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**A Proposal to Research the Artifact “The Trial of Dr. Beck” by Hughes Allison**

**Introduction**

The artifact, “The Trial of Dr. Beck” by Hughes Allison, written in the year 1937 explores the central theme of discrimination between skin colors. The play was an instant success when it first premiered in 1937 on the Federal Theater. “The Trial of Dr. Beck” became the only federal play at the time to be picked up and moved into Broadway. This feat can be attributed to themes and subjects Allison choose to focus on such as religion, miscegenation, and intraracial discrimination. These subject were not known to the other black playwrights of the time.(Abramson, Doris E, pg 51).The play is about the Trial of Dr. Beck, a light skinned African American who is suspected of murdering is darker skinned wife whom he does not love. The trial’s panel consists of a white judge as well as an all white Jury. The play touches upon the injustices in the judicial system before the civil rights movement. However, the play also includes racial segregation based on skin color within the African American community. (Miller, Jeanne-Marie A, 84) One specific topic the play includes is Eugenics, the science of improving the human race. In the play, Dr. Beck strongly believes in the importance of being lighter skinned and that people with light skin has a higher social and intellectual standard than those with darker skin. (Miller, Jeanne-Marie A, 85) In this assignment, I will discuss the intraracial racial discrimination within the African American community as a microcosm of the larger racial segregation of African Americans. My goal is to examine the intraracial struggles within the African American community and how has it changed after the Civil Rights Movement. I will also include the physiological effects of segregation of the oppressed group and how it changes their views of themselves and the belief that being light skinned translates to a higher intellectual and social standing.

The visual exhibit will contain pictures, artifacts, and documentations from the Billops-Hatch Archive and the Langmuir Photograph Collection at Emory University’s Rose Library. Using these artifacts, I wish to portray daily life in the African American Community before the start of the Civil Rights Movement. I also wish to provide my audience with the evidence that show the discrimination within the the African American community.

**Statement of Purpose**

The Trial of Dr. Beck is a play that centers around racial discrimination before the Civil Rights Movement. With the Judicial System as its main setting, the author brings important views that emphasises the injustices of racism. The play’s main character, Dr. Beck, is an “olive or light skinned” African American who just graduated from medical school. He believes that being light skinned means having a higher social and intellectual standing over people with darker skin. His wife, who he is jealous of and hates, is a successful and “dark skinned” entrepreneur. Dr. Beck is on trial for murdering his wife. All of the evidence points to him as he is jealous of the success of his “inferior” wife as well as wanting his children to be lighter skinned. The play’s main theme focuses on the racial segregation and discrimination between not only Whites and Blacks, but the tone of skin colors as well. (Miller, Jeanne-Marie A, 85)

The play is important as it describes the life and injustices as an African American before the Civil Rights Movement. While discrimination is one of the big themes, eugenics is also brought up in the play as a central story point. Eugenics, the science that improves humanity based on genetics, is an important study Dr. Beck believes in. He published a book stating that if a person as lighter skin than another, he should also have higher intelligence. This connects to the fact that Whites are seen to have a higher social standing than African Americans. This way of thinking has affected the way people in the 1930’s judgement and stereotypes based on skin color.(Abramson, Doris E, pg 45)The importance of this theme is to show discrimination not only between races but also between people with different skin color with the same ethnicity. It shows that before the introduction of the Civil Rights Movement, many African Americans accepted the fact they are an inferior race to the Europeans.(Abramson, Doris E, pg 44) Using the exhibit, I will conclude that the cause of internal prejudice between “lighter” and “darker” colored African Americans is caused by the external racism and discrimination they receive from the European American. I will also bring to the light the destruction of intraracial struggle with the rising of the Civil Rights Movement.

**Objective**

Using the theme in “The Trial of Dr. Beck” by Allison Hughes to show the effects of the Civil Rights Movement by comparing the values and mentality of the African American communities before and after the Civil Rights Movement. The African American community was split between groups which accepted the idea of a superior race and those who wanted to fight for equality. (Nelson, Emmanuel S, pg 121) “The Trial of Dr. Beck” depicts the desire for African Americans to have darker skins and straighter hair. Many believe that they were truly an inferior race and the determinant of the social hierarchy is skin colour. This created a large internal struggle between the African American Community as depicted in the play. However, after the Civil Rights Movement, fight for equality provided a idea for African Americans to rally around. While segregation still exists today in many forms, the internal struggle between African Americans based on skin color has disappeared.

**Plan of Action**

**Artifacts**

***“The Trial of Dr. Beck” by Hughes Allison***

My objective is to reveal the causes of struggle between African American communities and compare the mentally of American Americans before and after the Civil Rights Movement. I will achieve this objective by using specific criticisms of the play “The Trial of Dr. Beck” as well as inferring from the themes of the play. I will support the themes by providing real accounts of discrimination between African American communities by providing artifacts and pictures from the Rose Library and Langmuir photograph Collection.

The Photos that I will be using for my visual exhibit are from the Langmuir photograph collection. The list of photos is:

***African American holding Panama hats, posing on a sidewalk***

[MSS1218\_B010\_I076, Photograph, Robert Langmuir African American photograph Collection,] Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

***An Old West courtroom : including judge, jury, lawyers and observers***

[MSS1218\_B021\_I089, Photograph, Robert Langmuir African American photograph Collection,] Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University

***Woman with earrings lying in cloth with hair spread up***

[MSS1218\_B013\_I089, Photograph, Robert Langmuir African American photograph Collection,] Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

***Post-graduate class of Provident Hospital, Chicago, watching doctor and nurse perform surgery***

[MSS1218\_B015\_I063, Photograph, Robert Langmuir African American photograph Collection,] Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Other than the primary sources listed above, I will be using secondary sources such as online articles and books to further reinforce and reaffirm my claims. The secondary sources will include information on the author, Hughes Allison, and the play “The Trail of Dr. Beck”. These sources will be accessed through online databases. My two main secondary sources are two book that describe the history and culture of black playwrights in the 1930. Both of them include ten pages to a chapter on the play “The Trial of Dr. Beck”. The two books I am using are “Liberty Censored: Black Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project” and “The Great White Way: Critics and the First Black Playwrights on Broadway.” These two sources will be used to reinforce the theme of my exhibit as well as provide me with insights and criticisms of the play from both white and African American writers that that time. Next I will be using two journal, “Successful Federal Theatre Dramas by Black Playwrights” and “Out of Obscurity American Theatre” to provide information on the history of the author and the play. These two sources will mostly be used to try to connect my primary sources to the play. The last secondary source is “Ethnic American Literature: An Encyclopedia for Students”. This book contains a few pages of information of the way things were back in the 1930’s and the time period the play was written in. This will allow me to find other artifacts that connect to my primary artifact.

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**Annotated Bibliography**

Abramson, Doris E. "The Great White Way: Critics and the First Black Playwrights on Broadway."*Educational Theatre Journal* 28.1 (1976):pp. 45-55.

This book contains commentary and criticism made by both White and African American authors on the importance of Hughes Allison play “The Trial of Dr. Beck”. It contains important information such as the play was one of the first to introduce an “Upper Moneyed Class” of African Americans in harlem as well as a focus on intraracial discrimination. The author explains that the play’s central theme, intraracial discrimination as a rare topic people discussed back then as the African American community was split between believing in skin color privileges and believing in equal rights. It was commented on by people and newspapers such as the “New York Post”, giving an insight on how each media source interpreted the play. The most important part of this article is an in depth analyses on the two problems Allison Hughes proposed in this play by an editor of the “Times”.

Miller, Jeanne-Marie A. "SUCCESSFUL FEDERAL THEATRE DRAMAS BY BLACK PLAYWRIGHTS." *The Black Scholar* 10.10 (1979):pp. 79-85.

This resource is a collection of Scholarly articles that analyzes the play “The Trial of Dr. Beck”. It shows important themes such as intraracial struggles. It also dives into how people believed “Lighter Skinned Negroes” have better chances at advancing themselves economically and socially than their “Darker Skinned” counterparts. The author also talks about how “the white’s destruction of the black’s self image,” which is an important theme of my exhibit. As my theme is focused on how the civil rights movement changed the black’s self image, by showing my audience before and after, this article provides me the information needed to show my audience the situation before the civil rights movement.

Nelson, Emmanuel S. *Ethnic American Literature: An Encyclopedia for Students*. N.p.: Greenwood, 2015.

This book analyzes the response of the community on the play. It shows the reason of the plays four week success on Broadway. It provides examples of how the play informs that the African American Community at the time is broken and need to reform their self image. The play also challenges the social hierarchy based on skin color, which was extremely uncommon in such a successful play. This book provides small bits of information and is more of a secondary source to back up my thesis.

Nesmith, N. Graham . “Out of Obscurity” *American Theatre* **(**21:8), 22 08 2004, pp. 134-137.

This document explored the effect black playwrights had on their community during the 1930’s. It also analyzed the legacy of “The Trial of Dr. Beck” on future plays and playwrights. This document is important as it allows me to learn more about my author and the reasons for writing this play. It also provides information on how the play changed the way people viewed theater in the 1930’s as “Trial of Dr. Beck” was one of the first plays to include a controversial theme like intraracial discrimination.

Peterson, Bernard L. *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2001.

This book is a collection of profiles on African American stage performers and playwrights. It includes half a page about the life and achievement of my author Hughes Allison. While this book does not provide specific information and criticisms on the play, it provides background information on my author which can be used in the introduction of my exhibit. I plan to use this to learn more about my author and to connect his life experiences and other achievement to the success of his play “The Trial of Dr. Beck.”

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