

The Blues of *Seven Guitars*

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INTRODUCTION

So often in my career as a teacher I found myself teaching a work of literature that had very little to do with the interests, needs, and dreams of my students. Yet I taught it because it was part of the curriculum, and what else did I have to teach? I force-fed my students with it, keeping them awake, giving them assignments with a warning that they would have a zero if they didn't do it.

I was in such a rut when I came across *Seven Guitars* in a college seminar. I thought it was wonderful, and since I teach mostly African American students, I thought they would be interested in it, but I never expected it to have such a strong grip on them.

One of my most difficult classes comes to mind. Everyday I struggled to keep them focused on the lesson and unfocused on messing with each other. They were not very interested in reading a play. They probably thought it would be as boring as the other literature we read. After struggling to assign them roles, one of my girls began reading the opening lines, a song: “Anybody here wanna try my cabbage / Just step this way” (1.1)¹. She immediately picked up the beat of the language and read it in a bluesy rhythm. “Anybody here like to try my cabbage / Just holler Hey . . .” (1.1). A couple of girls, picking up the sexual innuendo, laughed. The reader got into it more and read it suggestively, and others laughed and read along eagerly. Talking jocularly about sex is an effective way to grab the audience’s attention. Shakespeare does it in *Othello*. It was working here. By page two, the readers and the class were engrossed in the cadence of the words, and one of my most lackadaisical students blurted out: “These fools sound just like us!”

His comment was special for a variety of reasons. The students had a connection with the characters of the play. What a wonderful experience: reading a piece of literature that is so close to who I am that the characters sound like me and the people of my life. Then when it became apparent that what they were saying was layered with the meaning of life, death, racism, history, religion, deceit, trust, etc. it implied to them that they too were involved in these important issues. In a way, the play added meaning to their lives, for since the characters were like them and were meaningful, they too were meaningful. And what they were doing in my classroom was much more than schoolwork; they were engaged with literature that was enlightening them about life and themselves—the true purpose of literature.

¹ References are to act and scene.

SUMMARY OF *SEVEN GUITARS*

Seven Guitars is about seven African Americans living in Pittsburgh in 1948. In their colorful conversations, which are often laid with metaphors, we experience their dreams, heartbreaks, anger, and African American heritage. The central character is Floyd, a guitarist and singer who dreams of become a famous recording star and is determined to attain his dream by getting the money together to travel to Chicago, where he has been invited to cut some records. Unable to get the money because of certain unscrupulous people and his irresponsibility, Floyd robs a loan office and buys a ticket to Chicago for himself and his girlfriend, Vera. Another character, Hedley, also has a dream—to own a plantation. Hedley is slightly demented. He has the idea that the spirit of a man who owed his father money is going to return and pay him what he owed his father. When these two dreams come together with racial injustice, the result is tragedy.

SUMMARY OF AUGUST WILSON’S LIFE

Before we begin reading *Seven Guitars*, I will print a copy of the following summary of Wilson’s life for my students to read because it is a remarkable, motivating story. My students, most of whom are African Americans and all of whom are minorities growing up in a tough environment, will identify with Wilson and be motivated by him. Further, his life story will lead them to have a positive outlook about reading his work, *Seven Guitars*.

August Wilson

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in 1945, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Wilson changed his last name to his mother’s maiden name and adopted his middle name as his first when he decided to become a writer. He was one of six brothers and sisters living in a two-room apartment. His mother was a cleaning woman. His father, a baker and German immigrant who came to the United States when he was 10 years old, hardly ever came to the apartment to see his children. Wilson was a precocious child who learned to read when he was only four years old. His elementary education in Catholic schools was uneventful, but Catholic high school was dreadful. He was the only African American there, and he regularly faced racism from his classmates and the faculty. He wanted to play football, but he was excluded from the team. When he ate lunch in the cafeteria, he sat alone. Often he found notes such as, “Go home, nigger.” He had many fights, and once the school principal sent him home in a cab to save him from 40 students who were planning to beat him up after school. Because of the constant abuse, his mother enrolled him in another school, but he was placed in the vocational block, a program for students who were unsuccessful in academic classes. He took shop classes, such as sheet-metal work, and was placed in academic classes that were several grades below his level. In the 10th grade, his history teacher accused him of plagiarizing a 20-page term paper he wrote. Wilson angrily tore up the paper, threw it in the trash, and “walked out of that school forever” (Wolf 2). Wilson did not tell his mother and

stepfather that he had quit school. Each morning he would leave the apartment carrying his books as if he were going to school, but he spent the school days playing basketball outside the principal's window and reading in the Negro section of the library. Wilson said his experience of dropping out of school was when his real education began, for he spent many hours in the public library reading. In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army but was granted a discharge after a year. He returned to Pittsburgh and worked as short-order cook, a gardener, a porter, and a dishwasher. He spent much of his spare time at Pope's Restaurant (which is mentioned in Wilson's play *Fences*) and at Pat's Cigar Store. Without knowing it at the time, he was ingesting the language of the Pittsburgh Hill District and was learning the beauty of language and how a people's culture, beliefs, and values were expressed in the day-to-day language.

While working at these menial jobs, Wilson continued reading and took up writing. He bought a typewriter for \$20 and decided he wanted to become a writer. He particularly liked the poet, Dylan Thomas, and modeled his own poetry after his. A black publication at the University of Pittsburgh published several of his poems.

Another strong influence on Wilson was the singer, Bessie Smith. One day in a resell store Wilson saw a stack of 78 RPM records selling for a nickel. He bought the stack and by chance, one of the records was Bessie Smith singing "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet-Jelly Roll like Mine." The song moved him so much he played it over and over. Later he said that after hearing this song he realized that African American history and culture is rooted in the music and diction of the people (Wolf 3). Most of Wilson's works have pieces of music and all of them are filled with the distinctive diction of African Americans living in the Hill District of Pittsburgh.

By 1968 Wilson was working hard on playwriting. He founded a theater company on the Hill, and for 10 years he worked on playwriting. In 1978, he published his first play, *Jitney*. Its success in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he had moved, encouraged him to finish another play which he had been working on for several years, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. This play impressed Lloyd Richards, the director of the Yale Repertory Theater, and he invited Wilson to study and work there. Richards worked with Wilson to refine the play, and when the Yale Theater presented it in 1984, critics hailed Wilson as a brilliant new playwright. Following *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson wrote more plays, which have earned him much success and many awards. By the early 1990s Wilson had established himself as one of the best-known and most popular African American playwright. Each of Wilson's plays is about the African American experience in a specific decade in the 20th century. Eventually, Wilson plans to write ten plays that chronicle the black experience in each decade of the 20th century.

Though Wilson grew up in a poor family, Wilson feels that there is much he does not know about the suffering of African Americans. Further he says that African Americans do not know of the suffering that their parents and grandparents endured. He says that his mother and the parents of all African Americans who grew up in the second half of the

20th century have withheld knowledge of their great suffering and hardships. In 1984 he told the New York Times, “My generation of blacks knew very little about the past of our parents. They shielded us from the indignities they suffered” (*August Wilson @ Dartmouth*). Wilson’s goal is to illuminate that shadowy past with his series of plays that are set in a different decade of the 20th century. Wilson described himself to the New York Times as “a cultural nationalist . . . trying to raise consciousness through theater” (*August Wilson @ Dartmouth*). (*August Wilson*, Wolf 1-3, *August Wilson @ Dartmouth*, and Rawson).

DISCUSSION POINTS

I will lead a discussion of various points about *Seven Guitars*. I will do so through leading questions, which, when answered, will lead students to the interpretation of the particular point. For example, when I discuss the symbols of “Black Label. Red Label. Yellow Label” (1.1) I will ask the students, “What do you notice about this line?” “What is apparent about these colors?” “What do you think he is saying about race and labels?” Our question-and-answer discussion will lead the students in identifying the colors as symbolizing three minority groups in America: African American, Native Americans, and Asians. Canewell also says, “You can get any kind of Label you want.” I will ask, “What is the underlying meaning of this question in reference to people of minority groups? From these words, we can infer that Wilson is referring to the “labeling” of people in America. Often, we are not perceived as individuals, but as *black*, *red*, *yellow*, *brown*, or *white*.

Further, I will ask them, “What emotions to these colors represent? What does this imply about the characters? What does this say about how we look at people? What does this line say about ourselves?” Questions such as these will lead the students into realizing that *black* refers to mourning and the “bad guy,” *red* refers to passion and violence, and *yellow* refers to fear and cowardice, and these describe the characters in this drama as well as ourselves as we journey through life.

I will use this discussion strategy with each of the following symbols, metaphors, and characters.

Symbolism and Prominent Metaphors in *Seven Guitars*

Chicago

Chicago symbolizes the place where dreams are suppose to be fulfilled, but where nightmares occur instead. Floyd continuously says that if he gets to Chicago he can make a hit record and become a big recording star. However, he was there before and made a hit record, but let himself be cheated by his manager and the recording company; instead of taking a cut of the profits, he accepted a flat fee. The record was popular, but he did not get his share of the profits. Canewell relates what a terrible experience Chicago was.

The Chicago police put him in jail when “I ain’t done nothing” (1.1). Further, Floyd cheated on Vera when he went to Chicago. He was supposed to take Vera with him, but he took Pearl Brown and never sent for Vera. Now he wants Vera to go there again with him.

Chicago is similar to America as a whole, especially for African Americans. Like Chicago, America is a place where dreams are supposed to come true, but for black people, it can be a place of enslavement.

Gold

In Act I, Scene 3, Hedley mentions “Old Gold” cigarettes. Gold is a symbol of wealth. When Hedley mentions “Old Gold,” Louise comments that “a whole lot of people smoke old gold,” which implies that a large number of people in America are wealthy. A moment later, she and Hedley both say they owe each other money. Although a lot of Americans are wealthy, Hedley and Louise are not. Hedley says that he does not have Old Gold. He has Chesterfield. The root word *field* in Chesterfield alludes to his dream to have a plantation. In the end, Hedley’s dream brings about Floyd’s death. Canewell later brings Vera a “goldenseal plant” and says, “I started to bring my Bible. I’m gonna bring it next time I come” (1.3). In other words, money is treasured more than the Bible.

Rooster

In Act I, Scene 5, Canewell gives an elaborate speech about the roosters of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. What is significant is that these three states were slave states and states of racial oppression after slavery. Then Canewell says that the roosters in these states did not crow during slavery. They started crowing after the Emancipation Proclamation.

The rooster is a metaphor for a black leader who speaks out against injustice: just as a rooster’s crow wakes people up, an outspoken black leader wakes people up about the unjust conditions of the country. During slavery no black leaders rose in the slave states, but after the termination of slavery, black leaders did rise and speak out.

At the end of this scene, Floyd is irritated by the rooster crowing next door. Hedley gets up and brings the rooster and slits its throat. This implies that when one speaks out, he gets killed. The fact that Hedley slit its throat – the part of the body from which it crows – is significant too. The rooster’s voice was silenced, like the voices of leaders, especially black leaders in America, who speak out against injustice. It is also significant that a demented black man killed the rooster. Could this mean that a black leader is killed by his own people, those who have demented dreams? Malcolm X is one example of such a thing happening, and in 1959 Martin Luther King was nearly killed when a demented black woman stabbed him in the chest.

Hedley's action also foreshadows what he does to Floyd in the end. Drunk with moonshine, Hedley sees Floyd with the money he stole; he thinks Floyd is the spirit of Buddy Bolden, the man who owed his father money. When Floyd refuses to give him the money, Hedley slices off his head with a machete, killing Floyd like he killed the rooster.

One interpretation of these events is: The injustice of the past (slavery) results in a psychological breakdown in the descendants (symbolized by Hedley). This psychological breakdown leads to destructive behavior (symbolized by Hedley killing Floyd) against one's own people (Floyd is a singer of blues, the music created by black people). This is a complicated metaphor, but the students can be challenged to discuss it.

Machete

The slaves used machetes to cut sugar cane. Cutting sugar cane was the primary reason why the Spanish began enslaving Africans. One reference to a machete is when Canewell tells us that he is named Canewell because his father cut sugar *cane* so *well* (1.3). Hedley uses the machete to kill chickens. He uses the machete to kill the rooster. And, in the end, he uses the machete to kill Floyd, slicing through his neck like a slave cutting down sugar cane.

The inference we draw from the machete is the role of racism and slavery in the tragedy of African Americans. We can link Floyd's downfall to racism. He was cheated by a white manager and a white record company, and he was jailed because he was black. Floyd cannot get paid for his stay in jail because he does not have his paper—this is similar to the fact that a black person could not maintain his freedom if he did not have his freedom papers.

What is more tragic is that racism leads black people to bring about each other's downfall. Floyd missteps many times, causing his problems and downfall; then, desperate to have money to attain his dream, he robs the loan office, leading to the death of Poochie. Hedley, in his drunken state, kills Floyd because he thinks he is Buddy Bolden come to pay his money, something he has dreamed of for many years. The futile dreams of an oppressed people eventually lead to tragedy.

REFERENCES

Seven Guitars makes reference to various famous people who need to be explained to the students so that they understand the underlying meaning of the play.

Buddy Bolden

Hedley thinks the spirit of Buddy Bolden is going to visit him and pay him the money that Bolden owed his father. Buddy Bolden (1877-1931) was the founder of New Orleans' first jazz band and was nicknamed "the King." He was a superlative musician

and performer. However, in his later years he became insane and spent the last 24 years of his life in a mental home (Wolf 140). Ironically, Hedley, like the man he is named after, is mentally ill.

Muddy Waters

Floyd admires Muddy Waters, a very successful and influential blues guitarist and singer from Mississippi. Waters developed a distinct blues guitar playing and, in the 1940s, brought it to Chicago where he recorded a hit record in 1948. His music featured an amplified blues guitar, which was very influential over the years. First he was popular with African American audiences and later with white middle class audiences as rock-n-roll gained popularity, especially in the 1960s when the British bands were heavily influenced by him (*The Official MUDDY WATERS Site*).

Joe Louis

Known as the “Brown Bomber,” Joe Louis was a dominant heavyweight-boxing champion. Further, he was a great source of pride for African Americans in the 1930s and 40s, a time when they endured fierce and violent oppression. To black people, Joe Louis symbolized the strength, ability, and dignity that African Americans had but could not express because of America’s racial oppression. Joe Louis retired in glory but had to return to the ring because of financial problems, and he was embarrassingly defeated. Having virtually no money, Louis ended his life working as a casino host in Las Vegas (*Joe Louis Official Website*).

Marcus Garvey

Marcus Garvey, born in Jamaica, became a black leader throughout the Caribbean, Central and South America, and in the United States. He spoke and wrote against the oppression of blacks and indigenous peoples and met with government officials on behalf of blacks and indigenous peoples. The lack of progress spurred him to believe that black people would never be treated justly in the Americas. He organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which advocated returning to Africa and building an African nation-state. His plans brought forth great support, and he traveled throughout the United States advocating black nationalism. However, during the 1920s, the popularity of the “Back to Africa” movement waned, some business ventures failed, and Garvey was convicted of fraud and had to serve 2 ½ years in prison. He was deported and died in obscurity in England in 1940 (*Marcus Garvey*).

Toussaint L’Ouverture

Toussaint Breda, later called Toussaint L’Ouverture and sometimes called the “black Napoleon,” led a successful slave revolt in Haiti against the French colonial government. After gaining independence for Haiti during the French Revolution, he became the

governor of Haiti. However, a few years later, Napoleon deceived Toussaint: Napoleon agreed to recognize Haiti's independence, and he invited Toussaint to come to France to negotiate Haiti's independence. When Toussaint arrived, Napoleon imprisoned him in a dungeon in the mountains where he slowly died of starvation, cold, and neglect (Brainard).

Lazarus

Lazarus was dead three days when Jesus raised him from the dead, saying "I am the resurrection and life. He who believes in me, though he were dead, will live" (*New Jerusalem Bible*, Jn. 11:25). Canewell says Jesus should have let Lazarus stay dead because living is suffering. Canewell's view implies that religion or perhaps more specifically, Christianity, does not relieve one's suffering. It did not relieve the suffering of African Americans. This interpretation is reinforced when Canewell mentions that he neglected to bring his Bible but brought a goldenseal plant and that, according to the Bible, only 44,000 people will be saved, and rest will "be cast into the fiery pit" (1.3).

This issue is a good discussion point: "What does Christianity teach?" "Why did Christians enslave Africans and then, after slavery, oppress them?"

Another point that could be brought up is: "Why is there so much suffering and cruelty if God is loving and gives life like the story of Lazarus says?"

SONGS

Beginning of Act I, Scene 1

Louise's song, "Anybody here wanna try my cabbage" is sexually suggestive. It quickly captures the students' attention. The sexual overtones are supplemented when Canewell and Red Carter talk and argue about the sweet-potato pie.

Beginning of Act I, Scene 2

Floyd's recorded song, "That's All Right," is about a man who is in love with a woman, but the woman is in love with another man. The song alludes to Floyd doing the same to Vera: he leaves Vera for another woman. The song also metaphorically refers to Floyd losing his dream: his desire to be a famous recording is like the desire of a man for a woman, but his dream lets him down, just as the woman lets the man down.

Beginning of Act I, Scene 3

Hedley's song, which begins, "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say," refers to Buddy Bolden, the insane jazz king that his father named him after. Hedley says later in the play that Buddy Bolden owed his father some money, and he thinks Bolden's spirit is going to

visit him one day and bring him the money. This song brings forth the theme of Hedley's delusion of being a king or a father of a king and getting money to buy a plantation. The song repeated throughout the play, brings us to the tragedy in the end.

CHARACTERS

Floyd

Floyd dreams of becoming a famous and wealthy singer. He made a record but made the mistake of accepting a flat fee instead of a percentage of the profits. Consequently, when the record became successful, he did not share in the profits. He has a pattern of being irresponsible. He spent 90 days in jail and was due money, but he lost the ticket that showed he spent jail time. He spent so much time in jail because he brashly bragged that he wanted to burn the jail down. He admits Vera is a special girl but he goes to Chicago with another girl. Vera tells him, "You done had more than enough chances" (1.2).

Floyd is a violent man. He makes reverence to violence and killing throughout Act I. After he leaves the army and sees Vera, he feels for the money in his pocket, but what he feels is his .38. Speaking of Vera, he says, "That's the kind of woman a man kill somebody over" (1.2).

Hedley

Hedley is falsely grandiose. He claims to be a king, a future plantation owner, and the father of Ruby's child; all of these are false. His grandiose dreams lead him to kill Floyd, whom he thinks is Buddy Bolden. Hedley shows that people with grandiose dreams are dangerous. Hedley considers himself a king, like Buddy Bolden was, and like Buddy Bolden, he is mentally unstable. He once murdered a man because he refused to call him King.

Hedley is associated with death. Wilson's setting description tells us that Hedley kills chickens, and in Act I, Scene 3, he kills chickens to make chicken sandwiches that he will sell at a funeral. As he stacks the crates of chickens, he comes and goes out of the basement, the room under the house, which also symbolizes death—it's under the ground like a grave. Further, he will sell the sandwiches at night, which is also associated with death for it is the end of the day. Later in Act I, Scene 3 he says that Buddy Bolden, instead of giving him the money, gave him ashes.

Hedley's heroes are Buddy Bolden, Joe Louis, Marcus Garvey, and Toussaint L'Ouverture. All four were great leaders of black people in their prime, but each has a tragic end. Buddy Bolden was a great jazz musician, but he ends up dying in an asylum. Joe Louis was a great boxing champion, but he ends up as a host for a Las Vegas casino. Marcus Garvey was a great political leader, but he ends up involved a failed business venture and gets sent to prison. Finally, Toussaint L'Ouverture led his people to freedom, but was duped by Napoleon and died in a French dungeon.

Hedley's dreams of owning a plantation and getting the money owed his father, are, like those of his heroes, doomed to failure. Further, he becomes the one who strikes down Floyd's dream of grandeur.

Floyd and Hedley

Both have dreams to be big men. Floyd wants to become a big recording artist; Hedley wants to be a great leader. Hedley says he is going to buy a big plantation so that "the white man not going to tell me what to do," and immediately, Floyd says, "He ain't gonna tell me what to do either" (1.1).

Both, though, are doomed to failure. Hedley is never going to own a plantation, and Buddy Bolden is never going to pay him his money. Floyd is not going to be a famous recording star. Racism plays a primary role in both men's failures, directly and indirectly. Floyd's manager and the recording company have cheated him, but on the other hand, Floyd let himself be cheated. Hedley, living in America at this time period, has no chance of becoming wealthy and powerful like his heroes (who themselves were eventually destroyed); moreover, he is such a failure that he has lost his sanity and drinks. As a result, he destroys Floyd's dream, killing him like a slave cutting down sugar cane.

Vera

Vera is the lady Floyd loves. Her name comes from the Latin word *verus*, which means "true." When Floyd leaves Vera to go Chicago with Pearl Brown to be a recording star, he, in a figurative sense, is leaving his true identity. Floyd, in seeking to be a famous and rich recording star by recording for a white manager and a white company who have already cheated him, is in conflict with his true artistry. His music expresses his people's heritage and culture as well as his own spirit, and he is selling it for fame and money, and for corrupt white people (the latter of which corrupt white people will probably walk away most of). Further, he was giving up what was precious to him—Vera—for fame and money. Floyd tells us that when he first saw Vera he said, "There go a woman" (1.2) and goes on to explain that whatever one says about Vera, one must use the word "woman." In other words, Vera is the ideal woman who is most precious to him, but he gives her up to go to Chicago to be a recording star.

Vera tells him, "I wouldn't put too much faith in whatever Mr. T.L. Hall say" (1.2). She knows the truth about Hall that Floyd cannot see.

Canewell

Canewell, Floyd's friend and the harmonica player in his band, symbolizes the bad times of African Americans. His name comes from sugarcane. That was the crop that spurred the Europeans to enslave Africans: they needed workers to cultivate it, so they enslaved Africans.

Canewell expresses the pessimistic insight of a people who have endured years of oppression and injustice. He does not believe, as Floyd does, that Chicago is the place where his dream will come true. He is not so naive. Chicago is the place where he, Floyd, and others were unjustly put in jail, and he is not going back there any more. He tells Hedley that Jesus should not have raised Lazarus from the dead because living is more painful than dying. He has come to believe that suffering is the nature of life (1.3). He plays the harmonica, an instrument identified with the blues, and in fact, his attitude that suffering and injustice are a natural part of life expresses the theme of the blues.

Louise

Louise is a skeptical person. In the first scene of the play, Vera, Canewall, Red Carter, and Hedley claim they saw angels at the cemetery, but Louise insists that she didn't see angels, and when they point out certain men, she exclaims, "They was with the funeral home, fool!" (1.1). Hedley believes he will be "a big man," but Louise tells him, "You ain't gonna be nothing" (1.3). Hedley talks at length about getting a plantation, being a great leader, and having respect from the white man, Louise disdainfully exclaims, "There ain't no plantations in Pittsburgh, fool!" Louise warns Vera more than once that she should not trust Floyd.

ASSIGNMENTS

Essay

I will assign students to write essays about certain aspects of the play, such as analyzing a character, comparing characters, and analyzing a symbol. Lesson 2 shows one example of how I will teach an essay lesson

Metaphor Interpretation

I will also pick out metaphors from the play and instruct the students to interpret their meaning and make an inference about the speaker, the object of the speaker, or the situation. Lesson Plan #3 shows an example of this lesson.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson 1—Act I, Scene 3

The students have roles, and as they read, I will periodically stop them and lead them in analyzing the text. What I remind the students is that when an author spends time discussing something that is not essential to the plot, usually it is a metaphor. August Wilson's work seems like it is a bunch of people just discussing things, but when we closely examine what they are saying, we realize that there is underlying meaning to the conversations (for example, at the beginning of Act I, Scene 3, regarding money, the dream of having it, and the reality of not having it). Louise and Hedley are going back

and forth about cigarettes. One of the names mentioned is Old Gold. I will ask the students what gold usually symbolized and then we will analyze the characters comments about Old Gold. Hedley says, “Nobody smokes Old Gold. Who you know smoke Old God?” Louise answers, “There’s a whole lot of people smoke Old Gold.” Then Hedley says that she owes him three dollars and 40 cents, and Louise mentions that he hasn’t paid her the rent. Clearly poverty is implied by the discussion of Old Gold. Shortly afterward, Canewell brings a goldenseal plant, and a few pages later, Louise tells Hedley to visit Dr. Goldblum. Then Canewell mentions three gold balls that are on the sign outside the pawnshop. In between these references to gold, Floyd declares he is going to make a lot of money recording another song, which is followed by his story of being sent to jail when he was in Chicago, the place where he dreams he will make a hit record. Further, he had recorded a successful song, but he didn’t make any money from it. Hedley is also talking about getting a lot of money, enough money to buy a plantation. He sings about Buddy Bolden coming to bring him money, but when he comes, he says, “He give me ashes.” So, we have a pattern of the characters dreaming of being wealthy, their present situation of poverty, and the destruction of their dreams.

Other Points of Discussion

Hedley is associated with death. He plans to make money at a funeral selling chicken sandwiches, using chickens he will kill. He is going to make many trips to the basement, he plans to sell the sandwiches at night, and he digs a hole for the goldenseal plant. All of these things are associated with death.

Canewell is associated with the oppression of African Americans. His name comes from his grandfather who cut sugarcane so well in Louisiana. The cultivation of sugarcane was why the Africans were enslaved. Hedley says that he hates sugar. Strangely, Canewell says that Jesus should not have raised Lazarus from the dead, but when we listen to his reasoning and grasp that he is the spirit of the suffering of black people, we understand. He says that raising Lazarus was going to cause him “to go through more suffering.”

Hedley and Floyd dream of becoming wealthy and respected, but it is clear that they won’t attain those dreams. Hedley especially, dreams of owning a plantation in Pittsburgh. Floyd has already been used by his manager and as he dreams of recording a hit song, his guitar is in the pawnshop and he doesn’t have enough money to get it out. Then at the end of the scene, he is going to pawn another guitar.

Lesson 2—An Essay Analyzing the Rooster, Act I, Scene 5

I will lead the students in taking notes about the rooster. Canewell tells the others about roosters in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. The students will take notes that summarize and that quote and under each one they will interpret it.

To begin the note taking, on the board I will write the following:

- Canewell describes roosters from Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. These are slave states and states of historic racism against black people
- "The rooster didn't crow during slavery" (1.5) A rooster wakes people up. A figurative meaning of "waking up" is speaking the truth and making people realize what is going on.

The students will follow this pattern, either summarizing or quoting and under each interpreting it. In the Plume book they will use pages 60-64.

The students will then use the notes to compose an essay that analyzes the figurative meaning of the rooster. I will remind them of the introduction, body, and closing. The students will write a rough and final draft. As they work I will walk around and examine how they are doing and give assistance.

Lesson 3—Interpreting Metaphors

I will pull out some metaphors from the play and the students will interpret their meaning and explain what the metaphors further infer about the speaker, the object of the speaker, or the situation.

The Metaphors

1. LOUISE: She (Vera) don't need to be getting tied back up with him (Floyd).
2. VERA: Everybody keep their trunk packed up.
3. VERA: Everything keep slipping out his (Floyd) hands.
4. FLOYD: God is in his heaven and he staying there.
5. HEDLEY: The black man is the conquering Lion of Judea.
6. HEDLEY: The white man walk the earth on the black man's back.
7. HEDLEY: The place of the black man is not at the foot of the white man's boot.
8. FLOYD: Every time I push . . . they pull.
9. FLOYD: My momma ain't had two dimes to rub together.
10. HEDLEY: I cried a river of tears but he was too heavy to float on them (referring to his deceased father).

Example

The students will do this activity in the following way:

1. LOUISE: She (Vera) don't need to be getting tied back up with him (Floyd).
 Meaning: *Louise thinks Floyd is going to cause Vera to suffer horribly.*
 Inference: *Louise doesn't like Floyd; Vera is too good for Floyd; Floyd is a terrible man.*

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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