

Study Guide for Court Theatre's 2007 production of
Pearl Cleage's
FLYIN' WEST

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(Compiled by Ben Calvert, production dramaturg)



"...some things gotta be said out loud to keep the life in 'em."

Miss Leah in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*

SUMMARY – general plot summary of *Flyin' West*

Characters

Sophie – oldest sister of Fannie and Minnie, born into slavery

Miss Leah – Sophie's elderly neighbor, born into slavery

Fannie – middle sister of Sophie and Minnie, born into slavery

Wil – neighbor and friend of Sophie, Fannie, and Miss Leah; born into slavery

Minnie – youngest sister of Sophie and Fannie

Frank – son of a white slave-owner father and black slave mother

Summary

Act I

The play opens as Sophie returns from town running errands to prepare for her sister Minnie's arrival from London. Miss Leah, an older neighbor of the sisters, has been living with Sophie and Fannie, who both are secretly hoping she will stay with them through the notoriously long and hard winter. Fannie enters with Wil Parrish, a 'good man and a good neighbor' as Miss Leah calls him. Miss Leah and Sophie tease Fannie about her and Wil 'dancing around each other' instead of just getting married.

At the train station, the sisters receive Minnie, their younger sister, and Frank Charles, her husband. Things get off to a rough start, as Frank begins to make sexist remarks regarding Minnie which only adds to Sophie's distrust of Frank. Back at the sisters' home, Minnie is trying to cover up a large bruise on her face which Fannie and Miss Leah notice. Minnie tells them there's nothing to worry about, that it was an accident, and not to pay any attention to it – the women know better but allow it to pass.

The next morning Minnie gets her hair braided by Miss Leah, only to receive a harsh reprimand from Frank as he is leaving to go to town for some business with visiting white men interested in buying land from original settlers. Later that evening he hasn't returned home, and Minnie grows worried. When he finally returns drunk, he tells Minnie that he has lost all of their money by gambling with some white men, and blames his loss on her. He pushes Minnie to the ground as Sophie and Fannie enter the commotion, Minnie pleads with Sophie not to shoot Frank because she is pregnant.

Act II

Frank is seen pacing outside the house while Sophie and Fannie talk about what has happened. Miss Leah is tending to Minnie, prescribing tea to comfort her and her unborn baby. Frank apologizes to Minnie, and we learn that it has been a

hard time for Frank since his father passed away and there is some misunderstanding regarding his inheritance. Wise Miss Leah says that if a man will hit a woman once, he will hit her again.

Wil Parrish delivers a telegram from Frank's lawyer: Frank is denied any money from his father's estate. Minnie tries to comfort him, but does not get too far as Frank beats her into unconsciousness, but not before making her sign the deed of her share of the land she and her sisters own over to him. Frank goes into town to speak with the white men he had been gambling with about selling the land and soon Fannie and Miss Leah discover Minnie in very bad shape and barely able to stand.

Wil patrols the land around the house while Sophie goes to Miss Leah's house to get some healing herbs for Minnie. Sophie is determined to protect her family by killing Frank but Miss Leah lectures her that 'shooting somebody is a messy business' and that there are other ways people just happen to die. She tells a story about a slave friend of hers from the old days, Ella, and how she knew a lot about herbs and an apple pie she made to protect her from a cruel overseer on the slave plantation. Miss Leah begins making an apple pie for Frank from her memory of Ella's recipe.

Frank returns to the house only to find Fannie ready to discuss business with him – she tells him that she and Sophie are prepared to buy back Minnie's share of the land, but that before they get down to business he should have a piece of apple pie. The play ends in spring, as the sisters are headed out to a town dance, having made it through another winter and comforted that they have been able to maintain their freedom and continue their legacy of sisterhood.

GLOSSARY – some terms and historical references in *Flyin’ West*

Terms

“I don’t outright pass. I let people draw their own conclusions.” Frank’s line about passing is a major theme of the time period. ‘Passing’ refers to a lightness of skin tone that allowed many African-Americans to ‘pass’ as white. Beyond passing as white, lighter skin tone often carried social standing within groups of African-Americans, and one of Frank’s lines (“You ever see a group of colored people who didn’t put the lightest one in charge”) emphasizes this point made as he directs it towards Sophie.

“Min tells me you’re a mulatto... Oh, excuse me! I didn’t mean to be so personal.” Mulatto is a now dated term used to describe people with one black parent and one white parent. The term carries a lot of weight in this context, illustrating the struggle between Frank, who is more concerned with his white heritage, and Sophie, who is concerned more with her black heritage. As is the case with both characters in the play, their fathers were white slave-owners who more or less forced their slave mothers to bare children of mixed racial identities.

“Every other wagon pull in here nowadays got a bunch of colored women on it call themselves homesteadin’ and can’t even make a decent cup of coffee, much less bring a crop in!” Homesteading, referenced in Miss Leah’s line, was the act of cultivating land under the Homestead Act which enabled land in western states to be purchased for a considerably low price, in the hopes that it would encourage western expansion in the United States, and aide in making the Union side larger in the Civil War. Work was often more difficult than early homesteaders had planned for.

“They had just had a lynching the week before we got there. Just my luck!” Frank’s line about a lynching in New Orleans illustrates the fear Ida B. Wells, a bold African-American woman journalist, had taken a crusade against. Lynchings ranged from mobs of ten to sometimes hundreds of white men exacting ‘mob-justice’ against a citizen – usually African-American – when a local courtroom’s verdict disagreed with their racist ‘gut instincts’.

“I’ll get Wil Parrish to teach me Spanish and move us all to Mexico!” Many escaped slaves used to flee to Mexico, where most often times they were greeted with open arms, if not indifference towards their race. Slaves often escaped and lived peacefully with non-white neighbors, as Wil Parrish’s character alludes to having lived with Seminole Indians and Mexicans.

THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM by Ben Calvert, production dramaturg

The century leading up to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s is overflowing with rich personal histories of the African-American experience. Yet these untold stories – tucked away in libraries, skipped over in history classes, or too generalized in textbooks – remain largely unknown to most Americans. Our childhoods were filled with iconic tales of white heroes and outlaws like Annie Oakley, Daniel Boone, and Buffalo Bill. Looking back there seems no room for a cattle rustler like Isom Dart or “Stagecoach Mary” Fields, the only African-American woman to drive a U.S. Mail route. Even still the perspectives of the true pioneers, ordinary men and women searching for freedom, go overlooked.

It is the spirit and struggle of these men and women living against the backdrop of national and international upheaval that allows us to begin to get a sense of our real American history. Whether it is a story about a family on the south side of Chicago buying their first home, as in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*; a man trying to make life better for the next generation in August Wilson’s *Fences*; or newly freed slaves heading West to escape race violence in Pearl Cleage’s *Flyin’ West*; hearing these stories puts a sharper focus on our understanding of the past and how these same issues reflect upon our collective present.

Ms. Cleage sets *Flyin’ West* in 1898, more than twenty years after Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, an African-American preacher working as an undertaker in Nashville, Tennessee, started hearing the troubles of black men and women who did not have a place to live because they could not afford the rent demanded by the white men they worked for, their former slave-owners. The practice of the new sharecropping system quickly reverted into the familiar pattern the abolishment of slavery had tried to dispatch.

Despite amendments to the Bill of Rights officially ending slavery and declaring that all citizens of the United States should be treated equally, ex-Confederate states soon found ways to introduce what would be known as the “Jim Crow Laws” legalizing the concept of “separate but equal.” Racial tensions were on the rise and mob riots against black men and women became more frequent. Ida B. Wells, African American activist and journalist, was writing about lynchings, directing attention to the way the southern white man’s oppression was taking shape: “Brave men do not gather by the thousands to torture and murder a single individual, so gagged and bound he cannot make even feeble resistance or defense.”

“Pap” Singleton began touring churches and advocating emigration West to freedom and new opportunity. Sojourner Truth, former slave and legendary women’s rights activist, assisted by calling it “the greatest movement of all time” and giving the charge:

“The word it has been spoken;
The message has been sent:
The prison doors have opened,
and out the prisoners went,
To join the sable army of African descent,
for God is marching on.”

The Great Exodus West was on and because of the passage of the Homestead Act of 1862, land was available to anyone who could afford the \$18 filing fee. With their lives endangered by the increasing violence in the South, the necessity for Exodus was too great and the prospects were too good to pass up. Citizens were not the only ones who jumped at the chance for this essentially “free land” (although taken from Native Americans by the United States Government). Companies were formed to locate prime areas for settlement and soon publicity appeared promising African Americans a place to establish all-black towns and self-government.

The “Nicodemus Town Company” formed in 1877 by the Reverend W. H. Smith, a black minister, and W. R. Hill, a white land developer, and five other black men, named the prospected Kansas town after a well-known slave legend familiar to many of the new pioneers in the hope that it would draw larger groups to their business venture. It did, and in 1879 the first group of “Exodusters,” as they would be called, reached Nicodemus only to realize their paradise was marked by clouds of chimney smoke coming out of the ground: lack of stone for building had forced residents to live in dugouts. The plentiful game that had been promised was now scarce with the quickly approaching winter. Tools for building homes were few, and the closest supply stores were thirty miles away. Most of the pioneers turned back as soon as they arrived. But some of them, mostly small groups of single women, stayed and forged ahead under extremely harsh conditions with little knowledge of the prairie environment or the hard work it would take to turn empty fields into self-sustaining homesteads.

Starvation and disease marked the early years of Nicodemus, but the townsfolk persevered and by the 1880s the town was bustling, boasting two newspapers, a post office, three general stores, and three churches. In hopes of promoting economic growth, the townsfolk pooled money to buy influence with the railroad company in an attempt to establish a train station. The railroad decided to pass through another town, leaving Nicodemus off the main route and struggling for economic survival.

Today, Nicodemus is the only remaining western town settled by African Americans. At its peak the town boasted a population of close to 800. At present there are 27 permanent residents, but yearly celebrations bring former residents back to unite with family and remember their town’s all too unique heritage and the resolve it took for their founding fathers and mothers to piece together a vision of paradise.

PEARL CLEAGE – a brief biography
(from <http://www.thehistorymakers.com>)

Writer, playwright, poet, essayist, and journalist Pearl Michelle Cleage was born on December 7, 1948 in Springfield, Massachusetts. Cleage is the youngest daughter of Doris Graham and Albert B. Cleage Jr., the founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna. After graduating from the Detroit public schools in 1966, Cleage enrolled at Howard University, where she studied playwriting. In 1969, she moved to Atlanta and enrolled at Spelman College, married Michael Lomax and became a mother. She graduated from Spelman College in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in drama.

Cleage has become accomplished in all aspects of her career. As a writer, she has written three novels: *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (Avon Books, 1997), which was an Oprah's Book club selection, a *New York Times* bestseller, and a BCALA Literary Award Winner, *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* (Morrow/Avon, 2001), and *Some Things I Never Thought I'd Do*, which was published in 2003. As an essayist, many of her essays and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Essence*, *Ms.*, *Vibe*, *Rap Pages*, and many other publications. Examples of these essays include *Mad at Miles* and *Good Brother Blues*. Cleage has written over a dozen plays, some of which include *Flyin' West*, *Bourbon at the Border*, and *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, which returned to Atlanta as part of the 1996 Cultural Olympiad in conjunction with the 1996 Olympic Games. In addition to her writing she has been an activist all her life. Starting at her father's church, The Shrine of the Black Madonna, Cleage has been involved in the Pan-Africanist Movement, Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement. She has also been a pioneer in grassroots and community theater.

Cleage is the mother of one daughter, Deignan, the grandmother of one grandson, Michael, and one granddaughter, Chloe Pearl. She is married to Zaron W. Burnett, a writer with whom she frequently collaborates.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Before the performance:

"The purpose of my writing, often, is to expose the point where racism and sexism meet." – Playwright Pearl Cleage in her collection of essays *Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot*.

- What have been your experiences with racism?
- What are some contemporary examples of daily life where racism affects you or someone you know?
- What have been your experiences with sexism? Have you ever been treated differently because of your gender?
- What are some roles that are imposed on you? Are there any that you impose on yourself?
- For example, discuss the following scenarios: a man opens a door for a woman; a woman opens a door for a man; a white man opens a door for a black woman; a black woman opens the door for a white woman. Discuss the simple act of opening a door for someone else and the issues of racism and sexism that might come up.

After the performance:

- How did the play make you feel?
- Did you find yourself identifying with any particular character? Why?
- What character do you least admire?
- What character's journey meant the most to you, and why do you think that is?