African American Modernist Lynching Drama

– Reconfiguring Domestic Ideology as Resistance against Racism –

A study of Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel* and Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *A Sunday Morning in the South*

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(24,732 words)
0. Introduction

When one thinks about modernism, the first associations that come to mind are often techniques such as the stream of consciousness and authors such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. This is, however, a too narrow understanding of modernism. A lot is going on in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, also in the socio-historical context of this time. In this polyphonic era of literary production, I will be focusing on one specific movement of modernism: African American modernism, more specifically on African American modernist drama. This movement, on the one hand shares key modernist concerns that Adrienne Johnson Gosselin describes as the use “alienation, primitivism, and experimental form” (37). These are generally used to experiment with a better representation of reality in modernist literature. On the other hand, African American modernist drama is rooted in a socio-historical context that is overshadowed by a remnant of slavery: racism. This is an issue that is still very topical, especially nowadays with crises of refugees and terrorism. The stage in this very specific socio-historical background of the African American artist presents itself as a unique and influential means for the African American to claim his rightful place, both in art and society, which is why a focus on drama in particular is eligible in this context.

The branch of African American Modernist Drama that will be dealt with here is not only the most famous but also the most enduring and influential branch: protest drama. In this kind of drama and theatre, the genre that will be focused on is the genre of the lynching play. A very important aspect of this genre is the fact that it is commonly applied by female writers and typically focuses on female perspectives. This aspect of modernist American drama deserves more attention, even though many critics have tried to grasp the polyphonic character of ‘American drama’, surprisingly, however, main works discussing early twentieth-century American drama, considered as reliable and extensive by many critics, have globally neglected the significance of African American female dramatists such as the ones who will be discussed in this dissertation: Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson.

The plays that will be analysed in this dissertation, Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel and Georgia Douglas Johnson’s A Sunday Morning in the South, are situated in this genre of the lynching play– or actually anti-lynching play, as it was fighting against the horror of lynching. This is a genre that was typically advocated by African American female playwrights, in which the focus lies on the domestic sphere and the effect lynching (public execution without fair trial) had on the families, mostly exemplified by female characters. Not only did these plays focus on a female perspective, the audience they tried to appeal to was
also female. This perspective invites a feminist approach to how the lynching play can be seen as, as Judith Stephens describes it, a kind of “interracial feminist dialogue in theatre” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59).

Key to the analysis of these plays will be following research question: How does the reinterpretation of domestic roles in the works of Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson function as a form of resistance against racism and interracial dialogue? The use of techniques of melodrama, folk drama and theatrical realism will be analysed to illustrate, on the one hand, how Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson creatively use them to strengthen their message and, on the other hand, to position both dramatists in the ‘art or propaganda’- debate, a notion I will return to further along in this introduction.

The overarching focus of this dissertation will be the use of the genre of the ‘lynching play’ as a means to criticize racial inequality. This will be discussed, first, by looking at the specific development of African American Modernist theatre in its socio-political/historical context and second, by performing a case study of two plays belonging to the genre of the lynching play, Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel and Georgia Douglas Johnson’s A Sunday Morning in the South. Both will be analyzed and contrasted, not only in the light of this framework consisting of the socio-historical context and drama theory but also by analyzing their use of dramatic devices.

As already said, before turning to the actual analysis of these two lynching plays, the socio-historical context, in which both dramatists are active, will be discussed. The cultural and historical background to these decades is called the Harlem Renaissance, a period of literary and artistic upswing as it had never taken place before, a period in which the African Americans claim their place in American art. Artistic production will act as a means of voicing the problems of racism and major civil rights’ movements, as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) (Miller 42), will be shown to be closely interwoven with the black artistic productions. In their struggle to unfurl their own black art they will not only come across internal disagreement, but they will also face a lot of white obstruction.

The Harlem Renaissance is not what solely influenced the specific development of African American art, drama and in particular, Grimké and Johnson. This specific ethnic group is not only defined by being American, their African roots plays an important part in their artistic expression. The African culture is a very expressive culture that incorporates a lot of music and dancing. The theory of black dramaturgy will therefore serve as a second
background pillar in this dissertation. The specific developments and questions raised regarding the success of African American drama have been theorized by, for example Henry D. Miller, his “Theorizing Black Theatre”. Miller’s work will serve as a main theoretical base.

In this work and theory about black drama, Miller touches upon a crucial question, which he describes as “an enduring feature of general dramatic theory in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”: the art of propaganda question (Miller 14-15). After analysing Grimké and Johnson’s plays, both for their significance in this socio-historical context as well as for the dramatists’ use of dramatic devices, this question will be readdressed, regarding how both plays can be situated in this debate.

After this outline of the theoretical and socio-historical framework surrounding protest drama, the specific authors and their respective plays will be discussed. Angelina Weld Grimké, the daughter of the Ambassador of the NAACP (Miller 42), is the author of probably the most influential play in this entire literary movement. Her play *Rachel*, was one of the first plays to voice protest against lynching and racial violence, selected and produced by the NAACP (Miller 41). Georgia Douglas Johnson, with her one-act play *A Sunday Morning in the South*, also employs protest drama to criticize bestialities of lynching. In their work both Grimké and Johnson employ black theatre as a means of social protest, both, however, in different ways, using different dramatic devices.

Analysis has frequently focused on their plays in terms of propaganda for the civil rights’ movement, even though this aspect – which is crucial to the more general “Art of Propaganda Question” and specifically the branch of protest drama – will be discussed, I believe, that a more text-intrinsic analysis of the plays, focusing on the use of dramatic techniques, will provide a far more elaborate and accurate view on the political parameters of gender and race that are portrayed in these plays. The dramatists’ creative use of melodrama, folk drama and theatrical realism will strengthen the critique they are communicating in their plays.

As already referred to in the research question, this dissertation will work towards a reinterpretation of domestic roles, or in other words, a refusal of stereotypical domestic roles, as a form of active resistance against racism. Both authors will be shown to address this issue in different ways, Angelina Weld Grimké as a dramatist who turns to melodramatic features to strengthen her play’s message and Georgia Douglas Johnson who opts for theatrical realism and folk drama in her one-act play.
1. The Harlem Renaissance as a Socio-Political Background

1.1 Harlem Renaissance: Composition and Objective

Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson are part of a select group of African American female modernist playwrights, who were writing in the artistically productive decades commonly known as the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ (Stephens, “Johnson's Lynching Plays” 87). In The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader, the “Harlem Renaissance” is defined as a cultural movement that was directed by leaders of a national civil rights movement that saw it as its purpose to improve interracial relations (Lewis xiii). Its main objective was to improve the relationships between the different races, bringing white and black people closer together. This movement wanted to propagate a new ideology that targeted “the bulk” of the African American people (physicians, dentists, educators, preachers, businesspeople, lawyers, morticians, etc.) because this layer of society was the most influential (Lewis xiii). This majority of society was to be addressed by only a few individuals, an ‘elite’ group of Afro-Americans labelled as “Talented Tenth” by W.E.B. Du Bois. This group represented only a fraction of the actual “racial total” (Lewis xiii), a “miniscule vanguard of a minority […] that] jump-started the New Negro Arts Movement, using as its vehicles the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL), and their respective publications, The Crisis and Opportunity magazine.” (Lewis xiii).

1.2 African American Art Production Prior to Harlem Renaissance

The literary production of the Harlem Renaissance evolved quickly and the reason why this was so overwhelming, is the fact that before, “in the years immediately prior to the Harlem Renaissance” (Lewis xv), very little art had been produced by African Americans. In his essay “The Negro takes his place in American Art”, Alain Locke refers to this void in “Negro art” (135): “A few years back there were Negro artists, but little or no Negro art.”, he states (135). “Most of our artists subscribed to the creed that racialism in art was an unwarranted restriction, but they either avoided racial subjects or treated them gingerly” (Locke 135). In contrast to the idea of the vital notion of ‘self-expression’ in poetry, music, fiction, drama, etc., there was, Locke says, “almost nothing representative or racial in the field of fine arts. While the poets, playwrights, writers and musicians were in the sunlight and warmth of a proud and positive race consciousness, our artists were still for the most part in an eclipse of
chilly doubt and disparagement” (135). Locke raises the question as to why there was such a void in art. He seeks explanation in the “social prejudice” that had “seized on the stigma of color and racial feature” (Locke 135). In this mindset, the “Negro artist” unfortunately was a “sensitive victim of this negative color-consciousness” (Locke 135).

The driving force behind the literary boom in the Harlem Renaissance was a call for genuine insight into African American subjects and a need to fill this void in the artistic field. They wanted to represent their reality in a better way, an urge that is typical of modernism and its industrialized world. White artists and intellectuals were aware that they were “theorizing about Afro-America and spinning out African American fictional characters in a vacuum – that they knew almost nothing firsthand about these subjects” (Lewis xix). Even though the African American was gradually appearing on stage, through white representation, the Harlem intellectuals were not that enthusiastic about these ‘new’ dramatic themes, since they were far from a genuine representation (Lewis xxi).

To counteract this, following the idea that “until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human”, many artists, including Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson, committed their talent to a common goal: applying art to change society (Lewis xxi). “For the whites, art was the means to change society before they would accept it. For the blacks, art was the means to change society in order to be accepted into it.” (Lewis xxi) Many, like Jessie Fauset, reasoned: “Here is an audience waiting to hear the truth about us. Let us who are better qualified to represent that truth than any white writer, try to do so” (Lewis xxi). And so they did.

1.3 “The Negro” Stepping on the Stage

The question of “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” took the form of a national debate as the Harlem Renaissance was just beginning.” (Olaniyan 21). Four fundamental principles surface; the African American voice had to claim its place on stage and it had to be, in the words of one of them: “About us, By us, For us and Near us” (Locke 134). According to Alain Locke, promoting the “Negro theme and subject” is vital to the “artistic expression of American life” (134). His appearance places African Americans in the foreground of general interest, both in art and society (Locke 134). Aaron Douglas points out in an interview about the Harlem Renaissance, that “the man on the streets” (119) did not have immediate thoughts upon him being such a matter of cultural importance. He, “the Harlemite”, the regular African American, was an unconscious participant because “he didn’t put his hands on anything. He
didn’t mold anything, excepting the thing was being emitted, something was coming out of him which the various artists responded to, could get hold of and make something that was later known as the Harlem Renaissance.” (Douglas 119-120). Even if the regular man, the “man on the streets” (Douglas 119) did not consciously contribute to the representation of the “Negro subject”, he was the basis on which this entire idea was developed and it was the black artist’s objective to capture their essence (Douglas 119; emphasis added). In the genre I will be discussing, the genre of the lynching play, plays were based on real-life events, on the suffering of these real people. Grimké and Johnson in this way belong to these artists who captured the essence of regular African American people and of the “Negro subject” (Locke 135).

Thanks to the rise of Negro artists and consequentially a growing popularity of this “Negro subject” (Locke 135), a “steadily maturing firmness and originality in the handling of non-racial subjects” was stimulated (Locke 135). African American artists were now able to express themselves, not only in originality, but in sincerity as well (Locke 136). Even though the relation of the African American artists towards the subject matter considered as their own was not fundamentally different from the relation of his “white fellow artist to the same material”, the advantage and nuance can be found in the their “closer psychological contact an understanding” (Locke 136). This evolution in African American art and artists was not only a rise of, as Alain Locke refers to this ethnic group of artists, “the Negro”, but also a conjoining of white American artists and African American artists, brought closer together by a common interest: “the promotion of Negro art and [...] the common denominator of contemporary American art expression” (Locke 136). In this way, the appearance of new actors on the stage of art, the African Americans, did not only contribute to more genuine and sincere attributions to the subject of the Negro, it also set new contributors of both races in motion. Locke concludes his essay with the words:

And just as it has been a critical necessity to foster the development of a national character in the American art of our time, by the very same logic and often by the very same means, it has been reasonable and necessary to promote and quicken the racial motive and inspiration of the hitherto isolated and disparaged Negro artist. The day may soon come, however, when he will need no special encouragement and no particular apologetic brief. It is good both for him and for American art that he is so rapidly reaching maturity. (137)
This rapid progression in African American art is not only crucial for the recognition of an ethnic society, it also influences a much larger cluster: American art and a genuine national character as the backbone of American art. Prominent scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois brought to prominence the “problem of the representation of difference in American culture, not only through their organizational insight – their management of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – but also through their writings focusing on the politics of the production and circulation of cultural discourses and their attendant subjectivities.” (Olaniyan 21). As Aaron Douglas states in an interview with Leslie Collins, artists of the Harlem Renaissance, like Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson, “only got it started” (125). He states: “We only lit the flame. We only set fire to this thing. But it’s their [referring to black college students decades after them] to take it, magnify it and to carry it on.” (Douglas 125). In other words, it is by no means a subject that has already come to a close, it still has an enormous impact and aftermath in the production and reception of art decades later.
2. **Theorizing Black Theatre – The Art or Propaganda Question**

2.1. Du Bois’ “Double Consciousness”

Not only did the African American’s appearance in American art have its specific socio-historical context, it also has its own theory surrounding the development of this art form. For this dissertation, the specific development and main characteristics of black theatre will be discussed. The base work supporting this theoretical framework is Henry D. Miller’s *Theorizing Black Theatre. Art Versus Protest in Critical Writings, 1898-1965*.

In the 1920’s, two important black scholars, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke “soon agreed to disagree.” (Hatch 1). Du Bois, the founder and editor of the NAACP’s *Crisis Magazine*, “called upon playwrights to teach, to prepare black audiences for the racial and political struggles that lay ahead” of them (Hatch 1). Alain Locke, “a classics professor at Howard University”, however, did not agree. Both had different ideas about theatre as “preaching politics” (Hatch 1). Locke objected to this, his opinion was that “Theatre should not be a pulpit for preaching politics, but rather an art to woo its audiences into appreciating the beauty of its African roots.”. Both won sympathy from different artists for their side of the argument, the issue, however, remained unresolved and still continues today. Miller explores a few valuable insights in African American drama, especially by analyzing one of the greatest debates in black dramatic theory, a debate that dominated the first sixty-five years of the twentieth century black dramaturgy and “defined black drama as art on the one hand and as propaganda on the other”: the art or propaganda question, represented by the opposing positions of Du Bois and Locke (Miller 14).

This debate, however, is not inherent to twentieth century black drama, the art of propaganda question has been “an enduring feature of general dramatic theory in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Miller 14-15). Yet it was in this African American history “replete with overt and covert struggles for social and political equality” that this ‘art or propaganda debate’ reached “a magnitude and importance found in no other area of twentieth-century dramatic theory.” (Miller 15). In this century, many, like Grimké and Johnson, were using the form ‘protest drama’, a kind of drama, that, as will be discussed in section 2.3, caused an even tenser dispute.

An aspect that is typical of the twentieth century African American drama and very important for its specific development alongside ‘American drama’ in general, is illustrated by W.E.B. Du Bois’ “issue of “double consciousness”” (Miller 15). With this idea, Du Bois
describes the sensation of a split identity. African Americans have lived in a society that has been historically repressing them, which makes it difficult for them to unify their black identity with their American identity. Du Bois knew that the “Negro in America was not simply a Negro. He or she had become an American, too.” (Miller 16) This doubleness reflects the multiplicity not only of American art, but the intrinsic double of the African American himself.

2.2 Rachel and the Protest Drama Tradition

Angelina Weld Grimké’s (1880-1958) play Rachel, a play that will be more closely examined later on, “publically precipitated the theoretical battle, the Art or Propaganda debate, which thereafter remained at the centre of twentieth-century black dramatic theory.” (Miller 41). The NAACP elected and produced Rachel, a play that is believed to be “the first extant twentieth-century black, full-length straight drama produced in the United States” (Miller 41). According to The Oxford Companion to Theatre and Performance, it is also believed to be the first full-length drama to have an all-black cast with black director, actors, a black producer and of course also a black playwright (“African-American theatre”, para. 3). The choice of the production of Rachel was a reaction to D.W. Griffith’s film called Birth of Nation. NAACP believed that, if such a film could use drama to reach “new height of anti-Negro propaganda”, then why not use the same means to counteract and use the stage as a site for pro-Negro propaganda (Miller 41). A far-reaching theoretical debate inspired the selection of Rachel, which renders a brief look at the “history of African American approaches to straight drama up to 1916” necessary as an “informative background” (Miller 41).

Rachel belongs to the protest drama tradition. Lynching drama in general represents a second form of protest drama. Similar in its passionate appeal, antislavery plays initiated this protest drama tradition and represent its first form (Stephens, The Plays of G.D.J. 33). This protest tradition started off in the nineteenth century with the writing of an escaped slave called William Wells Brown. In 1858 he had written The Escape: or Leap to Freedom to outrage Northern abolitionist’s consciences (Miller 41). By reading his play aloud to these white liberals, he tried to have impact on the minds of those with the most influence in society (Miller 41). Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel was written for the same influential minds years later, the “1916’s liberal white” (Miller 41). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) aimed to use Grimké’s play to “enlighten the American people” about the “lamentable condition of ten millions of Colored citizens” (Miller 41). A driving
force coloured by romantic ideals, issues not seldom featuring in protest dramas, like the ones of Grimké and Brown. In William Wells Brown’s play, it is “the endangered romantic relationships that finally makes slavery unbearable and therefore the catalyst for escape” (Miller 41). In Grimké’s play Rachel, it is “the aborted romance between Rachel and John Strong [that] makes it clear that the lynching of her father and brother – in the antecedent action – has destroyed Rachel’s almost beatific belief in motherhood.” (Miller 41).

Even though Rachel belongs to this protest drama tradition that had been rising in popularity since the nineteenth century, before the year of 1916, the “notion that Negroes should create their own Negro drama was still in its infancy”. This limited the scope and success of these early African American writers like Grimké and Johnson. African American playwrights were unable to use their talent profitably and white managers of theatre companies, as for example Lafayette Players, secured the stage as a white-dominated stage, by excluding plays written by “Negroes” (Miller 42). More than that, Lafayette’s policy even excluded white author’s plays written on “Negro life”, excluding a “vital part of American drama” (Miller 42).

Du Bois envisioned a “new theatre”, one that “on the one hand would teach coloured people the meaning of their history and their rich emotional life” and on the other hand, would simultaneously ‘reveal the Negro to the white world as a human, feeling thing.” (Miller 43). He had already established much of the groundwork, both practical and theoretical, to reach such a goal. When his close ally and NAACP Ambassador Archibald H. Grimké, not coincidentally Angelina Grimké’s father, decided to produce Rachel, he saw a play with the potential to represent his ambition and did not hesitate to support its production (Miller 42).

In his groundwork, not unknowingly, Du Bois had, with his idea of double consciousness, laid out the basis for two opposing ideas regarding black drama (Miller 43). On the one hand, an idea of “a Negro Folk drama”, primarily aimed at revealing to black audiences the Negro’s “rich, emotional life” and on the other hand, “Negro Protest drama designed primarily to convince whites of the Negro’s humanity” (Miller 43). Two opposing positions that caused conflict in the NAACP’s choice of a play like Rachel.

2.3 The Rachel Controversy

As already stated at the beginning of this chapter regarding the theoretical framework of black drama, two scholars (Du Bois and Locke) “soon agreed to disagree” and this was not different for a play like Rachel (Hatch 1). Du Bois, whose ideas were already portrayed as a theoretical
backbone of the ideals propagated by the NAACP, once again faced his opponent. In 1915, Locke began his efforts to try “to change the Du Bois School from within, to shift it from protest to art-theatre […] quietly pushing dramatists away from protest writing” (Miller 44).

When Rachel was selected, Locke’s resignation from the NAACP’s Drama Committee soon followed. His alternative vision of the future of black dramaturgy did not align with what the NAACP set out to do. Alain Locke believed “that a Folk play would introduce its audiences not only to the problems of Negro life [the objective of protest plays] but also to its seldom-depicted beauties.” (Miller 44). A “problem play”, or protest play, like Angelina Grimké’s Rachel, which, for Locke, represented a “single piece of propaganda”, could not instigate the kind of progression in “race drama” that would support the development of “a national Negro Theatre” (Miller 44). He did not believe in the power of change that one play like Grimké’s could contain, he wrote: “One play no more makes a theatre than one swallow a summer.” Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel did, however, keep resonating decades long and still has its aftermath on Broadway nowadays in plays like Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun.

Thus far, the socio-historical context of the Harlem Renaissance and literary theory, in which both writers, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Weld Grimké, were artistically active, have been outlined. It is clear that the context of the Harlem Renaissance had a lot of impact on the decades that were to follow it. The civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s definitely jump-started in the Harlem Renaissance thanks to the dedication of organizations like NAACP. The specific development of black drama theory and the controversy surrounding the specific genre of black protest drama are inseparably intertwined with the playwrights and the ‘branch’ of “Negro Theatre” and black dramaturgy to which they turn to.

In this tradition of protest drama, I will be focusing on the genre of the lynching play. This genre focuses on the domestic sphere from a typically female perspective, which already gives away that black women, not only men, had prominent roles as activists, and their role was only to be increased in the following years, especially in the peak of civil rights movements in the 1950s and 1960s (Roth 80). As Benita Roth states, “women’s work was at the core of the Civil Rights struggle” (81). This female approach in the struggle of race consciousness and race approach is already recognizable in the NAACP’s choice of a female playwright, Angelina Weld Grimké, and the choice of her play Rachel. This play focuses on a female perspective on the injustice going on in their society, a perspective also applied by other prominent writers such as Georgia Douglas Johnson. With this, it could be said that
black women in these movements were partially black feminists, since both argued for the change women could bring about in society (Roth 79). This female-inspired genre of the lynching play brings this dissertation to a final chapter in building a theoretical, historical and methodological framework to situate both playwrights and their specific plays that will be discussed.
3. **The Lynching Play**

In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the epidemic of lynching that engaged the Southern states of America, decades after the Civil War and the end of slavery, represents one of the darkest stains upon American history, that has often been the subject of history writing. Lynch law, as Flora and MacKethan state, refers to ordinary citizens, who assume the right to execute people they judge guilty of a certain crime. The crime in these cases was often “simply being an African American” and lynching here represents the “process of carrying out the judgement” (464). Activists like Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass took on the task of documenting such shameful practices, of these Southern horrors. Frederick Douglass describes not only what lynching law meant but the effects and sentiments it evokes as follows:

Think of an American woman, in this year of grace 1892, mingling with a howling mob, and with her own hand applying the torch to the fagots around the body of a **negro condemned to death without a trial, and without judge or jury**, as was done only a few weeks ago in the so-called civilized State of Arkansas. [...] . Its presence is either an evidence of governmental depravity, or of a demoralized state of society. It is generally in the hands of the worst class of men in the community, and is enacted under the most degrading and blinding influences. To break down the doors of jails, wrench off the iron bars of the cells, and in the dark hours of midnight drag out alleged criminals, and to shoot, hang, or burn them to death, requires preparation reparation imparted by copious draughts of whiskey, which leave the actors without inclination or ability to judge of the guilt or innocence of the victims of their wrath. (Douglass 17-18; emphasis added).

These bestialities against the African American race are what is being denounced in the genre of the lynching play, or rather the anti-lynching play, since it was using theatre as a stage for protest against such crimes. African American men were torn away from their family to be sentenced to death without any form of trial or fair judgment, leaving wives without husbands, mothers childless and children without fathers.

The genre of the ‘lynching plays’ is a genre typically applied by African American female playwrights, in which the focus lies on the domestic sphere and on the effect lynching had on the families, mostly exemplified by female characters. The choice to focus on women
is of course not coincidental. The parts of society that were being targeted were male, most often young men. Because of this, mainly African American women were left behind to mourn for their lost ones and to act as their voice. Households were deprived of their male powers, leaving women behind to maintain their family, a plea also made by Anna Julia Cooper:

I would beg, however, with the Doctor’s permission, to add my plea for the Colored Girls of the South: – that large, bright promising fatally beautiful class that stand shivering like a delicate plantlet before the fury of tempestuous elements, so full of promise and possibilities, yet so sure of destruction; often without a father to whom they dare apply the loving term, often without a stronger brother to espouse their cause and defend their honour with his life’s blood; in the midst of pitfalls and snares, waylaid by the lower classes of white men, with no shelter, no protection nearer than the great blue vault above, which half conceals and half reveals the one Care-Taker they know so little of. Oh, save them, help them, shield, train, develop, teach, inspire them! Snatch them, in God’s name, as brands from the burning! There is material in them well worth your while, the hope in germ of a staunch, helpful, regenerating womanhood on which, primarily, rests the foundation stones of our future as a race. (Ferguson 197-198).

This genre of theatre, the genre of the lynching play, therefore typically focuses on female perspectives, which invites an even stronger feminist approach. The anti-lynching play, in its struggle against the horror of lynching, can be seen as a kind of “interracial feminist dialogue in theatre” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59). I will illustrate and elaborate on these aspects of ‘interracial’ and ‘feminist’ in the analysis of Grimké’s Rachel and Georgia Douglas Johnson’s A Sunday Morning in the South.

Evaluation and appreciation of black theatre have been long-standing conflicts. The choice the Lafayette Theatre made in excluding black theatre from its stage is one illustration of the many problems black dramatists faced. The problem usually arises when the critic applies its own “Eurocentric standards to a work which grew out of Afrocentric values” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59). As already shown, African American dramaturgy has had a specific development and debate strongly linked to its double ethnic roots, to it being both American and African-influenced. By this, it is by no means meant that white critics are incapable of appreciating and analyzing African American theatre. It does,
however, urge the critics to take this opportunity “to step into the space of other individuals with understanding” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59).

In this approach, where theatre is to serve as a space to step in another individual’s understanding, the stage is a site for interracial feminist dialogue, this meant that white women would not read African American women’s texts from the point of view of the “white other” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59) but as “white women who may benefit from the possible insight the text can give them” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59). Barbara Christian sees this opportunity of insight as “one significant reason why black women’s writing can be so disruptive to white women as subjects. For in reading these works, they are confronted with what black women have learned as a result of their experience in this country, that the noun Woman cannot stand alone.”(Stephens “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59). By this she means that gender nor racial categories are closed, clean-cut entities, the boarders are always blurry and the categories interactive (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59). Such responses demand an approach including not only respect for but also knowledge of the specific culture and its history, from which the play emerged (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59).

Turning to terms like ‘feminist’ in an African American context, however, already brings us to a problem of terminology, brought to the forefront by Alice Walker. She insisted on using the word “womanist” since the word ‘feminist’ in “the language of the academy […] has come to mean radical white woman” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 59). Even though applied or appropriated for referring to women of colour, it does not however, include them in meaning. This was a nuance to the terminology that could not be left unconsidered in this context of African American women and especially artists, I will, however, apply the traditional label of ‘feminist’, including African American women in this terminology.

In this context of feminism, the anti-lynch play functions as a form of feminist drama because plays like these challenge “the dominant ideologies of race and gender in the historical periods in which they were written” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 60). Feminism in this perspective, as Bell Hooks states, is not “simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure women will have equal rights with men. It is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels – sex, race, and class to name of few.” (Hooks 194).

The choice of the anti-lynch play as such “ground for interracial feminist dialogue” is not merely because it draws attention to the female aspect of the racist horrors, nor just because the authors are typically women. The anti-lynching movement itself was female-
supported, by women maintaining leading positions in the organization of the campaign against the southern horror of lynching, as Judith L. Stephens states:

marked by extensive interracial co-operation between women under the leadership of black women. From Ida B. Wells Barnett’s first annual report on lynching in 1892 [where she discusses lynch law in all its phases, illustrating the “Southern Horrors” (Black women’s literary emergence Barnett 207)] to Mary Church Terrell’s 1904 essay entitled “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View,” to Mary B. Talbert’s organization of the Anti-Lynching Crusade in 1922, to Mary McLeod Bethune’s 1930 statement urging Southern white women to assume responsibility for halting the rise in racial violence, black women were always involved in leading the fight against lynching. (“Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 60)

It was the persistence, leadership and these women’s use of the power of art that assembled over ten million women for one common cause: trying to push through the Anti-Lynch Bill. It was due to the efforts of these persistent women, due to the labour “of black and white women organized against lynching that pressed for legislation throughout this period” and thanks to “the leadership of black women, many of whom had been active in the late 19th century women’s club movement and in the woman suffrage movement” that eventually such horrific actions were brought to an end (Stephens “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 60). Ida B. Wells-Barnett for example states how she felt an urge to contribute to this common cause. She felt that the task to stand against these bestialities brought upon the Afro-American had fallen upon her, as a writer. Even though they had tried to silence her before (through the destruction of her paper The Free Speech), she uses her writing skills to give a “true unvarnished account […] of lynch law in the South” (Barnett 207) :

It is with no pleasure I have dipped my hands in the corruption here exposed [in her preface to the description of lynch law in all its phases]. Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning, and it seems to have fallen upon me to do so. The awful death-roll that Judge Lynch is calling every week is appalling, not only because of the lives it takes, the rank cruelty and outrage to the victims, but because of the prejudice it fosters and the stain it places against the good name of a weak race. The Afro-American is not a bestial race. If this work can contribute in any way toward
proving this, and at the same time arouse the conscience of the American people to a demand for justice to every citizen, and punishment by law for the lawless, I shall feel I have done my race a service. Other considerations of mine are of minor importance” (Barnett 207).

It was this idea that also served as a motive for the various female playwrights to set their talent to work against lynching. These kinds of plays by black women “which deal with an issue marked by extensive interracial cooperation under the leadership of black women provide an ideal site for interracial feminist dialogue on the dramatic text as argument for social change.” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61). Plays like these, like the ones of Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Childress, etc. create opportunities for white women to “step into the space of black women with understanding and to experience a consciousness where the struggles against racism and sexism meet.” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61).
4. Case Studies of Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson

4.1 Introduction

The two anti-lynching plays that will be discussed are, as previously stated, Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel and Georgia Douglas Johnson’s play A Sunday Morning in the South. Both authors turn to the genre of the anti-lynching play to take the lead in raising the issue of such racist monstrosities and to “coax, prod and shame white women into action by drawing upon the female perspective and suffering under the lynching law in the south” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61). The authors and their plays will be discussed chronologically, starting with Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel as the first production and pioneer and continuing with the Georgia Douglas Johnson’s A Sunday Morning in the South. After a short introduction to the author’s lives, the content of the plays will be briefly outlined to illustrate how both these plays fit in and make up the genre of the lynching play.

4.2 Introducing the Authors

4.2.1 Angelina Weld Grimké

Angelina Weld Grimké originates from a wealthy African American-white family. She was named after one of her famous great aunts, Angelina Grimké Weld. To avoid direct participation in slavery, her great aunt, together with her sister, left South Carolina in the early nineteenth century (Herron 6). The sisters settled in Massachusetts and “became well-known abolitionists and advocates of women’s rights”. They discovered, years after the Civil War, that their brother, Henry Grimké, had conceived two children with his slave Nancy Weston. They decided to acknowledge both mulatto boys, named Francis and Archibald, as their nephews. The latter married a white woman, Sarah Stanley and together they had one daughter: Angelina Weld Grimké (Herron 6).

As an only child, whose mother left her at a very young age, Angelina developed a strong affection for her father (Herron 6). When her father was selected to take up an important position in the fight against racism, as the vice-president of the “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People” (NAACP), Grimké, not surprisingly, was immediately engaged in the struggle for obtaining political rights for the African Americans (Hebel 244). Her position as the daughter of the vice-president of the NAACP, granted her a privileged position in writing for and publishing in the association’s magazine.
Another privilege that Grimké had was the ability to enjoy a great education. After graduating from the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics, she began a teaching career from approximately 1902 until 1926, which she supplemented with classes at Harvard University. After she retired from this part of her career, she moved to New York where she was to spend the rest of her days (Herron 7).

As for her writing, Angelina Weld Grimke was, as Daylanne English points out, among the “African American women writers who responded to this new, modern form of racial-domestic violence by stretching literary form to – and beyond – its limits in order to enact their protests against it and against a modernity that permitted it” (English 119). She employs her talent to protest against and contradict the prevailing ideology of the white, male-dominated world. Most of Angelina Weld Grimké’s work as such a female pioneer was written between 1900 and 1920, with *Rachel* being her most famous published work (Herron 7).

Her three-act play *Rachel*, a play that centres around the Loving family, is one of the first in the genre of the lynching drama (Jansen 392). The image of the happy, peaceful Loving family that Grimké sketches in the first act, is soon overshadowed by a sad family history. About ten years earlier, the protagonist’s, i.e. Rachel’s, brother and father were rounded up to be executed by the “southern white lynch mob” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61). This event is represented to the audience through female perspectives. Since the lynching acts eliminated nearly all male perspectives, the ones who were to suffer permanently are the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters who were left behind. Rachel’s mother explains how the mob came to arrest her husband for refusing to retract an “editorial denouncing the lynching of an innocent black” he had written (Stephens, “Anti-Lynch Plays” 333). Her seventeen-year-old stepbrother, George, tried to protect his father from his certain death, but both were picked up and killed (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61).

Angelina Weld Grimké presents her audience with such a “woman-centred view of lynching” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61) as a means to reach her intended audience: white women. *Rachel* shows a young woman of African American background, who has always seen it as her ambition to start her own family and become a mother (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61). Her reasoning was as follows:

> If anything can make all women sisters underneath their skins. It is motherhood. If then I could make the white women of this country see, feel,
understand just what their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons were having on the souls of the coloured mothers everywhere and upon the mothers that are to be [as Rachel thought she was supposed to be], a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and battle would be half won” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61).

Grimké targets a white female audience and addresses white women who, as Judith Stephens states “subscribed to the dominant ideology of idealized motherhood but who ignored the particular pain of black mothers whose children were born into an environment of racial bigotry and violence” (“Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 62). The more elaborate discussion of the technique applied by Angelina Weld Grimké to reach such awareness and conscience amongst white women is the subject of the next chapter (5), but it is important to note that by challenging the dominant ideology of this historical period in which she was writing, Angelina Weld Grimké places herself in the framework of black feminist drama, a framework in which lynching plays generally are set.

Bell Hooks defines this context of feminism as “not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels – sex, race and class to name a few” (194). The ideal challenged in Rachel, is as already said motherhood, which was seen as the “ultimate achievement” for women (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 62). This concept was so influential in society that white feminists even applied this concept of ‘idealized motherhood’ to argue for a greater influence in the domestic sphere, for example a right to vote and higher education for women. By throwing back this ideal at white women, and white feminists, Grimké positions herself not only in the frame of feminist drama, but more specifically black feminist drama (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 62).

4.2.1 Georgia Douglas Johnson

Thus far, in comparison to Angelina Weld Grimké, not a great deal has been said about Georgia Douglas Johnson in this dissertation, yet she too is a very important playwright of the Harlem Renaissance. Georgia Douglas Johnson (1877-1966) was one of the earliest African American female playwrights and with her repertoire of twenty-eight plays, addressing both racial and non-racial themes, she was also the most productive of her age (Stephens, The Plays of G.D.J. 1). She was living in Washington DC during the artistically productive
decades of the Harlem Renaissance, the socio-historical context that was already outlined in chapter one, and like Angelina Weld Grimké, she was also part of the group of African American female playwrights who demonstrated an interest in lynching plays and the “political parameters of gender, race and patriarchal authority” that such plays question (Jansen 391). Johnson actually was the first playwright to use the label of lynching drama to describe her work. The plays she refers to as “plays on lynching” in her “Catalogue of Writings” demonstrate Johnson’s dedication, not only to the anti-lynching struggle, but also to the development of the genre itself. None of her anti-lynching plays, however, were published during her lifetime (Stephens, “Johnson's Lynching Plays” 91).

She proved herself to be a very versatile and multitalented artist. Besides writing plays, she also wrote short stories, music and poetry. Most critics have focused on her poetry writing and so she obtained the reputation of the “lady poet” of the Harlem Renaissance (Stephens, The Plays of G.D.J. 1). Examining her career and profile as a playwright enriches this poetry-focused work of prior scholars and gives further insight into her contributions to the historical and cultural history of the African American struggle against racial inequality and fight for their rightful place on the theatre stage (Stephens, The Plays of G.D.J. 1).

In the assessment of Johnson’s career as a female black dramatist, it is essential to bear in mind that she, like Angelina Weld Grimké, started writing plays in the 1920s. This was “an era in which a black female playwright was an anomaly and when the groundbreaking theatrical successes of Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress were still decades away” (Stephens, The Plays of G.D.J. 4). As the theatre historian Kathy Perkins points out: “the voice of the black woman playwright was slow to emerge because of racial and sexual barriers” (Perkins 2). It was thanks to predecessors like Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Weld Grimké that the path was cleared for later successors like Hansberry (Perkins 2). Johnson was one of the artists who prepared the audience for the upcoming achievements African Americans were to reach through applying theatre as a site to tackle the injustice imbedded in their society, since theatre reaches different layers of society and strongly appeals to emotional response of its audience.

Together with Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice-Dunbar-Nelson, May Miller, Zora Neale Hurston, Marita Bonner, Eulalie Spence and Mary P. Burrill, Johnson belonged to the group of pioneering playwrights who wrote before 1950 and “who became visible for their achievements in community theatre and through one-act playwriting contests sponsored by the journals Opportunity and the Crisis”, journals belonging to the national movement striving for the rights of the African Americans (Stephens, The Plays of G.D.J. 4). But besides
belonging to this “pioneering sisterhood”, Georgia Douglas Johnson also stands out from this group, “due to her lifelong dedication to writing plays and seeking outlets for their publication or production (Stephens, *The Plays of G.D.J.* 4). She struggled in getting published and sent numerous plays to the NAACP for contests and publications. In this way Johnson faced more difficulties than Angelina Weld Grimké, who, through her family tie with Archibald Grimké, the president of the NAACP, found it easier to get her plays, poems and short stories published. In her correspondence to Harold Jackman Johnson wrote: “You would be surprised to know how many foundations I have tried, and more surprised to learn that each one said ‘ne’ but most surprised to learn that I still have high hopes – am looking with my heart’s bright eyes to the bright tomorrow!” (Stephens, *The Plays of G.D.J.* 8). Even when facing enormous setbacks, she pursued her skills as a playwright, poet and composer to the fullest (Stephens, *The Plays of G.D.J.* 8).

Johnson is a central figure in the history of theatre and her plays are now considered as “landmark contributions to both African American theatre and American theatre in general” (Stephens, *The Plays of G.D.J.* 2). Through her art, she tried to offer alternatives to “a predominantly white, male, and New York City-centered theatre” (Stephens, *The Plays of G.D.J.* 2).

The twenty-eight plays she wrote were arranged in four different categories: “Radio Plays”, “Primitive Life Plays”, “Plays of Average Negro Life” and “Lynching Plays”. *A Sunday Morning in the South*, which I’ll be focusing on, belongs to this latter category. This typically situates the play in the domestic sphere of African American households in the South that are under threat of the lynching mob. The content of this play will now be briefly sketched in relation to the genre of the lynching play, to illustrate as to why it belongs to this specific genre.

In *A Sunday Morning in the South*, as the title already suggests, the play takes place on an ordinary Sunday morning, during breakfast, before the family of Sue Jones will go to church. Sue is Tom and Bossie Griggs’s grandmother. Tom is nineteen while Bossie is only seven years old. A friend, Liza, drops by with gossip about a black man who has supposedly attacked a white woman, and even though Sue agrees with Liza that such manners cannot go unpunished, they express their resentment towards the mob rule. Unfortunately lynching is what dispenses the law, and due to a similar appearance, Tom, Sue’s grandson, is rounded up as the assailant, which makes events lead up to Tom being one of the many victims who were unrightfully lynched.
“One of the many”, since African Americans were commonly charged for rape, assault, burglary, etc., far more than whites were. This “race-based criminal cod[e]” (272) as Dorothy E. Roberts labels the death penalty frequently applied to the former slave race, is intimately tied to the abolishment of slavery and the attempt to preserve white supremacy afterwards. In the Southern states, the lynching mob, responsible for “ritual kidnapping and killing of blacks in highly publicized ceremonies” was instituted to maintain white rule (Roberts 273). Hundreds like the character of Tom were publically tortured to set an example that black people were, slaves or not, still excluded from citizenship (Roberts 273). Rather than an exception to the law, lynching was an extension of it, which reinforced racial control. Even though lynching subsided over the years after the abolishment of slavery, in some Southern states in the twentieth century, these public executions were mainly reserved for black men accused of raping white females, the same crime for which Tom in A Sunday Morning in the South is executed for (Roberts 274).

4.3 Lynching Play: Theme of the Domestic Sphere

In lynching plays, the “violent act of lynching, despite its myriad effects on African American life in the early twentieth century, was rarely the focal point”. Such plays, most prominently written by black women playwrights, centre around “the looming or lingering threats of lynching and the repercussions of these threats within the domestic space” (Jansen 391). The impact on the domestic space, its role division and especially the permanent damage that such acts of “mob violence” caused in the African American households are the key perspective to propagate against this violent form of racism (Jansen 391). They emphasize the fact that lynching did not just target individuals but entire communities (Jansen 391). As Koritha Mitchell in her work on lynching argues, “not all victims were shot or burned or hanged, but all of their families were diminished (222).

Lynching plays by women, as Judith Stephens states, “challenged at the deepest level the hierarchical power relationships based on gender and race. The strength of their indictment lay in their representation of how these structures of domination were played out in everyday life” (Stephens, “Lynching Dramas and Women” 8). Especially the gender-related role division and the hierarchy of power relationships are challenged (Jansen 391). The idea of the traditional role division is criticized by questioning the efficiency of black families adhering to these traditional roles. By adhering, for example, to the ideal role of motherhood and passivity, black women place themselves in a vulnerable position, risking the
loss of their husband, brother, children and grandchildren. Because of the problems African Americans are facing due to racism, adhering to the accepted ideology and role division is no longer an option for black households. Crucial members of their family are being targeted, creating a need for women to take on different roles.

Besides questioning traditional domestic role divisions, these plays also turn against other stereotypical roles. Previous chapters have already touched upon the fact that African Americans were trying to ascend the stage and present the audience with a genuine portrayal of black lives. The stereotypes by white playwrights commonly relied on portraying black men as “the comic buffoon, the lazy shiftless Negro, the Uncle Tom, and the savage Negro brute”, while black women were portrayed as being “without character” (Giddings 93), “sexless domineering mammy types, […] loose trollops, and […] tragic mulattoes” (Hester 249). Such stereotypes were often used as a justification of the monstrosities performed against blacks, especially the image of the savage and the brute are “inherently tied to the real-life drama of lynching” (Jansen 391).

By questioning such role divisions, the genre of the lynching play was used “to counteract mainstream images of African Americans, especially as they portrayed black families, and to rethink popular representation of black men and women” (Jansen 392). An analysis of this idea of ‘reinterpretation’ of the domestic sphere and mainstream role divisions of Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel, as well as Georgia Douglas Johnson’s play, in their context of protest drama and ‘the art or propaganda question’ will be the subject of the next chapter.
5. Domestic Reinterpretation as Resistance against Racism

How the reinterpretation of domestic and gender roles in the works of Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson functions as a form of resistance to racism.

5.1 Analysis Grimké’s Rachel

5.1.1 Rethinking Motherhood

Angelina Weld Grimké’s play centres on Rachel’s wish to act as the protector, the mother of children, whether they are of her own blood or not. On several instances in the play, Grimké refers to the protagonist’s desire to nurse children. In the very beginning of the play, Rachel explains that she is late because of the cutest “little brown baby boy” (Rachel 6), named Jimmy, who she encountered on the staircase. Her love for children, and perhaps her exaggeration, is immediately reflected in the mother’s response: “Well I’m no prophet but I see very distinctively what is going to happen. This little brown baby will be living here night and day. You’re not happy unless some child is trailing along in your rear.” (Rachel 7). Rachel defines herself in the role of a mother, by saying things such as “I think the loveliest thing of all the lovely things in this world is just (almost in a whisper) being a mother!” and “if I believed that I should grow up and not be a mother, I’d pray to die now.”

An image that reoccurs in the play, for example when Rachel is sitting by the piano reflecting on how she would like to keep babies small and innocent, is Raphael’s “Madonna” (Rachel 13). After looking upon the “Sistine Madonna” Rachel expresses herself in a lullaby:

Sweetest li’l feller,
Ev’rybody knows;
Dunno what to call him,
But he mighty lak’ a rose!
Lookin’ at his Mammy
Wid eyes so shiny blue,
Mek’ you think that heav’n
Is comin’ clost ter you!

[…] (Rachel 13)
She is inspired by and identifies with the Madonna, which is even more clear when she states how her project is a divine-inspired cause and speaks of the “Annunciation”. She refers to the angel who came to the Virgin Mary to announce that the task to become the mother of God’s child had fallen upon her. Rachel similarly sees it as her God-given purpose “to be a mother to little children”, she whispers, “God spoke to me through some one, and I believe.” (Rachel 14), just like the Virgin Mary was chosen. She identifies herself with a typically white icon of motherhood, and in my opinion, this already hints at the fact that this ideal of motherhood belongs to the white female society, a point to which I will return later on in the analysis of the rethinking of motherhood.

However, soon after this, the “shadow of lynching” (Jansen 393), the permanent threat posed by the white lynching mob, is shed over Rachel’s family. Mrs. Loveling, upon a visit from two friends and after the harassment of Jimmy, recounts their own family tragedy; the lynching of her husband and son. Here, I agree with what Josephine Lee argues, Rachel “shows how the home is violated by the evils of racism; the home offers no protection against lynching and disenfranchisement” (628). The intrusion in everyday life and the enormous after-effects lynching has, lead Rachel to the conclusion that “there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hearts is three parts pain” (Rachel 30). A complete change of heart occurs, from her remark, that she’d rather die when she would have to grow up not being a mother she moves to realizing how much danger lies in becoming a mother, now that she witnesses the pain her brother George and Mr. Loveling’s death have brought upon her mother.

It is impossible to ignore the signs of racism creeping in everyday life of African American households. The hints of racism – for example restrictions in education and financial prospect – eventually culminate in horrifying tragedies such as family members being lynched. Not even little children are spared, Tommy is one of these unfortunate little ones. He is harassed because of the colour of his skin. In the final scene, Rachel explains how “They chased him through the streets calling him, “Nigger! Nigger Nigger!” One boy threw stones at him. There is still a bruise on his little back where one struck him. That will get well; but they bruised his soul – and that – will never – get well.” (Rachel 92). This inextricable connection between danger and motherhood grows only stronger throughout the play.

Rachel is torn between her longing for and potential of becoming a mother herself. This shows how the act of lynching here reconfigures the domestic sphere of the Loveling
family. Her belief in a cause she was so certain of, granted to her by God himself, now starts to crumble. Her understanding of her purpose in life evolves as she matures, culminating in the rejection of John’s proposal. Rachel responds with “If it nearly kills me to hear my Jimmy’s crying, do you think I could stand it, when my own child, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood – learned the same reason for weeping? Do you? (Rachel 92). Rachel foresees the enduring effect lynching will have on future generations of the African American people and for this reason rejects to become John’s wife, a role that would ultimately bring her into the role of motherhood, a role she will no longer fulfil (Jansen 393).

By choosing not to become a mother, Rachel will forever be a child and daughter. This is illustrated in Grimké’s use of “little girl” and “little Rachel” (Rachel 86-87) to address Rachel, even when she has long reached the age of an adult. Especially the strongly increasing use of such phrases by John Strong underscores this idea. In their final conversation, the use of such references to Rachel reaches its culmination point (Jansen 394). He starts addressing her as ‘little girl’ and from this point on, the frequency rises rapidly, up to the point that he uses it in nearly every utterance directed to Rachel, these are a few examples to illustrate this frequency: “Wouldn’t it be easier for you, little girl, if you could tell – some one?” , “Rachel, little girl, why – did you – kill the roses then?”, “Yes, little Rachel”, “Little girl, little girl, can’t you tell me why?” and “Look at me, little girl!” (Rachel 86-87). Through the repetitive use of “little girl”, John classifies Rachel as a perpetual child. He patronizes her and in this way does not treat her as equally mature as him. But even though this confirms the analysis of Grimké’s character Rachel as denying to adhere to the stereotypical role of a mother, it does not imply Rachel’s immaturity. Her maturity lies exactly in her refusal of becoming a wife and mother. She foresees the enduring suffering of lynching on future black generations and decides to create a form of resistance in her refusal, a resistance John Strong is unable to fully grasp the significance of.

Even though she refuses to become a wife and bear children of her own, she does not completely give up her role as a caretaker. She knows her choice of not becoming a mother will not put end to the already existing violence caused by the mob and will not undo the death of her father and brother, so she decides to dedicate her life to protecting the children who already exist, by keeping her unborn child safe “until the world is less perilous” (Jansen 394). In her acceptance of the role of the “perpetual child”, Rachel “undermines white society’s attempt to eliminate successful black families” (Jansen 394). Refusing to “grow up” is refusing to conform to society’s norms and by remaining in a state between a girlhood and adulthood, Rachel is allowed a certain freedom which enables here to look cynically at the
follies of adult life. I agree with Josephine Lee, on the fact that Rachel "realizes that the middle-class ideal of home and family does not protect her – or even more importantly, her unborn children – from the racism both of physical violence and of continuing economic deprivation" (629). By remaining ‘a child’ she is able to act as the protector of the neighbourhood children, who are mostly left on their own since their parents are too busy trying to find ways to provide for their family after key figures have been eliminated from their household because of the lynching law.

The fact that Grimké is referring to larger societal issues is reflected in Rachel’s response to John Strong’s remark (upon first meeting her) that it is difficult to be a girl: “Oh, no! It’s not hard at all. That’s the trouble; they won’t let me be a girl. I’d love to be.” (Rachel 10). Remaining a child allows her to avoid having to confirm to the dominant society’s constraints and expectations. Reference to ‘they’ refers to this restraint and the “larger societal expectations that push Rachel toward womanhood” (Jansen 394). By saying that it is easy to be a girl, the actual implication made here is that it is not easy to be a woman. Her wish to remain a child, in this way has further implications than solely refusing motherhood. Being a woman results in strict boundaries of race and gender, a restriction Rachel rejects (Jansen 394).

Grimké’s character Rachel “works against widely circulated images of black women, refusing to conform to the stereotypes such as the mammy or the whore” (Jansen 394). She decides to ‘remain a girl’ and in this way seems to turn to another stereotype, but her intellect – her insight into the future impact of lynching on her own family, which leads to her refusal of motherhood – shows that her state of mind is in fact that of an adult, she simply refuses to fill in society’s expectations of an adult female. By refusing to accept the domestic role of the mother of a child of her own blood, she destabilizes her attributed role in her own family. The continuation of the role she has been occupying since the beginning of the play, someone between a child and a caretaker, is recognized in Little Martha’s remark: “You’re the very nicest “grown-up”, (loyally) except my muzzer, of course, I ever knew. You knows all about little chil’run, and you can be one, although you’re all grown up” (Rachel 80).

In this way, Grimké’s character Rachel does not truly confirm any stereotype. Even though she might appear to be conforming to the mammy stereotype by becoming a caretaker for the neighbourhood children and adopting Jimmy– adoption that again can be seen as a refusal of traditional family structure – she prioritizes her own ideals. By remaining single (or unwed), she secures herself from becoming a widow and becomes head of a new differently structured household, caring for her mother, brother, adoptive child and neighbourhood
children. The first step in reconfiguration of the domestic sphere in the Loving family was an involuntarily one. Through the death of the male roles, Rachel’s mother, who had now become a widow, already had to take up tasks, such as providing for her family, which is shown in the needlework she does, to support her family. This aspect of the domestic sphere, in which Rachel grows up, illustrates the effect lynching had on the lives of black women affected by the execution of the black men in their household: creating a “single-woman-headed household in the early 1900s” (Hester 251). She protests to the idea of the inability of black people to create any form of resistance to racism and especially appeals to women, since they were the ones left behind. Accepting the roles in which the dominant white male society tries to force Afro Americans results in a bleak future for the generations to come, a future of continuous racism in which it is better to keep our unborn children safe by not letting them see the light of life.

As already stated, this was only the first step of reconfiguration. Grimké does not only create this single-woman-headed household to illustrate the effect on future generations, she creates a household in which all traditional roles are reinterpreted as a result of lynching. With Rachel she defines a daughter who will not grow up in order to become a mother of her own family, she creates a female figure who decides “it would be more merciful – to strangle the little things at birth” (Rachel 30) and makes a promise to herself and her unborn children: “You may be happy now – you are safe” (Rachel 94). This presence of her unborn children gives a voice to the future generations and expands the play’s outlook not only on present problems but also on future implications.

Grimké, with her character Rachel, shows the impossibility of becoming a mother and in this way shifts the focus from the African American men, towards a female and even more to a feminist perspective. In this way, lynching ceases to be a crime against the male part of the African American population and becomes a crime against all members of the African American race. Even in seemingly ceasing to fulfil her divine calling of becoming a mother, Grimké does not portray Rachel as a person “defeated or broken by racism” (Jansen 395). On the contrary, she represents a figure who intentionally decides to empower herself with greater agency by choosing not to conform to the traditional role of the mother. By refusing John’s proposal and choosing childhood above womanhood, she “exercises control over her own life”, and those of her unborn children, “and subverts the systematized racial violence and threat of lynching that awaits her as an African American woman” (Jansen 395). In a social environment, where only two options seemed possible for Rachel, either becoming a mother of her own and suffer under the possible loss of her husband and/or children or
giving up on everything she had set her hope on in life, i.e. caring for children, she decides upon a third option. She refuses to adhere to the accepted domestic roles by refusing a family structure like the one she had seen to destroy her family, and find a new way to survive and grow within her own family (Jansen 395). Grimké, in this way, attributes greater agency to women and instigates a reflection on future implications and especially the future generation under this racist oppression exemplified lynching.

5.1.2 Rethinking Uncle Tom

Rachel and her mother, however, are not the only members of the Loving family. Angelina Weld Grimké also introduces us to a male character: Tom Loving, Rachel’s brother. Even though he has been well educated and is an intellectual man, Tom is not granted any economic success under the prevailing racism of his time. Like his sister, he must too find an alternative path for himself.

Since both the father figure and the elder brother have been murdered, the task of the main provider is now Tom’s. Yet with prospects becoming bleaker as the play continues, Rachel and her mother, Mrs. Loving, replace him as the provider of the household. In this way, another setback due to racism is brought to attention, namely, the devaluation of degrees of African Americans:

“Rachel is a graduate in Domestic Science; she was high in her class; most of the girls below her in rank have positions in the schools. I’m an electrical engineer – and I’ve tried steadily for several months – to practice my profession. It seems our educations aren’t much use to us: we aren’t allowed to make good – because our skins are dark” (Rachel 41-42)

Tom is not alone, a similar example is that of John Strong. His story is told by Mrs. Loving after John had come to pick up his mother’s waist at the Loving’s house. Mrs. Loving explains how he and his mother worked extremely hard to get him through college. John had been searching for months to find a job that would suit his degree. Mrs. Loving explains to her daughter how he had “the tremendous handicap of being colored” (Rachel 10), which rendered his degree nearly useless. So one day, without his mother knowing – he did not want to disappoint her – he took a job as a waiter. John Strong’s story briefly sketches the prospects of young African American (male) scholars. Without the prospect of finding a good job, they were unable to take on the role of the patriarch and supporter of the family. If one cannot
support a family, starting a family of your own is out of question, which denies Tom to become neither husband nor father.

Tom is not just a character whose “plight highlights inequalities in employment and education”, he also defies racial stereotypes (Jansen 397). Due to the fact that Tom is literally called “Uncle Tom” (*Rachel* 38), a connection between him and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s ‘Uncle Tom’, and especially George Aiken’s interpretation of her key character, cannot be left unexplored (under lynching shadow 396). The link between the two mainly confirms the negative stereotype of ‘Uncle Tom’, the “subservient and domesticated black man who takes care of others’ children and ingratiates himself to his ‘masters” (Jansen 396).

Tom Loving does seem to respond to racism in a laughing, joking way, to shield himself from the actual emotional damage this kind of discrimination has on him. This kind of portrayal can be found in the second act of the play, when little Jimmy calls him “Uncle Tom” (*Rachel* 38). The image of the intelligent young man, here, is contradicted with characteristics of a joking, jolly figure that uses stereotypical responses like “Bless my stars!”(*Rachel* 43), “Oh Lordy!” (*Rachel* 38) and acting like a clown as he states himself: “Uncle Tom is funnier than any clown in the Kickus” (*Rachel* 38). In this way, Tom Loving confirms to the Aiken-interpretation of an ‘Uncle Tom’ by deliberately appearing less intelligent than he actually is for the amusement of a child, through the use of “allusive language” (Jansen 396).

This resemblance with the Aiken-stereotype, however needs to be nuanced. Tom’s behaviour towards Jimmy is out of love and a means to establish a father-son relationship in an alternative way. He was not allowed by the dominant white society to occupy the role of the provider and to step up as the patriarch of the family, since his attempts of finding a job as an engineer were hopeless. Obsequious figures like Stowe’s ‘Uncle Tom’ came to resemble were not perceived as threatening by this white society, so by occupying this role, Tom, as an uncle, is as close as he can get to a father-son relationship with Jimmy, without becoming a threatening individual or victim of lynching.

Again Grimké presents a reinterpretation of a domestic role, in a way that it is safe to care for a child and is able to reclaim “that figure [the Uncle Tom] from its hollow and demeaning stereotype” by “creating a complex, loving, laughing character who cares for Jimmy” (Jansen 397). By becoming an “Uncle Tom”, Tom creates a stable and secure way to care for a child, without facing the disrupting force lynching had on the traditional family structure. Just like Rachel’s reinterpretation of her domestic role, Tom’s becoming an uncle to the child disrupts the traditional domestic structure, and in this way, he acts as “a model of an alternative masculinity”, one that differs from the conventional role of the patriarch (Jansen
He does not function as the typical father figure, nor as the main financial provider. Instead, he contributes as a member of “collective partnership” (Jansen 397). Together with his sister, Tom forms the “father-mother unit” for Jimmy. Their extraordinary position places them in a kind of liminal space between, in Rachel’s case, the older sister and the mother and in Tom’s case, a hybrid form of both the uncle and the father role. Acquiring these new roles allows them to contribute to their non-traditional family in a meaningful way that enables them to secure their family stronger than if they were to adhere to the traditional domestic roles (Jansen 397).

The Loving family can be seen as exemplifying the larger context of society. Oppression of the African American people has influenced both gender roles and intergender relations (Lawrence-Webb et al. 628). African American men, as exemplified by Tom, have been historically excluded from the mainstream gender role division of provider and protector. Tom here represents this struggle to achieve a “male gender role identity” (Lawrence-Webb et al. 628). Because of this challenge, African American women, too, have struggled with the meaning of masculinity versus femininity. From the period of slavery onwards, these intergender relationships have been challenged and African American households, if they did not want to perish under this oppression, had to turn to non-traditional family structures. Generally, this varied from a rejection of marital roles, defining the husband as the provider and the wife as the caretaker (Dugger 431). Angelina Weld Grimké, by creating a new kind of functional partner-unit, shows, not only the lack of power African Americans faced (legally, financially, etc., which creates this need for a rethinking of traditional gender roles of the dominant society) but also the fact that, while fighting against racial inequality, the domestic sphere can serve as a site of resistance against white oppression, creating a stronger societal resistance.

### 5.1.3 Masculinity and the ‘Homemaker’

Besides Tom, Grimké includes another “model of masculinity for black men”: John Strong (Jansen 397). Similar to Tom, he represents the young, educated African American man whose search for a job that would match his degree is completely hopeless. As Lee rightfully states, “While slavery […] has been abolished, its legacy lives on in the lack of gainful employment for African Americans” (Lee 628). To support his family, John Strong became a waiter, an act with broader implications:
I studied waiting, I made a science of it, an art. In a comparatively short time, I’m a head-waiter and I’m up against another stone wall. I’ve reached my limit. I’m thirty-two now, and I’ll die a head-waiter. (a pause) College friends, so-called, and acquaintances used to come into the restaurant […] They come in yet; many of them are already powers, not only in this city, but in the country […] I am an artist, now, in my proper sphere. […] My philosophy – learned hard, is to make the best of everything you can, and go on. […] There are many disadvantages and some advantages in being a waiter. My mother can live comfortably; I am able, even, to see that she gets some of the luxuries. (Rachel 45-46)

The limited options under lynching’s shadow are clearly stated, his prospect of rising economically is brought to a stop, and he will not climb higher than head-waiter. He accepts this hierarchy because even though it is unfair, he is still able to take on the role of provider and become the patriarch of the family. He aspires to start a family with Rachel, yet she refuses to become his wife and in this way, denies him a part of his masculinity. She will not make a patriarch out of him because granting him this role would go against her own ideals and make him a possible victim of lynching.

When John proposes to Rachel, he speaks of an apartment he had already purchased and decorated a year before. On this instance, John’s idea of domestic roles that first seemed focused on stereotypical masculinity is slightly nuanced when he says: “Every single thing in it, I’ve bought myself – even to the pins on the little bird’s aye maple dresser. It has been the happiest year I have ever known. I furnished it – one room at a time. It’s the prettiest, the most homelike little flat I’ve ever seen. […] On the sitting-room floor is beautiful, Turkish rug – red, and blue and gold…[…]” (Rachel 90; emphasis added). Descriptions of soft, beautiful rugs and other detailed and quite feminine decorum in a household would normally be attributed to women. This places John Strong, like Rachel and Tom, in a kind of liminal space in between traditional gender roles, while he takes on the traditional role of the provider on the one hand, the role of the homemaker, on the other hand, adds a feminine dimension.

Even though this slightly feminine decorum surrounding Strong nuances his attitude towards the traditional domestic space, John Strong still broadly represents the specific type of masculinity that was targeted by the white racist lynching mob. Especially in describing himself as “big and strong” in his final plea to make Rachel his wife: “Little girl […] somewhere – there’s a big, strong man – with broad shoulders. And he’s willing and
anxious to do anything – everything, and he’s waiting very patiently. Little girl, is it to be – yes or no?” (Rachel 90; emphasis added) The reference to “waiting very patiently” is a clear reference to himself, as he had described himself before as someone who had made an art of waiting (in reference to his search for a job) (Rachel 45). Here, John Strong presents himself as a big strong man and by associating “himself with a specific brand of masculinity”, and in this way, instead of giving Rachel a feeling of comfort in marrying him, he does the exact opposite (Jansen 398). She can only notice the resemblance with her deceased relatives, ‘bigness’ leads to being targeted by white racist, which ultimately leads her to denying him his masculinity in her refusal to marry him.

In his tastefully furnished home full of Madonna’s and traditional items of the domestic sphere, John stages exactly what Rachel has been avoiding and, in this way, exemplifies exactly what Rachel sees as the “threat of violence that lurks within such finely furnished domestic spaces” under the threat of lynching (Jansen 398). White society had already (socially, economically and politically) denied John Strong to fulfil his potential as a patriarch power. By refusing to marry him, and denying him his role of patriarch again herself, Rachel does not passively conform to the white racist dominance. She makes a conscious decision and in this way refuses to conform to the traditional family role division that would place her family in a vulnerable position (Jansen 399).

5.1.4 Concluding the Domestic Reinterpretation as an Interracial Dialogue

In her lynching play Rachel, Grimké portrays the horror and injustice brought upon African American households in the white male racist society of the early twentieth century. Traditional family structures are deconstructed and reconfigured, which demonstrates the need for “alternative domestic arrangements” under racist oppression (Jansen 400). Rachel and her family members are characters that represent such alternatives and illustrate how Grimké questions the efficiency of adhering to traditional gender roles. Embodying traditional ideals results in seeking out the danger posed by the lynching mob.

The inability of a conventional “husband-wife unit” is exemplified by the relationship between Rachel and John (Jansen 400). The alternative to this union, interestingly, is demonstrated in the non-traditional father-mother unit formed by Rachel and her brother Tom. They fulfil roles of non-biological parents by becoming liminal figures between an uncle and a father and on the other hand between being a child and an adult-like older sister. By turning to such alternative “configurations of family”, Grimké shows the will to protest against
lynching by subverting the racism of the dominant culture (Jansen 400). Through creating a new model of the domestic sphere, Angelina Weld Grimké frustrates goals intended by the white lynching mob.

However, *Rachel* does more than simply depict the destruction and reconfiguration of families whose loved ones have been lynched. It “performs an artistic [example of domestic reinterpretation] that resist roles that mainstream society allotted to African Americans” (Jansen 402). While on the one hand, Grimké is showing alternative options for African American families, its limits, at the same time become clear as well. By protecting unborn generations, damage can be counteracted but it still limits them to waiting until society has undergone enough change to enable African American families to flourish again. *Rachel* propagates a change in society (racial equality) that will allow such flourishing, and in this way, Grimké succeeds in using the stage as a site for protest.

**5.1.5 Grimké Appealing to Interracial Sisterhood**

Who was Angelina Weld Grimké targeting with her critique? Grimké’s play *Rachel* was especially written to appeal a white female audience. The play represents a “woman-centered view”, through a young black woman’s, perspective (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61). The technique she applies to address the conscience of white women is the reinterpretation of the “current dominant gender ideology” of that moment, which was the focus of this chapter. In *Rachel*, she demonstrates that the ideal of motherhood as particularly represented by the image of the Madonna, the ultimate Christian embodiment of motherhood, did not apply in African American households.

Grimké believed that if anything could create a connection between a white female audience and the suffering of black households it would be motherhood. They might not know the suffering under lynching law, but by appealing to relationships like mother and child, she tries to establish a bond between two races, similar to a sisterhood (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 61).

*Rachel* throws back the gender ideology as it was accepted by most white women. I will follow Judith Stephens interpretation of this dominant ideology, by saying that motherhood was the ultimate achievement for a woman (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 62). In her article “The Anti-Lynch Play: Toward an Interracial Feminist Dialogue in Theatre”, she states how the concept of the idealization of motherhood was even applied by
feminists of the era to expand the range of their influence (Stephens, 62). By tackling such an idealized concept, Grimké is shaking the foundations of white gender ideology.

Utterances like for example “no child of mine shall ever lie upon my breast, for I will not have it rise up, in the terrible days that are to be – and call me cursed” (Rachel 63) question the appeal of having children and becoming a mother. The desirability of becoming a mother as a black woman was closely linked to the danger of losing a child to the racist murderers of the lynching mob. The heartbreaking choice of burying the dream of motherhood or becoming a mother only to live in constant fear of losing a child is used to appeal to the emotions of the (possible fellow-mothers in the) audience.

In order to break such a dominant gender ideology, Grimké uses a sentimental language. Upon realizing little black boys of the South might face the same fate as the one of her brother and her father, Rachel responds with: “How horrible! Why – it would be more merciful – to strangle the little things at birth. And so this nation – this white Christian nation – has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful – the most holy thing in life – motherhood!” (Rachel 30). The image of strangling a newborn is extremely violent and physical. To strangle a baby is a gruesome way of murdering a child. It is a physical act performed with your bare hands that would have shocked the audience, especially mothers who have looked upon the innocent face of their own infants. The image of a newborn baby brings to mind a very serene and loving atmosphere, an atmosphere that is immediately crushed by violence. Yet by presenting such horrific events as this as “more merciful”, it functions as an enhancement of the extremity of the horror of lynching.

By addressing such a sensitive subject as infanticide, Grimké was criticized for “preaching race suicide” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 62). My view, however, is that it suggests this as a protection from “racial bigotry”, a term W.E.B. Du Bois had already touched upon in discussing the death of a black baby (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 62). She is not preaching for the suicide of an entire race but merely using such a bleak ending to make a statement that there is a severe problem that she is trying to propagate. Her goal was to “awaken white women from their complacency”, if she had opted for a more positive ending, the shock effect would have had far less impact on the audience.
5.2 Analysis Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *A Sunday Morning in the South*

5.2.1 Sue Jones and Southern Male Chivalry

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *A Sunday Morning in the South*, like most of her plays, has not been extensively analyzed, since the critics’ main focus has been on her career as a poet. Johnson nevertheless is a leading African American playwright, who participated in writing protest plays as a response to the brutal and inhumane act of lynching (Young 25). She uses her play, as Patricia A. Young states, as a “vehicle to express the unique complications attending early black maternity” (25-26). *A Sunday Morning in the South* is a one-act play. One-act plays were the dominant form for lynching plays of that era, they represent a short and intense way to express critique and its concision emphasizes the quick pace of the play, which enhances the feeling of helplessness and hunted feeling of the family that is subject to the play. Johnson’s *A Sunday Morning in the South* focuses on the powerlessness of black mothers, who are not able to protect their children from the racial violence of lynching. It was written in a white church version as well as in a black church version. I will be using the latter in my analysis, since this version more strongly focuses on the domestic sphere. In this version, Sue Jones does not leave her house (the domestic setting of the play), in contrast to the white church version. In general, however, both versions are practically identical.

Different to *Rachel*, Georgia Douglas Johnson brings the act of lynching upon the stage. It is not an event of the past that took place beside the stage. This is a typical development in the genre of the lynching play in the 1920s, as Judith Stephens explains: “While representations of lynching in the previous decades [in earlier plays like Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel*] relied primarily on the verbal description of a past lynching, these dramas are set in a time frame in which the threat or actual occurrence of a lynching takes place” (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 667). These plays focus more on an immanent threat to the lynching rather than the tragic consequences, which reflects on a decade in history in which lynching reached incomprehensible heights with “more than 300 lynchings occurring and filibusters by Southern Senators repeatedly [being killed] all proposed anti-lynching legislation in the United States Congress” (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 1999).

Besides “abolishing the second-class citizenship” of African Americans, Johnson, similar to Grimké, tackles the stereotype of African American women and gender ideology. Especially with Sue Jones, who is the main character of the play, even though it is her grandson, Tom Griggs, who is the actual victim. Like in Grimké’s *Rachel*, the audience is
again presented with her woman-centred view on this racist conflict. Sue is introduced on the
stage as:

[…] putting the breakfast on the kitchen table. She wears a red bandanna handkerchief on her grey head, a big blue gingham apron tied around her waist and big wide old lady comfort shoes. She uses a stick as she has a sore leg, and moves about with a stoop and a limp as she goes back and forth from the stove to the table. (A Sunday Morning in the South (from now on abbreviated as ASMITS) 139-140)

The first impression is that she is a rather familiar character type, she invokes the stereotypical image of the ‘mammy’, as Hester describes the typical African American female stereotypes. She is the “sick, fatigued” mother (with her impaired body representing the exhausting and decaying effect that racism has on this African American generation) who, even though she is sore and limping, still is the on to cook, clean and care for the needs of her family (Young 27). This mammy-type image is also confirmed later on, when she seeks help for her grandson by sending someone to the judge and his daughter, Violet, whom she nursed as a baby: “Tell Miss Vilet her ole nuse Sue is callin on her…tell her they done took Tom and he is perfect innercent” (ASMITS 145).

Sue as the matriarch of the family – with no patriarch left in the family – takes on the role of leader of the family. She has seen to educate her grandson to be a dependable young man with the right spiritual and work ethic, as is made evident by Tom’s remark a the start of the play: “there’s the church bell. I sho meant to git out to meeting this morning but my back still hurts me. Remember I told you last night how I sprained it lifting them heavy boxes for Mr. John?” (ASMITS 140). Sue responds with “You hadn’t oughter done it; […] you ain’t a hoss!” (ASMITS 140), and nearly immediately afterwards adds Tom’s alibi for the crime he is unrightfully going to be arrested for: “Twant no moren eight when I called you to go to the store and git me a yeast cake fur my light rolls and you was sleeping like a log of wood; I had to send Bossie fur it.”, Tom’s little brother (ASMITS 140).

Her effort and belief that her right upbringing would protect her family from the lynching mob will soon be proved as a naïve mistake, When Tom wonders “whut would I do if they ever tried to put something on me…” (ASMITS 142), Sue’s response “sonnie, you won’t never hafter worry bout sich like that” (ASMITS 142) is immediately overshadowed by an impending doom. The singing from the church next door enters their domestic sphere, a
song of hope “Let the light from the lighthouse shine on me” (*ASMITS* 143) foreshadows the help (of God) she will need after that knock on the door that follows immediately after this conversation.

An officer enters, accusing Tom of raping a white girl. The dialogue that follows reflects the abuse African Americans suffered at the hands of white police officers:

SUE: (answering quickly for Tom) Right here sir, he was right here at home. Whut you want to know fer?

FIRST OFFICER: (to Sue) You keep quiet, old woman. (to Tom) Say, you answer up. Can’t you talk?

Where were you last night at ten o’clock.

TOM: (uneasily) Gramma told you. I was right here at home — in bed at eight o’clock.

FIRST OFFICER: That sounds fishy to me — in bed at eight o’clock! And who else knows you were here?

SUE: Say Mr. Officer, whut you tryin to do to my granson. Shore as God Amighty is up in them heabens he was right here in bed. I seed him and his little brother Bossie there saw him, didn’t you Bossie?

BOSSIE: (in a frightened whisper) Yessum, I seed him and I heered him!

FIRST OFFICER: (to Bossie) Shut up. Your word’s nothing. (looking at Sue) Nor yours either. (*ASMITS* 143).

This illustrates how Georgia Douglas Johnson portrays the threat of lynching in the present, as an immanent danger rather than a sad past family history. This short exchange is followed by a description of the attacker, a description that could have fit any African American young man, and even though Sue tries, several times, to verify Tom’s innocence – since he had an alibi, on that was already introduced to the audience – her voice is simply silenced and another oppressed voice enters the stage: the victim.
The “raped” woman is dragged in by the arm and is demanded to confirm Tom as her attacker:

SECOND OFFICER: (to girl) Is this the man?

WHITE GIRL: (hesitatively) I — I’m not sure . . . but . . . but he looks something like him . . . (holding back)

FIRST OFFICER: (encouragingly) Take a good look, Miss. He fits our description perfect. Color, size, age, everything. Pine Street Market ain’t no where from here, and he surely did pass that way last night. He was there all right, all right! We got it figgered all out. (to Girl, who looks down at her feet) You say he looks like him?

WHITE GIRL: (looking at him again quickly) Y-e-s (slowly and undecidedly) I think so. I . . . I . . . (then she covers her face with her arm and turns quickly and moves away from the door, supported by Second Officer. First Officer makes a step toward Tom and slips handcuffs on him before any one is aware what is happening)

SUE: (holding on to her chair and shaking her cane at the officer, while Bossie comes up close to her and snivels in her apron) Whut you doing? What you doing? You can’t rest my granson — he ain’t done nothing — you can’t rest him!

FIRST OFFICER: Be quiet, old woman. I’m just going to take him along to the sheriff to question him and if he’s telling the truth he’ll be right back home here in no time. (ASMTS 144).

The white woman is eager to satisfy the officers and is not speaking from her own perspective. She has no voice or claim of her own, she is simply there to affirm the officers’ findings, even though it is clear that she is hesitant and holding back, because she does not know if this is her attacker. She is brought to stage to affirm the stereotype of the “brute negro”, as the black man was perceived by the white male dominant society. Whether guilty or not, African American men were seen as beasts who posed a constant threat to society because of their raping white women and violence (Young 34), and by saying lynching was to
protect their women, a false myth was created as justification for murder (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 63).

Characters like Tom show the tragedy of this false “white male code of chivalry”, since he was already shown to be a good young man, an aspect of his education to which his grandmother had personally seen. Unfortunately, her efforts have been ineffectual, Tom has been arrested and is facing immediate murder. Here, I will refer to another stereotype Johnson is working on. Paula Giddings refers to this other stereotype of twentieth century black women, by describing them as being perceived as “having no sense of virtue and of being altogether without character” (93). Johnson counteracts this image by introducing a fuller comprehension of Sue Jones, who is shown to be a moral, intelligent, virtuous character, and therefore not at all without character. Not only in the upbringing of her grandson has she shown herself to be a virtuous and moral character but in her reaction to her grandson’s arrest, she also counteracts this passivity and lack of character ascribed to African American women (and women in general). After several attempts to verbally protest Sue even attempts to use the little physical strength she has left by threatening the policemen with her cane: “(holding on to her chair and shaking her cane at the officer, while Bossie comes up close to her and snivels in her apron) Whut you doing? What you doing? You can’t rest my granson — he ain’t done nothing — you can’t rest him!” (ASMITS 144). When this too has no effect, she turns to her final hope and tries to obtain help from “the good white folks” (ASMITS 145) by trying to persuade her former employer, the judge and his daughter, whom she nursed, to rescue her son.

SUE: (shaking nervously from side to side as she leans on her cane for support) Oh my God, whut kin I do?

LIZA: (alertly) You got to git word to some of your good white folks, that’s whut and git em to save him.

SUE: Yes . . . That’s whut . . . Lemme see . . . (she stands tense thinking a moment) I got it . . . Miss Vilet . . . I got to git to Miss Vilet . . . I nused her when she was a baby and she’ll do it . . . Her pa’s the Jedge.

LIZA: That’s right! I’ll go. You can’t go quick.
MATILDA: No. Lemme go; I kin move in a hurry, lemme go!

SUE: All right Tildy. Tell Miss Vilet her ole nuse Sue is callin on her and don’t fail me; tell her they done took Tom and he is perfect innercent, and they gointer take him away from the police, and ax her to ax her pa the Jedge to go git Tom and save him fur God’s sake. Now hurry, Tildy, fly!

BOSSIE: (to Sue) Lemme go long; I knows how to git there quick cutting through the ole field.

LIZA: Yes they knows Bossie and he kin hep tell. (ASMITS 145-146).

But, unfortunately, even her plea to obtain help from the whites goes unanswered and her grandson is lynched.

MATILDA: (reluctantly) It want no use.

SUE: No use?

LIZA: Whut you mean?

MATILDA: I mean — I mean —

LIZA: For God’s sake, Tildy, whut’s happened?

MATILDA: They — they done lynched him.

SUE: (screams) Jesus! (gasps and falls limp in her chair. Singing from church begins. Bossie runs to her, crying afresh. Liza puts the camphor bottle to her nose again as Matilda feels her heart; they work over her a few minutes, shake their heads and with drooping shoulders, wring their hands. While this action takes place the words of this song pour forth from the church:)

Lord have mercy.
Lord have mercy,
Lord have mercy over me. (ASMITS 147-148).
In Sue’s final lines and endless suffering, Johnson concludes what the desirability of motherhood looks like in African Americans. Not only does Sue Jones demonstrate the doomed position of the African American mother, for these women, motherhood is coloured with sadness and constant fear, the ideal of motherhood only seems to stand ground for white women. The ideal of sacred motherhood as exemplified by the Madonna in Rachel, is shown to be specifically white.

A second ideal of womanhood that is reconfigured by Sue is the female characteristic of ‘passivity’. She demonstrates the impossibility of passivity, submissiveness and acceptance of male dominance, as it was demonstrated in the voicelessness of the white woman on the arm of the officer. Because, if she were to have done absolutely nothing, her grandson would not have stood any chance. Even though her final plea to the whites was ineffective, she did not simply let her voice go unheard and bow to racism, as the white female is shown to do, who has, in this way, stained her hands with guilt and Tom Grigg’s blood.

5.2.2 Addressing the Weakness of White Women

As the previous paragraph suggests, Georgia Douglas Johnson’s A Sunday Morning in the South is partially addressing white women. Even though the play does not seem to aim at a white female audience as strongly as Angelina Weld Grimké’s Rachel, there are two scenes referring to the involvement of white women incorporated in A Sunday Morning in the South. Hatch and Shine note that “there is a tenseness throughout the work that will anger blacks and perhaps, appal some whites” (211). Following this reasoning, I believe that with her lynching play, Johnson tries to touch a chord in two different audiences, on the one hand, voicing the outrage of the African Americans, while on the other hand trying to call upon the conscience and awareness of white women by directly showing them as accomplices.

The first scene to illustrate a woman as an accomplice is when the white woman is brought in by the officer to identity Tom as her attacker. Instead of speaking her mind and the truth, accepts the male dominance represented by the two officers. The first officer has himself already completely convinced that Tom Griggs is indeed the rapist from the previous night, without even considering his alibi. He bases his judgment on a general description, “Age around twenty, feet five or six, brown skin… (he folds up the paper and puts it back into his vest) Yep! Fits like a glove.” (ASMITS 143), that fits every young black man, a totally invalid argument for arresting Tom. To support this claim, they bring in the young female victim as proof for Grigg’s identification. Even though she is clearly hesitant (“I—I’m not
sure…but…but…he looks something like him… *(holding back)* […] *(ASMITS 144)* she dares to say nothing that would not confirm the policemen’s claim. This scene, as already referred to in the previous part of the analysis, serves as an illustration of a failure to oppose the “white male code of chivalry” *(Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 63)*. The white female, here, is represented on a kind of parallel level as Tom. Both are repressed by the white male dominance. The weakness of this white woman is contrasted to the strength that lies within Sue Jones, an old physically disabled grandmother *(she limps and uses a cane (ASMITS 140)),* who does dare to resist this male oppression.

Johnson, here, tries to create a bond with white women. If they were to see their involvement by not resisting such white male ideologies, black and white women could work together, similar to Grimké’s approach who tried to obtain a sisterhood regardless what colour of skin through appealing to motherhood. The white woman here, after falsely identifying Tom Grigg as the perpetrator, shows her recognition of compliance by “cover[ing] her face with her arm and turn[ing] quickly [to] mov[e] away from the door” *(ASMITS 144).* Yet in this case, the Black-White alignment is an unsuccessful one, since she failed to resist the pressure of the officers.

Historically, such ties were eventually established by white women in the 1930s. These bonds served as a base for Jessie Daniel Ames’s “white organization of the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching” *(Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 63)*. The main purpose of this grouping was “to drive home the argument that black men did not provoke lynching by raping white women and that white women did not want this murder carried out under the myth that it was for their protection” *(Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 63)*. Which is what Johnson is ultimately pointing towards, by letting the girl cover her face, she indicates that there is an awareness of these false male pretences to randomly murder African American young men. For instance, the white woman was to play the avenged maiden, but her eventual part would be one of a woman who “would pay with a lifetime of subjugation to the men gathered in her behalf” *(Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 64)*. She will have to live with the fact that she has sent an innocent man to his death by not speaking her mind in company of the two policemen and tolerating this false act of chivalry. This young white woman, representing the white female society, in this way is portrayed as a passive, weak character. These characteristics are contrasted to the potency of Tom’s old grandmother who, even though she is portrayed with an impaired body *(representing the decay of the African Americans under the burden of racism)* and decaying health, is able to – verbally as well as physically – form a greater resistance to the oppressors than a younger and
physically stronger white female generation can (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 64). This accentuates the weakness that lies in the passivity of white women even stronger.

The second scene in which white women are connected to lynching, is when Sue sends Liza to turn to her former employer, the judge, and his daughter, Miss Villet. Unfortunately Tom is lynched before Sue’s message reaches Miss Villet, so her answer remains a mystery. In this way, Georgia Douglas Johnson is, as Judith Stephen states, “leaving a door open for white women who would join in the struggle against lynching” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 64). Stephens, here, refers to Talbert and Browns words when turning to white women to join the Anti-Lynch Crusaders in 1922 (“Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 64). They plead: “This is the first time in the history of coloured women that they have turned to their sister white organizations and asked for moral and financial support. We have never failed you in any cause that has come to us; we do not believe that you will fail us now” (“Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 64). Stephens, in my opinion, rightfully remarks how Sue’s plea (“Tell Miss Vilet her ole nuse Sue is callin on her and don’t fail me” (ASMITS 145)) is similar in spirit to the words of these anti-lynching crusaders (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 64).

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s A Sunday Morning in the South demonstrates how white women are not acquitted of complicity in lynching, on the contrary, they are used as ‘chivalrous purpose’ – the maiden who is to be rescued –, and in this way are used as a justification for the exploitation caused by the southern lynching mob. The play tries to reach the awareness of white women, that “southern male chivalry” was mainly a “means of control and repression” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 65). Lynching in this dominant gender ideology, which relied on “submissiveness” and passivity” (Stephens, “Interracial Feminist Dialogue” 65), was a mere extension of this kind of control that oppressed women as much as African Americans.
6. Grimké and Johnson’s Creative Use of Dramatic Techniques

6.1 Angelina Weld Grimké and Melodrama

6.1.1 Introduction

Thus far, Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel* has been analysed in terms of how she offers a reinterpretation of the dominant gender stereotypes and domestic roles. This kind of analysis proved itself to be closely interwoven with the themes typically represented in lynching plays. Other scholars have also approached Angelina Weld Grimké’s work from this kind of perspective – one that analyses such plays in terms of how they fit into the genre of the lynching play, how they approach the domestic sphere and where this play is situated in its socio-historical context – but to complement this kind of reading, I will add another aspect of analysis, one that has been given far less attention: the dramatic techniques. This is an aspect of analysis that deserves more attention and will add more nuance to the innovation Angelina Weld Grimké is bringing to the stage, which will also help situate her in the context of Locke’s ‘Art or Propaganda’ question. The dramatic techniques that I will be focusing on here are situated in the genre of melodrama, in this theory I will follow Johann Schmidt’s definition in his work *Ästhetik des Melodrama*, which I will supplement with James L. Smith’s *Critical Idiom* on melodrama.

In the genre of the lynching play, critics have provided different frameworks of analysis. Some, for example Judith Stephens, have categorized them in the genre of melodrama and in the realist movement of American theatre, while for example David Krasner in his article “Allegory and Mourning” shows yet another way by appropriating Walter Benjamin’s theory of ‘Trauerspiel’. I will now briefly introduce these three different positions to illustrate why I have opted for melodrama.

Krasner defines ‘Trauerspiel’ or ‘mourning play’ – a form of German dramatic tragedy – as a play in which “mourning is the only response to an incomprehensible injustice. Although grieving takes the form of an endless outpouring of words, the words are essentially meaningless, random and arbitrary” (“Allegory and Mourning” 67). I disagree with Krasner’s categorizing of Grimké’s *Rachel*, since mourning is not the sole response to the horror of lynching and what resonates through the play is not only the echo of mourning through meaningless words. *Rachel’s* response to the injustice is resisting racism through reinterpreting gender and domestic roles. Long outpouring of words serve as a way of
establishing a unity of language and feeling but not to the extreme that such an utterance loses the basis of realistic language, an example of such a long flood of words is the next:

Why, God, you were making mock of me; you were laughing at me. I didn’t believe God could laugh at our suffering, but He can. We are accursed, accursed! We have nothing, absolutely nothing. […] You God! – You terrible, laughing God! Listen! I swear – and may my soul be damned to eternity, if I do break my oath – I swear – that no child of mine shall ever lie upon my breast, for I will not have it rise up, in the terrible days to be – and call me cursed. (Rachel 62-63)

The words in this “outpouring of words” are not arbitrary or meaningless (Krasner, “Allegory and Mourning” 67). The sentiment associated with this complaint is one of mourning the injustice, but statements like “no child of mine shall ever lie upon my breast” have stronger implications for the meaning of the play – the reconfiguration of the domestic sphere – than solely representing the echo of mourning the incomprehensible justice of lynching.

Another possibility, the connection with dramatic realism, is something I partially agree with, but in my opinion does not cover enough criteria to apply to Grimké’s Rachel. Even though Grimké uses “realism’s mimetic power”, through the use of a “realistic setting, vernacular language, realistic characters”, characters recognizable in that era, “a linear causality to depict the conflict of motherhood faced by African American women of their era” (Krasner, “Allegory and Mourning” 64) her character is just too extreme for the realist movement (Krasner, “Allegory and Mourning” 66). In Rachel, the protagonist is “sentimental to the point of being melodramatic” (Hull 123), and the following analysis will show how the extreme sentimentalities can be ascribed to the dramatic techniques used in the genre of melodrama.

### 6.1.2 Grimké’s Practice of Melodrama

Schmidt, a German scholar who has done a significant amount of work on English (melodrama, defines it as a ‘popular stage genre’ that draws on other genres and representational devices, and in this way uses intertextual references. This genre, through the use of typical characterization, hyperboles and tautology aimed at creating a meaningful whole, that especially draws on the emotional responses of and moral lessons directed at its
audience. Melodrama here is understood as a particular form of staging of, the visual, acoustic and linguistic signs, in an emotionally intensifying state of mind, within which a polarization and deepening of the aimed effects is achieved (Schmidt 28). This “heightened emotionality” and “strong pathos”, as Ben Singer describes this drawing on emotional response to lead the audience in a certain direction, all evolve around a moral polarization: good versus evil (7). In classical melodrama, this kind of unambiguous representation of “virtue and villainy” served as a response to the vulnerability people felt and the need to express victimization of innocent people (Singer 11). How Grimké deals with techniques belonging to this genre of melodrama from the perspective of an African American modernist playwright will now be discussed.

Grimké, in the beginning of the play, structures Rachel according to the melodramatic conventions. The audience is represented with an unambiguous conflict between, on the one hand the aftermath of earlier slavery and, on the other hand, former slaveholders. This conflict is portrayed in the story of the lynching of both her brother and her father, years before. Such a portrayal serves as a means to trigger an emotional response of compassion. Other examples of drawing on specific emotional responses is when Tom and John Strong suffer from racial inequalities when applying for jobs and when little Jimmy is made aware of his skin colour and the restrictions this includes. Such confrontations clearly divide what Udo J. Hebel, a German scholar who elaborates on Schmidt’s definition, calls “Täter/Opfer-Rollen”, or a dichotomy between victim and perpetrator, ‘us versus them’ (Hebel 250).

What Hebel calls a dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ or ‘victim’ and perpetrator’ (Opfer/Täter), is a dichotomy to which James L. Smith in his critical idiom on melodrama also refers. According to Smith, theatre applying the form of melodrama, presents two “mighty opposites” that are confronted with each other in a conflict where no compromise is possible (72). It must end in either triumph or defeat (Smith 72). To this latter statement I will return later, but generally, both critics agree on the type of conflict that is portrayed in melodrama, and specifically melodrama applied in protest theatre. Smith illustrates three types of theatre in melodrama, the ones evolving around triumph and defeat and a third specific type drawing on these previous two: protest theatre. Protest theatre aims at stimulating “political awareness” through questioning certain established values and injustices (72). Grimké’s Rachel belongs to this specific type, and in this play this questioning and exposing of injustice is illustrated in the fight against racial violence (lynching) (Smith 72).

Grimké adheres to the conventions of melodrama, not only in presenting this kind of typical conflict, but also in characterization, by not giving the perpetrators an in-depth
characterization. She chooses to refer to them as a collective “this white Christian nation” (*Rachel* 30). The victims, however, get individual characteristics and are more detailed, especially the protagonist Rachel. The innocent victims of racism, including the Loving family, the Strong family and the children suffering from discrimination are all presented as pitiable. Especially referring to the little children Rachel takes under her wings, Grimké applies a sentimental-melodramatic rhetoric (Hebel 250). They are referred to as “the little things” or “the little children”, always loving and pitiful formulations, which is in strong contrast with the racist humiliation and physical abuse these frail children have to face.

Also in her staging of the domestic sphere of the Loving family, Grimké uses melodramatic techniques as they were defined by Schmidt. In staging the domestic sphere of the Loving household, she turns to hyperboles and tautology to create a loving, peaceful atmosphere. Especially in the affectionate addressing between the different household members, Rachel calls her mother “Ma dear” (*Rachel* 5) to which she is responded with an “Oh Rachel” (*Rachel* 5) on several instances. The family name itself, ‘Loving’, already resonates a melodramatic affect. This helps create a sentimental family bond, which is in strong contrast to the dangers imposed on their family by lynching.

Besides these melodramatic features, *Rachel*, is also full of intertextual references, especially generally known imagery. The stage setting is full of details and references. Especially colour imagery is strongly recurrent. Green and white are the dominant colours, curtains, table cloths, etc. (“The scene is a room scrupulously neat and clean […] The walls are painted green […] Its bare, green wall and white baseboard are all that can be seen of it. […] The white sash curtains […] The green shade is rolled up to the top. […] In front of this window is an open, threaded sewing-machine. Some frail, white fabric is lying upon it. […] A pair of vases, green and white in coloring […] In the center of the floor is a green rug […] a rectangular dining-room table […] with a green table-cloth.” (*Rachel* 3-4)). Hebel defines these colours as the conventional colours of hope and innocence, a definition I believe to be accurate, since all features that have discussed attribute to this kind of thematic content.

Another very important reoccurring image, and one I have already touched upon in my earlier analysis, is Raphael’s Madonna. She is a conventional, unambiguous image of selfless motherhood, love and sacrifice. She represents the “sweet World of Motherhood”, “a World so beautiful and so divine …/emblem of the Love Divine!/ The great white spark of Heaven in a woman’s life” that Grimké herself describes in her 1904 poem (Herron 62).

Connected to this visual aspect of melodrama is the acoustic appeal Schmidt refers to. After looking at the Madonna, Rachel is inspired to sing Ethelbert W. Nevin’s “Mighty Lak a
Rose”. “Rachel raises her eyes to Raphael’s Madonna over the piano. Her expression becomes rapt; then, very softly, her eyes still on the picture, she plays and sings Nevin’s “Mighty Lak a Rose”’’ (Rachel 13). This is not the only instance of the use of sound effects to stimulate a certain affect of serenity, Rachel also includes Jessie Gaynor’s lullaby “Slumber Boat” (Rachel 11). All these musical effects, loving, shushing songs, contribute to the atmosphere also set by the image of the Madonna, a typical white (and Western) image motherhood that is at this point not yet portrayed as problematic. Grimké already touched upon this aspect of ‘whiteness’ in her poetry on the “Sweet World of Motherhood” to which I referred to before, by describing motherhood as this “great white spark of Heaven in a woman’s life”. By contrasting this Western (white) image with black folk music such as this lullaby, Grimké is already playing with a ‘black versus white’ contrast (the ideal of motherhood as not belonging to black women) that is later to be ascribed to the Madonna.

The Madonna-imagery reflects Rachel’s divine calling to become a mother, but not in the traditional sense as has already been discussed. She is to sacrifice her own unborn child and biological motherhood to become a mother to all suffering children, to resist the evil – again this fight of good against evil – on earth that lynching and especially racism represents. By using this culturally accepted ideal of motherhood, Rachel again displays the use of sentimental rhetoric that was very important in melodrama of the 19th and early 20th century. Gustave Garcia describes the meaning of maternal love in melodrama as follows: “Maternal love is the most tender sentiment in living nature. It is the sweetest and most generous movement which the natural instinct can possibly prompt. It is the first inclination in animal economy […] The sentiments of a mother are spontaneous, never reflective or calculating” (136). This sentimental reference to motherhood again reflects Grimké’s use of melodrama in Rachel.

Angelina Weld Grimké, however, does not simply adhere to this model of melodrama. Even though her characterization, scenery, sentimental language and theme confirm Schmidt’s definition of melodrama, the second and third act illustrate how Grimké occupies an innovative position through her problematizing of this “sweet world of motherhood”, as it was depicted in the first act. She chooses to let her characters evolve towards psychologically complex characters – here leaning towards a characterization, as it would be seen in dramatic realism – by moving away from melodramatic one-dimensional heroic figures and stereotypes, as previous analysis has already demonstrated.

Another aspect in which Grimké moves away from the expected melodramatic features is in her ending. Grimké does not end her play Rachel with the happy ending
expected and by not applying the “absolute imperative of melodrama”, i.e. “the restoration of the moral, social and domestic order – and, consequently, the reassurance of the audience” (Mason 18). Neither Rachel, nor the “white society” triumphs. According to Smith, melodrama always ends in triumph or defeat (72), but Grimké opts for neither of these endings. She refuses to let her characters fulfil the traditional gender roles and in this way refuses to let their family be target to the accepted white male ideology and its racial violence. Neither parties of the conflict, in this way, win or lose. Grimké refuses to restore order in society by not letting the white, male-dominated ideology win, but at the same time by not granting the opposite side the victory of overcoming the racial violence that lynching represents. Grimké’s choice of an ‘open’ ending does not necessarily problematize the melodramatic feel to the whole of the play and its typical conflict between the two mighty opposites (good versus evil), but it adds a dimension of critique and a more urgent call for change than what would be the case if the play had had the expected closed ending with the defeat or victory of one of both parties.

This kind of compromise in resisting racism, however, is a ‘compromise’ that cannot be long-standing, because this would imply the extermination of an entire ethnic group, since lynching has not been brought to a stop – African Americans are continuously being murdered – and a common refusal to provide an offspring would eventually lead to race-suicide. In this way, Grimké, by arguing that society is in need of change, rather than presenting a fixed outcome, achieves a stronger effect of social critique than she would have accomplished if she had turned to the typical “triumph or defeat” ending.

6.1.3 Readdressing the ‘Art or Propaganda Question’

W.E.B. Du Bois saw it as the Negro artist’s responsibility to offer a genuine representation African American experience to help in the pursuit of social uplift. Alain Locke criticized such a vision as “propaganda” and positioned himself on the other hand of the debate. He on his turn argued that the primary responsibility of the artist is to express his “own individuality, and in doing that to communicate something of universal human appeal” (Carter, Stanford.edu). Where are lynching plays, such as the one by Grimké that has been discussed here, situated in this debate? Generally speaking, lynching plays have the goal to voice the inequality and resonate the depths of the suffering of African Americans. The genre of the lynching play is strongly linked to its socio-historical meaning but does that mean such plays cannot be evaluated from “purely artistic criteria” (Krasner, “ Allegory and Mourning” 64).
I am not the first to ask this question, Judith Stephens had already brought it into discussion and after analyzing Grimké’s *Rachel*, this is my answer as to how this play fits into this discussion: it is not only possible, but also necessary to look at such plays for its artistic criteria, or in this case the dramatist’s use of dramatic devices and techniques. After discussing how Grimké applies melodramatic features in her play, it is clear that the reinterpretation of the domestic sphere, which is the way in which Grimké’s characters actively resist racism, is enhanced by her creative use of melodramatic devices. In the second and third acts of the play, the moment on which Grimké’s innovates the conventions of melodrama by working towards a different process of characterization and an unconventional ending, is also the moment of change in the domestic/gender ideology. She is not merely voicing the injustice brought upon the African Americans, but expresses her individuality and talent as an artist through her innovation, and so she steps beyond this idea of creating ‘mere propaganda’. Through this individuality, she addresses a universal matter of motherhood in order to create such a “universal human appeal”, by making women sisters, beyond the colour of their skins (Carter, Stanford.edu).

6.2 Georgia Douglas Johnson

6.2.1 Introduction

Similar to the analysis of Angelina Weld Grimké’s *Rachel*, Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *A Sunday Morning in the South* has been analyzed in terms of how she offers a reinterpretation of the dominant gender ideology. Again, this kind of analysis proved itself to be closely linked to the genre of the lynching play itself, and the significance the stage has in obtaining the goals civil rights movements had set out. As Judith Stephens points out in her article “Racial Violence and Representation: Performance Strategies in Lynching Dramas of the 1920s”, lynching dramas not only represented a unique genre that contributed to the African American battle against racial inequality, they also conformed to a style of writing for the stage: dramatic realism. In this dissertation, I will not only turn to Georgia Douglas Johnson as a playwright, moving away from her dominant image of ‘Lady Poet’ of the Negro Renaissance, but I will analyze her use of dramatic techniques in her play *A Sunday Morning in the South*.

I contend this aspect of analysis in the genre of the lynching play has generally been given far less critical attention, therefore I will incorporate this aspect in the analysis of both authors and discuss how it contributes to my former part of the analysis and in what way it
helps to situate Georgia Douglas Johnson in Locke’s ‘Art or Propaganda’ question, as I already did with Grimké’s Rachel. The dramatic technique that I will be focusing on is dramatic realism, which is not a surprising feature in the genre of the lynching play. I agree, however, with theatre historian Randolph Edmond’s argument that the movement of realism converges with the folk drama tradition and that Johnson’s play is influenced by elements of realism as well as by folk drama. While Grimké turned to the genre of melodrama, a more traditional cultural form, Johnson opts for a more ‘urban’ kind of cultural form that draws more strongly on her African roots. This will be decisive in her position in the ‘art or propaganda’ debate that will addressed at the end of this chapter. Her unique approach to this melting pot of two movements, which I will call ‘folk realism’, lies in her use of irony. To address Johnson’s use of irony, I will draw on Henry Louis Gates Jr. definition of the concept.

6.2.2 Georgia Douglas Johnson’s Folk Realism

Judith Stephens defines dramatic realism as “a style of writing and production that endeavoured to portray a serious social problem through particularized characters (true-to-life individuals instead of type characters [with no debt to them at all]) who speak and act in localized settings of daily routine” (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 660). In dramatic realism, a social problem is straightforwardly portrayed and in the end left unsettled (Stephens, “Johnson's Lynching Plays” 90). The second influence on Johnson that will be approached is that of the folk drama movement. This movement is defined by Stephens as valuing “authentic reproduction of common life” and an attempt of “artistic representation of the speech, characters, manners and incidents of a particular people, culture or religion” (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 660).

Johnson’s lynching drama addresses a serious social problem, the problem of racial injustice. She presents the audience realistic, true-to-life individuals, both Sue and her grandson Tom Grigg represent realistic individuals, members of an African American family targeted by the white lynching mob. A threat that inescapably ends in Tom’s murder. By choosing not to give her play a happy ending, lynching is shown as an unresolved problem, and so Georgia Douglas Johnson forces her audience to confront the racist reality, which is an important aspect of theatrical realism according to Judith L. Stephens’s definition.

The setting in A Sunday Morning in the South in its depiction is not only located in a daily routine, (here a common morning scene, i.e. breakfast) as it was common in dramatic realism, it also shows features of folk drama by being set in a working-class household, one
morning in the South. Johnson here aims at representing a particular people and ethnic group by portraying “the extreme vulnerability of the black home in the 1920s by setting her play in a humble, two-room house in the South” (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 665).

An intermingling of these two movements was not uncommon for plays and playwrights centering on lynching after 1910 (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 660), Johnson’s innovative strategy in showing the horrors of lynching can be detected in her construction of a “dialectic of the senses” (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 665). She calls on a performance that contrasts what the audience is seeing versus what they are hearing, challenging the audience in how they respond to such contradictions.

This dialectic approach is what I will classify under Johnson’s irony, serving both as a rhetorical and a musical strategy. Irony is based on the audience surpassing the character’s knowledge. Both discourse and music take on a contradictory meaning than would be expected at first. Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that this dramatic use of irony as a disruption of “the conventional meaning of language reflects the African American literary tradition of ‘Signifying’” (Gates 90). He uses this term for all rhetorical strategies of the African American culture that “subvert the dominant meaning of the words and phrases through forms of free linguistic play” (Stephens, “Johnson's Lynching Plays” 92). Johnson uses this strategy in her title choice but also in her incorporation of music. I will expand the definition of irony to a strategy that contrasts the conventional meaning through both discourse and music.

The first example of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s use of irony is to be found in her title choice. Johnson uses this strategy to “create expressive space to represent the experience of a Black family confronting the lynching of one of its members” (Stephens, “Johnson's Lynching Plays” 92). She creates certain expectations by opting for a title like A Sunday Morning in the South. At first, this title suggests a peaceful, pastoral morning in the southern country, but instead of meeting such expectations, Johnson uses this expressive space to portray the destroying impact the violence of lynching has on Sue Jones’ family.

During this act of disturbance, music, as a double layer of irony, enters the stage. As already said before, Johnson was a versatile artist; not only did she write poetry and plays but she also composed music (Stephens, “Johnson's Lynching Plays” 93). Her interest in music is not solely reflected in her study of music at the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio, but also in the fact that she wrote and copyrighted 24 songs between 1898 and 1959 (Stephens, “Johnson's Lynching Plays” 93). She uses this “expressivity of music” (Stephens, “Johnson's Lynching
Plays” 93) to contrast the violence of the lynching mob and the reactions and expectations of black households, representing the black community in general.

In the black church version of *A Sunday Morning in the South*, the spiritual songs enter the domestic sphere of Sue Jones. The choir in the nearby church is singing “Amazing Grace”, “Let the Light from the Lighthouse Shine on Me”, “Alas And Did My Savior Bleed” and “Lord Have Mercy Over Me”. Each song accompanies a dialogue and serves as a contrast to the interior action (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 666). The structure of the dialogue, from the peaceful family breakfast, to the sudden accusing and arrest of Tom Grigg, to the following dreadful news of his lynching to eventually the outcry for mercy by Sue Jones, is contradicted with auditory elements. Songs as “Amazing Grace” or “Let the Light from the Lighthouse Shine on Me” might evoke different emotional responses from the audience. For some such songs of hope and religion while Tom is facing death might have a soothing or healing effect, while for others, this might enrage them (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 666).

The question raised here is, whether “religion or spiritual hope is an opiate of an oppressed people or a source of undying strength and survival in the face of oppression” (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 666). This sceptical approach towards this religious matter, which goes against the conventional meaning and annotation religious songs have, is a last example of her use of dramatic irony, that distinguishes her as a playwright (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 666).

In general, it can be said that Georgia Douglas Johnson’s folk-inspired realism “negotiates the area between actual history and the stage” (Krasner, “Beautiful Pageant” 159). What is seen on the stage draws on real-life experiences, but at the same time, these events are appropriated for the stage, to trigger the desired effect among the spectators. The audience is presented with a view on normal black life that is immediately shown to suffer under the threat of lynching. The tragic ending of the play stimulates a feeling of pity and unfairness in the spectator’s emotional state (Stephens, “Johnson’s Lynching Plays” 90). This emotional response is stimulated by her use of irony, both rhetorically, by contrasting the content of her play to the title, as auditory, through the use of spiritual songs. By creating such a drama that is concentrated on the emotional power it contains, Johnson shows her innovating artistic approach and proves her innovative status as a playwright (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 666).
6.2.3 Georgia Douglas Johnson in the ‘Art or Propaganda’ Debate

As already stated, two important black scholars of the 1920s, W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke “soon agreed to disagree” (Hatch 1). On the one side of the debate, Du Bois saw it as the task of African American playwrights to teach and prepare ‘black audiences for the racial and political struggles that lay ahead” of them (Hatch 1). The other position in this debate is occupied by Alain Locke, he did not agree on this idea of theatre as a means of “preaching politics” (Hatch 1). He saw theatre as “an art to woo its audiences into appreciating the beauty of its African roots.” (Hatch 1).

At first sight, lynching plays seem to occupy a straightforward position in this debate, as they occupy an important role in the pursuit of defying racial inequality. Judging from this perspective, the genre of the lynching play belongs to the position represented by W.E.B. Du Bois: propaganda. The previous classification of Grimké’s play Rachel, however, proved to be far less evident. This example of a lynching play, although strongly linked to its socio-historical context and implication was evaluated from its “artistic criteria” (Krasner, “Allegory and Mourning” 64), showing how the genre of the lynching play has been, unjustifiably, overlooked for its artistic value. Similarly, even though Johnson in her A Sunday Morning in the South uses theatre as a means of protest, which is in line with her role as an activist and participant in the national black theatre movement, she, like Grimké, simultaneously appeals to the opposite side of the debate.

The specific ethnic group of the African Americans, to which both Grimké and Johnson belong, is not only defined by being an American, their African roots play an important part in their artistic expression. The use of music and dance is at the roots of the African American’s enslaved ancestors. In Locke’s idea of theatre as “an art to woo its audiences into appreciating the beauty of its African roots” (Hatch 1), I believe Johnson’s incorporation of music places her within the African American tradition of being an expressive culture, with this aspect of expression being linked to its African heritage.

If Georgia Douglas Johnson were to be classified solely on the ‘propaganda’ side of the debate, her artistic talent and strategies to go beyond locating her play in the lynching play genre would be underrated. In her use of the stage as a place for social protest, she demonstrates a unique approach to examine the complexities ‘race’ represents in America, an approach in which she subtly draws on her African roots.
7. Conclusion

In their lynching plays, Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson portray the horror and injustice brought upon African American household in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century in a white male racist society. Traditional family structures are deconstructed and reconfigured, which demonstrates the need for “alternative domestic arrangements” under racist oppression (Jansen 400). Embodying traditional ideals result in vulnerability and exposure to the danger posed by the lynching mob.

In her play \textit{Rachel}, Grimké throws back the accepted gender ideology of the white dominant society by showing the vulnerability of black motherhood and therefore the impossibility of a traditional “husband-wife unit” that is exemplified by the Rachel’s refusal of John’s marriage proposal (Jansen 400). An alternative is represented by the non-traditional father-mother unit formed by Rachel and her brother Tom. They take on roles of non-biological parents by becoming liminal figures between an uncle and a father and on the other hand between being a child and an adult-like older sister.

By turning to such alternative “configurations of family”, Grimké shows the will to protest against lynching by subverting the racism of the dominant culture (Jansen 400). Through creating a new model of the domestic sphere, Grimké frustrates goals intended by the white lynching mob. Besides frustrating the objectives of the white lynching mob, \textit{Rachel} also appeals to the female part of the dominant white society. By questioning the “idyllic motherhood” and presenting this Madonna-inspired embodiment of motherhood in an African American household Grimké tries to appeal to an interracial sisterhood. She illustrates the white character of this ideal of motherhood and how the desirability of becoming a mother as a black mother is stained by the constant fear of losing a child.

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s \textit{A Sunday Morning in the South} appeals to this same ideal of motherhood. Her character Sue Jones demonstrates the doomed position of the African American mother that Rachel refuses to become. Besides motherhood, a second ideal of womanhood is reconfigured: female characteristic of ‘passivity’. She demonstrates the impossibility of passivity, submissiveness and acceptance of male dominance, as it was demonstrated in the voicelessness of the white woman brought in on the arm of the officer. Because, if she were to have done absolutely nothing, her grandson would not have stood any chance. The weakness of this white woman is contrasted to the (physical and verbal) strength that lies within Sue Jones, despite her impaired body.
Johnson tackles ideals of womanhood, not only because it represents a woman-centred view, as is typical of the genre of the lynching play in general, but more specifically – similar to Grimké’s approach – to target a white female audience. If they were to see their involvement by not resisting such white male ideologies, black and white women could work together, similar to Grimké’s approach who tried to obtain a sisterhood regardless what colour of skin through appealing to motherhood.

Grimké and Johnson tackle similar problematic and ideals in their plays by appropriating the current dominant gender ideology of the period that idealized motherhood in order to demonstrate how white womanhood and gender ideology was not sustainable for black women, nor for the twentieth century in general since white women (especially in Johnson’s play) are presented on a parallel level of oppression under the control of this white, male-dominated ideology. Both dramatists, however, apply different dramatic techniques to communicate this message. Angelina Weld Grimké turns to melodrama in her play Rachel, while Georgia Douglas Johnson opts for a kind of ‘folk realism’. As the analysis of their use of dramatic techniques illustrated, that their use of dramatic techniques strengthens their message of protest in the domestic sphere and define their position in the ‘art or propaganda’ debate.

In Rachel’s second and third act, Grimké innovates the conventions of melodrama by working towards a different process of characterization and an unconventional ending. This is also the moment of change in the domestic/gender ideology. She is not merely voicing the injustice brought upon the African Americans, but expresses her individuality and talent as an artist through her innovation, and so she steps beyond this idea of creating ‘mere propaganda’ that was criticized by Alain Locke. He argued that artists ought to express their “own individuality, and in doing so, they have to communicate something of universal human appeal” (Carter, Stanford.edu). Besides expressing her individual voice as an artist, Grimké also addresses a universal matter, one of motherhood, in order to create such a ‘universal human appeal’ by making women sisters beyond the colour of their skins. In this way, Angelina Weld Grimké defines herself somewhere in between the two positions of the ‘art or propaganda’ question.

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s folk-inspired realism represents the audience with a view on normal black life that is immediately shown to suffer under the threat of lynching. By choosing not to give her play a happy ending, lynching is shown as an unresolved problem. Tom’s death inspires a feeling of pity and unfairness in the spectator’s emotional state (Stephens, “Johnson’s Lynching Plays” 90). The emotional responses triggered in A Sunday
Morning in the South are stimulated by Johnson’s use of irony, not only rhetorically, but also auditory, through the use of music. By creating a drama that is concentrated on the contradictions of expectations and expressivity of music as strategies of irony, Johnson does not only show her innovating artistic approach that enhances her message on racism but at the same time positions herself in the debate of Locke and Du Bois in a position similar to Angelina Weld Grimké (Stephens, “Racial Violence and Representation” 666).

At first sight, lynching plays might have appeared to be easily classified in the ‘art or propaganda’ debate, as they occupy an important role in the pursuit of defying racial inequality. The genre of the lynching play in general seems to belong to the position represented by W.E.B. Du Bois. But, as an analysis of Grimké’s play Rachel proved, such a classification proved to be far less evident. The same goes for Johnson. Even though she uses theatre as a means of protest in her play A Sunday Morning in the South, she simultaneously appeals to the opposite side of the debate. Her African roots play an important part in her artistic expression. The use of music and dance is at the roots of the African American’s enslaved ancestors, and Johnson’s incorporation of music creates a link with this African expressive tradition. In this way, Johnson, besides turning to the universal appeal of motherhood and womanhood as in Rachel, also incorporates Locke’s idea of theatre as “an art to woo its audiences into appreciating the beauty of its African roots” (Hatch 1), and positions herself, even more definite than Grimké, in between both sides of the ‘art or propaganda’ debate.

If Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Weld Grimké were to be analysed solely in terms of how they fit into the genre of the lynching play and its typical thematic of the woman-centred domestic sphere, both would have been classified solely on the ‘propaganda’ side of the debate. I believe that the artistic value, dramatic technique and innovation of such lynching plays have been often undervalued because focus has largely been on the ‘collective’, the contribution to the genre ‘as a whole’ and to the battle against racism, rather than on the individual contributions of these influential female dramatists. Their artistic talent and strategies, however, go beyond fitting in and making up the genre of the lynching play. In their use of the stage as a place for social protest, they demonstrate a unique approach and creative use of dramatic devices to examine the complexities ‘race’ represents in the early twentieth century of America.

The complexity of race and the theme of the female struggling in a domestic sphere, scarred by racism, is still a very relevant issue in contemporary drama. It is a theme that has been repeatedly reinterpreted by dramatists following Grimké and Johnson, for example by
Lorraine Hansberry in her play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Her play illustrates similar approaches to race and racism. The fact that her play, which was the first play by an African American female dramatist to appear on Broadway, has been reappearing on it numerous times, even winning the price “Best Revival of a Play” (Septiyan 10) with actors like Denzel Washington, shows that the contemporary audience still has a reality, in which people still encounter racial tension and a need to voice protest and disappointment. As long as there are people who dream of how it could be, that we are not where we need to be in this world, there will be relevance in a play like Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, and especially relevance to plays, like the ones of Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Weld Grimké that introduced this unique approach to theatre as social protest.
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