantasy in which Lily acts out her fantasy of being a Rapunzel:

i’m gonna simply brush my hair. rapunzel pull your tresses into the tower. lady godiva give up horse-back riding. i’m gonna alter my social & professional life dramatically. i will brush 100 strokes in the morning/ 100 strokes midday & 100 strokes before retiring (90).

Lou interrupts to break the illusion or the spell cast by his magic lest they lose touch with reality.

The last episode in this act is an improvisation of Sue – Jean’s obsession with having a baby. The baby is a metaphor for the self in search of fulfillment. Natalie confesses:

my name is sue-jean and i grew here / a ordinary colored girl with no claims to anything / or anyone / i drink now / bourbon / in harder times / beer /but i always wanted to have a baby / a lil boy / named myself (92).

The inability of Black women to express themselves or ‘be born’ is poignantly portrayed here. Natalie talks about this process as “spinning sometimes like a ferris wheel / i cd get no child to fall from me”. Alec concludes: “& she forgot about the child being born / & was heavy & full all her life / with “myself” (96).
Act Two explores sexism and its effects on Black women in the theatre. The triple jeopardy, of race, sex and class make her more vulnerable to stereotyping for as Lou remarks "[...] the whole world knows / european and non-european alike [...] that nobody loves the black woman like they love farah fawcett-majors"(180). The male cast of Ross, Alec and Lou begin improvisation of a young man’s seduction of a gullible young Black woman. Maxine signifies on this improvisation from the Black woman’s perspective. This leads to a discussion of the kinds of roles available for Black actors in theatre. Alec expresses his anger at being made to feel like a slave on an auction block, when he auditions for a role. Natalie suggests that for Black women the solution would be, to become a white girl. Natalie mimics a white girl but cannot continue, while talking about Emmett Till from this position. Maxine continues as she tells the story of the Black girl, building up a story betrayal and passion, which ends in Lou’s intervention. He freezes them and leads them through a celebration of blackness.

This play, like For Colored Girls... operates on an alternate view of heroism. Tracing the history of Black entertainment in America, the play reveals the comodification and objectification of Black people. The actors ‘act out’ the truth about themselves and expose the lie that the dominant theatre holds up as truth. De-bunking the stereotypical images and ideas that white people have of black people, the actors assert themselves through the power of ‘Black magic’. The shifts between the real and minstrel actors form a kaleidoscope of theatrical postures such as music, dance, mime and narrative. The plot is episodic; each episode illustrating the theme and culminating
in the ritual scene at the end. The play is not one of development but of a cumulative effect, which is intensified by the repetition of the theme from different individual perspectives.

Shange’s plays reveal an original and authentic Black female expression. By consciously rejecting the notion of the well-made play, she constructs before the audience stories of survival. The merging of African-American cultural expressions provides new spaces and forms and alternatives in the theatre. The plays discussed above show a marked attention to developing a no-plot form that is centered around personal narratives. The shifting of roles and characters subverts the notion of a univocal heroic subject. The climaxes in both the plays arrive not as a result of a confrontation or catastrophic event but in the transition from the impersonal to the personal, from the personal to the political. The catharsis in the play comes from the ritual celebration of blackness.

In Spell #7, Shange creates a racially segregated space, to acknowledge and attack those areas that denigrate Black people’s self-esteem. Shange allows her characters, particularly her female characters to dream of the possibilities of overcoming social and psychological limitations. Lily pretends to be Rapunzel, she says “i’m gonna simply brush my hair [...] i’m gonna alter my social & professional life dramatically [...]” (90-91). Natalie too does the same, she states: “being a white
by dint of my will / is much more complicated than i thought it wd be / but i wanted to try it cuz so many men like white girls [...] so i thought if i waz a white girl for a day i might understand this better” (112). Natalie signifies on white women but realizes that the white girl is also a victim of the white man’s sexism, that “part of being a white girl is being absent” (112). A white girl’s whole life is about surviving “this culturally condoned incompetence”(113). She realizes that as a Black woman she has a complex

lidades her humanness, so she reverts back to being a Black girl.

The stories of Sue – Jean and Fay reveal a life less ordinary and fraught with longing, loneliness and exploitation. Fay would do anything to have a good time Ross claims “fay tried to shove her flesh anywhere / she took off her hat / bummed a kool / swallowed somebody’s cognac/ and sat down / waitin /for a good time (87). Sue-Jean escapes her world through fantasy. These stories reveal the narrow choices that Black women have, to survive racism and sexism. Shange insists that there are less debilitating and more dignified means of survival than these and offers solutions in spiritual awakening and healing.

Bettina, Lily, Natalie and Maxine illustrate through their experiences in the theatre, how difficult it is for Black women to find roles and not stereotypical roles. Lily says in the opening exchange “i wish i cd get just one decent part” (Spell 77). Bettina comments on how most plays feature white women and if there are any roles left for Black women, they are stereotypical roles. She says “[...] if that director asks me to play it any blacker / i m gonna have to do it in a mammy dress” (78). Millie in
Trouble in Mind echoes a similar sentiment “only chance I get to dress up is offstage. I’ll wear them baggy cotton dresses but damn if I’ll wear another bandana” (141). Maxine reiterates in her conversation with Ross, how Black women get to play the whore more than any other role. She says, “all they want me to do is put my leg in my face & smile” (Spell 87).

Shange’s direct attack on sexism is found in Act Two, Lily ridicules white directors who underestimate and undermine the intelligence of Black women. Through their improvisation, they signify on white directors and turn them into stereotypes. The next improvisation in the act reveals how Black girls looking for decent jobs become a prey to men as “this brown woman from there might be a good idea [...] everybody knows that rich girls are hard to find [...]” (99). Lou’s interjections that “everybody knows that nobody loves the blacks woman” like a white one or that “the black woman from there is not treated as a princess / as a jewel / a cherished lover” illustrate the worldview of men about Black women (101).

However Shange’s characters resist being over-determined by Black or white men. They have learned to fight sexism and express themselves in their distinct ways. The altercations between the couples at the end of Act Two reveal that Black women are practical, sensible and independent. Bettina tells Alec, “i’m tired of having to take any & every old job to support us / you get to have artistic integrity & refuse parts that are beneath you” (Spell 105). She sums up “you mean / i shd understand that you the
greatest artist & i'm the trouper?" (Spell 109). This discrimination that Black women face from Black men compounds their alienation. Shange shows however that Black women's instinct for survival has helped them to confront and cope with racism and sexism in unique ways.

Black women playwrights from Bonner to Shange display remarkable similarities in their approaches to plot and characterization. Plots are structured according to the demands of characterization. Interiority is often revealed through storytelling or monologues and through radical gestures such as avant-garde techniques that Kennedy employs or Shange's choreopoems, which rely on the narrative rather than the dramatic mode. These temporary playwrights subvert the classic plot structure by refusing linearity. Classic plots are arranged to delineate the character's growth and transformation. In the delineation of character, all of them expose not only the simultaneity of oppression but also locate the factors that have created her unique identity. An evaluation of these plays reveals the evolution of the Black woman from Rissa to Beneatha and also from Bonner to Shange. These playwrights thus 'herstorize' the presence of the Black woman and reveal her journey from slavery to self-hood.
Notes

1 Aristotle. Poetics. 14
3 Aristotle. Poetics. 26