A Soldier's Play Study Guide

Summary

A Soldier's Play, which won the Pulitzer Prize in drama in 1982, is a murder mystery in which Charles Fuller examines many social issues and poses provocative questions. The play won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, with a citation for best American play. The screenplay adaptation, *A Soldier's Story* (1984), which Fuller wrote, garnered an Academy Award nomination for adapted screenplay.

A play in two acts, *A Soldier's Play* examines and evaluates the causes of oppression of African Americans and the obstacles to their advancement. Unlike Fuller's two other award-winning plays, *The Brownsville Raid* (1976) and *Zooman and the Sign* (1979), *A Soldier's Play* has no particular, actual historical source. The play very realistically describes, however, the complex social issues that pervade his work: institutional, systemic racism in the U.S. Army during World War II; race relations; black genocide and the search for the meaning and definition of blackness in America; the meaning of democracy and the place of African Americans in it; and what it means to be black in a racially biased society.

Outside a segregated U.S. Army camp in Tynin, Louisiana, during World War II, a tyrannical technical sergeant, Vernon Waters, is murdered. The local brass has succeeded in playing down the murder until a Howard-trained attorney, Captain Davenport, is sent by Washington, D.C., to investigate the case. Initially assumed to be racially motivated, the murder's prime suspects are the white townspeople. The Ku Klux Klan is the first suspect, then two white officers. Davenport's thorough investigation, conducted in an atmosphere of racial hostility, mistrust on all sides, and condescension, leads to a surprising discovery of the murderer and the motives for the murder. The murderer is P.F.C. Peterson, the least-likely suspect.

Strong, outspoken, and opinionated, Peterson faces off with Waters, whose militant agenda for black destiny causes the innocent, naïve C. J. to commit suicide. Water's heinous, sinister, and obsessive master plan to cleanse the black race of "geeches" such as C. J. meets its match in Peterson's own calculated perspective of how to refashion the black image. Mutual hatred eventually leads to murder, not before, however, Waters realizes the flaw in his inhumane master plan, grieves his obsession with blackness, and challenges the source of his misdirected self-justifying posture.

In focusing on the character of Waters rather than on the murder or the murderer, Fuller is able to engage and address the major causes and effects of the race problem, particularly the psychological. The play indicts all of the characters—white and black, except C. J.—for racially motivated violence informed by pervasive prejudice and dangerous stereotypical assumptions.

Summary

A Soldier's Play is set on an Army base at Fort Neal, Louisiana, in 1944, near the end of World War II. A black soldier, Master Sergeant Vernon C. Waters, has been murdered at night on a country road near the base. The black soldiers and their white officers believe that the killing was racially motivated and probably the work of the Ku Klux Klan. In order to avoid tension between the black soldiers on the base and the local civilians, Colonel Nivens, the base commander, has not ordered a full investigation; the murder is not given the same kind of attention it would have been if a white soldier had been the victim. Captain Taylor, his subordinate, believes justice should be served, however, and he has reported the killing to Army headquarters. Consequently, an officer is sent from Washington, D.C., to investigate the murder.

The Department of the Army dispatches a bright Howard University-trained military attorney, Captain Richard Davenport, who happens to be an oddity for the time, a black officer. Both Colonel Nivens and Captain Taylor are worried about how local whites will react to Davenport. Nivens is convinced that the killers were white, and he assumes that Davenport will go after these racist murderers with a vengeance, causing problems in the white community. Nivens, however, does not understand the man Washington has sent.

Davenport's investigation is thorough, meticulous, and fair. He discovers that Waters was a hard taskmaster, feared by most of his men and despised by some of them. The story is revealed in flashbacks in which Waters alienates his men by picking on a well-liked, good-natured country boy named C. J. Memphis, whom he sends to the brig on a trumped-up charge. C. J. is held there and intimidated by the sergeant. Waters is embarrassed by C. J. and his Uncle Tom ways. C. J. is a gifted musician and also the best batter on the company's baseball team; he is a walking, talking stereotype of a talented, self-deprecating black man, and Waters hates the type. He frames C. J. to get him thrown into the brig so he can intimidate him and change his ways.

Yet the physically strong C. J. is psychologically weak. Driven to desperation in prison, C. J. commits suicide. Waters, who has a conscience after all, suffers guilt for what C. J. has done and turns to drink. His presumption is his tragic flaw; it causes his downfall and, ultimately, his death.

Gradually, Davenport begins to suspect that Waters might have been murdered by his own men, who blamed him for the death of C. J. The team falls apart and loses its chance to be the first all-black team to play the New York Yankees during an exhibition. Waters loses the respect of his men and then his own self-respect. Although Davenport suspects that Waters might have been murdered by his own men, Captain Taylor is pressing him to prosecute two white officers, Lieutenant Byrd and Captain Wilcox, who were placed at the scene of the crime shortly before the killing took place.

The issue becomes one of justice, not race, though the theme of racial justice is an important secondary one. Davenport is a good and dedicated lawyer who follows the evidence to where it takes him, discouraging though that may be. By the end of the play, one of the culprits has been apprehended; in a final monologue, the audience is told that the murderer will be captured a week later in Alabama, leaving the impression that justice will be done in military circles.

Yet there are other, larger social problems that are left unresolved. As Davenport's final monologue makes clear at the end of the play, the entire all-black company is doomed, even though they have won the right to fight the Germans in Europe. Davenport explains at the conclusion that the men of the company, the "entire outfit—officers and enlisted men—was wiped out in the Ruhr Valley during a German advance."

Moreover, Sergeant Waters is honored as a hero; he is believed to be the first black soldier from his hometown to die in action, because his death was wrongly reported. Thus, although the play celebrates a

victory for the black soldiers, who win the right to fight for their country, the story ends with an ironic denouement that is devastating. The moral victory and the resolution of justice are made to seem hollow by the final monologue, which was removed from the film version. Fuller was given the opportunity to reinvent his drama for the screen and, in doing so, managed to clarify the message, even though the tone of the conclusion was substantially changed.

Summary: Act I Summary

The play opens with the murder of Sergeant Waters. The audience sees Waters on stage; he is drunk. Immediately there are two shots, but the audience never sees who fires the weapon. In the next scene, five black soldiers are being searched for weapons and they are confined to their barracks, presumably until the risk of a revenge killing ends. Captain Davenport appears on stage and addresses the audience in a monologue that explains why a black lawyer has been sent to a southern army base to investigate a murder. There is immediate conflict when the company captain, Taylor, learns that Davenport is black. Taylor warns Davenport that he will get no cooperation and that no one in authority will allow a black officer to arrest a white man, if the murderer turns out to be white. Taylor also tells Davenport that white officers at the post will not accept a black man of equal rank, and that in his experience, blacks are subordinates without education. Davenport insists on performing his assignment and sets up to interview the men in Waters's company.

The first man interviewed is Wilkie, who tells Davenport that Waters put him in jail and reduced his rank after Wilkie was caught drunk on duty. Wilkie also tells Davenport about the black baseball team and how the black soldiers beat the white soldiers at baseball. From Wilkie, the audience learns that Waters, who thought southern blacks lazy and shiftless, was especially kind to C.J. C.J. was not only good with a baseball bat, but he sang and played the guitar. But the reality is that Waters only pretended to like C.J. In truth, Waters had no use for games or for southern blacks, whom he thought were playing into white stereotypes of black men. Wilkie tries to humanize Waters when he relates the sergeant's hopes for his two children.

The next soldier to be interviewed is Peterson, who tells Davenport that he and Waters came to blows and that Waters beat him after Peterson challenged Waters's authority. In the midst of talking with Peterson, Taylor sends for Davenport. When Davenport reports to Taylor's office, he is told that Taylor has filed papers to stop the investigation. Taylor also reveals that the night Waters was murdered, he has a confrontation with two white officers. One of the officers beat Waters severely before being pulled off by the second man. When Davenport accuses Taylor of covering up a black man's murder by white officers, Taylor replies that both men had faultless alibis. The act ends with Davenport pledging to prove the white officers guilty.

Summary: Act II Summary

Act II opens with another monologue by Captain Davenport, who tells the audience that he has gone to Colonel Nivens and received permission to question the two white officers involved. When he finishes this speech, Davenport begins questioning the next man, Henson. Henson relates how C.J. was framed by someone who placed a gun under his bed. When Waters told C.J. that he was under arrest, the young soldier attacked Waters, who then arrested C.J. and charged him with attacking a superior officer during time of war. The men discuss the arrest and decide to go to the captain and tell him that they saw someone sneak into the barracks and plant a gun under C.J.'s bed. When Davenport interviews Cobb, he is told that Cobb visited C.J. in jail and that the young man was severely depressed by the confinement. The day after the visit, C.J. commited suicide. The next interview is with Byrd and Wilcox. Taylor is also present. The atmosphere is filled with tension, but eventually Davenport learns that both Wilcox and Bryd have been cleared when their weapons passed ballistics tests.

At this point, Davenport goes back to interview Wilkie a second time and learns that it was Wilkie who planted the evidence that resulted in C.J.'s arrest. Wilkie also reveals that Waters hated southern blacks and thought they made all blacks look foolish. At that moment, Ellis enters to announce that the company has orders and will be leaving for Europe within 48 hours. Davenport arrests Wilkie and in the next moment learns that Smalls is in the stockade accused of going AWOL. When Davenport confronts Smalls, he confesses that he watched Peterson murder Waters. In a short monologue that follows this revelation, Davenport tells the audience that Peterson was arrested a week later. He also provides a brief follow-up to the men's lives and the audience learns that the entire company was killed during a German advance.

Themes: Themes and Meanings

A Soldier's Play explores the corrosive effects of racism by focusing on the tragedy of one man, Sergeant Vernon C. Waters. Although he has distinguished himself in World War I and has risen in the ranks by his own effort and against an entrenched racism, his vision of himself extends far beyond his own career. His action reflects another purpose, one grander than simple personal success: Waters has taken upon himself the role of savior of all African Americans in a racist society. Like Hamlet, Waters takes it upon himself to set things right. Waters's sinister side, however, is that he attempts to eliminate any black he considers inferior. By dramatizing the story of Waters, Fuller creates a powerfully moving tragedy.

Waters's identity as tragic hero is revealed to the audience slowly, through Fuller's use of the mystery plot vehicle. The investigating officer, Captain Richard Davenport, conducts a series of interviews in which characters summarize incidents involving Waters. Complicating the understanding of Waters is the fact that the soldiers interviewed themselves do not understand him. Wilkie, the first soldier interviewed, respects Waters because he earned his rank and is faithful to his wife and children; the second, Peterson, despises Waters because he sees him as a black bigot. The whites are even more divided on Waters: Captain Taylor thinks of him as a simpleton who does his job adequately, but the two bigots, Byrd and Wilcox, are threatened by his "uppityness." Racial stereotypes continually interfere with the characters' perceptions. The audience must infer Waters's character with Davenport as the guide; Davenport acts as a chorus, explaining the action while being involved in it.

The actual Waters, as disclosed in composite, is a failed idealist, a messianic African American who wants the best for his race but is uncertain about how to achieve it. "I don't intend to have our race cheated out of its place of honor and respect in *this* war," he tells Wilkie. Waters's tragedy is a consequence of his terrible miscalculation, his fateful error in judgment. Because he is convinced that "the only thing that can move the race is power," and that empowerment means becoming white, he chooses to deny his own racial identity and emulate white racists. This choice, however, commits him to a power dynamics that conceives only of the oppressed and the oppressor. If he accepts the assumptions of black inferiority from a racist society, his purpose is doomed to failure. Unable to relate to his men as brothers, he transforms them into objects to be rescued; Waters willingly destroys their self-respect and integrity in order to save them. His vision is clouded by his purpose until the end of his life. His own words "They still hate you!" begin and end the play, testifying to his own recognition that he has failed both himself and his race.

Waters is a sympathetic character because he suffers deeply over the wrongs committed against him and his race. More sensitive than other characters, he has withheld his rage, choosing instead to direct it, he supposes, against a vicious system that denies him his humanity. Ironically, his actions redound against him and his men, for his efforts to inspire them to achievement only alienate them and make them despise him. Even more important, he is alienated from himself; as C. J. says, "I feel kinda sorry for him myself. Any man ain't sure where he belongs must be in a whole lotta pain." C. J., whom Waters victimizes relentlessly, knows Waters best of all. Waters tells C. J., "Them Nazis ain't all crazy—a whole lot of people just can't fit into where things seem to be goin'—like you, C. J. The black race can't afford you no more." His unconscious use of a

mercantile vocabulary, as if some human beings were more "costly" than others, summarizes where he went wrong in trying to help African Americans.

C. J. provides an alternative mode of consciousness to Waters's dichotomous vision of the races. Waters hates C. J. because C. J. represents what Waters thinks blacks must abandon to achieve success: southern roots, African American spiritualism, and the blues (Waters himself listens only to symphonies). The play shows that C. J. accepts his own identity; he is unashamed of his dialect, his music, his beliefs, and his background. Fuller places C. J. at the center of historical African American self-expression by making him a blues singer, and his songs inevitably draw a response from the company. His baseball heroics also function as an affirmation of community, for he is a true team player. In C. J., then, Fuller advocates pluralism, the acceptance of diversity as good in itself and as the only solution to the "madness of race in America."

The murderer, Peterson, is a fully developed character, though he appears onstage only momentarily. Peterson, like the other soldiers, misunderstands Waters as the "new boss—shoutin', orderin' people aroun'." Peterson does not see that Waters is a reflection of his own hidden self. Although Waters is equally demanding of everyone, it is Peterson who kills him, for Peterson senses his connection with Waters. Like Waters, Peterson tries to conceal his southern roots, preferring to call Hollywood, not Alabama, his home; his ambition to rise in the Army (his early enlistment reveals his illusions) mirrors Waters's own. Finally, Peterson, like Waters, insults C. J. "Justice," Peterson says as he kills Waters. The murder, though, is his symbolic self-destruction, Peterson executing his own despised, hidden identity.

The white Captain Taylor also presents a complex, though economical, character study. Taylor represents the white liberal, pragmatic in his pursuit of justice. His unconscious racial prejudice is revealed when he meets Davenport, since he admits he cannot accept blacks in positions of authority. Thus, Taylor assumes that Davenport will fail in his investigation, and that he should allow Taylor to take control. The play suggests that liberal pragmatists, though well-meaning, may be as much a hindrance to racial justice as southern bigots are.

As chorus, Davenport represents an ideal in the play. He is an oracular commentator, narrating the action from a detached and Olympian perspective, but he also understands C. J.'s dislocation, Waters's misguided quest, and Peterson's rage. He derives self-definition from his profession, but he is not limited by it; he symbolizes in his character the acceptance of diversity that the play itself promotes.

Fuller's use of the detective form to dramatize a tragedy is itself worthy of consideration. The detective genre usually represents crime as an aberration in a well-ordered society (often the crime occurs in an isolated setting). The solution to the crime, a result of the detective's rationality applied to evidence, assumes the restoration of a benign social order, and justice reasserted reassures the audience.

Fuller, however, reverses the typical detective-story pattern. The crime, Waters's murder, is in fact a logical extension of a society that is itself corrupt and unjust. That men must suffer for the color of their skins renders ironic America's war against Hitler's Final Solution and Tojo's race-consciousness. Although the setting is isolated, Fuller makes clear that racism is institutionalized throughout America.

Fuller's use of the stage is also highly inventive. The entire set resembles a courtroom, implying that the play is in reality an interrogation of American justice. Dominating the set is a poster of boxing champion Joe Louis—as a private. The implication is that even black superstars have a very low ceiling in the segregated Army.

Themes: Themes and Meanings

Like many of his other works, Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* shows the devastating effect racism has both psychologically and physically on its victims and perpetrators. Fuller's goal is to expose both overt racist behaviors and beliefs, and those that are so ingrained in the culture that they are taken for granted.

In an interview with George Goodman of *The New York Times*, Fuller describes how the themes in his work (and the work of other African American writers in the early 1980's) were shifting from "focusing on our problems with whites, to matters involving blacks as human beings." Instead of depicting simple confrontations between blacks and whites, Fuller was "concerned about how racism affects blacks in their dealing with each other rather than as victims of a larger plot by whites. I want to explore the internal psychological effects of racism."

Fuller is also concerned about showing black men as complex humans instead of simplistic stereotypes. As the audience sees from the various interviews with the other characters, Waters is a black man with a Messiah complex, determined to save blacks from a racist American society; yet he is willing to sacrifice some of them to accomplish this goal. In the process he denies his own culture and loses his identity. C. J. is a threat to him because, by maintaining strong connections to his cultural traditions and music, C. J. maintains his identity in the face of adversity. As C. J. says about Waters, "I feel kinda' sorry for him myself. Any man ain't sure where he belongs, must be in a whole lotta' of pain." Fuller, in a 1999 interview with N. Graham Nesmith, notes thatMy concern throughout my work has been to depict African-Americans, especially African-American men, not as the stereotypes we have seen for years, but as we see ourselves. We live lives that are interesting, exciting. My struggle all these years has been to do nothing more than to change how people see us, and in doing so perhaps change how we see ourselves.

Additional Themes: Themes

Alienation
The alienation that black soldiers feel is best demonstrated by the baseball games that are played between white and blacks. The black soldiers view the baseball games as one area where they can prove superiority over white soldiers. The blacks are treated as subservient and subordinate underlings. They are not given the opportunity to be real soldiers; instead they function as little more than servants, handymen, garbage collectors, and gardeners. When these same black soldiers meet white soldiers on the baseball field, the game makes them equal, and when the black team wins, they are superior. Black soldiers emerge from the games knowing that they will be alienated and punished for winning, but their victory makes the alienation more tolerable.

Anger & Hatred
Although he disguises it, Waters really hates what he is—a black man, a black soldier in the army. He is so consumed with self-hatred that he turns it upon the men in his company. Waters is given power over other men; it is a power given by whites and largely controlled by whites, but Waters thinks that if he can do the job well, that he can change the white perception of the black man. So he is harder on his men and crueler than a white officer would be, and he tries to eliminate those blacks that he thinks would be unable to compete in a white man's world. Waters sees black survival in becoming white. He hates his own black race and his history, and he turns that hatred upon his men, ultimately being responsible for the death of one of them.

Betrayal
Waters betrays his men, especially C.J., when he plants evidence that implicates the young man in a crime. The sole purpose in framing C.J. is to remove him from the company. But Waters has befriended C.J., praising his singing and playing. The reality is that Waters hates all southern blacks, whom he considers fools who are perpetuating an image of black foolishness with their singing, dancing, and clowning around. C.J. is guilty of all these actions, and in his innocence, he never suspects Waters of betrayal.

Prejudice
Captain Davenport faces prejudice when he arrives at a southern military post to conduct his investigation into Waters's death. When Captain Taylor meets Davenport, the latter is told that the white community will not tolerate a black man investigating whites. But that is not the only reason for Taylor's concern. Taylor admits that in a conversation with other white officers, most admitted they did not want to serve with black officers and could not accept blacks as equals. Indeed, when Davenport finally interviews two white officers, Byrd and Wilcox, Byrd makes clear his distaste for the black captain. Byrd also admits that he beat Waters because the sergeant did not treat him with the respect he deserved as an officer and as a white man.

Racism
Racism is the source for the violence that occurs at this army post. Although there are many black soldiers, they are not welcome in the predominately white community that surrounds the post. When Waters's murder is discovered, initial suspicion falls on the local Ku Klux Klan, who have been responsible for attacks on black soldiers in the past. There is a clear division on the post as well, with the white officers and soldiers aligned against the blacks. The black soldiers feel that if they can only get overseas and into the war, they can prove that they are as good at killing Hitler's men as are the white soldiers. And finally, there is racism within the black community, also. Waters is guilty of racism when he turns on C.J., whose only crime is that he is from the south and represents the type of black man who Waters thinks is holding back other blacks.

Violence
Violence was too often the result of confrontations between whites and blacks. When Waters is murdered, suspicion first falls on white men, notable the Ku Klux Klan. But violence is also Waters primary way of dealing with difference. Waters identifies rural southern blacks as a hindrance to black advancement. He thinks that their singing and dancing recalls a period of ignorance and subservience that prevents blacks from achieving equality with whites. Rather than look for a way to overcome this problem, Waters seeks a solution in violence. Rather than educate these blacks, Waters has them jailed and placed in a prison population where violence becomes a means of survival; C.J.'s imprisonment leads to his death.

Characters: Characters Discussed

Captain Richard Davenport

Captain Richard Davenport, a black lawyer and military officer attached to the 343d Military Police Corps Unit. Davenport investigates the murder of Tech/Sergeant Vernon C. Waters. Ignoring the prejudiced statements and threats of Captain Charles Taylor, Davenport dispassionately fulfills his job and discovers that Private First Class Melvin Peterson murdered Waters while Private Tony Smalls watched. After the discovery, Davenport returns to his unit while the other men prepare to go to the front.

Captain Charles Taylor

Captain Charles Taylor, a white man in his mid-to late thirties who resents Davenport's assignment and rank. Taylor wants Davenport taken off the murder investigation because he does not believe that a black man can accuse white men or solve the case. After interrogating white soldiers Byrd and Wilcox, Taylor orders that they be arrested; however, Davenport proves that they are not guilty. When Davenport discovers the truth, Taylor admits that he was wrong about African Americans being able to be in charge.

Tech/Sergeant Vernon C. Waters

Tech/Sergeant Vernon C. Waters, a well-built African American with light brown skin who manages the baseball team and is disliked by his men. Waters believes that black men must overcome their ignorant status

and harasses his men who match the stereotype of being foolish. Waters belittles C. J. Memphis until Memphis attacks Waters. Feeling guilt after Memphis' death, Waters drinks too much; he is beaten by Byrd and Wilcox after insulting them, but the two men leave him alive. Peterson and Smalls find Waters lying in the road, and after beating him, Peterson murders him.

Corporal Bernard Cobb

Corporal Bernard Cobb, a black man in his mid-to late twenties who defends Memphis when he hits Waters. Cobb relives the scene between Waters and Memphis. He visits Memphis in the brig, and after Memphis' death, he helps throw the last baseball game. Cobb reports that Peterson and Smalls were on guard duty and the last ones in the barracks the night of Waters' death.

Private Louis Henson

Private Louis Henson, a thin black man in his late twenties or early thirties who does not like to talk to officers and is the pitcher on the baseball team. Henson tells Davenport about the shooting at Williams' Golden Palace and that he saw someone run into the barracks and put something under Memphis' bed.

Private James Wilkie

Private James Wilkie, a black man in his early forties, a career soldier. Wilkie reveals his anger over losing his stripes. Waters removed his stripes after Wilkie drank on guard duty. Wilkie was ordered to place the murder weapon under Memphis' bunk. Davenport places Wilkie under arrest.

C. J. Memphis

C. J. Memphis, a young, handsome, and superstitious black man from Mississippi who plays an excellent game of baseball. A likable man and the best hitter on the team, Memphis also plays the guitar and works harder and faster than anyone else, but Waters does not approve of him because he thinks that Memphis represents the honky-tonk side of the black man. When Memphis hits Waters and is put in the brig, he decides that he will not be caged like an animal. He commits suicide.

Private Anthony Smalls

Private Anthony Smalls, a black career soldier in his late thirties who is afraid of Peterson. Accused and arrested for going absent without leave (AWOL), Smalls claims that he did not go AWOL but got drunk and fell asleep in the bus depot. After Davenport's interrogation begins, Smalls admits that he did go AWOL and that he watched Peterson shoot and kill Waters.

Private First Class Melvin Peterson

Private First Class Melvin Peterson, an angelic looking black man and model soldier in his late twenties who calls Waters "ole Stone-ass." From Hollywood, California, by way of Alabama, Peterson plays shortstop on the baseball team. He joined the Army because he thought he might have the chance to fight. Peterson does not hesitate to talk back to Waters, and after a confrontation, the two men fight. Even though Waters beats Peterson, he later does not badger Peterson as much. Peterson discovers Waters lying on the ground in a drunken stupor. After kicking him, Peterson shoots him twice, once in the chest and once in the head.

Byrd

Byrd, a spit-and-polish soldier in his twenties who works in Ordnance. Byrd fights with Waters outside of the NCO Club the night of the murder. Byrd orders Waters to shut up and starts shoving him. Byrd beats and kicks Waters and threatens to blow his head off.

Wilcox

Wilcox, a medical officer who keeps Byrd from killing Waters. More sympathetic to Waters' condition, Wilcox tries to help. Wilcox attempts to keep Byrd from beating Waters, but Byrd breaks free of his grasp. Wilcox finally restrains Byrd and pulls him away.

Characters

Lieutenant Byrd
Byrd is a white, by-the-book military officer. He has a history of confrontation and conflict with black soldiers. The night he is murdered, Byrd beats Waters savagely after he comes upon the sergeant drunk and sick. When questioned by Davenport, Byrd is almost insolent and has to be threaten by Taylor before he will answer.

poral Bernard Cobb
Cobb is in his mid to late twenties. He appears to be focused on women—on the women he wants, the ones he has had, the diseases they may have given him. He is closest to C.J. and is almost unmoved by Waters's death.

tain Richard Davenport
Davenport is an military lawyer, assigned to investigate the murder of Waters. Because he is black, the army really cannot find a place for Davenport and so has assigned him to police black soldiers. He delivers a lengthy monologue when he enters the stage for the first time. This speech tells the audience the background of the story currently being acted on stage. Other officers, most of whom are white, do not know what to make of a black officer, and he is an object of intense curiosity. Davenport is not intimidated by the reception he gets from the white officers. His investigation is thorough, and he quickly is able to delve into the events leading up to Waters's murder.

poral Ellis
Ellis is a by-the-book soldier. He is assigned to be Davenport's assistant and his job is to deliver the men to Davenport for questioning.

vate Louis Henson
Henson is in his late twenties. He is nervous and convinced that the Ku Klux Klan is to blame for Waters's murder. Henson is used to being subordinate. He sits back and observes actions but is reluctant to speak up. When questioned by Davenport, Henson has to be ordered to tell his story.

vate C. J. Memphis
Memphis, a young black soldier, was a special favorite of Waters. He entertained with his singing and guitar playing, and he played baseball with the troops as well. Waters likes C.J. initially, but he also sees him as representing everything that blacks need to put behind them—the singing, clowning, and dancing around. C.J. is jailed after he strikes Waters, but Waters had provoked the young soldier and his arrest demoralizes the young man, who had felt that Waters liked him. C.J.'s death, two months before Waters's, sets in motion the events that follow.

Private First Class Melvin Peterson
Peterson is in his late twenties. He is the neatest of the black troops, shoes polished, his stripe clearly visible,

his uniform neatly pressed. Peterson had a history of conflict with Waters, having previously come to blows in a fight with Waters. The area of conflict centered on Peterson's perception that Waters failed to support the men, allowing white soldiers to use the blacks as common laborers and not soldiers. Later when Waters arrests C.J., it is Peterson who insists that the men need to report the truth to the captain. Peterson is aggressive and not intimidated by Waters.

Private Tony Smalls
Smalls is a small man in his late thirties. He is a career soldier and appears genuinely concerned about Waters's murder. Smalls is arrested for going AWOL, and when questioned, he confesses to what he saw the night Waters was murdered.

Captain Charles Taylor
Tayor is a white, West Point educated, officer in his mid to late thirties. When he first meets Davenport, Taylor confesses that he is not comfortable with a black officer. His only experience with blacks is as workmen or subordinates, and he indicates he cannot and does not support Davenport's investigation. He is clearly displeased that Davenport is not subservient or willing to be ordered about by a man of equal rank, who is clearly, in Taylor's mind at least, superior to any blacks. Taylor reluctantly becomes Davenport's ally in the investigation. Taylor, while not believing in equality, also recognizes that blacks deserve to be given justice.

Tech Sergeant Vernon C. Waters
Waters's murder opens the play. Thereafter, his presence on stage is as a voice from the past. He stands slightly off-stage in a pale light and recounts experiences with different individuals. Waters was all military correctness, wanting what was best for his men, but at the same time, hard on them when they disappointed him. Waters had a son for whom he wanted a better future than the one the army offered. He planned to send both his son and daughter to a white man's college so that they would be able to compete with whites and not be left behind. Waters was a complex man who could both praise and attack his men. His goal was to rid the army of southern blacks, who he felt held the entire black community back. But when C.J. commits suicide, Waters is stunned and realizes that he is to blame.

Captain Wilcox
Wilcox is a medical officer who is accused of participating in a beating of Waters on the night he was murdered. Wilcox is the one officer who treats Davenport with respect and who appears to have no bias against blacks.

Private James Wilkie
Wilkie is a career soldier in his early forties. He has recently lost three stripes. He was closest in age to Waters, and in spite of losing rank, pay, and going to jail for ten days, Wilkie claims to have had no hard grudge against Waters. Wilkie was Waters's servant. He ran his errands, managed the ball team, and cleaned his quarters; but when Wilkie got caught drinking, Waters took all his stripes, which had taken him ten years to earn. Then as a bribe to force Wilkie to plant evidence, Waters promises to return his stripes.

Critical Essays: Critical Context (Masterplots II: African American Literature)

Aesthetically and politically, Charles Fuller's plays occupy a middle ground between the more conservative, conventional dramatic narratives of black playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry and the politically radical, absurdist drama of writers such as Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). Fuller's first major success was with *The Brownsville Raid* (1976), based on a true incident. In that play, he re-creates the story of the dishonorable discharge in 1906 of an entire black regiment from the Army on the orders of President Theodore Roosevelt.

Like *A Soldier's Play, The Brownsville Raid* is organized along the lines of a mystery, slowly revealing the psychic torments that racism inflicts on African Americans. The play's focus is on a black sergeant's subsequent crisis of faith.

A Soldier's Play won immediate acclaim as a portrait of human relations, winning three Obies, an Audelco award, a New York Drama Critics Circle Award, an Outer Circle Award, and the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In 1984, the play was adapted to film by Norman Jewison as *A Soldier's Story*, and Fuller wrote the screenplay, which won the 1985 Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award for screenplay. Fuller has received a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation grant, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and a Creative Artists Public Service grant.

Fuller has engaged in writing a five-part dramatic history of African Americans from the Civil War to 1900. The first play, *Sally*, opened at the First National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta in 1988, and the second play in the series, *Prince*, was produced in 1989.

Critical Essays: Critical Context (Comprehensive Guide to Drama)

Drawing from his own experiences with racism in college, his enlistment in the U.S. Army, and later work in minority neighborhoods and local theaters in Philadelphia, Fuller wrote plays that explore relationships between blacks and whites and relationships within the black community. His plays have been praised by critics for their realism and complex characters.

Fuller's first major play was *The Village: A Party*, produced in 1968. Renamed *The Perfect Party* with the 1969 production, this play about interracial relationships then moved to New York City where it played Off-Broadway for several weeks. While not the best work of his career, it garnered Fuller enough attention and encouragement to persuade him to move to New York, where he wrote several more plays. In 1976 he wrote *The Brownsville Raid* (pr. 1976), based on the real-life story of a U.S. Army regiment dishonorably discharged after black soldiers in it were falsely accused of starting a riot in Brownsville, Texas, in 1906. It ran for more than one hundred performances. In 1980 he wrote *Zooman and the Sign* (pr. 1980, pb. 1982) about violence in black communities. It won two Obie Awards and an Audelco Award for best playwright.

Building upon his previous work and continuing to hone his talents, Fuller wrote *A Soldier's Play* in 1981 and won a Pulitzer Prize for it in 1982, along with several other awards, including the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best American play. In 1984 Fuller wrote the screenplay for *A Soldier's Story*, an adaptation that starred many of the original cast members of the play, including Denzel Washington.

Fuller went on to write *We* (pr. 1989), a series of plays featuring characters from the Civil War and postwar periods. In addition to plays, Fuller has written short stories and television and movie scripts that continue to focus on the black experience in the United States.

Critical Essays: Critical Overview

In general, A Soldier's Play received very favorable reviews when it debuted Off-Broadway in November 1981. Critics were enthusiastic and audiences receptive to Fuller's mystery. For example, Frank Rich's review in *The New York Times*, calls Fuller's play a major breakthrough and ''in every way, a mature and accomplished work.'' A Soldier's Play is also ''a relentless investigation into the complex, sometimes cryptic pathology of hate.'' What Rich calls a ''skillful portraiture of a dozen characters'' creates ''a remarkable breadth of social and historical vision.'' Rich is also enthusiastic about the cast, especially Charles Brown as

Davenport, Denzel Washington as Peterson, and Peter Friedman as Taylor, but Rich's greatest praise is for Adolphe Caesar's performance of Waters, a role that is ''hateful ... one moment and a sympathetic, pitiful wreck the next.'' Referring to Douglas Turner Ward's direction as ''superlative,'' Rich notes that Fuller's play ''tirelessly insists on embracing volatile contradictions because that is the way to arrive at the shattering truth.'' John Beaumont's review for *The Christian Science Monitor* is another emphatic endorsement of Fuller's play. Beaumont calls attention to Fuller's ''carefully written, tautly dramatic scenes [which] are filled with racial-psychological insights.'' But this reviewer also observes Fuller's use of comedic and raunchy material that sounds like the authentic voice of barracks talk. Beaumont also credits an excellent cast and the ''admirable staging by Ward for the play's success.

Another endorsement comes from Edwin Wilson at the *The Wall Street Journal*. Wilson's review calls A Soldier's Play ''a skillfully wrought, thoroughly suspenseful detective story.'' But Wilson points out that Fuller goes beyond a mystery to create, ''one of the most even-handed, penetrating studies of relations among blacks-as well as their relations with whites-that we have yet seen.'' As is the case with other reviewers, Beaumont also singles out the cast and director as deserving special commendation, and Fuller's ''complex web of con- flicting attitudes and emotions'' as strong elements of the play. Additional ratification for Fuller's play is supplied by Douglas Watt of the *Daily News*. Calling A Soldier's Play ''an absorbing, interestingly-layered drama'' that could use a bit of tightening, Watt states that an evening at this play is ''one of the more satisfying ones in town.'' While Watt praises Brown and Friedman's performances, he has special kudos for Washington, Caesar, and the other actors who portray the enlisted men; these men, he says, ''make up the heart of the play.'' Watt points to this play as Fuller's ''best achievement to date.'' These words are echoed by Clive Barnes of the *New York Post*, who writes that ''Fuller is revealing himself as a playwright of great sensibility ... [who] must be watched and, even more, cherished.'' After having complimented Ward's direction and the exceptional work of Caesar and Friedman, Barnes says of Brown, that ''he is developing into a consummate actor'' whose performance is the best of a fine cast.

Additional praise for Fuller is also provided by Jack Kroll of *Newsweek*. Kroll declares that this latest Fuller play ''is a work of great resonance and integrity, bound to be one of the best American plays of this season.'' The story that Fuller is telling, writes Kroll, is ''humanized and dramatized with a deep understanding and a sense of fatality that translate into riveting and revelatory dramatic action.'' Kroll also has praise for the cast, noting the performances of Brown and Caesar as particularly remarkable. A more mixed review is offered by T.E. Kalem of *Time*, who, while dismissing the investigation as a ''dry studies exercise,'' focuses on the way in which Fuller explores Waters complex character. Of Caesar's performance, Kalem states that Caesar ''merits an acting medal of honor'' for his portrayal of Waters. Another mixed critique is that of Robert Asahina, whose review appeared in the *Hudson Review*. Asahina singles out the investigation and murder mystery as mere distractions from the more important exploration of how ''racism distorts the soul of not just the oppressor but the victim,'' which Fuller does very well, and for he ''is to be commended.'' Asahina makes the observation that Fuller did not need to set the action in the army during 1944; any war could have provided the same setting for racism, since the attitudes that Fuller expressed are not outdated today.

Fuller's work did stir some controversy. Nearly two years after A Soldier's Play's debut, a particularly virulent attack appeared by Amiri Baraka, who was associated with a rival theatrical group. In his article, Baraka begins with what is intended to be a digression on how he always confuses Fuller with another writer whose work is ''pretty awful.'' One source of Baraka's animosity is the ease with which the Negro Ensemble Company is able to raise money from big banks. Baraka is often sarcastic, criticizing both Washington's casting and Brown's acting. His lone voice of opposition, failed to stop the momentum of A Soldier's Play, which went on to be made into a successful movie.

Essays and Criticism: Dramatization of Black Soldiers' Struggle During WWII

During World War II, the military finally succumbed to pressure to create black combat battalions. For most of the war, these units were largely for show and had very little role in the war effort, but near the end of the war when the need for more men surfaced, a few of these units were finally mobilized and sent to Europe. Some of these men, who had anticipated they would finally engage in battle, instead helped to liberate concentration camps at Buchenwald, Dachau, and Lambach. What they saw shocked them. These black soldiers, who had come from the segregation of 1940s America, were face to face with the effects of Hitler's racism. But there are other effects of racism, as Charles Fuller proves.

In A Soldier's Play, Fuller presents one possible effect of the racism that divides the United States in the 1940s. The black soldiers at this small Louisiana post are anxious to be sent across the ocean to fight Hitler, whom they are confident they can beat as effectively as any white soldiers can. But, as the war drags on, black soldiers sit and wait while whites are sent into battle. This is the racism of exclusion, which breeds hatred and ultimately leads to murder. In his play, Fuller demonstrates that sometimes racism can be turned inward. In A Soldier's Play, American racism is juxtaposed against the dark shadow of Hitler's racism. By the time the play ends, Fuller leaves the audience questioning their own prejudices and wondering if racism can be quantitatively judged.

Much of the shock that Americans felt at the end of World War II, derived from Hitler's ghastly extermination of more than 11 million people. This outrage is couched in an awareness that American society could never engage in racism is such an ugly way. But that ignores that effects of systematic racism, which dehumanizes people and consumes them slowly, over time. Sergeant Waters is an example of how racism can destroy a man. Waters readily admits that during World War I he participated in the murder of a young black man. The murder occurred in France when white soldiers took an ''ignorant colored soldier. Paid him to tie a tail to his ass and parade around naked making monkey sounds.'' Waters and other blacks slit the black soldier's throat. He tells Wilkie that blacks must turn their backs on ''fools like C.J.'' who would cheat their own race out of the honor and respect they deserve. Earlier, Waters tells C.J. he has gotten rid of five other soldiers at previous posts. And Waters explains that he did it because he does not want blacks cheated out of the opportunities that he thinks they will derive from fighting in World War II.

This proud admission reveals the hatred that Waters has for his fellow blacks. In his eyes, blacks must meet a higher standard that will help ensure their escape for the oppression of racism. Southern blacks, like C.J., recall stereotypes of black minstrels, who sing, dance, and clown around. Men who look like fools and behave like fools will negate all that a few good blacks can accomplish, according to Waters, who believes that all blacks must be superior to whites if blacks are to become equal to whites. But then C. J. does the unexpected and kills himself, and suddenly Waters is forced to question what he has become. He finally understands that he has willingly destroyed another man and turned his back on his people and has achieved nothing. Whites still do not like him, and they still refuse to accept him as an equal. And the audience must finally admit that they are complicit in this tragedy because they too have tolerated racism.

In constructing this play as a detective story, Fuller seeks to involve the audience in the action on the stage. Suspects are introduced and motives explored in an attempt to keep the audience guessing. In their essay on the detective elements of A Soldier's Play, Linda K. Hughes and Howard Faulkner point out that Fuller manages to implicate the audience in the quest to solve the killer's identity and that ''to the degree that we abandon open minds and jump to conclusions about the killer's identity at the outset, we deduce from stereotypes instead of inductively seeking the solution.'' This is because Fuller's red herrings are white officers and the Ku Klux Klan. The setting is the south, and the audience expects the killer of a black man to be whites.

In that sense, the audience participates in racism. Hughes and Faulkner argue that the audience initially sympathizes with Waters. At the end of the first act, he appears to be sympathetic, but as the second act unfolds, the audience learns that ''Waters is, if not a racist himself, one who imposes stereotypes and rigid codes of behavior on fellow blacks.'' Waters' vision of racial progress does not include fools like C.J. This act of black discriminating against black, just as white can discriminate against black, or white against white is, according to Hughes and Faulkner, suggested by ''Them Nazis ain't all crazy,'' a sentence, they argue, that ''reverberates throughout the fabric of the entire play.'' This sentence, ''reminds us that World War II was, in a sense, a racial war, a war to stop Hitler's dream of the Super Race. But black soldiers drafted to fight Hitler first had to confront a racial war of their own in the United States.'' Thus Waters in both victim and victimizer, according to Hughes and Faulkner, who also point out that the ending of the play tells the audiences that the entire company was wiped out in that ''other racial war in Germany.'' Thus, the audience is again reminded that both racial wars are connected for the black soldier.

It is worth remembering that Waters is not the only black man to kill another black soldier. The play's conclusion reveals that Peterson is Waters's killer. Both, men, as Hughes and Faulkner note, ''double as victimizers impelled by white racism and their own capitulation to imposed stereotypes of 'proper' black behavior. Both [Peterson and Waters] are willing to kill a fellow black to uphold that code, to 'purify' their race; and insofar as they do so, they are also eerie parallels of Hitler, whom Waters partly admires.'' But racism and prejudice are not limited to Peterson and Waters. Davenport initially thinks Byrd and Wilcox are guilty of the murder. He also assumes, erroneously it turns out, that other white officers are engaged in covering up a white officer's involvement. Later, Taylor, who assumes that blacks are neither intelligent enough nor devious enough to have committed the murder, wants Byrd and Wilcox arrested because he believes the two white officers must be guilty, since, clearly whites must be guilty. There is enough racism and prejudice to go around for everyone in the cast to engage in some aspect of this bigotry. Steven Carter's analysis of Davenport's role as detective offers some insight into how Davenport fulfills the traditional role of detective. The traditional skills of the detective, include being able to,

> place reason over emotion, admit past and even current mistakes so that you can find truth in the present, view a situation as a whole rather than be blinded by a part, rid yourself of preconceptions so that you can see reality more clearly. And perhaps hardest and most important of all, acknowledge the destructive elements in your own personality so that you can better understand the destructive side of others.

Carter states that these skills are also effective in counteracting and eliminating racism. That Davenport is able to finally solve the case, according to Carter, ''depends largely on his ability to free himself from racist preconceptions of any type.'' Davenport is able to stay focused on the issue at hand, but, as Carter points out, both Waters and Peterson have become so confused and so involved with in-group bickering that they almost lose sight of their real enemies, white racism at home and Nazi racist imperialism abroad.'' Self-hatred, the byproduct of systematic racism, is responsible for the destruction of both these men. As the play ends, Davenport tells the audience that four men were lost and that ''none of their reasons—nothing anyone *said*, or *did*, would have been worth a life to men with larger hearts-men less split by the madness of race in America.''

Fuller asks his audience to question the effects of racism, to question their prejudices. In A Soldier's Play, the effects of racial self-hatred lead two men to murder, for Waters murders C.J. just as surely as if he had tied the noose. The audience is asked to consider that ordinary men are capable of murder when pushed to extraordinary lengths. William W. Demastes, in an article that questions the role of prejudice in Fuller's play, observes that the typical murder mystery looks to the extreme or atypical conditions that lead to murder, such as the Ku Klux Klan confronting radical blacks. Instead, says Demastes, Fuller ''challenges the standard, comfortable assumptions that tensions exist only between such radical elements of both races.'' The racism that resulted in Nazi concentration camps shocked people, as it should. But Fuller would like his audience to

consider that racism that results in blacks murdering blacks is also shocking and deserving of greater thought. When Waters real intent toward C.J. is revealed and when Peterson is disclosed as the murderer, the audience should be dismayed as well as stunned. And they should question their own prejudices.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000. Metzger is a Ph.D., specializing in literature and drama at The University of New Mexico.

Essays and Criticism: Theatre Chronicle

For a change, this year's Pulitzer Prize actually went to the season's most deserving work: Charles Fuller's A Soldier's Play, produced by the Negro Ensemble Company and directed by Douglas Turner Ward. But it deserves criticism as well as praise.

Set in 1944, A Soldier's Play could also have been written then; it is a straightforward piece of psychological realism that takes the form of a murder mystery. In the first scene, Vernon C. Waters (Adolph Caesar), a Tech/Sergeant in the 221st Chemical Smoke Generating Company, is killed by two unknown assailants. Waters is black, as are the other noncoms and enlisted men at Fort Neal, Louisiana, in the year before the end of World War II. Suspecting that the killers are white and fearing a racial conflict between the soldiers and the residents of the nearby town of Tynan, the white officers restrict their troops to the base and order an investigation.

A black captain, Richard Davenport (Charles Brown), assigned to the military police, arrives at Fort Neal to conduct the inquiry (and to narrate the play, which largely consists of flashbacks). Davenport is reluctantly assisted by a white captain, Charles Taylor (Peter Friedman), a West Pointer who makes known his antagonism by aggressively announcing, ''I never saw a Negro until I was twelve or thirteen.'' Still, it is clear to both of them that the investigation is supposed to fail, since everyone assumes that the murderers are white and will thus be impossible to bring to justice in the South. ''Don't take yourself too seriously,'' Taylor warns Davenport, who sardonically acknowledges that ''the matter was given the lowest priority.''

Nonetheless, the black captain persists, eventually daring to cast suspicion on two white officers, Lieutenant Byrd (Sam McMurray) and Captain Wilcox (Stephen Zettler). By this time, Taylor has grudgingly come to respect Davenport's efforts; in fact, he is even more eager than his black colleague to bring charges against his fellow whites. But Davenport has begun to believe that the case is more than an incident of racial violence. His questioning of the black soldiers gradually leads him—and us— to the uncomfortable realization that the murder was committed by someone under Waters' command.

As the captain digs deeper, a complex portrait of the dead sergeant emerges from the flashbacks that spring out of the interrogation sessions around which the play is structured. A veteran of World War I, Waters is a career man and a strict disciplinarian who expects his troops to toe the white man's line as squarely as he does. When he busts Corporal James Wilkie (Steven A. Jones) to the rank of private for being drunk on duty, Waters complains, ''No wonder they treat us like dogs.'' His favorite target for abuse is a Southern black, Private C. J. Memphis (David Alan Grier), who represents everything he despises. Pleasant but slow-witted, Memphis is the star of the company baseball team, as well as a mournful blues guitarist and singer. But to

Waters, a Northerner, Memphis is nothing but an embarrassing exemplar of a ''strong black buck.'' ''Niggers aren't like that today,'' the sergeant sneers. Waters is no simple Uncle Tom, however. ''This country's at war,'' he tells his men, ''and you niggers are soldiers.'' To him, they must be more than good soldiers—they must be the best, for their own sake if not the army's. ''Most niggers just don't care,'' he claims. ''But not havin's no excuse for not gettin'. We got to challenge the man in his arena.'' In his twisted way, Waters truly believes that the black race can only advance by following his example— by being better than the white man

at his own game. ‘‘Do you know the damage one ignorant Negro can do?’’ he asks Memphis. ‘‘The black race can’t afford you laughin’ and clownin’.’’

Davenport soon learns the lengths to which Waters went to ‘‘close our ranks on the chittlins and collard greens style.’’ During the year before his death, the company team had been so successful that a game with the Yankees was in the works if the Fort Neal soldiers were to win their conference title. But the better the troops do on the field, the worse they do on the base. ‘‘Every time we beat them at baseball,’’ the soldiers complain about their white opponents, ‘‘they get back at us any way they can’’—in work details ranging from KP to painting the officers’ club. Waters, of course, believes ‘‘these men need all the discipline they can get,’’ since he regards their athletic achievements as frivolous, even dangerous, because they reinforce the white man’s stereotype of the black.

To his horror, Davenport discovers that Waters found a way of eliminating Memphis while simultaneously sabotaging the team. The sergeant framed the hapless private for a mysterious shooting on the base (‘‘one less fool for the race to be ashamed of’’), and when Memphis killed himself in the stockade, the players threw the championship game in protest. But the cost of Waters’ demented discipline was a growing desire for vengeance among his troops. As Davenport finally determines, two of them—Private First Class Melvin Peterson (Denzel Washington) and Private Tony Smalls (Brent Jennings)— took matters into their own hands and killed their tormentor. Yet even at the moment of his death, Waters had the last word, or words—the same ones that opened the play. ‘‘You got to be like them,’’ he cries in torment. ‘‘But the rules are fixed. It doesn’t make any difference. They still hate you.’’

Whatever else can be said about A Soldier’s Play, Fuller must be credited for creating a truly tragic character for whom those words are an anguished, self-proclaimed epitaph. It is in Waters that the toll of racism is most apparent. To be sure, all the black characters in the drama are representative of different modes of dealing with white oppression: the cautious rationality of Davenport, the self-abasement of Wilkie (brilliantly brought to life by Jones), the unenlightened self-interest of Smalls. Likewise, Memphis embodies the black past, stolid and humble, just as surely as Peterson does the future, or at least one possible future: righteous but also arrogant.

Yet Waters is unique among the men by being both the engineer of his own downfall and the victim of his circumstances; like all genuinely tragic figures, he attains universality because of rather than despite the stubborn reality of his particularity. From the smallest of his affectations—the pompous, gravelly voice, the pipe-smoking, the military carriage, the cultivated disdain for his inferiors—to the enormity of his crimes against his own people in their name, the costs of Waters’ unnatural, willful assimilation are painfully apparent. (‘‘Any man don’t know where he belongs,’’ says Memphis, ‘‘got to be in a lot of pain.’’) Fuller’s resolute writing and Caesar’s forceful acting have created a truly unlikeable yet strangely sympathetic character, unpleasant yet unexpectedly revealing of what we fear as the worst accommodationist impulses in ourselves.

Unfortunately, Fuller does not handle the investigation into Waters’ violent death as ably as he does the sergeant’s tortured life. Somehow the murder mystery comes to dominate the other elements of the play; the larger problems of human behavior in adverse circumstances become secondary to the whodunit questions of motive and opportunity. True, the investigation gives the drama a certain forward momentum, but not enough to disguise the fact that almost everything interesting takes place in the past. The most compelling figure is the victim, whose life is revealed in flashback; the action in the present is, for the most part, structured according to the familiar strategy of revelations leading to further revelations and ultimately to a rather comfortable resolution.

Not too comfortable, mind you; Fuller is to be commended for honestly exposing how racism distorts the soul of not just the oppressor but the victim. For this genuine revelation (as opposed to the convenient revelations

that advance the plot) to matter to us, however, it must matter to the character through whose eyes we perceive it. And it is not unreasonable to expect that Davenport's discoveries will change him—somehow. After all, he began his inquiry more or less convinced that the killers were white, and then had to overcome his own prejudices to uncover the truth. He could also see something of himself in Waters. Though younger, the captain must have had to pay the same dues as the sergeant—perhaps even more, to rise to the higher rank.

Yet Davenport maintains an eerie emotional distance throughout (which is underscored by Brown's rather affectless performance; he is so cool that he practically freezes into rigidity). Perhaps Fuller thereby meant to comment on the captain's notion of soldierly conduct, which causes him to be almost color-blind. Indeed, early in the play, Davenport rebuffs Wilkie's presumption of racial familiarity (''You all we got down here,'' the private claims).

But this sort of irony seems absent elsewhere, particularly from the author's decision to set the play so far in the past. (I do not think the drama required the segregated army, which came to an end after the war; in fact, the play might have been more pointed had it been set after integration. As for the war itself, it could as easily have been Korea or Vietnam—or no war at all, for all the difference it makes to the action.) Did Fuller believe that the attitudes represented by, say, Memphis and Waters would seem outdated today? That Davenport, too, would seem anachronistic, or even Peterson insuffi- ciently militant? Or did he think (or does he recognize) that setting A Soldier's Play in 1944 somehow lets all of us—playwright, cast, audience—off the hook? Or was it that he wanted all concerned to consider the drama as art rather than as ''relevant'' social comment? It is not that I suspect Fuller's motives—it is just that I don't know what they are.

Source: Robert Asahina. ''Theatre Chronicle'' in the *Hudson Review*, Vol. XXXV, no. 3, Autumn, 1982, pp. 439–42.

Essays and Criticism: Favorable Review of Fuller's Play

After fourteen seasons, the Negro Ensemble Company can no longer be regarded as an exotic enterprise on the fringe. The N.E.C. came into being because the established American theater didn't seem to have any place for the black experience. So the group proceeded to carve such a place for itself, with determination if not always a clear notion of what it was doing. Its stance was either aggressive, that of an adversary, or defensive, which meant insular and self-validating; it stumbled, fell, rose and kept going.

Never quite a true ensemble, in that it frequently brings in performers for particular productions, the company has had difficulty creating an identifi- able style, a way of doing things unmistakably its own. If it still has that difficulty, at least its repertory has become much more flexible, so that its socially oriented realism has lost some of the pugnacious, parochial quality that once marred it.

Charles Fuller's A Soldier's Play, the opening production of the N.E.C.'s fifteenth season, is exemplary of this change and, as I see it, this growth. A flawed but estimable play, it's about the black experience but is supple enough in its thematic range and social perspectives to treat that experience as part of a complex whole, as part of American reality in its widest sense. To be released from an adversary position may mean a loss of fierceness— it certainly means a reduction in ideological thunder—but it can make for an increase in subtle wisdom and intellectual rigor.

Not that A Soldier's Play is a triumph of the dramatic imagination. But it is intelligent and morally various enough to overcome some basic uncertainties and remnants of the N.E.C.'s older confrontational manner, and so commend itself to our attention. Set in a Louisiana army camp in 1944, the play deals with the fatal shooting of a black sergeant (reflecting the times, blacks are called ''negroes'' or ''coloreds''), a martinet who, out of shame at his people's seeming acceptance of their inferior status, is tougher on his own men than

are their white officers.

He's far from likable, but when he's killed and the culprits aren't found, the mood turns ugly among the black soldiers. At first, the Klan is suspected, then some white officers, but the brass wants no trouble and the incident is shunted aside. Finally, an investigator is sent from Washington, a black lieutenant with a law degree from Howard University. His relationship with the white captain previously in charge of the case makes up the moral and psychological center of the drama, which on one level proceeds as a moderately absorbing detective story.

The captain, an earnest liberal, is convinced he knows who the killers are but feels his hands are tied, and he grows impatient with the black officer's slow, careful inquiry. The real problem, however, is the dislocation the captain experiences in his abstract good will. ''I can't get used to it,'' he tells the black man, ''your uniform, your bars.'' Still, he comes to accept the investigator, whose mind is much more in tune with reality than his own and who eventually brings the case to a surprising conclusion. Along the way there are some deft perceptions about both political and psychological matters, and a jaunty historical sense: ''Look out, Hitler,'' a soldier says, ''the niggers is comin' to get your ass.''

The biggest burden the play carries is the direction of Douglas Turner Ward, the N.E.C.'s artistic director, who is also a well-known playwright. Ward manages the many flashbacks, through which the action is propelled, with a heavy hand: lights go up or down with painful slowness, figures from the past *take their places* obediently in the present. There are also some soft spots among the performances and an unpleasant ending, or coda, in which the black officer gratuitously reminds his white colleague of the lessons taught and learned. Yet in its calm concern for prickly truths and its intellectual sobriety, A Soldier's Play elicits the audience's approval, if not its boisterous enthusiasm.

Source: Richard Gilman. Review of A Soldier's Play in the *Nation*, Vol. 234, no. 3, January 23, 1982, pp. 90–91.

Analysis: The Play

A Soldier's Play exposes the institutional racism of the Army in the 1940's and explores the psychological effects of oppression on African Americans. Although set in 1944 in a segregated barracks at Fort Neal, Louisiana, the play shows the pervasive effects of racism by utilizing the detective mystery form. Ironically, the all-black company is eager to fight for justice in World War II but has not yet been deployed because of discrimination.

The play begins with Sergeant Vernon C. Waters's murder; the setting then immediately shifts to the barracks of Company B. The white commanding officers, Captain Charles Taylor particularly, are fearful that Waters's murder may cause a violent racial confrontation between the company and whites in nearby Tynin, Louisiana. Captain Taylor's anxiety increases when he meets the black lawyer sent to investigate the case, Captain Richard Davenport.

Davenport's investigation consists of interviews with soldiers who knew Waters, and these interviews allow the audience to form a composite characterization of Waters. Each interview is an incident dramatized on stage as it happened in the past; for example, the first interview, with Private Wilkie, reveals Waters's uncompromising standards: He demotes Wilkie because Wilkie was drunk on duty.

The next interview, with Private First Class Peterson, reveals more clearly Waters's unreasonable expectations and his seemingly racist bias. Despite their winning an important baseball game, Waters orders his men to paint the officers' club; when his men complain, he tells them, "I'm the kinda colored man that

don’t like lazy, shiftless Negroes!” His frustration and rage is especially directed at C. J. Memphis, a talented baseball player and a blues singer. When Melvin Peterson attempts to defend C. J., Waters challenges him to a fistfight, which is interrupted by Captain Taylor, who condescendingly compliments the men on their baseball game.

The interviews are diverted by a red herring: Taylor reveals to Davenport that two racist white officers, Byrd and Wilcox, were the last to see Waters alive. The audience is led to believe that Byrd and Wilson killed Waters. Because Taylor thinks that only he, as a white liberal, could prosecute whites for the murder of a black, he requests that Davenport be relieved of his duties. The interview with Byrd and Wilcox reveals the profound division in Waters’s spirit. Waters fully believed that by operating within a white supremacist’s definition of success, he himself could provide an example of African American achievement. Such commitment to the white power structure, however, took its toll by inducing in him a contempt for his own race: “I hate myself!,” Waters tells Byrd and Wilcox, yet when Waters says, “I’ve killed for you!” he discloses the clue that ultimately will solve the case for Davenport.

In his next interviews, Davenport discovers that an unforeseen consequence of Waters’s self-hatred was C. J.’s death. Waters, in his effort to cleanse the race of people he considers undesirable, had trumped up charges against C. J., provoking C. J. to assault him. When he is imprisoned in the stockade, C. J. despairs, again with Waters’s provocation, and commits suicide. Davenport realizes whom Waters had “killed”—C. J. The tension between Captain Taylor and Davenport then erupts: Taylor too wants to punish those responsible for Waters’s death, and the primary suspects are whites. Once again, he argues with Davenport over control of the case. When Davenport interviews Byrd and Wilcox again, however, he suddenly understands that neither murdered Waters. Davenport asserts his authority, and Taylor relents, allowing Davenport a free hand.

The final interview, with Private Smalls, reveals the mystery’s solution. Both Smalls and Peterson were on guard duty when Waters was murdered, and Smalls confesses that he witnessed Waters’s murder. Peterson, enraged with Waters, had accused Waters of a racism as vicious as Adolf Hitler’s and Hideki Tojo’s. Drunken and filled with despair, Waters had told Peterson that it “doesn’t make any difference! They still hate you!” At that, Peterson had fired twice, killing Waters.

In the play’s denouement, Davenport discloses the men’s destiny: Peterson is captured and jailed, Waters’s murder is misreported, and the entire company is later killed in a surprise German advance. Davenport laments the split caused by “the madness of race in America.”

Analysis: A Soldier's Play

In *A Soldier’s Play,* Charles Fuller achieves the most powerful and coherent expression of the theme he initially developed in two earlier works, *Zooman and the Sign* (1980), which told the story of a contemporary black community’s cowardly refusal to name a murderer in its midst, and *The Brownsville Raid* (1976), which dramatized an actual incident of mass racial injustice in World War I. That theme is the destructive nature of racial hatred and injustice as it affects both blacks and whites. In *A Soldier’s Play,* Fuller’s focus is on the psychological self-destruction of the black man, particularly as embodied in the figure of the murder victim, Technical Sergeant Vernon Waters.

At the play’s beginning, Waters, very drunk, staggers out onto the almost darkened stage, where he is gunned down. Immediately before the fatal shots are fired, Waters can be heard mumbling: “They’ll still hate you! They still hate you . . . They still hate you”; the meaning and implications of these words are actually more important than the identity of Waters’ killer. Later in the play, Captain Richard Davenport, the investigating officer, asks “Who the hell was he?”; the answer to that question lies at the center of the play. Gradually, one realizes that Waters embodied all the tensions, complexities, and contradictions of the black man in the white

man's world, and that his death was the nearly inevitable result of those contradictions.

The job of formally investigating the killing—more than a month after it took place—is given to a black lawyer, Captain Davenport, who faces not only the usual racial barriers and hostilities but also the implacable opposition of the white company commander, as well as his own intense emotions and complex prejudices. Despite these obstacles, Davenport quickly establishes his authority and meticulously investigates the circumstances surrounding Waters' death, ultimately discovering that the solution of the mystery lies not in any overt hatred for black soldiers in the white South, but in the enigmatic personality of the victim himself and in the tangled, volatile relationships among the black soldiers of the 221st Chemical Smoke Generating Company.

As the investigation progresses, the characters' revelations trigger dramatic flashbacks that gradually make it possible to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. The notion that the "Klan did it" is never taken seriously by anybody. Two white officers are introduced as prime suspects, and it is determined that they assaulted the drunken sergeant on the night on which he was killed, but it seems increasingly unlikely that they committed the murder. What does emerge from the conflicting testimony is a portrait of a group of black men under enormous race-related pressures that have been made more intense by the war itself. That such pressures eventually explode in violence and that the violence is directed at one of their own seems not merely believable, but even inevitable.

The black soldiers of the 221st Chemical Smoke Generating Company represent a cross-section of character types and attitudes, the most interesting and important of which are revealed in Melvin Peterson, James Wilkie, and C. J. Memphis. Each of these men confronts Waters in a different way and each plays a significant role in his death. Peterson confronts him directly and defiantly, suffering a beating for his efforts. Wilkie, who has been "broken" by Waters from sergeant to private for drunkenness, is completely servile, even betraying a fellow soldier, in hopes of getting his stripes back. Memphis, the billet's "innocent," is unable to alter his behavior in order to please Waters and thereby incurs the sergeant's wrath. This, in turn, begins the sequence of events that leads to Waters' death.

Fuller has acknowledged that the relationship between Waters and Memphis is at least partially based on that between Claggart and Billy in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Foretopman* (1924). Like Claggart, Waters goads his Billy Budd, C. J. Memphis, into an act of violence, an act which destroys both of them. With the connivance of Wilkie, Waters frames Memphis for a shooting he did not commit. The accusation drives the boy to strike his sergeant. Memphis is easily cleared of the shooting charge but is sentenced to the brig for assaulting the sergeant. Unable to stand the confinement, he hangs himself. It is his death, not Waters', that is the play's real catalyst.

Waters' hostility toward his victim, however, is not simply an evil man's hatred of the innocent; it is the product of Waters' almost pathological obsession with the "image" of the black, an obsession forced upoon him by white society. At first, Waters seems to like and admire Memphis, a handsome black boy with impressive talents both as a baseball player and as a guitar-strumming blues singer, but these very talents are instrumental in turning Waters' admiration into a deeply felt hostility. The more impressively Memphis exercises his natural abilities and pleases his white audiences, the more, in Waters' view, he reinforces the image of the black man as a "singin', clownin', yassah-bossin' . . . niggah." As Waters gloatingly tells Memphis, after having coaxed the boy into the impulsive blow that sends him into the stockade:C. J. the black race can't afford you no more. . . . Folks liked that—you were good—homey kinda niggah—they needed somebody to mistreat—call a name, they paraded you, reminded them of the old days—cornbread bakin', greens and ham cookin'—Daddy out pickin' cotton, Grandmammy sittin' on the front porch smokin' a pipe. . . . Not no more. The day of the geechy is gone, boy. . . . We can't let nobody go on believin' we all like you! You bring us down—make people think the whole race is unfit! . . . Now I got you—one less fool for the race to be ashamed of!

Waters is a man obsessed with succeeding in the white world, and the only avenue he can find is the Army. World War II, he believes, will provide the opportunity for his race to achieve a breakthrough, a belief that is shared in varying degrees by the other blacks, who wait expectantly for the "privilege" of fighting Hitler (the audience learns from Davenport's bitterly ironic final report that they are all eventually killed while exercising this privilege). Waters' dream is to send his children to "some big white college—let 'em rub elbows with the whites, learn the white man's language—how he does things." To pursue this dream, Waters tries with excessive rigidity to force his idealized image of the "respectable" black man onto his soldiers. More important, he systematically attempts to destroy those who will not or cannot conform to it, a group he refers to contemptuously as "geechies." With C. J. Memphis, the attempt succeeds all too well.

Yet Memphis' suicide also destroys Waters. Waters' drunken run-in with the white officers, which preceded his murder, shows that his private vision had collapsed. Deliberately provoking white officers is an act of self-destruction. Even had he not been killed that evening, it is likely that his career would have been irreparably damaged.

It is in this context that those enigmatic last words—"They still hate you!"—become meaningful. Who is "they" and who is "you"? "They" clearly refers to the white Establishment and "you" to Waters in particular and the black man in general. No matter how much a black man, in or out of the Army, tries to act "white," he will still be hated and despised, as much for his "success" in playing the role as for his failure. Yet "they" can also refer to the other blacks, those whom Waters tried to guide and lead by example and coercion, who ignored or rejected or failed to understand his vision. In the end, Waters puts himself at odds with both worlds, creating a limbo for himself in which, finally, he cannot survive. There are elements of the tragic in the fall of this black Army sergeant.

As Davenport investigates the facts surrounding Waters' death, he is vigorously opposed by Captain Charles Taylor, the white company commander, and the conflict between these two develops into a potent dramatic counterpoint. Davenport is a tough, smart black lawyer with no illusions about the job he has been given. He knows that the investigation was authorized in response to political pressures and to avoid bad publicity. He is not expected to learn anything—if they thought he would, they would not have sent him. Nevertheless, he takes the job quite seriously and pursues it skillfully and vigorously, cajoling and intimidating his way to the truth. One of the delicious ironies in the play is the way in which Davenport manipulates the Army brass by threatening their professional vulnerabilities and their precarious self-images—by exploiting, in short, the same kinds of attitudes and fears in the white officers that had, in a more malignant form, destroyed Sergeant Waters. Davenport's real test, however, comes when he understands the situation that provoked the murder and is faced with a hard choice between accepting the obvious and desired answer—the whites did it—or letting his doubts force him to continue the hunt for the truth, wherever it leads.

The white commanding officer, Captain Taylor, is an even more interesting character. The basis for his opposition to Davenport is more practical than racial. He believes that a black investigator will only play into the hands of those who would squelch the investigation altogether. At the same time, he does have racial prejudices, which he admits are the product of little contact with any race but his own. In their first meeting, he admits to Davenport that "you're the first colored officer I've ever met," and a few moments later he adds: "I don't want to offend you, but I just cannot get used to it—the bars, the uniform—being in charge just doesn't look right on Negroes!"

Taylor's candor does not ingratiate him with Davenport, but it does reveal him to be an honest, direct man, capable of admitting personal weaknesses, but tenacious in doing what he thinks must be done. He is the one white officer whom Davenport cannot intimidate, because he has never been willing to play the "good officer" game. His motives for wanting to find Waters' killer are emotional and practical. As the white commanding officer of a black unit, he is nervous about going into combat with men he does not understand. He believes that a conviction—of white officers—would give the men confidence in the white man's justice and, more

important, in him. Taylor also believes that his superior officers, who clearly want the incident forgotten, are mocking him by sending a black to conduct an investigation doomed to failure. He is certain that Byrd and Wilcox are guilty and feels an impotent rage that he can do nothing about it. When Davenport is able to force incriminating statements from the two men, Taylor jumps to the conclusion that they are guilty not merely of assault but also of murder. Almost gleefully, he demands immediate punishment.

At this point, the conflict between the two men reaches its ironical climax. Taylor, the white man, insists that the white officers should be charged with murder and dealt with severely. Davenport, the black man, who also wants to implicate the white men and knows that he could probably get away with it, has too many doubts, so he orders them released at some risk to himself—even though he knows that his search will probably pin the guilt on members of his own race and fuel the lies and distortions that produced the situation in the first place. Davenport's final dedication, however, is to truth, not color. The question of whether his decision will lead to real justice is left open.

A Soldier's Play was awarded the 1982 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Analysis: The Play

The first act opens on a darkened stage with the murder of Sergeant Waters by a mysterious man holding a .45-caliber pistol. Drunk and trying to stand, Waters is mumbling "They'll still hate you! They still hate you. . . !" when he is shot twice. His last words are symbolic of the play's theme of the effects of the institutional racism rampant in the United States Army in the 1940's and the self-hatred it often created in people living under its oppression.

The scene immediately shifts to the Company B barracks, where five African American enlisted men are being searched by Corporal Ellis, a black "spit-and-polish" soldier. Captain Charles Taylor, a white officer in his mid-to late thirties, watches the policelike search for weapons, worried that the murder of Waters might incite severe racial confrontations between members of Company B and local whites in the nearby town of Tynin. Those being searched are Corporal Bernard Cobb, a man in his mid-to late twenties; career soldier Private James Wilkie, a soldier in his early forties who has lost his stripes; Private Louis Henson, a thin man in his late twenties or early thirties; the angelic-looking Private First Class Melvin Peterson, a soldier in his late twenties who wears eyeglasses and has the most polished appearance; and Private Tony Smalls, a career soldier in his late thirties who "is as small as his name feels."

Finding no weapons, Captain Taylor and Ellis then exit the barracks, leaving the men to discuss how, instead of being allowed to fight alongside white soldiers overseas, they have been stationed in the Deep South, essentially doing custodial work. They also discuss the Ku Klux Klan and Waters's murder. Henson says, "I just hope we get lucky enough to get shipped outta' this hell hole to the War": A cutting commentary not only on the life of a black man in the American South at this time, but also on the reality of black American soldiers who will eventually be allowed to fight overseas for a freedom that they cannot experience at home.

Captain Taylor then meets Captain Richard Davenport, who will be investigating Waters's murder. Captain Davenport is a very confident African American man with a degree in law from Howard University and the first "colored officer" that Captain Taylor has ever met. Even though he believes himself to be a liberal man who is concerned about his black troops even to the peril of his own career, Captain Taylor is very threatened by Captain Davenport's rank, composure, and confidence.

As Captain Davenport begins to interview each soldier (with flashbacks accompanying each interview), the many facets of Waters's character are revealed. From Private Wilkie, Captain Davenport learns about Waters's unyielding standards as he demotes Wilkie for being drunk on duty and lectures him that his

behavior provides ammunition for racist claims that blacks are untrustworthy.

The next interview with Private First Class Melvin Peterson begins to reveal Waters's internalization of the racism he has dealt with all of his life, and how this racism created both a self-hatred and hatred of members of his own race. For instance, after winning another baseball game against the white soldiers, Waters tries to make the company paint the lobby of the Officers Club, a club they are not allowed to enter under normal circumstances. In response to his men's protests, especially Peterson's, Waters responds that he is the "kinda' colored man that don't like lazy, shiftless Negroes!" When Peterson later attempts to defend C. J. Memphis from Waters's rage, he and Waters almost get into a physical fight just as Captain Taylor enters. It is apparent that C. J.'s boyish mentality, ball playing, and musical abilities bring out a violent response from Waters. Despite Waters's request to the contrary, Captain Taylor relieves the men from painting duty and gives them some time off. Yet, after Captain Taylor leaves, Waters insists on fighting Peterson and beats him badly.

Peterson leaves and Captain Davenport then meets Captain Taylor. Taylor tells Captain Davenport that two racist officers, Byrd and Wilcox, were seen fighting with Waters outside the club for "colored" soldiers. He also tells Captain Davenport that he is working to get him off the case because he believes that only he, a white liberal officer, has a chance to bring these two to trial for murdering a black officer. In the flashback of Byrd and Wilcox's interview with Captain Taylor, a drunken Waters mocks them, telling them that he is not going to listen to white people, do what they tell him to do, or try to be like them any more. Waters tells them, "Look what it's done to me!—I hate myself!" and divulges a clue about what really happened when he says, "I've killed for you!"

In act 2, Captain Davenport interviews Private Louis Henson, who reveals that Waters was after C. J. Memphis, especially after the incident at the pay phone that resulted in two dead black soldiers and one dead white M.P. (military police). Wilkie finds the gun under C. J.'s bunk; Waters accuses C. J. of the crime, and C. J. denies any involvement in it. When he realizes what the consequences of being arrested for this could be, C. J. attempts to break free from the other soldiers, lunges at Waters, and knocks him down. He is restrained and put in the stockade.

In his next interview with Corporal Bernard Cobb, Captain Davenport learns that C. J. had relayed to Cobb that Waters had come to his cell and told him that he and Wilkie had caught the real murderer, but that Waters was going to let C. J. take the rap. The audience learns that Waters has developed his own plan to cleanse his race of black men like C. J., men whom he describes as "singin', clownin'—yas-sah-bossin'" types who make white people believe "the whole race is unfit." Distraught at what lies ahead of him, C. J. commits suicide. His suicide, though, impacts Waters on a deep psychological level and awakens him to what he has been willing to do to himself and others in his efforts to integrate into a racist white society.

Captain Davenport dismisses Cobb, and he and Captain Taylor begin talking about the case. Captain Davenport tells Captain Taylor he believes that Waters goaded C. J. into attacking him. They both arrive in Captain Taylor's office where Captain Davenport interviews Byrd and Wilcox. After the interrogation, Captain Taylor wants to arrest the two, but Captain Davenport overrules him. He realizes that Waters's earlier claim to have killed for white people was really about his "killing" of C. J.

Captain Davenport then returns to talk with Wilkie, where he learns about a racist incident that happened to Waters in France in World War I. This incident helped to develop the self-loathing and hatred of his own race that Waters carried with him to the end. During his talk with Wilkie, a celebration breaks out as the black troops learn they are finally going to be sent overseas to fight the Germans.

Captain Davenport goes on to meet Private Tony Smalls in the stockade, where he was placed for going absent without leave with Peterson. Smalls admits that they were running because they knew Davenport would figure out that Peterson had killed Waters while they were both on guard duty. Meeting with the

drunken Waters after he was beaten by Byrd and Wilcox, Peterson had compared Waters to Adolf Hitler and Japanese war general Hideki Tojo, the racists they were supposed to be fighting overseas. In response, Waters tells the two that in order to succeed, they have to be like white people, even to sacrifice their own. Yet, he admits that despite his efforts, he could never fit in because the "rules are fixed." No matter what he did, in the end, he says, "They still hate you!" Peterson then shoots Waters twice, killing him.

In the denouement, Captain Davenport describes how Peterson is caught and sent to prison, Waters is incorrectly reported as the first colored soldier killed in action, which elevates him to a hometown hero, and the rest of the outfit gets killed in a surprise German advance.

Analysis: Dramatic Devices

Creating this play as a mystery was an important strategy that allowed Fuller to use the interviews with the other characters as a means of slowly unraveling the complex Sergeant Waters. It also allowed the author to comment on American society and racism. Gary Storhoff, an African American literary critic, notes that the detective genre generally represents crime as an anomaly in a well-ordered society and that the solution of the crime therefore restores the proper social order and gives the audience a sense that justice has been restored. Yet in Fuller's case, the typical detective-story pattern is reversed since Waters's murder is, in fact, a logical extension of a society that is itself corrupt and unjust.

Another important element is the entire stage set, which Fuller designed to resemble a courtroom with several platforms at varying levels. On the right side of the stage near the barracks arrangement is a poster of boxing champion Joe Louis in military uniform. As Storhoff notes, this arrangement is symbolic not only of American society and justice on trial, but also is effective in demonstrating how a black superstar in the public world can become literally and figuratively a lowly private in the army.

Analysis: Historical Context

In 1981, when Charles Fuller wrote A Soldier's Play, the United States military was fully integrated. In fact, the military services have been the largest equal opportunity employer of blacks for many years. But it was not always this way. Historically, blacks have been recruited into the military during wars but unceremoniously returned to civilian life once the war ended. World War II began in much the same way. For many blacks, there was no reason to want to involve themselves in this war. The experience in World War I had taught that once their services were no longer needed that blacks found they had gained nothing by their sacrifice. The freedoms they fought for were not theirs, and the country they defended rejected them. Consequently, many blacks saw World War II as a white man's war, but some, like Sergeant Waters, saw the war as an opportunity to prove that blacks were as brave, as strong, and as accountable as any white soldiers. They reasoned that blacks could shoot a weapon, fly a plane, and kill a German as well as any white man, and they wanted a chance to prove it. They also saw the war as a means to wedge a crack into the segregation that still defined American life. If the military could be integrated, then maybe other areas of American life could be opened up, as well.

During both World War I and II, the army was completely segregated. Blacks were largely restricted to non-combat units, where they were responsible for basic duties that were mostly limited to labor and not combat. In other words, blacks were largely domestics, gardeners, mechanics, and handymen. Only a few blacks were permitted to join artillery units, and these units were also segregated so that blacks fought alongside blacks, and whites fought alongside whites. With the beginning of World War II, black community leaders pressured President Roosevelt to open up aviation schools to blacks. He responded by authorizing an aviation school for blacks, but it took a lawsuit against the War Department before blacks became members of the Army Air Corps. The black unit that was formed became known as the Tuskegee Airmen. Initially no one

wanted these black airmen, but eventually they found combat in North Africa and Italy where they distinguished themselves.

Toward the end of the war, black infantry units were sent to Germany, where they participated in the liberation of the concentration camps. It is difficult to imagine what they felt as these victims of American racism liberated the victims of Nazi racism in Europe. But when blacks returned to the United States after the war, they began to demand greater equality, especially in the military. This demand finally forced President Truman to sign an order that eventually led to the integration of the military, and for the first time ever, blacks would not be cashiered out of the military at war's end. Instead, after the Korean War and Vietnam, blacks became a part of a peace-time military. Prior to World War II, integration had to be forced upon white America. In 1941, President Roosevelt had to order employers and unions to cease all discrimination again blacks. In particular, he emphasized that those companies that were awarded defense contracts must not discriminate. Race riots in 1943 among defense workers signaled that integration would not come easily. It did not come easily in the military either. Although World War II made it easier for blacks to integrate the military, much of that integration led to a greater proportion of black casualties during war. It would take many more years before blacks truly began to achieve a more equitable share of the military effort.

Analysis: Literary Style

Character
A person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. ''Characterization'' is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation. Davenport is a black attorney, who divulges much about himself in the monologues that he uses to update the audience on the action that occurs between scenes. His character is revealed in other ways also, most notably in his confrontations with Taylor.

Drama
A drama is often defined as any work designed to be presented on the stage. It consists of a story, of actors portraying characters, and of action. But historically, drama can also consist of tragedy, comedy, religious pageant, and spectacle. In modern usage, drama explores serious topics and themes but does not achieve the same level as tragedy.

Genre
Genres are a way of categorizing literature. Genre is a French term that means ''kind'' or ''type.'' Genre can refer to both the category of literature such as tragedy, comedy, epic, poetry, or pastoral. It can also include modern forms of literature such as drama novels, or short stories. This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, comedy or romance. A Soldier's Play is a mystery.

Monologue
A monologue is a speech given by a character and principally addressed to the audience. In a monologue, the character speaking is alone on stage, or thinks he is alone, and thus he speaks the truth. This device is a way for an author to relate to the audience that the speaker really thinks, rather than what he may be telling other characters. A monologue can also be used like a Greek Chorus—to give information about details that occur off stage or between acts or to comments upon action that has occurred. In A Soldier's Play, Davenport uses a monologue to tell the audience that has occurred behind the scenes and what he is thinking.

Plot
This term refers to the pattern of events. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also sometimes be a series of episodes connected together. Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus the plot of A Soldier's Play is the investigation into who killed Sergeant Waters. But the themes are racism and prejudice.

Setting
The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for A Soldier's Play is an army post in the south. The cultural setting is racism and segregation and the division that occurred within the still segregated military.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1944he cost of living rises almost 30% in one year. For blacks, who already live at or below the poverty line, this inflation makes existence even more difficult.

1981: Inflation is so great that in an effort to help cut the budget, President Reagan orders that the school lunch program cut back on serving vegetables. In response, the Department of Agriculture declares that ketchup is a vegetable.

Today: The economy continues to grow, with unemployment low and the Dow Jones tops the 10,000 mark.

1944: Women become the backbone of the nations workforce, and the term ''Rosie the Riveter'' becomes the nickname for women who are now building the machines of war.

1981: Sandra Day O'Connor becomes the first woman jurist on the U.S. Supreme Court

Today: While women appear to be equal members of the nations work force, the ''glass ceiling'' in many companies means that some women still earn only 70% of men's salaries.

1944: Prior to the war, blacks had played baseball only in the Negro league. Baseball is curtailed temporarily during the war years; however, women's baseball, The All-American Girls' Baseball League, draws almost a million spectators. After the war ends, Jackie Robinson becomes the first black man to integrate professional baseball

1981: Baseball is fully integrated, with black players, such as Curt Flood of the St Louis Cardinals, helping to create free agency. However, women are still denied access to professional baseball.

Today: Some of baseball's biggest stars, including Ken Griffey Jr., are black, but women are still excluded from major league baseball.

1944: There has been little opportunity for blacks during the war boom production. Where jobs have been plentiful, conflicts over housing and transportation have caused riots in several major U.S. cities.

1981: President Reagan's social and economic programs hit blacks especially hard. Many AIDS victims are minorities, especially black drug users, and little effort is being made to fund research while the victims are largely black and Hispanic. Unemployment among blacks is at record levels and will climb to 45% in Los

Angeles by the mid 1980s.

Today: Unemployment is low, but the surplus of jobs is largely in the lower salaried areas; in one area, professional sports, black athletes, such as Carl Lewis, Florence Griffith-Joyner, Michael Jordan, and Tiger Woods prove that blacks can achieve economic benefit from their athletic talents and escape the poverty that holds so many other blacks.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

Research the role of black soldiers in World War II. Blacks did not fare well after the end of World War I; in view of this experience, what did they hope to change by fighting in this second war?

Investigate the history of the Ku Klux Klan. Why did it seem to Henson that the Klan must be responsible for Waters's death?

Compare the film version of A Soldier's Play, now titled *A Soldier's Story*, with the theatrical play. How are the characters revealed and the mystery maintained in the film?

Compare Davenport and Taylor. Each is a captain and each is concerned with justice, but each man has a different plan on how to resolve the murder. How are they alike? How are they different?

Waters's motive in framing C.J. is to rid the army of those he considers to be southern black fools, who hold back all blacks and prevent their success in a white world. Research the economic status of rural blacks in the 1940s and compare it to that of northern blacks. Is there a large disparity in wages?

Analysis: Media Adaptations

In 1984, A Soldier's Play was adapted for the screen from Fuller's play as *A Soldier's Story*. The movie starred many of the same actors from the theatrical production, including Adolphe Caesar, Denzel Washington, and Larry Riley. Howard Rollins, Wings Hauser, and David Alan Grier also starred. Norman Jewson directed the film, with a musical score by Herbie Hancock. The film won several awards, including the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Screenplay and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Best Supporting Actor (Adolphe Caesar). Academy Award nominations included Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Picture, and Best Supporting Actor (Caesar). Columbia Tristar Video is the distributor or this 101 minute film.

Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

Charles Fuller's *The Brownsville Raid* (1976) examines a 1906 incident that resulted in the dishonorable discharge of 167 black soldiers from the 25th Infantry.

Charles Fuller's *Zooman and the Sign* (1980) is about the quest for justice after a young girl dies and no one in the black community will identify the killer.

Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II (1993), edited by Phillip McGuire, provides an authentic voice from black soldiers.

The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II, by Mary Motley (1987), consists of a series of interviews with black officers and enlisted men who served in the military.

Liberators: Fighting on Two Fronts in World War II (1992) by Lou Potter, William Miles, and Nina Rosenblum, relates the experiences of black soldiers who liberated concentration camps of Buchenwald, Dachau, and Lambach. This book is based on a documentary by PBS and is available as a 90 minute video from Direct Cinema Limited in Santa Monica, CA.

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