

**RAGE INSIDE RELIGION:
IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY
IN THE WORKS OF ADRIENNE KENNEDY**

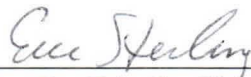
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For my wonderful family: Keary, Noah, and Hallie.

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INTRODUCTION

This project will examine the religious imagery in award-winning dramatist Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *The Owl Answers*, *A Lesson in Dead Language*, *A Rat's Mass*, and *Motherhood 2000* as they relate to identity construction. These plays feature characters struggling with the social constraints dictated by their race and gender while trying to reconcile both their mistreatment and their response to this mistreatment with a Christian ideology grounded in the concepts of love and forgiveness. Examining Kennedy's work from this perspective is important because her characters confront the psyche-splitting consequences of repressed anger—even though their repression is rooted in spiritual impulses. This project will examine the religious questions that Kennedy asks in the aforementioned early plays and the answers that she suggests in *Motherhood 2000*. Kennedy demonstrates how identity formation based on gender and racial mythology is complicated by religious impulses and doctrine.

Kennedy is a highly acclaimed dramatist whose work emerged during the 1960s and is imprinted with a global and post-modern perspective. In the introduction to *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*, Werner Sollors describes Kennedy's dramatic work as having “an unmistakable style, characterized by fragmentation, ritualistic repetition and variation, and radical experimentation with character and plot” (vii). Her work “echoes the entire dramatic tradition, from Greek tragedy to the Theatre of the Absurd, from Euripides to Shakespeare, and from Chekhov to Tennessee Williams” (vii). Kennedy, who has taught playwriting at several universities, was a member of the playwriting unit of the Actors Studio from 1962 to 1965, where under the mentorship and direction of dramatist Edward Albee, Kennedy's first play, “*Funnyhouse of a Negro*,” was produced. She has been

lauded with three Obie Awards by the *Village Voice*, two Rockefeller grants, and a Guggenheim Fellowship; however, despite receiving numerous awards, Kennedy's work has yet to receive full critical attention.

The dearth of research into Kennedy's work is likely the result of several different factors. First, Kennedy's plays are just as poetic as they are surreal. The playwright packs much meaning into each text and incorporates a variety of cultural resources, both popular and classical. Unpacking the various allusions in each play is a daunting task—even to the Kennedy enthusiast. Second, critical exploration is a product of the era in which it arises. The playwright's gender and race, as well as her subject matter, to a certain degree, have impacted the way that scholars approach her work.

Those critics who approach Kennedy's work from a "black aesthetic" might find the texts disappointing. In the introduction to *Double Consciousness/Double Bind*, Sandra Adell discusses theoretical approaches towards texts written by African Americans. Adell asserts, "The Black Aesthetic, which grew out of the Black Arts movement of the 1960s, helped define the contours of African-American literary tradition as we understand it today. It also helped to elaborate and refine the theories of black literary criticism received from an earlier generation of black writers" (3). Adell refers to Addison Gayle's introduction to *The Black Aesthetic* which asserts that "the task of the black critic is to question the extent to which a play, a poem, or a novel has helped to transform an 'American Negro into an African American or a black man'" (3). Kennedy's work stands outside this margin because this approach seeks to destabilize the black/white opposition by "empowering" blackness and tends to favor works such as those produced by Kennedy's contemporary and fellow Actor's Studio participant Amiri

Baraka. Baraka's characters engage their anger towards racial discrimination—prepared to suffer any reprisals. By contrast, Kennedy's early characters desperately want to participate in the larger culture and are subsequently driven mad by their rejection. Consequently, those critics seeking to use literature as a means of socio-political empowerment have ignored Kennedy's work.

Kennedy's exploration of the mental and spiritual impact of rejection in the pursuit of assimilation has roots in the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, one of the founders of the NAACP. As the daughter of a local NAACP president, Kennedy was grounded in and familiar with DuBois's ideas. Her plays offer a visual example of the theories DuBois espoused. DuBois discussed the issue of double-consciousness in his groundbreaking work *The Souls of Black Folk*. He espoused the idea that black people lived with the sense of "twoness," seeing themselves as they were and as they were seen. DuBois rejected the notion that black artists need to divide themselves from either their blackness or the larger world in order to be successful. DuBois briefly discusses the torturous nature of this double vision. Recent theorists, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., have expanded on DuBois's premise. Gates explores race as a social construct and examines how this construct manifests in literature. In works like "*Race' Writing, and Difference*, and *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates proffers an approach to texts that discusses race by discarding the notion that canonical texts are somehow ethnicity free. This perspective renders cultural identity issues as an organic element in a text and prevents works like Kennedy's, which deal with issues of marginalization, from being marginalized.

Ironically, Kennedy's protagonists are not as tortured by their "blackness" as much as they are obsessed with images of "whiteness" largely based on myth. Playwright Susan-Lori Parks interviewed Kennedy and concluded that one of the greatest tragedies in Kennedy's plays is "to fall in love with something that didn't include you" (Kolin 16, Parks 44). Kennedy's characters obsess over idealized images from popular culture. This discussion locates Kennedy within the larger pantheon of American theatre during the era in which *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *The Owl Answers*, *A Lesson in Dead Language* and *A Rat's Mass* emerged. Kennedy's theatrical contemporaries, such as Sam Shepard and Edward Albee, scratch off the veneer of American myth in their plays and ruminate on the dysfunction in our archetypes without providing polemical statements at the end of their plays. Kennedy's plays, *Funnyhouse* in particular, are grounded in this post-modern perspective of American culture. Kennedy's characters find themselves in the self-torturous position of trying to construct an identity measured against an ethereal yardstick.

Against this backdrop of racial and gender mythology, Kennedy's protagonists attempt to create a spiritual identity. Kennedy's autobiography *People who Led to my Plays* provides an excellent perspective on the connections that black preachers made between the story of Jesus and the plight of African Americans (that is not to say that Kennedy's audience needs to know her background in order to understand or be entertained by her work.) Christianity is a particularly thorny dilemma because the impetus towards forgiveness defers justifiable anger and foments resentment. Kennedy's characters have trouble integrating religious dogma in their lives because it undermines other aspects of their identities and seems to dismiss rather than diminish painful and

confusing situations. This discussion provides the crux of this project and is necessary because these plays revolve around religious imagery, and scholars have yet to fully explore this aspect of Kennedy's work.

Kennedy's plays are largely autobiographical, and while I will certainly explore her autobiography in this project because it provides insight into Kennedy's background, one cannot rely on it as a sole authority because her works are plays meant to be performed, and the playwright's life is not necessarily accessible to all theatregoers. Furthermore, the autobiography doesn't necessarily provide any definitive answers. Elin Diamond, who interviewed Kennedy in 1988, describes the "sensibility" of her autobiography as "post-modern—distinctions between subjectivity and social formation, foreground and background, history and fantasy, word and image are slippery or continually displace; the texture of the text admits gaps, silences, refuses closure, so that no unified reading of Kennedy's life is possible or even desirable" (126-7). All the same, historical and cultural references saturate Kennedy's work, and her autobiography highlights some of the allusions that contemporary audiences might find obscure. This project will examine some of those influences that Kennedy mentions which have yet to receive full critical exploration. In that same vein, I want to emphasize that these are plays; thus, the visual impact of production should be an important consideration. As a fan of cinema, Kennedy consciously constructs her play with an eye towards visual aestheticism. Reading these plays as literature provides the opportunity to reflect on the rich and compounded meanings that Kennedy packs into each play. Still, the dramatist's goal is to stage performance; thus, I want to examine the plays with regard to their translation to the stage.

With this project, I hope to explore the religious imagery, impulses, and doctrines which serve to exacerbate already complicated identity issues in five of Adrienne Kennedy's plays. Much like Calpurnia and the soothsayer in *Julius Caesar*, Kennedy is a dreamer whose vision is underappreciated. In her role as playwright, she creates a poetic reality in which multiple meanings converge and overlap. Her ability to compound subtext into visual spectacle is one of the reasons that her work is so groundbreaking. Therefore, critical exploration of her texts must take all symbols, images, and allusions into account. Religious ideology proves particularly problematic for Kennedy's characters because it requires a love and inclination towards forgiveness that is sometimes difficult to access, given the severity and enduring nature of the transgressions directed towards them. The protagonists in Kennedy's early non-linear, dreamlike plays, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, *The Owl Answers*, *A Lesson in a Dead Language*, and *A Rat's Mass*, either kill themselves or are tortured to the point of madness by their obsession with racial and/or gender myth and ideology. Kennedy revisits these issues in *Motherhood 2000*, a play which diverges from the playwright's other works in that it is largely realistic and offers a protagonist secure in her identity and inclined toward action. This grounded character literally reconstructs religious ideology and finds resolution.

Reflections of Jesus in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

Adrienne Kennedy's play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) is a non-linear, highly aesthetic nightmare in which the main character NEGRO-SARAH fragments into different selves trying to cope with the confining and destructive ideology of racism and correlative colonialism. The audience views SARAH as SARAH views herself from a perspective that she imagines others view her; thus, her self-image is distorted, like that of a reflection in a funhouse mirror. Theatrical examinations of racism and oppression tend to focus on racist actions or the mental processes of those engaging in oppressive acts; however, *Funnyhouse* wallows in the mental and spiritual quagmire of one objectified by racism who has internalized her oppression. Whereas W.E.B. DuBois famously discussed the concept of double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Kennedy conjures a world of quintuple-consciousness in *Funnyhouse*. Among SARAH's selves are THE DUCHESS OF HAPSBURG, QUEEN VICTORIA REGINA, PATRICE LUMUMBA, and JESUS. By splitting SARAH into a physical manifestation of her religious ideology, the character JESUS, Kennedy compartmentalizes the spiritual aspect of the character SARAH and offers the opportunity to view the inner machinations and effectiveness of religion in helping her manage her marginalization.

Funnyhouse is an important play because of its content as well as its construction. Kennedy's surroundings during the composition of the play influenced both. She wrote the play during her stay in Africa with her husband and continued to work on it when she traveled to Rome during a pregnancy. The images and atmosphere in both of these places are evident in the play, reminding audiences of the global legacy of colonialism. Upon returning to the United States, Kennedy workshopped the play with three-time Pulitzer

Prize winning dramatist Edward Albee who accepted her into his non-profit Playwrights' Workshop. The play was first staged Off Broadway at the Circle in the Square Theatre and starred Yaphet Kotto as Lumumba and Diana Sands as Sarah (Kolin 24). Albee's one-act style influenced Kennedy's writing. In *Understanding Adrienne Kennedy*, Philip Kolin asserts "Like Albee, Kennedy bravely brought taboo subjects into the theatre . . . [She] explored incest, miscegenation, racial genocide, and female oppression years before they would be freely staged elsewhere" (26).

Kennedy's subject matter rendered *Funnyhouse* revolutionary for the period in which it originated; however, her approach to the subject matter extends the play's relevance into the new millennium. In "The Characters are Myself: Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of A Negro*" Lorraine Brown contends that Kennedy:

. . . emphasizes the perils of wish-fulfillment, evasion, and escape as methods of alleviating the anguish of the present moment. Even if such impulses stem quite understandably from the enormity of the problems and the intensity of the suffering, they are addictive and crippling, and Miss Kennedy reminds us of the age-old necessity of possessing one's own souls. Her view that the modern world is oblivious, if not downright hostile, to spiritual struggles links her work to that of many others writing for the contemporary theater. That her plays have gone unheralded and unappreciated is unfortunate, for Miss Kennedy is undoubtedly one of the foremost playwrights in America today. (88)

Dramatizations of racism generally focus on outwitting, denying, condemning or eradicating the behavior, rather than coexisting with it. Kennedy's SARAH does not

want to live with racism either, but rather than attack the racism, she attacks those elements of herself which mark her as African American and participates in her own marginalization. The audience witnesses this process. Thus, *Funnyhouse* is groundbreaking in both its subject matter and perspective.

Just as *Funnyhouse* covers new territory in regard to subject matter, the play's construction is equally inventive. Kennedy discusses her style in her autobiography *People who Led to my Plays*.

After I read and saw *Blood Wedding*, by Fredrico Garcia Lorca, "I changed my ideas about what a play was. Ibsen, Chekov, O'Neill and even [Tennessee] Williams fell away. Never again would I try to set a play in a 'living room,' never again would I be afraid to have my characters talk in a nonrealistic way, and I would abandon the realistic set for a greater dream setting. It was a turning point. (108)

Kennedy employs a revolutionary approach to storytelling in *Funnyhouse*. "The 'action' of the play consists of a series of monologues spoken by SARAH's selves. Even when two appear together, they fail to engage in dialogue; instead, one continues a haunted monotone at the point at which another leaves off" (Barnett 375). As a result, the story is more a projection of the protagonist's state of mind as opposed to a realistic linear narrative.

Albee's one act writing style influenced Kennedy, as did his absurdist approach—to a certain extent. Martin Esslin includes a section on Albee in *The Theatre of the Absurd* but laments the "relative absence of dramatists of the Theatre in the United States" (311). Esslin attributes this dearth of American examples to the fact that:

the convention of the Absurd springs from a feeling of deep disillusionment, the draining away of the sense of meaning and purpose in life, which has been characteristic of countries like France and Britain in the years after the Second World War. In the United States there has been no corresponding loss of meaning and purpose. The American dream of the good life is still very strong. (311)

Albee's plays pull off the veneer of the American dream and examine futile aspects of the pursuit of it; however, Kennedy's plays, and certainly *Funnyhouse*, contain that element of hope that prevents the plays from being fully absurd and certainly tragic.

In a discussion of women playwrights and writing in the style of the absurdist, Toby Silverman Zinman argues that, "Kennedy who, in some ways shares the absurdist's metaphysics of despair, uses methods far closer to expression. To see life as a symbolic nightmare, heavily invested in and with Christianity as Kennedy does is, almost certainly, to miss out on the humor. And a strong sense of the ludicrous is essential in—and to—the absurdist playwright" (205). Kennedy's plays are highly stylized, non-linear, and dreamlike. Although some elements seem absurd, Zinman's contention that Kennedy's reliance on Christianity steers the play away from the absurdist genre rings true. However, if *Funnyhouse* lacks ironic humor it is because the audience, as members of society, have not examined race to the extent that they can see the ridiculous nature of maintaining these categories. Although some of the elements in the play may seem absurd, the ironies in the play are not funny. The irony that SARAH wants something that has value because of the oppositions that she represents is tragic. SARAH still has hope, which is represented by the Christian elements in the play.

Although Zinman concludes that Kennedy's incorporation of Christianity signifies a hope that prevents her work from being considered absurd, critical exploration of Kennedy's use of JESUS generally misses this optimism, not surprisingly because SARAH hangs herself in the end, and as Kennedy states in her autobiography, she created a "surprising JESUS, a punishing JESUS; berserk, evil, sinister" (123). Still Kennedy, like DuBois, considers racial struggle a matter of "spiritual strivings" (the title of the first chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk*). Her autobiography reflects her use of religion as a refuge in the face of adversity, a familiar view in the traditional African American church. Kennedy's SARAH, like other black literary heroines, uses JESUS in the same way.

Funnyhouse dwells on images and gazing. The title alludes to the funhouse attraction found at carnivals and amusement parks, generally containing a hall of mirrors that distort the reflection of the person gazing into it. The character SARAH fixates on the distorted image she sees through the imprecise gaze of how she thinks that she is seen. Consequently, SARAH tortures herself with racialized memes attached to physical appearance, more specifically skin color and hair texture. Each of SARAH's selves obsesses over their collective hair. "It begins with the disaster of my hair" are her first lines in the play (18). Kolin addresses the significance of hair in *Funnyhouse* stating that "hair and skin color—among the two most prominent cultural signifiers of race—become the leading tropes in Kennedy's plays" (28). SARAH's "hair becomes linked to self-recognition and self-contempt. The various references to and representations of wild, kinky hair symbolize [SARAH's] own frenzied state, her confusion of being. For [SARAH], kinky hair stigmatizes her as the outcast Negro" (28-9). SARAH's obsession

with hair reflects a very real aspect of oppressive ideology, which black women have internalized. Neal Lester writes about the cultural significance of hair in the *Book Once Upon a Time in a Different World: Issues and Ideas in African American Children's Literature*. One of the chapters entitled "Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks: African American Daughters and the Politics of Hair," chronicles the racial meanings attached to hair. Lester demonstrates that "racial and gender biases about head hair both within and outside black cultural perceptions" exist and persist. Further:

Competing mythologies around something deceptively insignificant as hair still haunt and complicate African American's self identities and their ideals of beauty, thus revealing broad and complex social, historical, and political realities. The implications and consequences of the seemingly radical split between European standards of beauty and black people's hair become ways of building of crushing a black person's self-esteem, all based on the straightness or nappiness of an individual's hair. (81-2)

SARAH and her selves throughout the course of the play obsess over these racial identifiers and their amplified and distorted meaning. She blames her father for "diseasing her birth" (13). SARAH must be content to be "yellow" because although her "mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman's," her father is "black, the blackest one of all" (12), and SARAH blames him for her negroid features, which she sees as the roots of her problems.

In an interview featured in the book *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*, Kennedy expresses her feelings about what being black means to the surrounding world: "I think you have to feel that there is a resistance to you. There is a

resistance, and it is never going to let up. It never lets up. I feel that quite strongly. That any black person has to fight twice as hard to achieve anything” (Bryant-Jackson and Overbeck 7). Kennedy talks about the hostility to her play within Albee’s group in an interview with Wolfgang Binder that appeared in *MELUS*: “They did my play, and it was very controversial. In many ways if it had not been for Edward Albee, I would have thought maybe the play was a total flop ... because so many people in the workshop didn't like it. I was the only Black person in the group, I was already self-conscious, there were only two women. People sort of had a hostility to it” (104). Kennedy’s experience with hostility, and how that hostility affects the psyche comes through in the story in a way that few playwrights have captured. Kennedy’s assaults with images that seem random capture the confusion of emotions that she is trying to convey. The plays leap from the stage in a jarring and communal experience.

This concept of distorted reality harkens to what Dubois calls double-consciousness. DuBois, whom Kennedy refers to in her autobiography *People* as one of the people about whom her father told stories (12), discusses the impact of racism on the psyche of Americans of African descent in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In the very first chapter, entitled “Our spiritual strivings,” DuBois establishes a perspective from whence double-consciousness originates, predicating it on an awareness of the undercurrent present in his conversations about race in America during an era one generation removed from legalized slavery:

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They

approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern Outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (7)

Similar to Kennedy, DuBois relates the story of a happy childhood in which he does not realize that he is considered different or understand the import of this difference. He develops this understanding when he and his childhood friends began a game of exchanging visiting cards and “one girl, a tall newcomer,” refused his card. He describes this moment as recognizing that he was “shut out from their world by a vast veil,” but at this time he had “no desire to tear down that veil or creep through” because we was smarter, and faster than the other children at the games that they played in childhood (7). Still, DuBois came to the realization that the world and its opportunities were sequestered beyond a veil—visible, yet unavailable to him because he was considered more of a problem than a person. To answer the real question, DuBois concludes that being a problem is a “strange experience” (7). Kennedy’s play provides a visual snapshot of a mind trying to make sense of “a strange experience.”

Kennedy’s *SARAH* offers a visual portrait of DuBois’s double-consciousness, a concept DuBois defines thusly:

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true-

self consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (8)

DuBois foresees the inevitable lowering of self-esteem and self respect that accompanies prejudice. He encourages African Americans to pursue education in the face of prejudices, believing education to be the key means by which member of the black race could "catch up" and attain a status beyond that of "mere hewer of wood and drawer of water" (9).

Kennedy's SARAH embodies DuBois's hopes. She is a representation of an African American. She dedicates herself to dispelling stereotypes:

As for myself I long to become even a more pallid Negro than I am now; pallid like Negroes on the covers of American Negro magazines; soulless, educated and irreligious. I want to possess no moral value, particularly value as to my being. I want not to be. I ask nothing except anonymity. I am an English major, as my mother was when she went to school in Atlanta. My father majored in social work. I am graduated from a city college and have occasional work in libraries, but mostly spend my days preoccupied with the placement and geographic positions of words on paper. I write poetry filling white page after white page with imitations of Edith Sitwell. It is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques

and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table. I will visit my friends' apartments which will contain books, photographs of Roman ruins, pianos and oriental carpets. My friends will be white.

I need them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro. For, like all educated Negroes—out of life and death essential—I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself. My white friends will be anxious for death. Anyone's death. I will mistrust them, as I do myself. But if I had not wavered in my opinion of myself, then my hair would never have fallen out. And if my hair hadn't fallen out, I wouldn't have bludgeoned my father's head with an ebony mask. (14)

SARAH is educated and cultured, and she even has integrated socially, for she speaks of her white friends. Still in the midst of this striving to “catch up,” SARAH does not merge her two-warring souls, but splits into more people, gathering reinforcements in this war against herself—ultimately, as DuBois predicted, being “torn asunder.”

SARAH's fundamental problem stems from the misguided notion that she can overcome her marginalization by disproving racial stereotypes, which contradicts their function. In the pioneering book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patrica Hill Collins discusses the function of stereotypes, which she refers to as “controlling images” (69). Collins reiterates Hazel Carby's assessment of stereotypes in the equally innovative *Reconstructing Womanhood*:

the Emergence of the Afro-America Woman Novelist which suggests that stereotypes disguise or mystify objective social relations (22). Further, Collins asserts that:

These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life...African American women's status as outsiders becomes the point from which other groups define their normality...As the 'Others' of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging. (69-70)

Carby and Collins effectively relate the conundrum that SARAH faces in *Funnyhouse*. SARAH desperately wants to assimilate into an ephemeral social construct that only exists because of the boundaries created to exclude her. Confronted by this inherent conflict, the character shatters. SARAH's fragmentation is not unusual according to Collins's assessment of fictional African American characters attempting to escape the degradation associated with blackness. Collins demonstrates how many "use drugs, alcohol, excessive religion, and even retreat into madness in an attempt to create other worlds apart from the ones that produced such painful black female realities" (94). Collins's examples do not include Kennedy's SARAH, but this character, as well as the character CLARA from Kennedy's "The Owl Answers," resembles Collins's assessment. Hostility towards the African-American experience makes SARAH want to escape herself and religion is one of the modes she chooses to employ. However, the pallid

SARAH would shun any outward expression, opting to be the “soulless, educated and irreligious” (14); therefore, she splits into a repressed expression of JESUS who like SARAH “possess[es] no moral value, particularly value as to [his] being” (14).

Kennedy rifts on this opposition to blackness, using opposition(s) as a recurrent theme in *Funnyhouse*. In the introduction to *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader*, Werner Sollors describes the destructive themes of *Funnyhouse* as a contradiction between the title, which “evokes the image of an amusement park” and the “serious overtones” (ix). The play “explores a split heritage and the central self’s suicidal refusal to accept part of that heritage—or to recognize herself in that part (ix). Similarly, critical exploration of *Funnyhouse* has focused on Kennedy’s choice to split the main character SARAH into differing, and somewhat contradictory, selves. In the “Owl and Rats in the American *Funnyhouse*: Adrienne Kennedy’s Drama,” Sollors contends:

In the play, Kennedy has taken the contemplation of Sarah to the breaking point at which the central character is split into several antagonist aspects which collide dramatically. Such a dramatic strategy is especially suited to shed light on a social world in which human beings belong to more than one community. Kennedy focuses on the moment when different modes of identifying are in sharp, deadly conflict. She portrays her central character not as unified or whole but as a collage of multifaceted and contradictory selves (who are not only black and white, or male and female, but also father’s daughter and mother’s daughter, ruler and martyr, stoic and revolutionary. Dead and alive, carnal and spiritual, young and old, hairy and bald, glamorous and humble, or proper and lascivious). The

antithesis between Victoria and Lumumba may thus be seen as that between empire and anticolonialism; Jesus and the Duchess of Hapsburg may relate to each other as love and lust; the Duchess and Victoria may represent the conflict between a scandalous and a proper woman; Lumumba and Jesus may embody militancy and forgiveness. Sarah, however, is all of these masks, and each of the selves a person in the original sense of the word 'persona,' mask. Rosemary K. Curb emphasized that Sarah's selves 'are not the historical persons whose names they carry and whose costumes they wear, but fragments of Sarah's mind so real as to seem separate persons.' (509)

Sollors sees LUMUMBA and JESUS as oppositional expressions of militancy and forgiveness. However, Kennedy undermines assumptions with these characters. In this instance, LUMUMBA represents forgiveness, truth, and salvation, as opposed to the JESUS character who represents militancy (in this case, and internal battle), false images, and destruction.

Kennedy confronts race through the lenses of African American church tradition, which addresses issues of racism, discrimination, and oppression as matters of the spirit. The connection between the plight of African Americans and that of Christ and Christianity is a recurrent theme in her autobiography from childhood onward. In the section of *People* covering her childhood, Kennedy says of JESUS, "He could endure, and as a 'Negro' I needed that quality" (14). She also saw this connection in the spirituals she heard as a child: "I learned that I belonged to a race of people who were in touch with a kingdom of spirituality and mystery beyond my visible sight" (14). Still as

an adult, Kennedy used religion to deal with her fears: “I continued to read Psalms often to quell the fear I felt at seeing the strange, fragmented thoughts that poured from my diaries, the violent imagery. Why so violent? I didn’t understand. I had many black moods. And would cry for no apparent reason” (89). Kennedy the playwright certainly finds solace in Christianity, and her descriptions reflect a religion that emphasizes personal relationship. Consequently, the character SARAH views JESUS as a part of herself.

Kennedy’s autobiography acknowledges religion’s power to vent sorrow, and the rage—which would be a reflection of the militancy Sollors sees in the oppositions. Kennedy heard the sorrow in the spirituals:

I had a slim yellow book in the piano that contained many Negro spirituals, “Go Down, Moses,” “Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child,” “Nobody Knows the Troubles I’ve seen,” “He Knows Just How Much We Can Bear.”

My mother often sang when she cooked Sunday-morning breakfast: particularly “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child.” It seemed that we as ‘Negroes’ sang of sorrow. It seemed strange. In the church in Georgia that my cousins and I drove in the carriage to, the songs were even sadder. They were moans. Why did we ‘sing’ of sorrow? (97)

Kennedy’s emphasis on the word “sing” in her rhetorical question leads one to reflect on the creative expression of sorrow. Even the titles of these spirituals focus on sorrow. Kennedy recognized that religion was somehow altered like the rest of society because of racial marginalization. Thus, she writes of the minister of her church: “He spoke the

sermon in a way that said there was rage inside religion” (14). Kennedy saw the anger over these circumstances reflected in the sermons: “Our minister, Rev. -----: He was always angry when he finished preaching and the congregation seemed angry. I was afraid of him. He had dark eyes and dressed in black robes. He seemed evil” (20). In these instances, Kennedy alludes to a repressed anger, an anger that was released during these sermons. As an irreligious representation of blackness, SARAH has neither the catharsis of spirituals nor the sermons; consequently, she creates JESUS to experience these emotions and bear her burdens.

Two ideas of Christ appear in the text. The character JESUS is described in the stage directions as “*a hunchback, yellow-skinned dwarf, dressed in white rags and sandals*” (15). He does not lament his skin color because one can infer from his close relationship with the DUCHESS that he shares her “at least I’m yellow” (12) attitude, but JESUS has a negative view of his circumstances because he laments his hair, both because of the texture and the thinning, which is a reflection of SARAH’s progressing insanity. JESUS’s physical appearance is a reflection of his spiritual and emotional maturity. His diminutive stature visually indicates stunted growth. What is more, throughout *People*, Kennedy says that she tried to capture the essence of Giotto’s frescoes, which she saw in Italy and later placed prints above her desk, in her poems and stories (88). Although Kennedy does not describe the pictures, Giotto often depicts the Christ child with full grown teeth and more mature features, like a smaller man, elements that Kennedy incorporates in the character JESUS. Still, allusions to the biblical Christ appear in the text as well. During the MAN/LUMUMBA’s second monologue he states:

I always dreamed of a day when my mother would smile at me. My father...his mother wanted him to be Christ. From the beginning in the lamp of their dark room she said—I want you to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race. You must return to Africa, find revelation in the midst of golden savannas, nim and white frankopenny trees, white stallions roaming under a blue sky, you must walk with a white dove and heal the race, heal the misery, take us off the cross. (19)

The inclusion of the term “Genesis” suggest a new beginning and the term “revelation” implies both truth and divinity. Some part of SARAH realizes that she can save herself through (re)creation, an allusion to being “born again,” which is a major element in Christianity. In this (re)creation she will find divine truth within the African part of herself that she is suppressing. Through this “true” self, SARAH will be able to move past the persecuted JESUS and on to the resurrection. However, according to the stage directions, “CHARACTERS: DUCHESS, VICTORIA, JESUS *go back and forth. As they go in their backs are to us but the NEGRO faces us speaking*” (19). This stage business indicates that although some dimension of SARAH believes that “salvation” is available to African American people in Africa, which is a symbolic representation of blackness, the DUCHESS, VICTORIA, and JESUS choose to ignore it.

JESUS, LUMUMBA, and the father are interchangeable figure in the text. Like the DUCHESS and the QUEEN, LUMUMBA is an adapted historical figure, but the similarity ends with that aspect of their biographies. LUMUMBA stands in opposition to these two characters, more so than JESUS, because they represent colonialism and LUMUMBA’s self-rule. Kennedy writes of her experience in West Africa in *People*:

When we arrived in West Africa everyone talked of Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's young heroic Prime Minister. And in Ghana, at every store and market, there were photographs of Lumumba walking with Kwame Nkrumah. (These men represented a vision of a freed Africa.) I carried the small gilt-edged photo of Nkrumah and Lumumba in my purse. Suddenly Lumumba was murdered.

'They killed Patrice Lumumba,' everyone in the streets of Accra, in the restaurants, at the campus of Legon, said. 'They've killed Patrice Lumumba. Lumumba was the hope.'

Just when I had discovered the place of my ancestors, just when I had discovered this African hero, he had been murdered. Ghana was in mourning. There had been a deep kinship between Nkrumah and Lumumba. A few people we met had heard Lumumba speak. Even though I had known him so briefly, I felt I had been struck a blow. He became a character in my play...a man with a shattered head. (119)

LUMUMBA represented a hope to the newly freed African people, which must have been very exciting for Kennedy, an African American, to witness. Kennedy also saw a connection between LUMUMBA and her father, whom, because of his social work, she had always mixed with the biblical Jesus: "I remembered my father's fine stirring speeches on the Negro cause...and Du Bois' articles in *Crises* which my father had quoted...There was no doubt that Lumumba, this murdered hero, was merged in my mind with my father" (120).

Despite his sinister qualities, SARAH's selves find JESUS the character to be comforting. In a scene between JESUS and the DUCHESS, JESUS offers comfort, while sharing the DUCHESS' experience.

JESUS. My hair. (*The Duchess does not speak, JESUS again screams.*)

My hair. (Holding the hair up, waiting for a reaction from the DUCHESS).

DUCHESS. (*As if oblivious.*) I have something I must show you. (*She goes quickly to the shutters and darkens the room, returning standing before JESUS. She then slowly removes her headpiece and from under it takes a mass of hair.*) When I awakened I found it fallen out, not all of it but a mass that lay on my white pillow. I could see, although my hair hung down at the sides, clearly on my white scalp it was missing. (Her baldness is identical to JESUS'.)

The LIGHTS come back up. They are BOTH sitting on the bench examining each other's hair, running it through their fingers, then slowly the DUCHESS disappears behind the shutters and returns with a long red comb. She sits on the bench next to JESUS and starts to comb her remaining hair over her baldness. (This is done slowly.) JESUS then takes the comb and proceeds to do the same to the DUCHESS OF HAPSBURG's hair. After they finish they place the DUCHESS' headpiece back on and we can see the strands of their hair falling to the floor. (21-22)

Like the spirituals to which Kennedy refers in her autobiography, JESUS “knows the trouble [she’s] seen” and urges the DUCHESS to confess them. He helps the DUCHESS maintain the illusion that everything is okay, for he does not heal the DUCHESS’s baldness but merely helps her mask her trouble, and only momentarily. The pantomime action reinforces the notion of the connected nature between these characters who share history, and thus misery. The shared baldness indicates that this racially induced insanity infects SARAH’s white selves as well as her black. The exchange is bittersweet and reveals the limitations of this view of JESUS as a personal savior who masks repression.

The “beserk” and “punishing” JESUS appears later in the text during the final scenes in which the cast moves to the jungle. This relocation is a visible metaphor echoing SARAH’s feelings towards her father. By passing on his physical characteristics, he draws her closer to blackness, the primitive, and LUMUMBA, and further away from whiteness, civilization, and the QUEEN and the DUCHESS. In this setting, SARAH’s personal savior, JESUS, vows to set her free; however, here, JESUS offers violence rather than forgiveness:

JESUS. Through all my apocalypses and my raging sermons I have tried so to escape him, through God Almighty I have tried to escape being black. *(He then appears to rouse himself from his thoughts and call:)* Duchess, Duchess. *(He looks about for her, there is no answer. He gets up slowly, walks back into the darkness and there we see that she is hanging on the chandelier, her bald head suddenly drops to the floor and she falls upon* JESUS. *He screams.)* I am going to Africa and kill this black man named Patrice Lumumba. Why? Because all my life I believes my Holy Father

to be God, but now I know that my father is a black man. I have no fear whatever I do, I will do in the name of God, I will do in the name of Albert Saxe Coburg, in the name of Victoria, Queen Victoria Regina, the monarch of England, I will. (23)

Lorraine Brown asserts, “this intention to murder Lumumba is expressed, she says, without fear, for whatever she does she does in the name of God, Albert Saxe-Coburg, and Queen Victoria—a signal that her fantasy life has won out, that she is unable to accept her Blackness, and that her suicide is near” (88). Brown’s perspective rings true because JESUS knows how much [SARAH] can bear, and obviously the DUCHESS dimension of SARAH can no longer bear anything. Thus, she hangs herself. What is more, with the death of the DUCHESS, JESUS and SARAH lose one of the “whitish-yellow” (12) dimensions of themselves. Blackness represents an inescapable hole that is erasing their Caucasian facets. They have to eliminate LUMUMBA before he eliminates the QUEEN.

Rosemary Curb, who has published several articles on Kennedy’s work, views this scene and JESUS differently.

Sarah's two male selves resemble her father. Like Lumumba, Sarah's father was the victim of divided allegiance. He tried to be Lumumba and Jesus—an impossible contradiction. In the play, Lumumba comes out of the darkness as a dark, faceless, unidentified Man and echoes Sarah's obsessions about hair loss and her dream of being surrounded by whiteness. Portraying Jesus as dwarfed and deformed perhaps suggests what Christianity is for Africans and Black Americans. In his only

monologue, the character Jesus announces that he is going to Africa to kill Lumumba (to destroy symbolically his own hated blackness). Sarah's father fails to become Jesus, Lumumba, or even Lumumba's assassin, although at one point Sarah says that her father killed himself when Lumumba was assassinated. Sarah fears that she is nailing her father to the cross by her unwillingness to accept and forgive him, but she can only see him as the Black beast rapist of her mother and a fruitless martyr. (182-3)

Curb's concludes that SARAH can only see the black MAN who is both her her father and LUMUMBA in stereotypical terms, and that these three figures are connected and impossible to reconcile. However, reconciliation is possible. The historical figure of LUMUMBA/MAN in this play closely resembles the martyred biblical Christ. In this instance, the religion in this play is not a true external manifestation, but a creation of someone who has internalized derogatory messages. JESUS is a reflection of SARAH's stunted development and rejection of herself. JESUS represents SARAH's attempts to save her SELVES, as LUMUMBA represents the martyred hope that colonial rule could be overcome.

The play climaxes with a discussion on the Christ-like impulses of forgiveness. Although the language is jarring, the audience sees all the SELVES chant the same speech, *mixed and repeated by one another* (24):

I see him. The black ugly thing is sitting in his hallway, surrounded by his ebony mask, surrounded by the blackness of himself. My mother comes

into the room. He is there with his hand out to me, groveling, saying—
 Forgiveness, Sarah, is it that you will never forgive me for being black.

Forgiveness, Sarah, I know you are a nigger of torment.

Why? Christ would not rape anyone.

You will never forgive me for being black.

Wild beast. Why did you rape my mother? Black beast, Christ
 would not rape anyone.

He is in grief from that black anguished face of his. Then at once
 the room will grow bright and my mother will come toward me smiling
 while I stand before his face and bludgeon him with an ebony head.

Forgiveness Sarah, I know you are a nigger of torment.

*(Silence. Then they suddenly begin to laugh and shout as though
 they are in victory. They continue for some minutes running about
 laughing and shouting.) (24-5)*

In this scene, the characters try to reconcile their life trapped in blackness with their religion. If SARAH were to release her anger and embrace her father, she could escape her torment. However, negative stereotypes interrupt the pleas for forgiveness. The image of the black rapist, blackness as it is associated with beastliness and the racial epithet “nigger” work to undermine the father’s plea for forgiveness and his claim on the image of Christ. The madness described stage directions, which indicate a celebration, reflects SARAH’s inability to choose forgiveness. She ends up hanging herself.

The final exchange between the LANDLADY and RAYMOND convey the source of SARAH’s maladapted views, and the futility of her attempts to overcome

stereotypes, as opposed to their underlying presumptions of the preeminence of “whiteness.” RAYMOND, SARAH’s boyfriend, also represents the FUNNYMAN in the play. As such, he is the one in charge of the distorted mirrors.

LANDLADY. The poor bitch has hung herself. (*FUNNYMAN RAYMOND appears from his room at commotion.*) The poor bitch has hung herself.

RAYMOND. (*Observing her hanging figure.*) She was a funny little liar.

LANDLADY. (*informing him.*) Her Father hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba died.

RAYMOND. Her father never hung himself in a Harlem hotel when Patrice Lumumba was murdered. I know the man. He is a doctor, married to a white whore. He lives in the city in rooms with European ruins, walls of books and oriental carpets. Her father is a nigger who eats his meals on a white glass table.

END. (25-6)

This exchange reinforces the idea that SARAH’s life revolved around lies. She lies to others as she lies to herself. The fact that RAYMOND the FUNNYMAN who represents the social strata to which SARAH aspires sees through SARAH’s false construction underscores Collins’s and Carby’s contention regarding the function of stereotypes; One cannot coexist with or endure them. What is more, RAYMOND’s description of SARAH’s father drips with disdain culminating with his use of the epithet “nigger.” SARAH is the second generation of her family to adopt this distorted self-image which

devalues blackness and destroys her, and RAYMOND, the one in charge of the mirrors still views them as “niggers.”

Funnyhouse demonstrates how the racial ideology under which SARAH exists chokes the life out of her and that she needs more from religion than the ability to endure. She lives in a hell created by a desire to conform, which collides with an inability to achieve conformity because of her physical features and cultural boundaries. Confusing religious impulses amplify this hell. An examination of the religious elements in the play *Funnyhouse* is important because Kennedy places the internalized aspects of racism and colonialism as they relate to spirituality under a microscope. She depicts the illusions of a person who has internalized her oppression and, consequently, despises and rejects elements of herself. The diminutive character JESUS represents SARAH's religious impulses. He, like the Christ in the sermons the playwright remembers from childhood, helps her bear her burdens; subsequently, he is tortured and tempted by the same cultural demons that plague the Negro SARAH. However, this is the JESUS of the playwright's childhood, and the baby in Giotto's frescoes. SARAH must move beyond the ideas that she assumes from her childhood and society. She must construct an image, free from the distortions of double-consciousness, and accept and affirm her kinky-haired, yellow-skinned self—singular without apology. She needs to see herself as whole person, a creation of God who could look in the mirror without having to ask forgiveness for her appearance.

God and Morality in *The Owl Answers*

“I call God and the Owl answers” laments the protagonist in Adrienne Kennedy’s *The Owl Answers* (1965) (41). *The Owl Answers* confronts issues similar to those raised in Kennedy’s first play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), in that the protagonists in both plays are women of mixed racial heritage seeking solace in Christian faith to cope in a world where people of color face social marginalization. While the main character SARAH from *Funnyhouse* and SHE WHO IS CLARA PASSMORE WHO IS THE VIRGIN MARY WHO IS THE BASTARD WHO IS THE OWL in *The Owl Answers* share a struggle, the characters stand in opposition to one another. To begin with, SARAH from *Funnyhouse* exists as separate representations of a fractured soul, while SHE WHO IS and the other characters in *The Owl Answers* manifest as one body representing multiple selves; the characters metamorphose with the change of costume. While SARAH internalizes her oppression, SHE WHO IS challenges her marginalization. Whereas SARAH isolates herself in her room, a symbol of how she retreats into her own mind, SHE WHO IS finds herself locked in the Tower of London that is simultaneously a Harlem hotel room, St. Peter’s Cathedral, and a New York subway. Instead of attempting to assassinate her blackness like SARAH, SHE WHO IS attempts to claim her whiteness, staking a claim to her father’s ancestry as well as his English heritage. While SARAH dates RAYMOND, a character described as being white and Jewish, SHE WHO IS rides the subway looking for different men such as THE NEGRO MAN she attempts to seduce during the course of the play. Whereas SARAH seeks empathy from a JESUS character/caricature to help bear her self-loathing, SHE WHO IS seeks acceptance from her father, asking that he acknowledge her because, despite her blackness, she is still part

white. Yet, the oppositions between SARAH and SHE WHO IS end with race and religion. SHE WHO IS's father, like SARAH and her alter ego JESUS, cannot overcome the fact that SHE WHO IS is a Negro (this racial term is used throughout the play). In the absence of fatherly acceptance, SHE WHO IS seeks sensual love from THE NEGRO MAN whom, in some slip of the tongue device, she alternately refers to as God; however, something happens during her encounter that prevents consummation. Ultimately, SHE WHO IS reveals that she needs from God and her father the same thing that SARAH needed in *Funnyhouse*—unconditional love.

SHE WHO IS's approach to her marginalization is just as destructive as SARAH'S because by arguing for her inclusion based on her whiteness, SHE WHO IS reinforces the system which devalues her for inhabiting the category of blackness—the “fallen” aspect in the black white opposition. Still, this racial opposition is not the only opposition challenged throughout *The Owl Answers*. SHE WHO IS “is white and she is black; She is the Virgin Mary and a Harlem Whore; She is literate and yet reduced to a moaning owl. She lives in the present and the past at the same time. In essence, SHE [WHO IS] is a fragmented soul who does not fit in” (Kolin 51). Kennedy heightens the irony in these binary oppositions that trap SHE WHO IS by adapting the religious, theatrical form of a morality play, a form that involves a battle between oppositions—a form reflecting the spiritual struggle SHE WHO IS faces from the oppositional forces that converge to negate her identity. In *The Owl Answers*, Kennedy utilizes the elements in this binary, religious, formulaic drama in a way that reflects and challenges the legitimacy of socially constructed categories and their inherent instability.

Kennedy employs the traditional religious theatrical form of the morality play to underscore the protagonist's quest for unconditional love and acceptance from a DEAD FATHER, which is an allusion to Christian eschatology. In a discussion of the structure of Kennedy's plays as being avant-garde, Elinor Fuch suggests Kennedy's early plays, *Funnyhouse*, *The Owls Answers*, and *Rat's Mass*, are modern mystery or passion plays because "they take the format of ritual reenactments, enclose ceremonies and processions, and culminate in the dark sacrificial events" (76). Fuch's assessment of drama during this time period suggests that an allegorical movement emerged in theatre during the 1960s which included expressionists such as Antonin Artaud and Samuel Beckett. Fuch also suggests that Eugene O'Neill, and Percy MacKaye experimented with mystery plays:

Without being religious drama, these plays were steeped in the sense that human beings are exposed without mediation to vast mysterious forces in the universe. In them, proximate concerns of the social order give way to questions of ultimate destiny—sin, death, and redemption. Playwrights found a dramatic vocabulary, derived in part from allegory. From the moralities, from the passion play, and from the atmospherics of mysticism, to signal the audience that the stage represented not merely a particular time and place, but the universe; and that characters were not only individuals, and sometimes not even individuals, but emblematic figures embodying transcendental human destiny. (77)

The Owl Answers conforms to Fuch's description in that the convention of the characters acting as multi-selves and the setting comprising multiple places contribute to the sense that the characters are representative and the setting is universal. However, Kennedy's

aforementioned plays are just as much religious drama as they are secular philosophical exploration, inasmuch as the protagonists either interact with or reach out for some projection of God or His son Jesus.

Robert Potter provides an extensive analysis of the traditional form of the morality play in *The English Morality Play: Origins, History, and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition*. In a morality, “a concept—what it means to be human—is represented on the stage by a central dramatic figure or series of figures. Subsidiary characters, defined by their function, stand at the service of the plot, which is ritualized, dialectical, and inevitable: man exists, therefore he falls, [and] nevertheless he is saved” (Potter 6-7). These subsidiary characters generally fall into two categories: vices that tempt the fallen protagonist towards damnation and virtues who advise him towards redemption. Morality plays replaced the medieval cycles as the economic and sociopolitical conditions that supported the genre decidedly shifted. Religious drama had to deal with competing ideology in the aftermath of the Reformation: “Moralities had the advantage of greater independence from Church doctrine and were accordingly more flexible in doctrinal content—Catholic one day and violently anti-Papist the next, concerned with spiritual matters in one reign and with politics or social problems in another” (Bevington 114). Kennedy includes historical figures and settings intrinsically tied to the English Reformation in *The Owl Answers* to challenge socio-political mores while searching for spiritual affirmation; therefore, an inclusion of elements from the dramatic tradition seems wholly appropriate.

The post-Reformation reality play provides the perfect genre to challenge cultural assumptions regarding oppositions. In fact, the Reformation presented an oppositional

challenge to the genre. In “The English Morality Play as a Weapon of Religious Controversy,” Rainer Pineas discusses the shifts in the genre in the aftermath of the Reformation. While it still functioned as a teaching tool to instruct on “the means of salvation, there were now two competing theological systems. The ‘false’ means had to be exposed and eliminated before the ‘true’ could be taught” (180). Just as the vices of the old plays engaged the protagonist in fulfillment of some homiletic function, the vices in the new plays continued this function; however, they were now charged with helping to teach the difference between the “false” path towards salvation and the “truth.”

According to Pineas, the vices accomplished this mission:

- 1) By condemning himself by his threatened or actual aggression against the virtuous characters to demonstrate that he was part of the false theology. (179)
- 2) By using parody to demonstrate the worthlessness of the religion he professes and his own hypocrisy in continuing to support it. (175)
- 3) By inadvertently revealing the truth about himself... [through] the slip-of-the-tongue device to once again reveal his association with the false path. (173)
- 4) By teaching his audience that “his knowledge of evil is accompanied by a complete general ignorance, as well as a specific ignorance of the good—that is, of the ‘true’ faith he is so eager to destroy.” (177)
- 5) By seducing his victim using one or all of “three techniques: open falsehood, misapplied truth, and some form of disguise.” (178)

Kennedy incorporates these elements into *The Owl Answers*. She also utilizes a technique characteristic of the morality play known as doubling (described further in the next paragraph). However, Kennedy applies her artistic vision to the genre. She states in her autobiography, *People Who Led to my Plays*, that after seeing Jackson Pollock's work at the Museum of Modern Art, she "thought continually of how to write . . . without a linear narrative" asking "was it possible" (100). She also found the need "to continue to try to achieve truth and power in very small sections of [her] stories and then analyze that success on a small scale" from viewing Picasso's drawings of bullfights" (117). Thus, *The Owl Answers* is a Pollack/Picasso-like morality play. Kennedy captures the expression of a morality play, combining the elements and emphasizing some over others. *The Owl Answers* is post-modern morality relating the story of a protagonist who inhabits the fallen aspects in different oppositions as she hopes to be claimed/redeemed.

The practice of doubling is an element of the morality play that Kennedy adapts to great effect in *The Owl Answers*. In *Medieval Drama*, David Bevington describes the practices employed by the strolling players who performed morality plays:

Deprived as they were of the means to achieve multiple staging and elaborate scenic effects, the strolling players inevitably chose the expedient of casting as a way to imitate the scope of medieval drama. They had only themselves and their costumes, set upon a makeshift stage, with which to produce a modified pageant play. In the face of their severely limited numbers, the players had essentially three practical alternatives: the employment of supernumeraries, the reduction of the cast of characters to a manageable size, or doubling. (Bevington 115-6)

Kennedy incorporates the practice of doubling into the structure of the play by compounding settings such as the Tower of London that is simultaneously a Harlem hotel room, St. Peter's Cathedral, and a New York subway. The doubling of settings emphasizes the fluidity of time and space in the play, thus challenging the privilege associated with history. This challenge underscores the issues of ancestry raised during the course of the play. Likewise, Kennedy applies the practice of doubling to the characters SHE WHO IS CLARA PASSMORE WHO IS THE VIRGIN MARY WHO IS THE BASTARD WHO IS THE OWL, GODDAM FATHER WHO IS THE RICHEST WHITE MAN IN THE TOWN WHO IS THE DEAD WHITE FATHER WHO IS THE REVEREND PASSMORE, THE WHITE BIRD WHO IS THE REVEREND PASSMORE'S CANARY WHO IS GOD'S DOVE, and THE BASTARD'S BLACK MOTHER WHO IS THE REVEREND'S WIFE WHO IS ANNE BOLEYN. The multifaceted monikers serve manifold purposes that hinge on the inclusion of the phrase "WHO IS." To begin, the phrase "WHO IS" connects one character/characterization to the next which, in effect, collapses the distinction between the characters. Further, "WHO IS" relates to identity, as in who is Sara Passmore? In this instance, Kennedy uses the device to advance the thematic focus on the search for identity in the play. Finally, the phrase challenges the meaning of the allegorical categories, as in what does the category "THE RICHEST WHITE MAN IN TOWN" signify?

In the case of the protagonist SHE WHO IS, Kennedy uses doubling to reflect the precarious social position of the character as well as to challenge her marginalization. By assuming the character of the VIRGIN MARY, SHE WHO IS echoes the tendency in post-Reformation morality plays to incorporate religious figures. SHE WHO IS also

inhabits the category of THE BASTARD. The juxtaposition of an exalted status with a mean one deconstructs the distinction between the two. What is more, the combination of the two categories also serves a homiletic function. THE VIRGIN MARY was married to someone else besides Jesus' father—yet God claims him. Kennedy uses doubling to underscore the challenge to the prevailing “false” system that rejects SHE WHO IS for who she is.

Kennedy also incorporates historical figures who serve as guards: a device that maximizes their allegorical impact. In an interview with Howard Stein, Tony-nominated director Michael Kahn, who has directed *Funnyhouse* and *The Owl Answers*, asserts, “Every word for Adrienne counts. . . . When people ask me to describe her, I always think of a poet, with roots in our own unconscious—it’s somehow her unconscious and everyone’s” (197). Stein follows up Kahn’s statement with the assertion that “whatever [Kennedy] says is considered, and it is said with extreme economy (197).” Kennedy’s use of WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR, ANNE BOLEYN, CHAUCER, and SHAKESPEARE exemplifies her ability to compound meaning. On the one hand, the characters represent Kennedy’s childhood impression of “white people,” that being “They tried to hold you back. That implied that a great challenge existed in life” (14). However, these specific figures are more than just random images of “whiteness,” or patriarchy. These particular characters in one form or another share stories with SHE WHO IS, thereby challenging the social construct which separates them.

The absence of doubling as seen in the Negro Man also underscores the homiletic function in *The Owl Answers*. While the doubled characters act as vices, THE NEGRO MAN functions as the closest thing to a virtue in the play. In fact, SHE WHO IS refers to

him as God. He does not engage in the five behaviors listed by Pineas; rather, he engages the protagonist in those conversations that provide SHE WHO IS with the brief flashes of “truth” in the play. Most importantly, as the only singularly named character in the play, THE NEGRO MAN functions as an allegorical Everyman, or universal person of color. He is, as the audience sees by contrast to the other characters, the trinity of sensual love, self-love, and Godly love. Since the other characters fade in and out of one another, they assume the role of vice, attempting to corrupt one another.

According to Pineas, “the Vice of the polemical morality condemns himself by his threatened or actual aggression against the virtuous characters” (179). *The Owl Answers* begins with aggression on the part of the characters SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR, CHAUCER, and ANNE BOLEYN. According to the stage directions, they are dressed in costumes indicative of their characters, but ‘*too they are strangers entering a subway on a summer night, too they are guards in the Tower of London*’ (30). The quartet utters the very first lines in the play indicating their aggression towards the protagonist SHE WHO IS:

THEY. Bastard (*They start at a distance, eventually crowding her. Their lines are spoken coldly. SHE WHO IS is only a prisoner to them.*)

You are not his ancestor.

Keep her locked there, guard.

Bastard

SHE. You must let me go down to the chapel to see him. He is my father.

THEY. Your father (*Jeering.*)

SHE. He is my father.

THEY. Keep her locked there, guard.

(SHAKESPEARE *crosses the gate and raises hands. There is a SLAM as if a great door is being closed.*) (30)

In this instance, the characters clearly demonstrate their hostility towards the protagonist, who indicates that she merely desires to see her father. Lorraine A Brown, asserts, “This episode dramatizes most effectively the dissonance created by the devoted espousal of the cultural heritage of her white father and her own humiliating experiences of rejection and scorn from those she most venerates” (87). With this first scene, Kennedy foreshadows the themes in the play. The historical figures WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR and ANNE BOLEYN share a similar heritage with their connection to the English monarchy. CHAUCER and SHAKESPEARE relate similar tales. This initial scene represents more than aggression. This scene is merely the first of many parodies in the play, filled with hypocrisy that undermines the social constructs against which Kennedy’s homily preaches.

In addition to acting aggressively, “the vice of the polemical morality uses parody to demonstrate the worthlessness of the religion he professes and his own hypocrisy in continuing to support it” (Pineas 175). WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR serves multiple purposes at the beginning of the play. His aggression towards SHE WHO IS should be enough to identify him as a Vice, but when one considers the story of the historical figure William the Conqueror, the character’s hypocrisy in barring SHE WHO IS from accessing his culture makes his actions seem almost comical. William the Conqueror “was the bastard son of Robert I, sixth duke of Normandy, by Herleve” the daughter of a tanner (15); thus, he was known as “William the Bastard.” Still, he inherited his father’s

title and became Duke William II of Normandy and eventually conquered England to become King William I on Christmas Day in 1066. King William's ascension to throne essentially changed English culture:

The Norman Conquest of England ... was perhaps the most revolutionary event in English history between the Conversion and the Reformation. It gave to England a new monarchy, a feudal policy of a special type, a reconstituted Church, and a changed concentration on a new set of political and intellectual ideas. But, at the same time, it was so achieved as to ensure the essential continuity of English life. By combining much that was new with the revival of much that was old, it went far to determine the highly individual character of medieval England. (Douglas 367)

The character WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR focuses on SHE WHO IS's status as a BASTARD, which is ridiculous given his history. Even more ridiculous are his efforts to somehow preserve the DEAD WHITE FATHER'S heritage by barring SHE WHO IS access. WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR presents more of a challenge to English culture—having influenced the religion, language, and the aristocracy with his Norman influence. By contradistinction, SHE WHO IS reveres WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR and the whole of English heritage so much that she asserts her whiteness in an effort to dissuade any misgivings that he, the other guards, and the DEAD WHITE FATHER might have regarding her blackness.

The historical figure of ANNE BOLEYN is one facet of the multi-named character BASTARD'S BLACK MOTHER WHO IS THE REVEREND'S WIFE WHO

IS ANNE BOLEYN. They share similar stories despite different names. Since King Henry VIII held fast to his construction of reality, placing value on a legitimate male heir, Anne Boleyn found herself locked in the Tower of London until she was executed with “only one blow of the ‘very sharp bastard sword’” and buried at St. Peter’s ad Vincula, the chapel at the north end of Tower Green (Warnicke 234). Ultimately, Anne’s female child Elizabeth (who at one point was declared a bastard) ascended to the throne to become one of England’s most beloved queens. In light of this history, the character ANNE BOLEYN’S efforts to lock up SHE WHO IS are just as parodial as WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR’S.

Just as Kennedy casts ANNE BOLEYN, the mother of Queen Elizabeth, in a parodical function as a guard, she also includes a character/caricature of the most famous playwrights of the Elizabethan age, William Shakespeare. Like ANNE BOLEYN and WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR, SHAKESPEARE acts aggressively, demonstrating his role as a vice. His behavior is also somewhat hypocritical because, like the aforementioned guards, he shares part of SHE WHO IS’s story. In SHAKESPEARE’S case, it is not his personal history that intersects with that of SHE WHO IS but part of his play *Hamlet*. Kennedy’s fascination with the play is evidenced by the fact that references to *Hamlet* and the character Ophelia appear in Kennedy’s later works *Motherhood 2000* and *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*. An examination of the following lines Ophelia speaks in *Hamlet* reveals how SHAKESPEARE should be as sympathetic to the plight of SHE WHO IS as should WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR and ANNE BOLEYN. Shortly after the death of her father at the hands of Hamlet, Ophelia wanders in to the King and Queen singing:

Well, God 'ild you! They say the owl was a
 Baker's daughter. Lord we know what we are, but
 Know not what we may be. God be at your table! (4.5.42-4)

Aside from the obvious mention of the owl, this passage echoes many of the elements in *The Owl Answers*. First, the descriptive term "Baker's daughter" could apply to SHE WHO IS because the DEAD FATHER repeatedly addresses her as "daughter of somebody that cooked for me" (33). Second, the themes raised in Ophelia's lines echo the themes in *The Owl Answers*. Robert Tracy's examination of the passage from *Hamlet* highlights the major conflict underscoring the scene. Ophelia's madness stems from trying to reconcile her chaste love for her father with her sensual love for Hamlet: "It is the strain of attempting to reconcile these opposing allegiances that has shattered her reason . . ." (Tracy 83-4). Tracey points to the oppositional imagery in *Hamlet* as support for his conclusion. According to Tracey, during Elizabethan times "the owl was often a symbol of virginity, probably because of its association with the virgin goddess, Athena-Minerva" (85). In this same vein, "The owl's connection with virginity and its loss is quite explicit in the Welsh belief that the owl's hooting warns not only of death, but often of some village maiden's loss of virginity. The hooting signals the exact moment of such an occurrence" (85). This imagery is juxtaposed with that of a Baker's daughter, who, as Tracey points out, was associated with prostitution, an association that stemmed from Ancient Rome (85). Kennedy includes the owl, a cook's daughter, ruminations on virginity as well as accusations of whoring in *The Owl Answers*, echoing Ophelia's conflict regarding love and the confusion she articulates regarding identity. Thus, SHAKESPEARE the vice functions as a foreshadowing element. SHAKESPEARE

should know that SHE WHO IS is on path similar to Ophelia, one that in the absence of reconciliation between warring impulses leads to madness and death.

CHAUCER functions in a manner similar to SHAKESPEARE in that his “Parliament of Fowls” echoes the themes and allegorical elements in *The Owl Answers*. The poem begins with a poet falling asleep and dreaming of going to heaven and witnessing the birds gather to select their mates. Three birds vie for the hand of a female eagle, but as the birds are divided into a hierarchy, the lower class birds argue that they should be able to compete, and a debate ensues over love. Unable to reach a conclusion, the birds must gather the next year. Lawrence Besserman discusses the implications of the poem in *Chaucer’s Biblical Poetics*:

Like the choices among the three noble suitors that the female eagle (female eagle) will have to make next year, for Chaucer and the readers the problematic choice among the three varieties of love—courtly, natural, and religious, each under the sponsorship of its respective deity, Venus, Nature and the Christian God—also remains unresolved. Chaucer’s deferred effort in the “Parliament” to resolve the conflict among these varieties on love—his effort to choose among them or else somehow to reconcile their perceived disparities—will continue to be a major theme of his later poetry (178).

Besserman’s assessment of “Parliament” could apply just as easily to the themes in *The Owl Answers* as well as Kennedy’s work. Indeed, SHE WHO IS is trapped in a social hierarchy, and as a result, she does not receive acceptance from her DEAD FATHER. She is unable to consummate her relationship with THE NEGRO MAN. Instead, she

transforms into a bird at the end of the play, and her issues remain unresolved. Similar to Chaucer, Kennedy continues to ruminate on issues in the play—focusing on identity, acceptance, and faith in her later works.

In addition to parody, “the Vice inadvertently reveals the truth about himself [through] the slip-of-the-tongue device (Pineas 173). “Slips of the tongue” manifest throughout the text; however, one recurrent “mistake” seems to be the repeated by the vices. The guards challenge SHE WHO IS at the top of the play, demanding: “If you are his ancestor why are you a Negro?” (30). THE DEAD WHITE FATHER repeats the challenge:

If you are my ancestor, why are you a Negro, Bastard? What is a Negro doing at the Tower of London, staying at the Queen’s House? Clara, I am your Goddam Father who was the Richest White Man in the Town and you are a schoolteacher in Savannah who spends her summer in Teachers College. You are not my ancestor. You are my bastard. Keep her locked there, William. (33)

Logically SHE WHO IS would be his descendant. Because Kennedy uses every word to great effect, this “slip of the tongue” signals an artistic device—perhaps one that intersects with the practice of doubling. Philip Kolin addresses this misnomer in *Understanding Adrienne Kennedy* thusly:

She is her father’s ‘descendant’ rather than ‘ancestor.’ Yet as Carla McDonough argues, ‘Clara’s bastardy indicates that she bears the sins committed by her father and her mother because she herself is made to be also the causes of that sin—its originator or ancestor. By confusing

'ancestor' with 'descendant,' throughout the dialogue plays upon the idea that history is always present: the past is never gone but endlessly repeated/re-enacted.' These cruel reversals and rejections counter [SHE WHO IS's] fantasy acceptance by her WHITE FATHER and WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR. 'We were wandering about the garden, you leaning on my arm, speaking of William the Conqueror' (33), She tells her fictionalized benevolent white father. But the idealized white father, Mr. William Matheson, only joins King William to denounce her as a bastard, a black girl, unworthy even to make such genetic claims. (Kolin 59)

The DEAD WHITE FATHER's decision to ask WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR, also William the Bastard, renders this exchange a parody as well as a "slip." Thus, his "slip" serves the homiletic function of collapsing the categories.

However, SHE WHO IS has a "slip of the tongue" moment that undermines the truth and advances the notion that the categories have collapsed in the play. With SHE WHO IS's reverence for the oppositions that negate parts of her identity, she represents her own vice. In a discussion of the elements in the play, SHE WHO IS reveals: "Now they, my Black Mother and my Goddam Father who pretend to be Chaucer, Shakespeare and Eliot and all my beloved English, come to my cell and stare and I can see they despise me and I despise them" (41). This revelation demonstrates the "truth" of the situation. SHE WHO IS seeks redemption into the company of those whose value depends upon their marginalization of her.

The vice "is also made to teach his audience that his knowledge of evil is accompanied by a complete general ignorance, as well as a specific ignorance of the

good—that is, of the ‘true’ faith he is so eager to destroy” (Pineas 177). SHE WHO IS looks for men to seduce in the absence of acceptance by her father. In the following exchange with THE NEGRO MAN, SHE WHO IS seems clueless about what she needs:

NEGRO MAN. (*Touches her.*) And what exactly do you yearn for?

SHE. You know.

NEGRO MAN. No, what is it?

SHE. I want what I think everyone wants.

NEGRO MAN. And what is that?

SHE. I do not know. Love or something, I guess. (36)

Love and acceptance are exactly what SHE WHO IS should look for, but here again she serves as her own vice. She must identify what she wants in the same way that she seeks her identity. This scenario is indicative of the confusion into which SHE WHO IS spirals. She neither recognizes what she wants nor the fact that she cannot find it in the places she seeks. She must figure out who she is and what she wants—independent of the structure and oppositions that negate her.

Finally, the vice’s main mission in the morality play is to seduce his victim. The vice attempts to accomplish this mission through “the use of all or one of three techniques: open falsehood, misapplied truth, and some form of disguise” (Pineas 178). Kennedy employs all three techniques. Again, SHE WHO IS acts as her own vice, for she searches for men to take home. In the final scene, she assumes several characteristics of the vice as she tries to grasp the DEAD FATHER’s world. She is so enamored of her fantasy that she dresses the men that she finds on the subway as her father. In this instance, she lies to herself, engages in a religious dialogue that contains elements of the

“truth” but misapplies it to the scene, and tries to disguise THE NEGRO MAN, who allegorically represents part of SHE WHO IS. The final seduction scene reverberates with the collapse of the “false” construct:

SHE. God, say, “You know I love you, Mary yes, I love you. That love is the oldest, purest testament in my heart.” Say, “Mary, it was a testament imprinted on my soul long before the world. I pray to you Mary, Mary.”
 God, say “Mary, I pray to you. Darling, come to my kingdom. Mary leave owldom—come to my kingdom. I am awaiting you.” (*The NEGRO MAN tries again to kiss her. The WHITE BIRD picks up the DEAD MOTHER and takes her to the top of St. Peter’s Dome. They remain there, watching down. The REVEREND reads the Bible, smiling.*)

NEGRO MAN. What’s wrong?

SHE. Wrong, God?

NEGRO MAN. God?

SHE. Wrong, God?

NEGRO MAN. God? (*They are upon the burning High Altar. He tries to force her down, yet at the same time he is frightened by her. The DEAD FATHER who has been holding the candles smiles.*)

SHE. Negro! (*MUSIC ENDS.*) Keep her locked there guard. (*They struggle.*) I cry for death of Mary’s.

(*They struggle. SHE screeches.*) Negro! (*She tries to get out of the room, but he will not let her go.*) Let me go to St. Paul’s Chapel. Let me go down to see my Goddam father who was the Richest White Man in the

town. (*They struggle. He is frightened now.*) God, God, call me, Mary.
 (*She screeches louder.*) GOD!!! (*Suddenly SHE breaks away, withdraws
 the butcher knife, still with blood and feathers upon it, and very quickly
 tries to attack him, holds the knife up, aiming it at him, but then dropping
 it just as suddenly in a gesture of wild weariness. . .*) Ow . . . oww.
 (*FATHER rises and slowly blows out candles on bed.*) (41-2)

Here, Kennedy serves up a seduction scene that is just as convoluted as the protagonist's identity. SHE WHO IS has a "slip of the tongue" moment that is characteristic of the genre, which signals to the audience that she is practicing the false religion. SHE WHO IS has an opportunity to embrace the NEGRO MAN as an allegorical affirmation of her blackness. Yet she tries to make him something else. She in essence is denying a part of herself. While the NEGRO MAN tries to hold her down, his hold is not vice like aggression; he prevents her from going to St. Paul's Chapel, which as we know from the story of ANNE BOLEYN is associated with death. However, SHE WHO IS shifts into threatening behavior that is more aggressive than the other vices. Rather than die like the historic ANNE or the BASTARD'S BLACK MOTHER, SHE WHO IS transforms into an owl. This ending, like CHAUCER'S "Parliament of Fowls" leaves questions unresolved. However, they are questions created by irresolvable constructs. While SHE WHO IS fails to find the love or even the "true" path towards that love, with her final words, she finally acknowledges that the path she has traveled thus far has caused her pain.

The Owl Answers delivers a powerful sermon utilizing elements of religious drama. The ambiguity of the protagonist SHE WHO IS CLARA PASSMORE WHO IS

THE VIRGIN MARY WHO IS THE OWL CLARA, along with the other characters, who also represent more than one player, demonstrates the limitations attached to socially constructed categories. Kennedy attacks the question from a Christian perspective by utilizing elements associated with religious allegory as well as themes and figures from Christianity. The doubling of players, setting, and genre, which in some instances conflict with one another, echoes the major oppositions in the play. SHE WHO IS does not know who she is, nor does she know what she wants—familial love, sensual love, or Godly love. Like the protagonist of the traditional morality, SHE WHO IS exists; therefore, she falls. However, in this instance she inhabits the fallen aspect of several oppositions. In the end, SHE WHO IS finds transformation rather than redemption. THE OWL who is part of SHE WHO IS, with the final words “Ow. . .www,” finally stops looking for affirmation in the very elements that reject her and acknowledges that the system itself is a source of pain.

Challenging the Dog/ma in *Lessons in Dead Language*

Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing pow'r?
 Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
 Are you fully trusting in his grace this hour?
 Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
 Are you washed? (are you washed?)
 In the blood? (in the blood?)
 In the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb?
 Are your garments spotless?
 Are they white as snow?
 Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? (Hoffman 170)

The hymn “Are You Washed in the Blood?” raises a series of questions about blood and Christianity, much like Adrienne Kennedy’s *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1966). The central question in the song “Are you washed in the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb?” refers to Jesus Christ’s blood as a cleanser with redemptive powers for those who have sinned or fallen from the grace of God. By contrast, the blood in Kennedy’s play represents a pollutant and a punishment, and in this play, Kennedy challenges the cultural dogma that twists Christian ideology and uses it to marginalize women. The language lesson in the short, one act play focuses on cultural constructs and the methods by which they are communicated. Over the course of the play, the WHITE DOG, a figure with a human body who is “*costumed as a dog from the waist up,*” teaches a lesson on the language of bleeding as seven PUPILS methodically take notes and ask questions (43). Similar to Kennedy’s earlier plays *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and *The Owl Answers* (1965), *A Lesson in Dead Language* includes references to iconic figures—permitting Kennedy to pack meaning into the four-page play. In the case of *A Lesson in Dead Language*, the PUPILS and their teacher continuously reference William

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Also similar to the earlier plays, Kennedy utilizes religious figures. Talking statues of JESUS, JOSEPH, MARY, TWO WISE MEN, and A SHEPHERD frame the perimeter of the set—just as Christianity provides the backdrop for Kennedy to explore identity and betrayal issues as they relate to identity formation in young women. In *A Lesson in Dead Language*, Kennedy deconstructs the oppositions in cultural dogma and exposes the way dogmatic contradictions are veiled and protected.

In order to understand fully the artistry in *A Lesson in Dead Language*, one must look closely at the allusions in the play, such as the references to *Julius Caesar* and the religious statues, in context, while simultaneously recognizing that Kennedy co-opts these elements to relay entirely different stories. In “Kennedy’s Body Politic: The Mulatta, Menses, and the Medusa,” Jeannie Forte asserts:

The surreal quality of [Kennedy’s] plays invites a formalist approach, but this also proves impossible; traces of common themes and coherent meaning run through the plays like Hansel’s bread crumbs—you can follow them only so far, then they disappear, or transmute, and suddenly the ground has shifted. In a postmodern age, Kennedy’s texts seem quintessential: fragmented, decentered, nonlinear, marked by marginality and alterity, begging for comprehension and simultaneously defying it, haunting a search for meaning and identity in a world where all such categories have been rendered mobile, elusive. Rather than providing a realistic scenario, the work moves via images and associations, registering as an experience and of consciousness effected by representations in

literature, pop culture and film, as well as by the movement of history.

(158-9)

Analysis of *A Lesson in Dead Language* demands a formalist exploration of the use of the WHITE DOG, the religious figures, and *Julius Caesar*. However, Kennedy's post-modern style—which features repetitive dialogue articulated by different characters—frustrates efforts to organize that analysis. Therefore, it is best to examine the elements in the play with the understanding that each element is not truly separate; they collapse into each other.

Kennedy condenses the story, capitalizing on all the elements in the play—including the costumes. The costume notes place the audience in the position of confronting a negative social taboo. According to the notes within the play, the PUPILS are dressed in white organdy dresses—each with “a *great circle of blood on the back*” (44). Obviously, placing the large red circles on the PUPILS' white dresses evokes an uncomfortable image for the audience because one would associate this scene with the menstrual cycle and the idea that the girls have had some sort of accident in which they failed to keep the blood from soaking through their dresses. This bloody image, coupled with discussions of punishment throughout the play, alludes to the idea of menstruation as a “curse.” Rosemary Curb, in the article “‘Lesson I Bleed’: Adrienne Kennedy's Blood Rites,” deals with the discussion of blood and bleeding in some of Kennedy's plays. She notes that in *A Lesson in Dead Language* Kennedy “uses the words blood or bleed” thirty-four times “in a play so short that it has only thirty lines of dialogue” (51). Curb discusses the significance of blood as it relates to gender:

To become a woman means to bleed. The phases of progression from girlhood to womanhood all involve bleeding: menstruation, sexual initiation or deflowering and childbirth. The three rites of passage are naturally terrifying to a girl/woman experiencing them for the first time because all three involve internal pain never before experienced and the sight of blood coming out of her body . . . Her mother and older women may contribute to her sense of confusion about becoming a woman by calling menstruation “the curse” and indicating that the menstrual bleeding is shameful—a dark secret that must be hidden from men lest they ridicule and reject her simply for being female. Numerous patriarchal religions regard menstruating women and women who have given birth as unclean. (42)

Within society and the context of the play, the messages surrounding these natural bodily functions are punishing and diminishing as well as mysterious. Curb draws the conclusion that patriarchal society has influenced the way that women view bleeding. By coupling the discussion regarding bleeding with allusions to *Julius Caesar* and including representations of religious figures, Kennedy asserts that this patriarchal influence is codified in traditional thought and has religious undertones.

Within the context of *A Lesson in Dead Language*, blood carries different connotations as it relates to religion and society. Beginning with the first line in the play, in which the WHITE DOG says, “Lesson I bleed,” the class contemplates the significance of blood and women’s bleeding (43). The PUPILS question the lesson regarding bleeding in the first few lines of the play, a device which allows Kennedy to

explore the cultural connotations of the term. The PUPILS ask, “Why do I bleed?” (44).

Several reasons are given:

PUPIL. My mother says that it is because I am a woman that I bleed. (44)

WHITE DOG. I killed the White Dog and that is why I must bleed. (44)

PUPIL. I killed the White Dog and that is why I must bleed for Caesar.

Dear Caesar. (44)

PUPILS. This bleeding started when Jesus and Joseph, Mary and the two Wise Men and the Shepherd died. I found their bodies in the yard of my house tumbled down. (45)

The characters blame the bleeding on different sources ranging from maturation to killing a white dog—and whether or not this dog is the same dog that addresses the PUPILS, or a pet, or both seems purposely unclear. The characters also associate the bleeding with the death of Julius Caesar and the fall of religious figures. While the PUPILS and the WHITE DOG offer different explanations for the bleeding, a common thread emerges—the PUPILS must assume the responsibility for bleeding and accept some type of punishment.

Just as the PUPILS associate their bleeding with the fall of religious figures, the negative connotations associated with the female reproductive cycle are rooted in Judeo-Christian religious ideology, beginning with the fall of mankind. Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth discuss the social construction of menstruation in the book *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation*. In a chapter entitled “Woman Unclean: Menstrual Taboos in Judaism and Christianity,” Delaney, Lupton, and Toth assert, “codified, organized discrimination against menstruating women in the Jewish and

Christian cultures begins in Genesis” (37). The coupling of the female reproductive cycle with the idea of punishment connects to the original sin or fall of man. Once God discovers that Adam and Eve have disobeyed his directive to avoid eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, He curses Adam, sentencing his offspring to work for a living (Genesis 3:15). Although both Adam and Eve have sinned and fallen from grace, Eve’s punishment assigns her to a position below Adam:

To the woman He said,
 ‘I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing;
 with pain you will give birth to children.
 Your desire will be for your husband,
 and he will rule over you.’ (Genesis 3:16)

This punishment stigmatizes reproduction while assigning Eve to the fallen aspect of the man/woman opposition. While Genesis includes reproductive related punishment for challenging authority, the laws in Leviticus 30 declare menstrual blood and menstruating women as being “unclean,” thus, exhorting menstruating women to separate themselves from the rest of society during this period of their reproductive cycle (Leviticus 30:19-33). Delany, Lupton, and Toth point to other sections in the Bible which cast menstruation as “unclean” and a cause to eschew those menstruating, as well as the items or people with whom the person menstruating comes in contact. However, the authors also direct attention towards Jesus’ inclination to embrace those whom society deemed as unclean and his rejection of marginalizing traditions. Delany, Lupton, and Toth offer Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well in John 4:1-42 as an example of his general

repudiation of the practice of separating oneself from those people deemed unclean because, as a Samaritan, the woman at the well was unclean because of the “bad blood” between the Jews and the Samaritans (39). Delany, Lupton, and Toth also point to the miracle of the woman with the issue of blood as a direct negation of the prohibitions surrounding menstruation. In the account, a woman with a twelve-year issue of blood comes to see Jesus in hope of being healed, but since she is ritually unclean, she comes up behind Jesus and touches the hem of his garment. She is immediately cured, and Jesus tells her, “Your faith has healed you” (Matthew 9:20-2, Mark 25-34, Luke 5:43-45; Toth et. al 39). Despite Jesus’ example, “those who made Christianity a worldwide religion listened less to Jesus than to the urgings of their own cultural predilections” (40). The marginalizing verses have morphed with cultural constructs over the centuries to contribute to the notion that the reproductive cycle of women supports their designation as fallen.

The WHITE DOG is symbolic of closely held convictions and cultural ideology. Rosemary Curb asserts, “the White Dog in the play represents the whole world of elders and ancestors from Christianity and classical antiquity down to the two most powerful female authority figures in the adolescent girl’s life: mother and teacher” (Curb 43-4). The WHITE DOG can also represent dogma or dog/ma since the PUPILS address the WHITE DOG as teacher and mother interchangeably. By combining the word “dog” and “ma”—the variant for—mother—the WHITE DOG signifies dog/ma. While the WHITE DOG’s role as teacher merges with that of mother, the DOG as teacher occupies the position of central authority in the text, and she perpetuates the view of menstruation as punishment”

WHITE DOG. Since we do not know the one that killed the sun, we will all be punished. We will all bleed, since we do not know the one, we will all be punished. (*The PUPILS stand in the aisle, backs to the audience. Silence. They each have a great circle of blood on the back of their dresses. They go stiffly to the three boards, three PUPILS at one board, two PUPILS at the other two.*) Write one hundred times, “Who killed the white dog and why do I bleed? I killed the white dog and that is why I must bleed. And the lemons and grass and the sun. It was the Ides of March.” (44)

The death of the WHITE DOG is a reference to the death of the central authority—Adam’s and Eve’s original sin. In Genesis, God tells Adam and Eve, “You may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (2:15). The serpent tempts Eve with the suggestion that if she eats from the tree, she will be like God. If Adam and Eve possess the same knowledge as God, then God’s authority is called into question by his creations. However, the original sin also represents a contradiction. If Eve is unaware of the difference between good and evil, then what does a warning represent to her? How does one process the fact that something is wrong if she lacks the ability to distinguish between obedience and disobedience? What is more, as one of the first people, Eve is too innocent to understand the concept of death. Similarly, as the WHITE DOG asks the PUPILS questions they are unable to answer, she tells them that since they do not know the answers to her questions, “We will all bleed since we do not know the one, we will all

be punished” (Kennedy 44). Like Eve, the students will bleed whether they understand the lesson or not.

Dog/ma veils its inherent contradictions, and preordained punishments are inherent in the dog/ma. The PUPILS ask the WHITE DOG a series of questions, and one tells her, “Teacher my mother is sending me to the Asylum if I don’t stop talking about my white dog that died and my bleeding and Jesus and the game in the green grass” (45). The PUPIL realizes that she must accept the dog/ma as “truth” concerning the menses without discussion or understanding. Although the dog/ma may lead to questions, voicing those questions defies the teachings of the dog/ma, and if the PUPIL persists in challenging the dog/ma, the mother will banish her from society, as Eve was banished from the Garden. The PUPIL must not ask or speak about the menses; rather, she must accept the lesson in good faith, thus protecting the contradictions in the dog/ma.

Just as in Kennedy’s earlier plays, faith takes shape onstage in *A Lesson in Dead Language* in the form of the characters. JESUS, JOSEPH, MARY, TWO WISE MEN, and a SHEPHERD share the PUPILS’ misery, much like the JESUS character shared the protagonist’s burden in Kennedy’s earlier play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. The religious statues in the play connect the bleeding to tumbling or falling down. The characters speak in unison ruminating on their fall:

STATUES. (Voices from offstage) It started when Jesus, Joseph, Mary, the two Wise Men and the shepherd died. I found their bodies in the yard of my house, One day they disappeared and I found their bodies in the yard of my house tumbled down. (45)

and also,

STATUES. That I found the bodies on the grass at the Capitol at the foot of Pompey's statue. (45)

In both instances, the statues commiserate about their fall. This fall echoes Adam and Eve's fall and Julius Caesar's fall, as referenced by the line repeated throughout the play, "Calpurnia dreamed a pinnacle was tumbling down" (46). The religious figures undergo a transition along with the PUPILS. One of the PUPILS says, "This bleeding started when Jesus and Joseph and Mary, the two wise men and my Shepherd died, and now Caesar" (45). Later in the play, a PUPIL says, "Jesus and Joseph and Mary, two Wise Men and the Shepherd were friends of my childhood. Dear mother" (46). In childhood, Christianity serves as a comfort for the PUPIL. Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, two Wise men, and the shepherd symbolize the protective and nurturing aspects of the Christian religion promised in childhood. Mary is the mother of the savior Jesus. Mary and Joseph protect Jesus. The wise men come to Bethlehem to watch over Jesus. The shepherd in the play might represent one of the shepherds who witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the shepherd refers to the protective figure of God featured in Psalms:

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,

³ He restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk
 through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I will fear no evil,
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff,
 they comfort me. (Psalm 23:1-4)

That the bleeding starts the day the Biblical figures tumble/fall reflects the oppositional positions these figures assume in the lives in the maturing girls. The intrusion of the menstrual “curse” displaces the meaning faith holds for the PUPILS. The Bible promises that the Lord will comfort and protect them while culturally constructed religious dog/ma simultaneously perpetuates a curse. The curse represents a betrayal by a central source of comfort.

However, these are not the actual religious figures, but cultural constructions, as the stage directions reveal in the final section of the play:

Then a light to the WHITE DOG, who turns slowly about a full circle, revealing a blank human face. She holds a great Latin book. The statues are revealed as statues of Romans. (46)

This revelation of the statues as Romans intersects with the movie version of *Julius Caesar* (1959) directed by Joseph Mankiewicz, in which statues of preceding Roman leaders frame the set. By employing this revelation with the disclosure that the WHITE DOG is human, Kennedy reminds the audience that the lesson is a human construct and that these representations of religious figures are human creations. Therefore, the cultural religious dog/ma, like the previous Roman emperors, are mutable, and the lesson offered

by the WHITE DOG is just as anachronistic as a Latin lesson—despite the exalted status accorded to both.

Kennedy underscores the lesson by engaging in an intertextual conversation with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* regarding the multiple meanings of blood/bleeding to contemplate the marginalization of women and their complicity in that marginalization. Kennedy references *Julius Caesar* in relation to her Latin class. She discusses the significance of her Latin class, the play *Julius Caesar*, and the movie version as well as the sound recording of the movie in her autobiography *People who Led to my Plays* (1987). Kennedy says, "Three years of Latin made me more interested in [Caesar] than in any figure except Jesus. Caesar, his campaigns, his armies, his assassination, the betrayal by Brutus on the steps of the Capitol. How I loved him" (63). From this statement, one can see that Kennedy was both familiar with the play *Julius Caesar* and maintained an affinity for the character. In addition to studying the tragedy in Latin class, she had access to a sound recording of Mankiewicz's movie version of *Julius Caesar*:

I saw a movie with Louis Calhern, [Marlon] Brando, and James Mason. I bought the recording of the movie and played it for my father. He seemed subdued in these days and sometimes (in the evening) looked at his scrapbooks of the '30s newspaper clippings of himself. Hearing of Caesar will help, I thought. (78)

This passage illustrates both Kennedy's admiration of *Julius Caesar* as well as her familiarity with the text. Consequently, any examination of *A Lesson in Dead Language* demands close investigation into the relationship between the two plays because the

playwright evidently harbors an affinity for *Julius Caesar* and extensive experience with the text.

Although the image of the girls in the blood-stained dresses raises the specter of menstruation, their repeated references to *Julius Caesar* ties this image to that of the conspirators in the play and the movie, reminding the audience that people conspire against themselves when they fail to question cultural dogma. Kennedy fills *A Lesson in Dead Language* with as many references to *Julius Caesar* as she does the dog, grass, Jesus, and bleeding. Still, as critics dissect the densely packed images in the play, they often neglect *Julius Caesar*. Critics either limit their analysis of Caesar's role in the play to a symbolic representation of patriarchy or dismiss references to Caesar as nonsensical mystification. Caesar was considered a god by some people; thus, he represents a central authority figure. However, unlike Jesus and the other religious figures, Julius Caesar is not a statue in this play; *Julius Caesar* is a play within this play. To disregard the intertextuality between *A Lesson in Dead Language* and *Julius Caesar* is to dismiss part of the playwright's artistry, thus diminishing the play's impact and rendering critical analysis incomplete. A greater understanding of the implications of the images Kennedy accesses in *Julius Caesar* deepens the understanding of how much meaning Kennedy packs within the short play. The allusions to *Julius Caesar* amplify Kennedy's exploration of authority and opposition while underscoring her thematic emphasis on blood and reproduction.

Blood serves as a major symbol in *Julius Caesar* as it does in *A Lesson in Dead Language*. Shakespearean critics such as Gail Kern Paster have connected the use of blood in *Julius Caesar* as it relates to gender roles. For instance, Paster's article "In the

Spirit of Men there is no Blood: Blood as a Trope of Gender in *Julius Caesar*” asserts that:

at certain discursive occasions in the play, these signs function as historically specific attributes of gender, as important tropes of patriarchal discourse. The meaning of blood and bleeding becomes part of an insistent rhetoric of bodily conduct in which the bleeding body signifies as a shameful token of uncontrol, as a failure of physical self-mastery particularly associated with women. (284)

Critical analysis that examines blood imagery in *A Lesson in Dead Language* must carefully examine the relationship between the two plays in order to appreciate Kennedy’s use of subtext.

Obviously, blood takes center stage in *Julius Caesar* when the conspirators stab Caesar; however, blood dominates much of the dialogue related to Caesar’s wife Calpurnia as well. Kennedy alludes to both the imagery and dialogue in *A Lesson in Dead Language*. Caesar relates Calpurnia’s dream to Decius, one of the conspirators, in an effort to explain his reasons for staying home from the senate:

She dreamt tonight she saw my statue,
Which like a fountain with an hundred spouts
Did run pure blood: and many lusty Romans
Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it.
And these does she apply for warnings and portent
Of evils imminent, and on her knee
Hath begged that I will stay at home today. (II.ii.76-82)

From this passage, it is evident that blood plays a major role in the language, imagery, and spectacle of *Julius Caesar*. We begin to see that the relationship between *Julius Caesar* and *A Lesson in Dead Language* is more than a discussion of patriarchy; it is a subtextual element underscoring the thematic emphasis on blood and bleeding. This idea is evident when Calpurnia sees the blood as a warning for Caesar to stay home, while the conspirator Decius offers an alternate reading of her dream:

This dream is all amiss interpreted.

It was a vision fair and fortunate.

Your statue spouting blood in many pipes,

In which so many smiling Romans bathed,

Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck

Reviving blood, and that great men shall press

For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance.

This by Calpurnia's dream is signified. (II.ii.83-90).

This re-interpretation of Calpurnia's dream is important for several reasons. First, both interpretations are valid. Calpurnia is right to interpret the dream as a bad omen for Caesar. Decius's reinterpretation in effect forecasts the scene in the Senate after the assassination when the conspirators literally bathe their hands in Caesar's wounds and in his blood, smearing the blood on their white robes. Second, it shows how the conspirators manipulated the meaning of blood in order to deceive Caesar. Examining Shakespeare's use of reinterpretation is important because it supports Curb's findings regarding the socially constructed definition of blood as a means to undermine women. In the opposition between Decius and Calpurnia, Calpurnia's interpretation of her vision

occupies a secondary or fallen position primarily because she is a woman. Third, this reinterpreted dream mirrors the conception of blood as a means of salvation in Christianity and ties the lesson on *Julius Caesar* to the statue of Jesus.

Reproductive issues are another area in which *A Lesson in Dead Language* and *Julius Caesar* intersect. The references to lemons throughout the play seem absurd; however, in one explication of the play, Maureen Curley and Phillip Kolin contend that lemons “simultaneously evoke religious symbolism and the physiology of womanhood” (170). They cite George Ferguson’s *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, which explains, “The lemon is a symbol of fidelity in love, and as such, is often associated with the Virgin Mary” (Ferguson 17). This link is important because it ties the girls’ game of lemons to the statue of Mary, thus evoking “religious symbolism.” Curley and Kolin go on to cite Anna Chupa’s explanation of lemons on St. Joseph’s Day altars. According to Chupa, “It was good luck to steal a lemon from the altar leaving hidden coins behind for the poor...[A] lemon blessed on St. Joseph’s altar will not turn black and is a symbol of good luck. Lemons are for young married women who want to become pregnant” (171).

¹ Kolin charges that growing up in a large Italian Catholic community, Kennedy would be familiar with St. Joseph’s altars (*Understanding Kennedy* 96). This view connects the lemons to the PUPILS’ ability to reproduce. Of course, the image of lemons as a symbol of fertility links to Caesar’s first conversation with Calpurnia. Julius Caesar’s first lines in the play revolve around fertility. Caesar enters in Act I scene ii and calls to Calpurnia and Antonio to issue instructions regarding the festival race. He says:

Forget not in your speed, Antonio,

To touch Calpurnia, for our elders say

The barren, touched in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile curse. (I.ii.8-11)

These lines represent the first words of the title character in the Shakespearean drama.² Obviously, issues surrounding fertility carry importance in *Julius Caesar*. Calpurnia's barrenness is significant because as Caesar's wife, she bears the responsibility for producing a successor. The conspirators think that they can kill Caesar and assume his power because he has only an adopted son—not an heir by "blood." Thus, the shedding of Caesar's blood at the base of Pompey's statue represents the end of his direct bloodline. By contrast, the PUPILS' bleeding in *A Lesson in Dead Language* signifies their burgeoning ability to reproduce. Accordingly, their blood to a certain extent symbolizes the "reviving blood" from Decius's reinterpretation of Calpurnia's dream. In this way, the pupils resemble the conspirators because they redefine the meaning of blood with their ability to reproduce. Kennedy plays off the subtext in *Julius Caesar* to displace the meanings associated with female bleeding.

With *A Lesson in Dead Language*, Kennedy demonstrates that language is mutable, like Caesar the man, and a social construct like government, whose authority depends upon collective agreement. Prior to dismissing Calpurnia's dream, Caesar dismisses the soothsayer's warning:

SOOTHSAYER. Beware the Ides of March.

CAESAR. He is a dreamer. Let us leave him. Pass. (I.ii.25-26)

Kennedy alludes to the soothsayer's warning in the dialogue in *A Lesson in Dead Language* so that she can reference this moment (44). In this case, Caesar dismisses the soothsayer by defining him as a dreamer, and everyone passes him accordingly because

the term carries connotations of triviality. Similarly, when Decius redefines the meaning of blood in Calpurnia's dream, Caesar becomes ashamed of his reaction to her message because Decius implies that to receive the vision as a warning is to view it as a woman. While the Calpurnia example carries misogynistic overtones, Kennedy uses these "dreams" to show how reality is constructed through language. Although Calpurnia's and the soothsayer's "visions" of reality contain valid information, their messages, like the messengers themselves, fall into socially constructed categories that diminish their value. Kennedy plays off this subtext in order to subvert this linguistically biased approach to reality. As the authority figure in the classroom, *The WHITE DOG* offers no definitive explanation for anything. As the statues on the boundaries of the stage fall to reveal images of the Romans, she merely tells the students to "translate what I read" (46). In this instance, she invites the students to adapt her lesson to fit their construction of reality. Moreover, the fall of the statues—like the fall of Adam and Eve and the fall of Caesar—illustrate simultaneously that both boundaries and authority are expendable and can change at any time because while the Roman statues replace the Christian icons, these statues signify the Roman line of succession. In this way, Kennedy shows how language is a social construct much like governance and therefore just as mutable as Caesar. Although Latin is considered a "dead language," the language in this play is neither dead nor fixed, but alterable.

Examining the passage regarding the aftermath of the killing in *Julius Caesar* further accentuates the rich subtext in *Lesson*:

CASSIUS. Stoop, then, and wash.

[They smear their hands with Caesar's blood]

How many ages hence

Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,

In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

BRUTUS. How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,

That now on Pompey's basis lies along,

No worthier than the dust. (III.i. 112-7)

This passage connects directly to *Lesson* on many levels. First, the PUPILS' act of walking around with blood on their dresses mirrors the conspirators' act of walking around with Caesar's blood on their hands. The similarity between the visual depiction of this scene in the movie bears resemblance to the scene in the classroom. In the movie version, the conspirators wear white just like the PUPILS and deliver their lines in the aftermath of the killing with blood smeared on their robes as well as on their hands. Making the textual connection between the images of blood smeared hands and dresses is essential to any discussion regarding the role that blood occupies in a play that references Caesar and the conspirators because it deconstructs the cleanser/pollutant connotations inherent in socially constructed meanings of blood. Dissecting this contrast would support Curb's assertion that the play displaces patriarchy. Further, this passage seems to relate directly to *Lesson* because Kennedy appears to take Cassius's prediction that their "lofty scene [will] be acted over, [i]n states unborn and accents yet unknown" as an invitation from Shakespeare to adapt the scene. The *Norton Shakespeare* text notes distinguish Shakespeare's use of the term "accent" in this passage as denoting languages (1560). Kennedy maximizes the interplay between the terms because the PUPILS learn about *Julius Caesar* in a "dead language" while visually adapting the scene to fit their

context. Coupling the image of the girls with blood on their dresses with references to *Julius Caesar* allows Kennedy to tease the contradictions inherent in these notions regarding blood.

The PUPIL's line "I killed the White Dog and that is why I must bleed for Caesar" compounds meaning upon meaning. Caesar dies because his friend Brutus betrays him. Brutus joins the conspiracy because Cassius exploits those convictions which inflame Brutus's passions enough to induce him to kill his friend. Similarly, the PUPIL in this instance kills that in which she believes and bleeds. Her blood could represent the loss of innocence or purity, since the color white carries connotations of purity as opposed to the "unclean" or polluted connotations associated with the blood on her dress, as well as empathy for that which she betrayed—which she likens to Caesar. Kennedy uses *Julius Caesar* as a subtext to communicate ideas regarding belief and betrayal in multiple ways. Those in the senate besides the conspirators flee in the aftermath of Caesar's death, but the conspirators remain and take responsibility by bathing their hands in his blood. As Maurice Charney points out, the conspirators are either guilty of killing a benevolent leader because of their jealousy or they are saviors who free Rome from the tyranny of oppression; thus, the blood in *Julius Caesar* indicates both guilt and salvation (Paster 284). This dichotomy of meaning in Shakespeare, between self-centered murder and guilt, on the one hand, and altruism for the state and salvation, on the other, relates, perhaps, to the mutability or deconstruction of language, which is also prevalent in Kennedy's *A Lesson in Dead Language*.

Kennedy builds on Shakespeare's manipulation of the definition of blood and bleeding by using his method and alluding to his meanings. She also condenses meaning

into each image and line of dialogue, as evidenced by one of the PUPIL's assertions:

“Teacher, my mother is sending me to the Asylum if I don't stop talking about my white dog that died and my bleeding and Jesus and the game in the green grass. I asked her who made me bleed. The conspirators, she said” (45). Perhaps the PUPIL who delivers this line represents the confessional playwright herself acknowledging that some audience members might describe as crazy the non-linear style, repetitive dialogue, and subject matter that comprise the play. However crazy these elements might seem, they merely reflect the nonsensical social constructs the play challenges. Through the imagery and the repetition of dialogue, Kennedy demonstrates how society attempts to control the uncontrollable through the connotations in language. However, just as the PUPILS must surrender the Jesus, green grass, and little white dog of their childhood, Kennedy urges her audience to relinquish those ideas that undermine the humanity of these girls.

¹ This quotation is taken from Curly and Kolin, who cite Chupa, Anna, “St. Joseph's Day Altars” 10 Sept. 2001, <http://www.Ire.msstate.edu/~achupa/StJo/sj-stand.html>. This information is now available at <http://www.houstonculture.org>.

² This scene stands out in the movie because Caesar delivers the lines in front of the crowd and leaves Greer Garson's Calpurnia visibly embarrassed.

Tainted Brotherly and Neighborly Love in *A Rat's Mass*

“I told myself afterward it was one of the boys playing horseshoes who had done those horrible things on the slide with my sister. Yet I told Kay I am her keeper, yet I told Rosemary I love her. It is the secret of my battlefield” (53). So bemoans BROTHER RAT in Adrienne Kennedy’s *A Rat’s Mass* (1966). His lines echo those of Cain from the Bible when, in the aftermath of the first case of fratricide, the following exchange takes place between God and Cain:

⁹ Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”

“I don't know,” he replied. “Am I my brother's keeper?”

¹⁰ The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. ¹¹ Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. ¹² When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.” (Genesis 4:10)

This allusion to Genesis in *A Rat’s Mass* functions much in the same way as the allusion to the fall of Adam and Eve operates in *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1966). Just as Eve’s fall has been incorporated into cultural constructs to justify the marginalization of women, the curse of Cain has melded over the centuries with the curse of Ham (also in Genesis) to justify racism and slavery (Davis 12, 14). Kennedy’s *A Rat’s Mass* depicts these marginalizing constructs as a perversion of God’s message—much like incest.

Like *A Lesson in Dead Language*, *A Rat’s Mass* is one of Kennedy’s plays that is more uncomfortable due to the visual imagery and focus on social taboos. Many of the

elements from *A Lesson in Dead Language* also loom large in *A Rat's Mass*. As in *A Lesson in Dead Language*, *A Rat's Mass* also includes allusions to William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and the plays share a thematic emphasis on blood and the loss of innocence. Similarly, just as half-animal imagery accentuates the lesson in *A Lesson in Dead Language*, half-animal imagery visually underscores the homily in *A Rat's Mass*. Kennedy proffers visual shocks: the plot revolves around two characters known as BROTHER RAT, also referred to as Blake, and SISTER RAT, also referred to as Kay, who, according to the stage directions, have "a rat's head and a human body, a tail" and "a rat's belly, a human head, a tail" respectively (47). However, this visual jolt is matched by repeated references to the taboo of incest. Whether this incest is real or imagined, Kennedy compounds the shock of the alleged incest with the implication that the character ROSEMARY, a neighbor who wears a communion dress similar to that of the girls in *A Lesson in Dead Language*, instigates the act. BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT repeatedly profess their love for their neighbor ROSEMARY; however, despite their love, ROSEMARY torments them, and she eventually betrays them by surrendering them to a procession comprised of JESUS, JOSEPH, MARY, TWO WISE MEN, and a SHEPHERD, whom she refers to as Nazis. The PROCESSION shoots the brother and sister with machine guns. The play is a dark nightmare, twisting fairytale, history, and myth, questioning the religious concept of brotherly/neighborly love as it relates to those labeled as outcasts.

In addition to including some of the same elements featured in *A Lesson in Dead Language*, Kennedy confronts religious hypocrisy in *A Rat's Mass* using religious imagery and allusions to the folk legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Additionally, several elements in the play reflect Kennedy's desire to make sense of her

experience with prejudice and its impact on her life. The ruminations on the relationships among BROTHER RAT, SISTER RAT, and ROSEMARY in the play are allegorical and speak to a larger experience, but the play is grounded in Kennedy's relationship with her own brother. The play stems from a dream that she had on a train. In "A Growth of Images," Kennedy connects the play with childhood fears, adult traumas, and death:

A Rat's Mass was based on a dream I had once when I was on a train. I was very frightened, doing something I had never done before. I was on a train going from Paris to Rome, and I was going to try to live in Rome for a few months. I was with my seven-year-old son. It was a very difficult thing for me to do because I'm not really that adventurous. I had never tried to do something like this. In a way, I just wanted to turn around and go back. I had this dream in which I was being pursued by red, bloodied rats. It was a very powerful dream, and when I woke up, the train had stopped in the Alps. It was at night. I had never felt that way. It was a crucial night in my life. So, I was just haunted by that image for years, about being pursued by these big, red rats.

Then I try to take these images and try to find what the sources for them are. All this is unconscious; all this takes a long time. I'm not in that much control of it. In the case of *A Rat's Mass*, there was a connection to my brother. At that time my brother was in an automobile accident, from which he subsequently died. This evoked an almost unreal memory of when we were children, we used to play in the attic, and there used to be a closet in the floor of the attic. I didn't like to go up there by myself because I would imagine that there would be something in that closet. (Kennedy and Lehman 44-5)

The death of Kennedy's brother in connection to her dream imposes his presence in the sad elements of the play. The loss of innocence upon which the play ruminates emanates from the empathy Kennedy felt for her brother.

This dream on the train seems to meld with an earlier experience Kennedy and her brother shared during their childhood. In her autobiography, *People who Led to my Plays*, Kennedy recounts an experience participating in her own degradation:

Although I loved my grandparents immensely, I hated the train ride to Georgia that my brother and I took every June, especially the ride from Cincinnati to Montezuma in the dirty Jim Crow car. When the Traveler's Aid met us in Cincinnati station, my brother was still crying. He was about seven then, and as soon as the train pulled out of the Cleveland Terminal Tower he started to cry and he cried all the way to Cincinnati. Night would come while we rode into the South, and he cried with his head on my shoulder. My father had bought me some magazines at the Cleveland terminal. One was a *Modern Screen* with a picture of Clark Gable in an army uniform. I tried to interest my brother in the magazine, but he kept sobbing, "I want to go home." I put my arm around my brother, looked out of the dirty double-panel windows and clutched the *Modern Screen* magazine with Gable on the cover. (33-4)

When travelling in the North, the children were treated as children traveling alone, receiving assistance; however, once they reached the South, they had to move to a dirty car, conditions that reflected what society thought of them. In this instance, Kennedy and her brother knew that better conditions existed, but they had no choice but to participate in their own degradation if they wished to arrive at their destination. This experience and others similar to

it would almost certainly leave some sort of psychological/spiritual residue. While society has rightly focused on eradicating segregation, the impact this ostracism had on the mental/spiritual states of the people objectified receives less attention—almost as if those previously excluded should be so elated that they are now included that they should just “get over it” no matter how deeply scarred they might be. Kennedy’s play visits these dark pockets of emotion in dreamlike settings where all the imagery that symbolizes marginalization bombards the audience simultaneously.

The imagery is like a series of similes all designed to explain what the impact of racism is like. How one could allow this marginalization to creep into his or her consciousness as a child and not sustain some sort of damage is unbelievable. Indeed Kennedy’s brother suffered. Kennedy recounts over the course of her autobiography how unhappiness haunted her brother’s life. She repeatedly associates him with Constantine from Chekov’s *The Seagull*:

I wasn’t aware of it, but many times when I read and reread Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, I saw my brother as Constantine. (If my brother and I could only play jacks again and bounce the tiny red ball on the porch. If we could only play pick-up-sticks again or together with a piece of chalk draw hopscotch on the sidewalk in front of our house.) In his twenties my brother spoke bitterly of his life in a way I could not fathom. He often said he felt hopeless, and then he joined the army. Like Constantine, he seemed to feel an inability to get the esteem and attention he craved from the world...all the more puzzling to me because in many ways I had seen my brother as the favorite child. (101)

Here, Kennedy longs for the innocence associated with childhood. She hoped that she could counteract some of the sadness that permeated her brother's life. *A Rat's Mass* reflects some of that experience, as BROTHER RAT laments, "If only we could go back to our childhood" (51).

The visual spectacle of the main characters highlights the heart of the homily in *A Rat's Mass*. The half rat/half human characteristics of the BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT characters are a symbolic representation of how the author sees these children as being seen. In a description of the people from the fairy tales of her childhood, Kennedy writes: "There was a journey in life that was dark and light, good and evil, and people were creatures of extreme love, hatred, fear, ambition and vengefulness, but there was a reward if one kept seeing the light and hoping" (*People* 8). Kennedy's comment includes a picture of the Pied Piper of Hamelin as an illustration of this memory. In *A Rat's Mass*, Kennedy collapses the fairy tale integrating the desirable child with the undesirable rat. The play includes the following description:

BROTHER RAT *has a rat's head and a human body, a tail.* SISTER RAT *has a rat's belly, a human head, a tail.* ROSEMARY *wears a Holy Communion dress and has worms in her hair. Mass said in prayer voices that later turn into gnawing voices. They were two pale negro children.* (47)

The images dictated by these stage notes create a spectacle that underscores some of the major thematic threads in the play. First, the half-rat/half-human image reflects the binary extremes Kennedy gleaned from fairy tales. Kennedy challenges socially constructed oppositions throughout the play. Second, the half-rat/half-human image coupled with gradual change from human voices to rat voices contribute to the idea that the children are in

transition. They are leaving the innocence and protection of childhood for adulthood, yet they long for the innocence of youth as a remedy for the degradation they face. Third, as BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT grow, they seem to lose their humanity; they are no longer shielded from prejudice. In *Understanding Adrienne Kennedy*, Phillip Kolin asserts:

The rat also symbolizes racial roles that society assigns to black children, stigmatizing them as the grotesque other. White society thereby perpetuates its own segregationist racial expectations. Blackness is equated with loathsomeness, the ugly, the nonhuman, being fit for extermination...

Historically, rats, brown and black were thought to carry disease, a point the Nazis made when they metamorphosed the Jews, their racial enemies, into swarming rats in Joseph Goebbels's fascist propaganda films of the 1930's.

(82)

Kolin's reading accentuates the connections to the Holocaust that appear throughout the play. Kennedy expands the discussion of marginalization beyond black people in the United States, connecting her experience to the larger continuum. She challenges the overall impulse to dehumanize groups of people. Fourth, the communion dress of the character ROSEMARY symbolizes both religion and society. The word "communion" denotes both the religious act of commemorating the last supper before the crucifixion of Jesus, as well as the bond that exists between people. As we see over the course of the play, ROSEMARY's wormy hair suggests Medusa and supports her role as a temptress—the Pied Piper who leads the children astray. Thus, the visual spectacle is integral to the story.

The emphasis on transitions is evident in the first lines of the play. BROTHER RAT recognizes that a detrimental shift is occurring:

BROTHER RAT. Kay within our room I see our dying baby, Nazis, screaming girls and cursing boys, empty swings, a dark sun. There are worms in the attic beams. (*Stands.*) They scream and say we are damned. I see dying and grey cats walking. Rosemary is atop the slide. Exalted! (*kneels again.*) Kay within our room I see a dying baby, Nazis, again they scream. (*Stands again.*) and say we are damned. Within our once Capitol I see us dying. Rosemary is atop the slide exalted. (47)

In typical Kennedy fashion, the lines cannot be dissected formally to the extent that a more linear play can be traced. As Jeannie Forte asserts in “Kennedy’s Body Politic: The Mulatta, Menses, and the Medusa,” the trail goes so far and fades or rather melds into the other imagery (158-9). The collection of disparate images in this dialogue coalesces to convey the disorientation the protagonists experience as they recognize things are changing. The baby that they refer to throughout the play could symbolically represent birth in general, and in this passage BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT begin to understand that they are damned from birth—not from anything that they have done. The reference to the “Capitol” echoes *A Lesson in a Dead Language* in which “Calpurnia dreamed a pinnacle was tumbling down (46). In that play the notion of the falling pinnacle echoed the fall of women in the male/female opposition as well as the fall of man in the Book of Genesis. In the case of *A Rat’s Mass*, as children, BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT enjoy the paradise of equality with their neighbor, but as they mature, they “slide” from grace, and ROSEMARY assumes a higher position in society.

Much of the dialogue in *A Rat’s Mass* expresses a longing to return to the innocence of childhood. Kennedy crafts a dysphoric collage of frightening images and social taboos

juxtaposed with Biblical allusions. Many of these allusions refer to BROTHER RAT's and SISTER RAT's lives before their transition or slide/fall:

BROTHER AND SISTER RAT. The Communion wine. Our father gives out the Communion wine and it turns to blood, a red aisle of blood. Too something is inside the altar listening. (SISTER RAT *kneels.*) When we were children we lived in our house, our mother blessed us greatly and God blessed us. Now they listen from the rat beams. (*Sound rats. They remain kneeling. Sound rats.*) It is our mother.

Rosemary, Rosemary was the first girl we ever fell in love with. She lived next door behind a grape arbor her father had built. She often told us stories of Italy and read to us from her Holy Catechism book. She was the prettiest girl in our school. It was one of those Midwestern neighborhoods, Italians, Negroes, and Jews. Rosemary always went to Catechism and wore Holy Communion dresses. (49)

This passage is a jumble of religious allusions. The line "Our father" evokes the Lord's Prayer found in Matthew 6:9–13 and Luke 11:2–4. The references to God, wine, and blood suggest the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ—which promises redemption from the fall from grace. ROSEMARY, the next door neighbor, calls to mind the admonition to "love your neighbor as yourself" commanded in Leviticus and in three of the gospels in the Bible (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19, 22:39, Mark 12:31, and Luke 10:27). However, BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT do not feel the love of their neighbor; rather, they feel the rejection of society. Things are turning on them. Before they began to change in the eyes of society, they were part of a communion of all nationalities. Now they are

damned. Much of that damnation stems from trusting their neighbor who lives “behind a grape arbor that her father built.”

Phillip Kolin’s reading of ROSEMARY casts her as a temptress. Kolin maintains, “The most surrealistic reminders of ROSEMARY’s Fidessa/Duessa role are the worms in her hair. They suggest Medusa’s poisoned snakes, but they also point to the snake that betrayed Adam and Eve in the Garden. The fact that Rosemary’s father owns a grape arbor that the children once visited contributes to such a reading” (87). Over the course of the play, BROTHER RAT mentions being his sister’s keeper, and SISTER RAT insists, “Blake I thought you were my brother’s keeper” (52). These allusions reference the story of Cain, also from Genesis, and underscores Kolin’s reading. Indeed Mason Stokes, in “Someone’s in the Garden with Eve,” chronicles some of the long history of using Genesis to justify the subjugation of people of color and the persistence of racialized readings of the Judeo-Christian creation story. Kennedy highlights the connection between marginalization and biblically-based cultural constructs in *A Rat’s Mass* in the same fashion as she did in *A Lesson in Dead Language*. In the case of *A Lesson in Dead Language*, Kennedy focuses on religious dogma used to subjugate women. In the case of *A Rat’s Mass*, she draws attention to the subjugation of people of color. Still, ROSEMARY’s hair merely suggests Medusa’s snakes. Her hair actually consists of worms, and worms simply feed on decay as part of the life cycle. Thus, ROSEMARY’s power rests in connotations and suggestions.

If BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT represent an amalgam of the undesirable rats and desirable children from The Pied Piper fairy tale, then ROSEMARY also represents a Pied Piper. BROTHER AND SISTER blame her for instigating the indecent act on the slide:

BROTHER RAT. It is Rosemary. (*Stares.*) Did you tell? Does anyone know? Did you tell? Does anyone know? You started to cry Kay and I struck you in the face with our father's rifle. It was the beginning of summer. Just getting dark, we were playing and Rosemary said let's go to the playground. After you lay down on the slide so innocently Rosemary said if I loved her I would do what she said. Oh Kay. After that our hiding in the attic rats in the beam. Now there is snow on the playground, ambulances are on every street and within every ambulance is you Kay going to the hospital with a breakdown. (50)

Whether or not incest occurs, the act on the slide symbolizes a perversion of brotherly love.

BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT betray themselves because of the way they love ROSEMARY. She is exalted because they slide from grace. That exalted status is dependent upon BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT believing her suggestions. This scenario mirrors marginalizing constructs which are mere suggestions dependent upon societal consent, and in this instance, BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT consent to their oppression. Their act on the slide represents a perversion of brotherly love because, while they "love their neighbor," they subscribe to the constructs which elevate ROSEMARY to their debasement, and they fail to love themselves.

Wolfgang Meider offers an analysis of the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin in *The Pied Piper: a Handbook*. According to Meider, the fairy tale is based on the legend of an event that occurred in Hamelin, Germany, during the thirteenth century in which the young people in the village were lured away. Asserting that the legend of the Pied Piper is widespread and has been widely studied—particularly in Germany, Meider traces the legend

and explains its popularity and translation into other cultures. Meider asserts that “the Pied Piper is a motif or an icon that has been adapted to a multitude of situations where someone or something leads people to a goal that might prove to be a good or bad one in the long run” (1-2). Meider’s vision of the Pied Piper fairy tale mirrors that of Kennedy’s vision of fairy tales from childhood. Meider’s analysis of the reality upon which the fairy tale draws also parallels Kennedy’s vision of the constructs that undermine the world **BROTHER RAT** and **SISTER RAT** inhabit:

The principles of hope that governs fairy tales gives children and adults alike the feeling that better days might lie ahead and that things will work out in the end. In many ways, fairy tales give the wonderful answers to the basic questions of life, showing that good will win out over evil and that goodness and good deeds will be rewarded in a perfect world. Legends on the other hand show the negative and tragic sides of life, above all matters and occurrences that cannot be controlled. At the end of a legend is a question rather than an answer. In the case of the “Pied Piper of Hamelin” folktale the question that has remained to this very day is “what really happened on June 26, 1284?”...But the complete answer eludes us, and that is in many ways what legends want to achieve. Complete answers are not always possible, and not everything in life can be explained rationally and historically. But one thing is for certain, and that is the message of most legends and certainly also of the “Pied Piper” narrative: There are many numinous threats lurking everywhere, and one of them appears from time to time in various disguises as a Pied Piper leading people away if not astray (4).

This passage captures a major undercurrent in *Rat's Mass*. Like the folktale's attempts to make sense of a horrific even in Germany, Kennedy combines the Pied Piper legend with another historic event in Germany. Her references to Nazis in the play raise the specter of the demagogue Adolf Hitler, who led a nation astray.

Hitler was a scary and real threat for Kennedy during her childhood, and World War II literally intruded into her childhood and her childhood games:

Hitler: He was the person who caused a tower to be built in the school playground across the street from our house, a frightening orange steel structure (a white light at its pinnacle shone at night into our windows) that was surrounded by a jagged metal fence said to electrocute you if you touched it. This tower was a watchtower in case an attack from the Germans or the Japanese occurred. . .

My Jewish friend Yvette told me that Hitler didn't like Jews and she and her widowed mother were afraid. Hitler didn't like anyone except the Aryan race... the blond race. When I went to see the movie *Hitler's Children*, with my brother and the kids from next door, we were very upset that Bonita Granville was beaten by the SS, the German officers in their strangely designed uniforms, helmet and boots. She was beaten with a whip because she didn't want to fight for Hitler. We were children. If Hitler came to Cleveland and we resisted, would we be beaten and sent to a concentration camp?

My mother said she was buying war bonds, and we gave up butter and meat, we saved coupons. I asked my father when he came home at night, was

that helping? I didn't want the Nazis to come, I didn't want to be a Hitler's Child or go to camp. My best friend said as long as the tower was up we were in danger." (*People* 27-28)

Kennedy connected this childhood experience to the play *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and its attic setting serves as an allusion in *A Rat's Mass*. According to Kennedy, when she saw the play on Broadway one Thanksgiving afternoon, "[she] cried aloud in the theater when the Germans came up the stairs to the annex. It was the evil of Hitler again" (99).

Kennedy's use of the attic as part of the setting allows her to access that play. Of Anne Frank, Kennedy says, "I often thought of her a great deal. Her life seemed a study in courage in adversity. I often thought of that attic in Amsterdam" (*People* 102). BROTHER RAT's and SISTER RAT's transition phase echoes some of the sentiment expressed in the *Diary of Anne Frank* where ANNE and PETER try to make sense of the degradation that they suffer:

ANNE. We're not the only people that've had to suffer. There've always been people that've had to . . . sometimes one race . . . sometimes another . . . and yet

PETER. That doesn't make me feel any better!

ANNE. I know it's terrible, trying to have any faith...when people are doing such horrible . . . But you know what I sometimes think? I think the world may be going through a phase, the way I was with Mother. It'll pass, maybe not for hundreds of years, but some day...I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are really good at heart. (168)

The explanation that the Holocaust was a phase that the world was going through, similar to that of adolescence, posits ANNE in a place similar to BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT, in which children try to make sense out of nonsensical constructs created by adults. Still, with a *Rat's Mass*, Kennedy ponders ANNE's contention that her people are not the only race that has had to suffer. By referring to the procession of JESUS, JOSEPH, MARY, TWO WISE MEN, and the SHEPHERD as Nazis in *A Rat's Mass*, Kennedy challenges those who label themselves as Christians, questioning how they can allow such atrocities to occur.

The ending symbolically demonstrates what happens when religion is perverted. The PROCESSION comes to mean death rather than resurrection. Kolin asserts, "In one of Kennedy's most caustic attacks on bigoted white Christianity, the procession at the end of *A Rat's Mass* is transformed into Nazis who shoot the children, illustrating how the sacred is perfidiously co-opted by racial politics" (84):

ROSEMARY. It is our wedding, Blake. The Nazis have come. (*Marching.*)

Brother and Sister Rat you are now soon you will become headless and all
cease the dark sun will be bright no more and no more sounds of shooting in
the distance. (*Marching procession appears bearing shotguns.*)

BROTHER AND SISTER RAT. WE will become headless and all will cease
the dark sun will be bright no more and no more sounds of shooting in the
distance. It will be the end. (*The procession shoots, they scamper, more shots,
they fall, ROSEMARY remains.*)

CURTAIN (54).

If we look to the Bible, the image of the sun going dark always portends the time of judgment—a time when the faithful are rewarded and the wicked are punished. However, life, unlike fairy tales, cannot and should not be reduced to binary oppositions. The procession of JESUS, JOSEPH, MARY, TWO WISE MEN, and SHEPHERD bearing arms and killing BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT stands as a perversion of biblical beliefs. Here Kennedy challenges those who are content to hope that evils will correct themselves—if only one has faith.

Like the folk tale Kennedy references, *A Rat's Mass* is a cautionary tale. Kennedy is concerned that entire societies have allowed themselves to be led astray. She mixes religious figures and ceremony with the legend of the Pied Piper to contemplate hypocrisy. In *A Rat's Mass* Kennedy delves into the religious roots of marginalization and reflects on how they have been codified into social constructs. Within this play, religious imagery, cultural references, and social taboos collide to underscore the notion that marginalizing constructs are a perversion of religion. The protagonists BROTHER RAT and SISTER RAT articulate a desire to return to the innocence of childhood—a time before they fell outside the margins of society, and although the protagonists are eventually pushed outside social margins, they recognize that external forces are at work casting them as the “other,” and they challenge these forces. However, Kennedy avoids placing all the blame outside the margins; rather, she raises an important question: why do any of the parties consent to participate in negating constructs?

The Rage Inside *Motherhood 2000*

The play *Motherhood 2000* (1994) proffers an aggressive alternative to some of the issues raised in *Funnyhouse of A Negro* (1964) and *The Owl Answers* (1965). In an allusion to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Kennedy utilizes meta-theatrical techniques to engage her rage and exact vengeance. Within this drama, which features a passion play, Kennedy replaces the early plays' fractured young female protagonists, who are tortured by their quest to appease those who reject their humanity, with a mother decidedly bent on avenging the marginalization of her son. *Motherhood 2000* challenges the sacrificial black mother stereotype and addresses some of the inaction and the inclination towards assimilation that contributed to the protagonists' torture in the earlier plays. The play features the protagonist MOTHER/WRITER who, when confronted by racially biased police brutality against her son, is in no mood to turn the other cheek as the Bible suggests in Matthew 5:39 and Luke 6:29. MOTHER/WRITER manages to assimilate with those who reject and degrade her son, only to obtain vengeance. With *Motherhood 2000*, Kennedy demonstrates that people can and do inflict pain and misery—even persecute others—while assuming the costume of faith, and her protagonist challenges this fictional construct as a writer.

While *Motherhood 2000* is fictional, the story stems from an incident in Kennedy's life. In 1991, a police officer beat Kennedy's son Adam in his father's front yard:

An Arlington, VA policeman followed Adam's car for several blocks because of a faulty tail light. When Adam Kennedy pulled into the driveway of his father's home, the officer brutally beat him without provocation and arrested him without specifying the charge. Unjustly accused of resisting arrest and

assaulting an officer, [Adam] Kennedy was the one sent to the hospital with multiple bruises, while the policeman produced no evidence of having been injured. The charges against Kennedy were dropped after the trial, and he won a civil suit against Arlington County. (Kolin 157-8)

Despite the fact that Kennedy's earlier plays and her autobiography *People who Led to my Plays* ruminate on experiences with racism, Kennedy was shocked to confront this type of racism and injustice. She describes the incident thus, "It happened in my husband's front yard ...I think of all those years he worked to buy this white house with yellow shutters and a forest behind it. It was his dream house, but somehow I realized that we were living in kind of a dream world. It was a shock for this to happen to my son, a real shock" (Hartigan 113).

Motherhood 2000 is one of three pieces Kennedy penned related to the incident. In the first, "A Letter to My Students on My Sixty-First Birthday by Suzanne Alexander," Kennedy utilizes her literary doppelganger Suzanne Alexander to chronicle her anxieties during the ordeal: The "prose piece dramatically intersperses memory narrative with documents, letters, and depositions" (Sollors xiv). The second piece, *Motherhood 2000*, appeared as part of a 1994 festival of new plays produced at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. According to dramaturge Janice Paran, the festival was aimed towards expressing the "anxieties that grip us on this waning century of progress" (Kolin 168). The festival included short plays with a run-time of ten to thirty minutes, and the producer hoped that the plays would spur longer productions. The third piece, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, which won an OBIE in 1996, was co-written with Kennedy's son, Adam Kennedy, and focuses on the trial. This play intersects with the play-within-a-play

device Kennedy employs in *Motherhood 2000*: an acting troupe is mounting a production of *Hamlet* during the same period that the trial is underway.

For Kennedy, the incident seems to connect to *Hamlet*. The passion play-within-the-play that MOTHER/WRITER uses as a cover for revenge represents an allusion to the 1958 film version directed by and starring Sir Laurence Olivier. In this instance, Kennedy references Olivier's *Hamlet* and stands in opposition to it. Olivier's cinematic version of *Hamlet* features the addition to Shakespeare's prologue: "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind." Olivier's portrayal of Hamlet emphasizes the psychological aspects of the character and his indecision as he eventually avenges his father's murder. In Kennedy's case, the protagonists from the earlier plays are the ones in social and psychological limbo; however, in *Motherhood 2000*, MOTHER/WRITER decisively avenges her son's marginalization in an act of revenge which plays on Hamlet's lines, "the play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (II, ii, 604-605).

Structured in a fashion that is more linear than most of Kennedy's plays, *Motherhood 2000* begins with a monologue that sets the stage and provides the exposition before fading into a passion play. The audience learns from the dense, free-verse monologue delivered by MOTHER/WRITER that her son was brutalized, and falsely arrested by a police officer, and then prosecuted; however, the charges were dismissed at trial. Several years later, MOTHER/WRITER discovers that those involved in the violence and subsequent prosecution have formed an acting company known as the Oliviers, which perform the passion of Christ regularly. The troupe consists of RICHARD FOX, the police officer who beat MOTHER/WRITER's son, and some of the other actors who participated in the incident, including the former district attorney, the county manager, the police chief, and two police

officers with some involvement in the case. Ironically, RICHARD FOX portrays Jesus. MOTHER/WRITER volunteers with the company, and in time, they allow her to rewrite some of the script. She eventually joins the company on stage, portraying the role of a guard assigned to accompany Christ. At this point, the monologue fades into the passion play, and MOTHER/WRITER takes her revenge during the performance—striking RICHARD FOX in the head with a hammer.

A warped “Jesus” character and a multi-moniker main character are some of the elements in *Motherhood 2000* that echo Kennedy’s earliest plays, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*. However, if the earlier plays illustrate the torturous struggle of young protagonists trying to assimilate and create an identity in a world filled with racism, *Motherhood 2000* depicts the mental processing of a person grounded in her identity. Despite the dual moniker, MOTHER/WRITER is neither fractured like SARAH from *Funnyhouse of a Negro* nor is she contradicted like SHE WHO IS CLARA WHO IS THE VIRGIN MARY WHO IS THE BASTARD WHO IS THE OWL from *The Owl Answers*. In her dual role as MOTHER/WRITER, the protagonist in *Motherhood 2000* finds affirmation in her identity. She directs her anger towards those who perpetuate marginalization—instead of internalizing their attitudes and accepting the blame. What is more, she represents a shift from the mothers in the earlier plays and a shift from social constructs regarding black motherhood.

The mother figures in these early plays perpetuate the status quo. These mothers serve as negating voices that reinforce marginalizing systems—behavior which typifies the tragic mulatto and mammy stereotypes. Patrica Hill Collins identifies some of the enduring stereotypes of black women that serve to perpetuate systems of oppression. In *Black*

Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. The mammy serves as one of those images:

[She is] the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White "family," the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She has generally accepted her subordination. (72-3)

Collins maintains that the mammy not only accepts her marginalized role, but the mammy also functions as teacher, training her offspring to learn and accept their place outside the margins:

The mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Regarding racial oppression, controlling images like the mammy aim to influence Black maternal behavior. As the members of the African-American families who are most familiar with the skills needed for Black accommodation, Black mothers are encouraged to transmit to their own children the deference behavior that many are forced to exhibit in their mammified jobs. By teaching Black children their assigned place in White

power structures, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetrating racial oppression. (73)

MOTHER/WRITER steps away from this image. She is in no mood to sacrifice her child to this system nor is she willing to perpetuate the system. She sees the system for what it is—negating. However, given the enduring nature of the self-sacrificing mammy stereotype, one could see how the Oliviers might mistake MOTHER/WRITER as a potential caretaker for their band of actors. The small power that they eventually grant her, by virtue of their misplaced trust and general belief that she is benevolent, comes back to haunt them.

MOTHER/WRITER represents a shift in attitude as well as roles. She is the mother that SARAH and SHE WHO IS CLARA needs. While SARAH's mother does not occupy the stage in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, the mother's presence casts as much of a shadow over SARAH as the father. Her mother contributes to SARAH's self-negating attitudes. This undermining attitude is evident when SARAH, speaking as the MAN, who is one of her selves, describes the mother:

And in my sleep I had been visited by my bald crazy mother who comes to me crying, calling me to her bedside. She lies on the bed watching the strands of her own hair fall out. Her hair fell out after she married and she spent her days lying on the bed watching the strands fall from her scalp, covering the bedspread until she was bald and admitted to the hospital. Black man, black man, my mother says, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. She comes to me, her bald skull shining. Black diseases, Sarah, she says. Black diseases. I run. She follows me, her bald skull shining. That is the beginning. (18)

In this passage, it is apparent that the mother does not represent an affirming presence. She does not serve as a counterweight against societal attitudes that negate her daughter nor does she try to protect her. By contrast, MOTHER/WRITER looks for those who reject her son. She intends to end the marginalization:

I had wanted to find him. I wanted to find his house somewhere in the suburbs of Virginia, but the lawyers concealed any information about Fox from me.

“You’re behaving like a mother,” the lawyer said. “You could hurt your son’s case. Don’t interfere” (229).

Here, MOTHER/WRITER turns her anger towards those threatening her son. Her approach serves as a shift in attitude because she protects her son from marginalization instead of feeding the system. As the lawyer aptly states, she behaves like a mother.

While MOTHER/WRITER in *Motherhood 2000* bears a multifaceted-moniker like the mother figure in *The Owl Answers* and they both assume similar roles as guards, they stand in opposition to each other. The BASTARD’S BLACK MOTHER WHO IS THE REVEREND’S WIFE WHO IS ANNE BOLEYN acts as the guard in the first scene and blocks SHE WHO IS CLARA from entering the chapel because of her race. She joins the other guards who question, “why is it you are a Negro if you are his ancestor? Keep her locked there” (31). In neither capacity as the BASTARD’S BLACK MOTHER nor as the adoptive mother, REVEREND’S WIFE, does the mother affirm SHE WHO IS CLARA. Rather, this mother acts as a mammy figure and enforces the status quo. In fact, early in the play, the BASTARD’S BLACK MOTHER segment of the character denies the ANNE BOLEYN dimension of herself, stating, “Clara, I am not Anne. I am the Bastard’s Black

Mother, who cooked for somebody” (32). She eventually stabs herself to show SHE WHO IS CLARA “the way to St. Paul’s Chapel,” an act which symbolizes the mother’s belief that both she and SHE WHO IS CLARA are not welcome in the same social circle—or the same faith for that matter—as GODDAM FATHER WHO IS THE RICHEST WHITE MAN IN THE TOWN WHO IS THE DEAD WHITE FATHER WHO IS REVEREND PASSMORE during their lifetime (41). By comparison, WRITER/MOTHER crosses paths with RICHARD FOX, a man whom she describes as still “agonizing” her after nine years because of an incident that degraded and horrified her, yet while he played a prominent actor in this episode of her life, she did not warrant his recognition (231). MOTHER/ WRITER states, “I decided to join their company. I told them I had once been a playwright and had taught at Harvard. I was relieved to see they did not remember my name from my son’s case” (231). While MOTHER/WRITER acts as caretaker to her son, she is definitely a professional. The band of actors allows her to join their company, seeing her profession as an asset to be exploited for their own ends, without acknowledging her as a person, just as the GODDAM FATHER exploits the BASTARD’S BLACK MOTHER without acknowledging their child. While SHE WHO IS CLARA longs for recognition, MOTHER/WRITER finds the fact that she is not worthy of notice by the band of actors to be an asset as she pursues revenge.

The passion play culminates in an act of revenge that releases the anger that MOTHER/WRITER understandably feels towards this particular band of actors, despite the fact that they cloak themselves in religion. Whereas the protagonists of the early plays try to accommodate nonsensical constructs, MOTHER/WRITER confronts and challenges them. The acting troupe symbolizes the establishment that works to marginalize the protagonist and her progeny. In the monologue, MOTHER/WRITER reports, “Members of The Oliviers

were all white. They seemed protected by the soldier costumes they wore. My neighbor, a casting director, Judy, said she thought The Olivers were one of the groups who traveled from national monument to monument trying to find asylum” (231). This description suggests that these actors take refuge in a history/heritage that privileges them. If the troupe is symbolic, then their casting decisions amplify this symbolism. “The man I had thought of constantly since 1991 was playing Christ,” laments MOTHER/WRITER (229). This casting echoes the hypocrisy in many social constructs. Fox is cast in the role of Chris; however, he is the one in need of forgiveness, and he is the one in need of salvation.

MOTHER/WRITER assumes the role of a guard, just like the mother in *The Owl Answers*. However, she does not use her position to bar her offspring from a chapel or from his father. In her capacity as guard, the MOTHER/WRITER teases the irony of the situation. With the final lines of the reenactment of the passion of Christ, MOTHER/WRITER rewrites more than the play. She de/reconstructs the false reality:

WRITER. I spoke my lines coughing, wheezing . . . then found my place directly before Fox and struck him in the head with a hammer.

(She does)

(He falls). (233)

The play ends with this image. The MOTHER/WRITER takes her place in front of RICHARD FOX, rather than below him or in the margins, and holds up a mirror to his behavior. Her act of vengeance mimics Fox’s decision to take the law into his own hands and beat someone he has falsely accused. MOTHER/WRITER’s method of execution is important. She could have gone through with the crucifixion or perhaps strangled FOX or shot him. However, crucifying him would only underscore his connection to Christ, and

Kennedy makes the point that the WRITER strikes FOX—not JESUS in the head, and shatters the illusion he creates. In this instance, the protagonist reconstructs the story to deconstruct the false constructs.

MOTHER/WRITER recognizes her power as a creator. She defiantly rejects her marginalization and affirms herself by exercising her power to rewrite false constructs as well as her response to them. MOTHER/WRITER literally attacks the false god instead of being led astray like the prior protagonists, and she protects her beloved son. Rather than repress her feelings, she comes to understand them, and she releases her anger. In her autobiography *People who Led to my Plays*, Kennedy includes her views on religion from her childhood. Of Jesus she says, “He could endure, and as a ‘Negro’ I needed that quality” (14). This seemingly passive view reflects the approach to faith taken by the earlier protagonists. SARAH and SHE WHO IS CLARA internalize the negative stereotypes to the point that their spiritual impulses are corrupted. Instead of finding affirmation and redemption in JESUS, they find death in the midst of distortion and demonstrate the inability of spirituality to heal a psyche that understands and accepts its own marginalization. Still, within her autobiography, Kennedy also includes a passage on the minister stating that, “He spoke the sermon in a way that said there was rage inside religion” (14). Rather than repress her anger and descend into madness, MOTHER/WRITER gets mad. She inflicts pain as opposed to accepting painful circumstances. Rather than simply “enduring” her problems, she arms herself with her pen and opposes those constructs which work to marginalize her, “and by opposing, end[s] them?” (*Hamlet* III, I, 60)

CONCLUSION

“I continued to read Psalms often to quell the fear I felt at seeing the strange, fragmented thoughts that poured from my diaries, the violent imagery. Why so violent? I didn’t understand. I had many black moods. And I would cry for no apparent reason” (Kennedy, *People* 89). Award-winning playwright Adrienne Kennedy used biblical scripture in her writing to cope with the images that disturbed her. Her work explores the psyche of socially marginalized characters with brutal honesty, thus incorporating material that might disturb audience members as much as it disturbed Kennedy. In the midst of marginalization and dehumanization, the protagonists in her early plays *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), *The Owl Answers* (1965), *A Rat’s Mass* (1966), and *A Lesson in a Dead Language* (1966) turn to religion. Kennedy revisits these themes in *Motherhood 2000* (1994). When examined together, these plays relate a cohesive spiritual journey through depression and repression to a candid encounter between the impulse towards vengeance and Christian ideology grounded in the concepts of love and forgiveness.

While Kennedy’s plays might make some uncomfortable, her works reflect her experience as a person of color, born in 1931, growing up and living during the twentieth century. Some may feel that negative attitudes towards people of color have changed significantly or that instances of racism are isolated to fringe elements; however, this progress neither negates the past nor erases the psychological and spiritual residue that stems from racial oppression. Kennedy’s willingness to confront these unsettling remnants makes her work revolutionary. Much of what she deals with are social constructs, and as a creator, she asserts her power to alter those constructions. As she stated in an interview, “Obviously

there was always great confusion in my own mind of where I belonged, if anywhere. It's not such a preoccupation now since I see myself as a writer. I don't worry about the rest of it anymore" (Kennedy and Lehman 46).

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