

Huntington Theater curriculum guide - Synopsis

The play opens with thirty-six year-old King Heldey II entering the yard of the house he is sharing with his mother, Ruby, and his wife, Tonya. He takes a packet of seeds from his pocket and begins to plant them in the yard. Ruby enters, ascertains his intention to grow flowers for Tonya, and tells him that the ground is too rocky and the soil too poor to sustain life. King adamantly asserts that “dirt is dirt! A seed supposed to grow in dirt!” Ruby, changing the subject, asks him what he and his friend Mister have been doing and soon accuses him of stealing the refrigerators he says the two men are selling. King denies stealing and states simply that he doesn’t know where the man who hired him received the appliances he is providing for King and Mister to sell. Ruby worries that the police will soon arrest her son, and declares that “they know everything.” King refutes her statement with examples of unsolved crimes in the neighborhood. When King presses her on her plans to move, Ruby responds that she’s waiting for insurance money due her following the death of Louise, her recently deceased Aunt, who raised King.

Mister stops by on his way to work with news about a black cat that has apparently been staking out a hole in a wall for two solid days. King replies that the cat belongs to the neighborhood fortune teller, Aunt Ester. After suffering another of Ruby’s warnings about their illegal activities, King tells Mister of his intention to get Tonya’s portrait taken at Sears for the anniversary. Mister replies with a remembrance of having his mug shot taken by the police, and that in turn reminds him of a dream in which he had a halo around his head and therefore was respected by everyone. Ruby assures Mister that he certainly has no halo around his head in reality and warns that believing in such things will land him in Mayview, a psychiatric hospital. Mister tells King he has heard that Pernell’s cousin is back in town badmouthing King for having killed Pernell and never giving him a chance at life. King murdered Pernell in retribution for his slicing King’s face open with a razor, from which King received a vicious scar. King dismisses the danger and berates Pernell as stupid, implying that his cousin is stupid, too.

Tonya enters, dressed for her photograph sitting, but complaining that her daughter, Natasha, has taken the red blouse she had intended to wear. Mister compliments her on how nice she looks in the yellow she is now wearing and then remarks how Natasha and her child resemble one another. Frustrated, Tonya says she has sent Natasha to her mother’s, and talks of Natasha’s penchant for quitting things (school, hair dressing school).

Ruby tells Tonya she has received a letter from Elmore, her ex-boyfriend, in which he states that he has changed, that he is “a new man,” and that he is coming to see her. Ruby wishes that Elmore would stay away, proclaiming his inability to change and warning King against gambling with him if he arrives. She says that Elmore brings trouble with him, leaves it, and walks away “smelling sweet.

Ruby next asks Mister why she hasn't seen his wife, Deanna, for a while, to which Mister replies that she has left him because she wanted more than he could provide. The conversation turns to refrigerators again and Ruby mentions her desire for a new one. King callously tells her she can have one for two hundred dollars, and when Tonya asks why he won't give his mother one, he replies that "this is business. If everybody did business that way they'd be broke." Mister, King, and Tonya leave for their respective destinations.

As Ruby smoothes the dirt over the seeds that King had planted, Stool Pigeon enters from his house next door. Ruby tells him to leave and accuses him of killing Floyd Barton, a blues musician who was murdered in 1948. Stool Pigeon denounces her as a liar by quoting a biblical passage and leaves the yard as Ruby returns to tending the seeds.

Act I, Scene 2: Two days later, Mister enters the yard as King is watering his seeds and tells him that the cat is still in the same place, evidently waiting for the rat she chased into the hole to come out. King directs Mister's attention to the first sprouts of green coming up from his seeds and inquires as to Mister's refrigerator sales. Mister complains that selling TVs would be easier and asks King if he can dip into their pot, the stash of money they have put aside toward the purchase of a video business, to buy some furniture. King replies that he also would like to have some money, for rent and phone bills, and especially for baby supplies, as Tonya is pregnant, but insists that they have to leave the money where it is, and keep adding to it, or they will never realize their dream. King brings up the idea that Mister had proposed earlier of burglarizing a local jewelry store, and tells Mister that he's interested after all.

When Mister gripes about Deanna's mother threatening him, King tells him that that's what mothers are supposed to do: look out for their kids. As an example he speaks of a mother of Bryn Mawr Road who has a .9 millimeter gun and is looking for the drive-by killer of her son. King's thoughts turn to Neesi, his ex-girlfriend, who turned state's evidence against him. She later died in a traffic accident while King was serving prison time for Pernell's murder. After King avers that he doesn't blame Neesi for his incarceration, Stool Pigeon arrives, carrying a bundle of newspapers and attributing a headline describing a house collapsing to an act of God. Responding to King's inquiry about why he goes around removing the lids from his neighbors' garbage cans, Stool Pigeon says he does it to allow dogs to get food. Stool Pigeon and Ruby argue over the mass of newspapers cluttering his house. Finally, Stool Pigeon goes into his house, uttering an oft-heard refrain, "I ain't studying you woman. I don't want you," contradicting the past when he did indeed long for Ruby's love.

King and Ruby are now interrupted by the arrival of Elmore, passing through on his way to Cleveland, looking for a crap game and a place to sleep. Learning that King is selling refrigerators, Elmore sees an opportunity to make some money and

negotiates a deal for a percentage of every unit he sells. Elmore then sees Stool Pigeon sitting on his steps. When King greets him as “Stool Pigeon,” the older man reacts strongly, denies the appellation and identifies himself as “Canewell.” After Elmore tells a cautionary tale illustrating the relative value and fleeting nature of money, Stool Pigeon likens him to the Buffalo Soldier who needed to be “a bad motherfucker” in order to survive. He is interrupted as Tonya, visibly upset, storms in. When King learns that Tonya has attempted to obtain an abortion, he voices his anger over the decision, and the two debate the merits of having the child. Tonya argues against King’s ability to live within the law, cites Natasha’s irresponsibility, and proclaims her reluctance to bring another child into a society that doesn’t treat poor black people with respect. Declaring “I ain’t having this baby...and I ain’t got to explain it to nobody,” she runs into the house. As King turns to leave the yard, Ruby stops him and warns him that he’s going to lose Tonya if he isn’t careful.

Act I, Scene 3: The next morning, Ruby and Elmore are talking about their shared past and catching up on each other’s lives apart. Elmore professes that he has always loved Ruby, but says that he couldn’t handle her “fire;” that being with her he was “starting to get trapped in a burning room.” The conversation turns to Leroy, a long-ago boyfriend of Ruby, for whose murder Elmore served jail time. Ruby concedes that she felt guilty for loving Elmore after he killed Leroy, and admits to wishing she had killed Elmore to assuage her guilt. At this, Elmore alludes to a disease that his doctor says is killing him by degrees and then asks Ruby if she has ever told King that Hedley, the man for whom King is named, wasn’t his father. Ruby replies negatively and warns that King would likely kill Elmore if he ever told him that. She goes on to chastise Elmore for walking out on her years ago even after they had gotten a marriage license, and tells him of her mother’s death, Louise’s leukemia, King’s incarceration, and how she finally gave up singing with a band. Elmore once again proposes marriage but Ruby rebuffs his advance, instead demanding the present he has said he has brought for her. Elmore goes to get the gift.

Mister stops by looking for King, who has gone to Sears to pick up Tonya’s pictures. Mister and Ruby reminisce briefly about Mister’s father, a drummer named Red Carter, who introduced Ruby to the bandleader with whom she sang in East St. Louis, Walter Kelly.

When Elmore returns with his gift, an inexpensive piece of costume jewelry, Ruby responds delightedly. He promises her a new dress to accompany the necklace and she goes back in the house to fix breakfast, leaving Mister and Elmore alone in the yard. Elmore offers to sell Mister a derringer for seventy-five dollars and, after negotiating and test-firing the gun, parts with it for fifty-five.

King returns. He expresses frustration that, as a black male, it is more difficult to get a decent job and succeed in the system than to steal and get what you need for yourself and your family. Claiming to have no regrets for the events of his life, he

describes his rationale for killing Pernell: “The nigger deserve to die. He cut my face. Your blood supposed to stay in your body.” King’s tale of the declaration of the guilty verdict and his subsequent actions reminds Mister of an incident from third grade. King then relates a story about how a teacher labeled him unruly, a term which was to stick with him throughout his school years. He declares his honor and dignity come from within; he was born with them, he says, and he will let nobody take them from him.

Act I, Scene 4: As Ruby and King argue over financial matters, Mister enters with the news that the local conjure woman, Aunt Ester, has died. Ruby borrows twenty dollars from Mister to buy flowers for Aunt Ester and Stool Pigeon enters with yet another stack of newspapers, hollering that God is responsible for Aunt Ester’s death and is getting ready for the second coming of the Messiah. Hearing the commotion, Elmore comes from the house as the two women depart for work and the florist respectively.

Elmore tells King he has a buyer for a refrigerator and, after dickering over the price, pays and tells King to deliver one to Ruby. He has bought it as a gift. After a discussion comparing the merits of different types of guns, Elmore and King each proclaim themselves gunfighters, the type of men who command fear and respect. Elmore rhapsodizes on his unique style and segues into the rules by which a man must live: “You can’t let nobody take nothing from you” and “Push back.” He continues to impart wisdom developed through years of hard living—characterizing honor, describing a man’s need for woman, defining love, and ultimately designating himself as the center of a circle wherein he controls the destiny of all those who enter. King denies his assertion and, outraged that Elmore has inadvertently stepped on his new-flowering seeds, attempts to bury himself in the dirt—replanting himself in hopes of a new beginning.

Act II, Scene 1: Tonya comes out of the house to find Stool Pigeon burying Aunt Ester’s black cat next to King’s flowers and upbraids him for not calling the city to dispose of it. Stool Pigeon explains to an unbelieving Tonya that if he sprinkles some blood on the grave the cat may come back in seven days if she hasn’t used up her nine lives.

King enters with a roll of barbed wire, determined to protect his seeds. Seeing the cat’s grave, he draws a line in the dirt, effectively setting a boundary that he will not allow others to cross. King, demanding to be left alone, dismisses Tonya, who goes into the house with Ruby.

Stool Pigeon presents King with a machete, telling him that it is the weapon Hedley, the self-proclaimed “Conquering Lion of Judea,” used to kill Floyd Barton in 1948. As he describes seeing Floyd ascend to heaven carried by angels dressed in black it becomes apparent that this event marked a turning point in Stool Pigeon’s life. He tells King that Ruby pinned the name Stool Pigeon on him for turning on Hedley after Floyd’s murder, and that somehow it stuck, but he calls himself a Truth Sayer. By giving the machete to Hedley’s son, he says, “me

and Hedley come full circle...I give it to you and we can close the book on the chapter.” Stool Pigeon expounds on God and, his duty done, goes back into his house.

King unwraps the rusty machete as Mister enters with a pillowcase; “about the only thing” Deanna has left him. King notices Mister’s derringer and the two men, after a brief comparison of the relative “badness” of Billy the Kid and Jesse James, turn to the task of the impending robbery of the jewelry store. The men swagger from the yard, men with a dangerous job to do.

Act II, Scene 2: Stool Pigeon enters the yard from his house carrying a paper bag. He has a bandage above his left eye, owing to an attack by me who have robbed him of sixty-three dollars and burned his newspapers. The paper bag contains ashes of his papers, which he sprinkles over the cat’s grave. As he approaches the grave, King and Mister run into the yard, King clutching the pillowcase holding the robbery money under his coat. The men wait for Stool Pigeon to go home and then count their stolen money. Disappointed in their relatively small take, they briefly argue about why they didn’t force the proprietor to open his safe.

Elmore comes in grumbling about the dearth of serious gamblers in town. He has just won two hundred dollars but complains that “nobody down there got any money.” Mister leaves and Elmore is left alone with King. The two men each relate the stories of the murders they have committed and it becomes clear how these acts of violence have irrevocably changes their lives and their perspectives on honor.

As Elmore sees Ruby enter, he states his intention to take her out to a nightclub, promising first to buy her a new dress, and he goes in to change his clothes. At the same time, Tonya is on her way out to work and King stops her, handing her a thousand dollars. Surmising that King has stolen the money, Tonya refuses to accept it and once again warns him that she doesn’t want her child to grow up not knowing his father because he’s in jail. King lies and tells her he obtained the money legally, “the best way I can.” Disbelieving, Tonya goes off to work.

King, Elmore, and Mister wheel Ruby’s new refrigerator into the yard. Delighted, Ruby inspects the appliance thoroughly as Elmore promises to buy her a new stove and furniture as well. The men leave to make another delivery but promise to carry the refrigerator into the house for Ruby as soon as they can return.

Three hours later, Tonya returns and sees Stool Pigeon ministering over the cat’s grave. He explains that he is making offerings to satisfy God. He tells Tonya that Aunt Ester was taken to the coroner to determine the cause of her longevity, but declares that she died too soon—she was only three hundred and sixty-six years old. After another verbal assault from Ruby, Stool Pigeon places some plastic flowers on the grave and goes back into his house.

Left alone with Tonya, Ruby reveals the nature of her relationship with Hedley and the circumstances of King's birth. Ruby explains how proud Hedley was to hold King as a baby, believing himself to be the father. She tells Tonya that Hedley, though sick and dying, was the first man she ever met who didn't want something from her, except for the baby. All he wanted was to be a father, so Ruby kept her pregnancy (by her dead lover Leroy) secret, giving Hedley his last wish. Ruby goes on to enlighten Tonya about her difficulties with men after King was born. Enumerating various affairs and incidents, including her near marriage to Elmore, she explains that she finally got tired of men.

Mister enters with the news that King has been detained by the police for questioning because he was in a local bar when a shooting took place. Mister describes the murder and the victim just as King returns. King describes his interrogation by the police.

Act II, Scene 3: Mister tells Ruby how he got fired from his job as she notices something in his hand. He shows her the derringer and explains how it's too big to actually be hidden in his hand. When she comments that she needs a gun, citing the battery of a little old woman in the neighborhood, he gives it to her. King returns and complains that his flowers would be bigger had Elmore not stepped on them. Ruby goes in to get him some water for the plants and King tells Mister that the police have apprehended someone for the jewelry store robbery. King explains that he went out to visit Neesi's grave and in so doing, stumbled across Pernell's grave and was surprised to learn from the inscription that the man he had killed was a father. His thoughts turn to Pernell and to a time when, as children, Pernell had spilled a carton of milk on a picture of a lion representing Hedley that King had drawn. He recalls getting so mad at Pernell that it caused him to dislike King ever after.

Stool Pigeon enters claiming that the previous night's strong winds were caused by God. He further states that God had to get Aunt Ester out of the way because He's planning to visit Pittsburgh with fire. Warning the two men to lock their windows and bar their doors, he hurries into his house as Tonya brings water for King's seeds. Mister goes off to a record store to get Aretha Franklin's new album.

King reiterates his desire for Tonya to keep the baby. He reveals his belief that everything should have a chance at life, referring to the flowers, which are growing despite the barren soil and Elmore's stepping on them. He further indicates at least an understanding that Pernell was not, as he had always believes, entirely to blame for the way in which people perceived King. He states, "Pernell stepped on me and I pulled his life out by the root. What does that make me? It don't make me a big man." Tonya says that if she is going to have the baby, King must stop stealing. She is afraid that her child will be fatherless because King will be in jail. When King protests that the world won't give him a break and replies that he can't stop living, that he's just trying to do his job, Tonya retorts

that she doesn't want "everything;" all she wants is King. She states that his job is simply to be around so that the baby will know its daddy. Unable to respond, King turns to tend to his seeds.

Act II, Scene 4: As Mister complains to King about being evicted from his place, Elmore and Ruby enter with the news that they are going to get married. Elmore has gotten her a diamond ring. Tonya arrives in time to hear the news and is elated for Ruby. Ruby presses Elmore to dance with her, and after he acquiesces, they dance a silent waltz around the yard. Stool Pigeon enters, and for the first time in many years, Ruby addresses him by his given name, Canewell. Pleased, he quotes a biblical passage and leaves. Ruby grabs King, attempting to teach him to waltz, but he demurs and Mister steps in for a moment. When he drops out, she continues by herself. In her glory, Ruby alludes to having danced all over the country with Leroy. At the mention of his name, Elmore becomes angered and launches into a long tale, which begins with Leroy cheating him of fifty dollars. Leroy told Elmore that the fifty dollars was included in the fifty percent split of Leroy's winnings to which the men had previously agreed. When Elmore later confronted him publicly about the money, Leroy pulled a gun on him and held it right between his eyes, but ultimately did not pull the trigger. That, says Elmore, was Leroy's mistake—"I'm supposed to be a dead man cause he was supposed to pull the trigger. That's the first thing you learn about carrying a pistol. When you pull it you better use it." Feeling lost and humiliated, Elmore pawned his possessions and bought a Greyhound ticket for Natchez, but before departing he went looking for Leroy. Finding him in a barbershop, he drew his gun and killed him. Shaking and crying, he went home, sat down, and fell asleep. Elmore recalls waking the next day and going about his normal business until a chance visual image made him remember the previous day's events. Ruby then describes the painful experience of identifying Leroy's body and how her feelings for Elmore changed when she learned that he had been the killer. Elmore presses Ruby to tell the rest of the tale and when she is reluctant to do so, Elmore shocks King with the news that Leroy was King's father. King turns away and walks about of the yard.

Act II, Scene 5: No one has been able to find King, although Mister feels that he is probably visiting Neesi's grave again. Mister explains to Tonya and Ruby that Elmore had better get on his way to Cleveland if that's his plan, or it is likely that King will kill him. He says, "Somebody kill your daddy and that seem like blood for blood to me." King enters the yard with Hedley's machete, cleaned and shined, in his hand. He calls for Elmore to come out of the house and when he does, King draws a circle on the ground with the machete saying, "Come on, let's shoot some crap." Elmore accepts the challenge; frightened, Ruby and Tonya attempt to stop the two men, but to no avail. King offers four to one on a twenty dollar bet and as Elmore throws his money down, King accuses him of disrespect for telling him about Leroy, then rolls the dice. King loses the bet. He then places sixty dollars on Elmore's twenty. When Elmore calls attention to the fact that the bet was four to one, King replies, "How much money you got there?"

Eighty dollars. That's how much you supposed to have." Realizing that King is baiting him with the same ploy that Leroy used on him, Elmore bends to roll the dice again. As he does so, King kicks him, knocks him down, pulls his pistol and places it against Elmore's head. Ruby runs into the house as Tonya screams. Mister urges King to shoot Elmore—"Blood for blood." King, however, fires the pistol six times into the ground, stating, "There now...you a dead man twice." As he turns to walk away, an enraged Elmore pulls his pistol, screaming for King to turn around. Ruby rushes from the house with the derringer in her hand imploring Elmore to leave King alone. This causes King to turn and as Ruby tries to shoot around him at Elmore, King grabs her hand and the bullet catches King in the throat. He falls to the ground on the cat's grave. As Tonya lurches for the house to call 911, Ruby sits down on the ground and begins to sing:

“Red sails in the sunset

Way out on the sea

Oh carry my loved one

Bring him home safely to me.”

Mister walks over to comfort Ruby, and Stool Pigeon, who has observed the action from his porch, begins to rail to the heavens, exhorting God's angry will on earth. As the lights fade, the sound of a cat's meow is heard.

(From the Huntington's *King Hedley II* Curriculum Guide)