Topdog/Underdog

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SUZAN-LORI PARKS

Suzan-Lori Parks was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky in 1963 to a military family. Because of her father's post in the army, she moved frequently as a child, even living in Germany for a short stretch of time before returning to the United States, where she eventually attended Mount Holyoke College. During this time, she took a writing class with James Baldwin, who recognized her talent and encouraged her to pursue playwriting. Although Parks is most widely known for her Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Topdog/Underdog*, she has also won awards for her plays *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *Venus*. In 2003, she wrote *Getting Mother's Body*, a novel, and in 2005 she helped Oprah Winfrey adapt Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into a made-for-TV movie. She currently teaches at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play's two main characters, Lincoln and Booth, are named after prominent historical figures: President Abraham Lincoln and his assassin, the actor John Wilkes Booth. In 1865, the final year of the Civil War, the Confederacy (a group of pro-slavery southern states that seceded from the United States in 1860) was failing in its fight against the Union in support of states' rights and slavery. Only five days after General Robert E. Lee (commander of the Confederate Army) surrendered to Union forces, John Wilkes Booth (a famous actor and fanatical Confederate supporter) snuck up behind President Lincoln in a theater balcony during a play and shot him in the back of the head. In the chaotic aftermath, Booth jumped off the balcony and onto the stage, injuring his leg but still managing to escape. President Lincoln died early the next morning, and Booth was later captured and killed in a barn in Virginia. President Lincoln's death devastated the nation, though it did nothing to reverse the fate of the Confederacy—the Union solidified its win of the Civil War the following month. At the end of the play, Booth (the character, not John Wilkes) shoots his brother, Lincoln, thus echoing the famous assassination of President Lincoln.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

First and foremost, *Topdog/Underdog* owes one of its defining conceits—a black man who works as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator—to *The America Play*, which Suzan-Lori Parks wrote in 1992. In this play, a black gravedigger resembles and adores President Lincoln, so he works as an impersonator, allowing his customers reenact John Wilkes Booth's assassination of Lincoln. In the foreword to the 2002 edition of *Topdog/Underdog*, Parks explains that she was thinking about this character when she suddenly had a new idea for a play: "This time I would just focus on this [character's] home life. This new Lincoln impersonator's real name would be Lincoln. He would be a former 3-card monte hustler. He would live with his brother, a man named Booth." *Topdog/Underdog* is often compared to other plays and novels that explore racial identity because its main characters are two young black men struggling to survive in America. When the play premiered, the theater critic Ben Bentley likened its interest in "the existential traps of being African-American and male in the United States" to Ralph Ellison's magnum opus, *Invisible Man*. Similarly, people often consider *Topdog/Underdog* in tandem with August Wilson's *Fences*, a play about race, masculinity, and family.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Topdog/Underdog
- **When Published:** The play premiered on July 26, 2001
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Theater
- **Genre:** Contemporary Theater
- **Setting:** Booth's New York City apartment
- **Climax:** Booth shoots Lincoln after Lincoln cons him out of his inheritance money
- **Antagonist:** Although for all intents and purposes Booth is the antagonist, he has a number of redeeming qualities, and both brothers ultimately wrong one another. The difference, though, is that Booth harms Lincoln irreparably by shooting him in the neck.

EXTRA CREDIT

Fateful Typo. Suzan-Lori Parks's first name is supposed to be spelled with an "s" instead of the "z," but an advertisement for one of her first plays accidentally wrote her name using the "z." Rather than trying to correct this, she decided to embrace the new spelling.

Star-Studded Cast. When *Topdog/Underdog* first opened, Booth was played by Don Cheadle (known for his roles in *Hotel Rwanda*, *Ocean's 12*, and *Crash*, among many other films) and Lincoln was played by Jeffrey Wright (of *Westworld* and *The Hunger Games*). When the play ran on Broadway, the rapper and actor Mos Def replaced Cheadle as Booth.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the opening scene of *Topdog/Underdog*, Booth sits in a squalid apartment and practices playing Three-Card Monte atop a cardboard box propped up by milk crates. He rehearses his banter, imitating phrases he's heard hustlers use on the street. Interrupting him, his brother Lincoln enters. Lincoln is a former hustler and Three-Card Monte dealer who's staying with Booth because his wife, Cookie, has left him. He's wearing a long coat, a fake beard, and a top hat. He has just come from his new job at the arcade, where he sits dressed up as Abraham Lincoln while customers shoot him with cap guns, a job he recently took so that he could leave behind his dangerous life as a Three-Card Monte conman. Startled by his brother's costume, Booth whirls around and points a pistol at Lincoln, threatening to shoot him next time he scares him like that. Lincoln explains that he didn't have time to take his costume off at work because had to catch the bus, but this does nothing to calm down Booth, who announces that Lincoln can't dress like that in this apartment because, he claims, it will scare away women.

Booth explains that he has a date with his girlfriend Grace. "Shes in love with me again but she dont know it yet," he says, showing Lincoln a ring he stole for the purpose of proposing to Grace, calling it "diamond-esque" and claiming that as long as it looks authentic, it's "just as good as the real thing." Lincoln admits he thought the ring was authentic at first glance—he even thought Booth bought it with his "inheritance," the $500 their mother left him before leaving when they were still children (Lincoln also received an inheritance of the same amount, but has already spent it). As Lincoln takes off his costume, Booth announces he has decided to change his name to 3-Card because he's going to be a prolific Three-Card Monte dealer.

The second scene takes place the following evening, when Booth enters the apartment wearing multiple suits, which he has stolen. When Lincoln comes home with a paycheck, the two brothers rejoice over their new suits and the money, divvying up the earnings and calculating how much they have left over after paying rent and utilities and buying alcohol. Lincoln confides in Booth, saying he's worried he's going to get fired from the arcade because rumors are circulating about cutbacks. Upon hearing this, Booth insists that Lincoln should exaggerate his performance as Abraham Lincoln to prove he's indispensable. Lincoln agrees and asks Booth to practice, but Booth is on his way out to meet Grace for their date. When he leaves, Lincoln dresses up as Lincoln and practices dying, then sits in his armchair drinking whiskey.

The third scene begins later that night, when Booth comes home and brags to Lincoln, saying that Grace wants him back. "She wants me back so bad she wiped her hand over the past where we wasnt together just so she could say we aint never been apart. She wiped her hand over our breakup." Lincoln congratulates his brother, and Booth goes on to brag about having sex with Grace. When Lincoln asks him to help him practice the Abraham Lincoln routine, Booth declines, saying he's too tired. At this point, Lincoln accuses Booth of lying, suggesting that his brother didn't actually have sex with Grace. He pokes fun at him for owning pornographic magazines, the pages of which stick together because Booth "spunked in the pages and didnt wipe them off." Defending himself, Booth says he needs "constant sexual release," and that if he wasn't "taking care" of himself he would just be out spending money that he doesn't have "out of a need for unresolved sexual release." Then he feebly adds, "I gave it to Grace good tonight." The brothers speak again about Three-Card Monte, and Booth finally decides to help Lincoln practice his act, pretending to shoot him and then watching him writhe and scream on the floor. Unnerved, he tells his brother that now the death looks "too real or something." Lincoln agrees this is a bad thing, and remarks that people are funny about "historical shit," and "they like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming."

In scene four, Lincoln wakes up on Saturday morning and, to prove to himself that he still has talent, practices dealing Three-Card Monte while Booth is asleep. His moves are much more fluid and practiced than Booth's, and his banter is well-rehearsed. As he goes through the motions, Booth wakes up and secretly listens to his routine.

After intermission, the apartment has been transformed. Several days have passed, and in place of the makeshift Three-Card Monte setup there now stands a table beautifully set for a romantic dinner. Booth is alone, and he skitters about the room tidying up and trying to hide his pornographic magazines. He assures himself that Grace will come, even though she's late. Just then, Lincoln tries to come in, but Booth blocks the door, saying he isn't welcome in the apartment tonight. Lincoln understands, but still tries to get in, eventually convincing Booth to open the door. "I lost my job," he says. Apparently, he was replaced by a wax dummy. Booth allows him to stay until Grace arrives, and to pass the time they reminisce about their childhood, talking about their parents, both of whom left them in order to elope with different lovers. According to Lincoln, each parent was running from various hardships in their pasts—hardships they hoped would simply disappear if they changed their lifestyles.

Lincoln and Booth drink whiskey while waiting for Grace. Booth tells Lincoln that he wants to work as brothers hustling unsuspecting people on the street. Hearing this, Lincoln decides to impart some wisdom about Three-Card Monte. The dealer, he explains, never reveals that he actually wants to play. This way, the crowd grows even more desperate to gamble. Lincoln finally plays with Booth, moving around the cards. The objective is for Booth to choose the correct card out of the three on the tabletop. After Lincoln finishes his routine, Booth

chooses the right card. "Make room for 3-Card!" he shouts. "Here comes thuh champ!" This happens several times, and Booth grows more and more animated and confident. Then Lincoln tells Booth to show him his skills as a dealer, and they switch roles. When Booth displays his clumsy talents, Lincoln laughs hard, telling him he's "a little wild with it." As he laughs, Booth puts his coat on and puts his gun in his pocket. Remembering how late Grace is, Booth grows angry. Link offers to go to the corner to call Grace, but Booth ignores this, saying, "Thuh world puts its foot in yr face and you dont move. You tell thuh world tuh keep on stepping. But Im my own man, Link. I aint you." With this, he leaves the apartment, slamming the door on his way out.

In the final scene, which takes place the following evening, Lincoln bursts into the apartment yelling, "Taaadaaaa!" Alone, he pulls from his pocket $500 and recounts the triumphs of the day, which he spent hustling people on the streets in Three-Card Monte. As he rejoices, Booth appears in the doorway and listens. Upon noticing him, Lincoln asks his brother how his night has been. Booth tells him that Grace has actually proposed to *him*, which means Lincoln's going to have to pack his bags and leave, since Grace will want to live in the apartment. Unfazed, Lincoln agrees to be gone the next day. He also advises his brother to get a job, suggesting that Grace won't like him anymore if he isn't bringing money into the house. Offended, Booth steers the conversation toward confrontation, revealing that he slept with Cookie right before she left Lincoln. "All she knew was you couldnt get it up," he says. "I had her. Yr damn wife. Right in that bed."

Lincoln is rather unperturbed by Booth's outright hostility, saying that he doesn't think about Cookie anymore anyway. However, the brothers continue to argue, and Link mocks Booth for believing he's going to survive as a card dealer. They start playing Three-Card Monte, and Booth picks the right card, besting Lincoln, who congratulates his little brother on getting "pretty good." But Booth feels his victory is empty because there isn't any money on the line. To remedy this, Lincoln puts down the $500 he made that day, but Booth points out that it's not real if he doesn't put some of his own money down, too. Booth fetches his inheritance, which is still tied up tight in the nylon stocking in which his mother gave it to him. "Dont put that down," Lincoln says, but Booth urges him to deal the cards. After a moment, Lincoln does, on the condition that Booth can only win the money if he wins two rounds. Sure enough, his little brother chooses the right card on the first round. Right before picking for the second time, Booth reiterates the terms of the bet, saying that if he picks right again he wins, and Lincoln agrees. "Plus I beat you for real," Booth adds, to which Lincoln asks, "You think we're really brothers?" Lincoln then deals the cards, duping Booth and winning his inheritance.

"Aint yr fault if yr eyes aint fast," Link says to Booth. "Throwing cards aint thuh whole world." Gloating, he starts untying the nylon stocking, marveling at the fact that Booth never even opened it to count the money. Lincoln then reveals that he has conned Booth, saying, "Cause its thuh first move that separates thuh Player from thuh Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning." Furious, Booth suddenly confesses that he shot and killed Grace, and Lincoln decides to give his brother back the inheritance, but Booth's anger can't be calmed. "Go on," Booth shouts. "You won it you open it." As Link reluctantly cuts open the stocking with a knife, Booth seizes him from behind and shoves the barrel of his gun into his neck. "Dont," Lincoln pleads, but Booth pulls the trigger, killing him. In the aftermath of the gunshot, Booth paces back and forth, yelling at his brother's dead body before suddenly falling to the ground, holding Lincoln's body, and screaming in agony.

CHARACTERS

Lincoln – One of only two characters seen onstage during the play, Lincoln is living with his brother, Booth, because Lincoln's wife, Cookie, has left him. An intelligent man who likes to drink, he works at an arcade as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator, dressing in an old overcoat, a top hat, and a fake beard. Because he is a black man, he has to go to work in "whiteface," smearing white paint over his skin in order to look more convincingly like Abraham Lincoln. At the arcade, he sits with his back turned to customers, who come up behind him and shoot him with cap guns in a reenactment of John Wilkes Booth's assassination of the president at the end of the Civil War. Before working at the arcade, Lincoln used to be a virtuosic hustler who played Three-Card Monte on the streets and conned people out of their money. Now, though, he's trying to stay away from hustling, hoping to live an honest life in his brother's apartment until he can get back on his feet. Both he and Booth have painful personal histories, since their parents abandoned them as children, each parent leaving separately. When their mother left, she gave Booth an "inheritance" of $500, and when their father left, he gave Lincoln the same amount. Lincoln has long since spent his cash, but he knows Booth hasn't. He takes advantage of this when, after refusing time and again to play cards with his brother, he relents and cons Booth out of his inheritance—a fatal mistake, since Booth can't stand to lose and, in an effort to regain a sense of dominance, shoots and kills Lincoln.

Booth – A hotheaded, unemployed man who allows his older brother, Lincoln, to stay in his apartment. Booth is obsessed with making money and attracting women, though he has neither a job nor a healthy romantic relationship. Indeed, he talks often about his love interest, Grace, whom he's determined to keep from seeing other men. He periodically brags to Lincoln about how much Grace loves him, though there's no evidence to support these claims. When he's not

talking to his brother about Grace, he's begging Lincoln to teach him the trade of a Three-Card Monte dealer, explaining that he wants to be a revered hustler. He even makes Lincoln call him 3-Card, declaring that he'll shoot anybody who calls him Booth. Throughout the play, Booth reveals his violent side, an element of his personality that surfaces early on, when he points a gun at Lincoln in the very first scene. This aggression is ultimately his way of overcompensating for his various insecurities, many of which are related to his fraught conception of masculinity and the traumas of his abandonment as a child. These violent and confrontational predilections eventually come to fruition when he admits to Lincoln that he not only slept with Cookie (Lincoln's wife), but he also murdered Grace for spurning him. Later that night, after Lincoln cons Booth out of the $500 "inheritance" his mother gave him, Booth tries to reassert his power by shooting and killing his older brother. This only leaves him in a state of sorrow and desperation, and the play ends with him screaming out in agony while holding his brother's lifeless body.

Grace – Booth's love interest, who never appears on stage. Booth talks extensively about Grace, saying things like, "Shes in love with me again but she dont know it yet." In the play's final scene, Booth reveals that Grace told him he has "nothing going on," rejecting him and expressing distaste for the ring he gave her. In response, he tells Lincoln, he killed her.

Cookie – Lincoln's ex-wife, who never appears on stage. Still, the brothers talk about her, and Booth explains that she came to the apartment one night when her marriage with Lincoln was falling apart. Apparently, she complained that Lincoln was having impotency problems, and expressed a desire to have extramarital relations (just as Lincoln himself was having with other women). As such, she and Booth had sex. Booth tells this to Lincoln as a way of taunting him, saying, "I had her. Yr damn wife. Right in that bed." Lincoln, for his part, is indifferent, merely saying, "I dont think about her no more."

Lonny – A fellow conman with whom Lincoln used to hustle. While Lincoln served as the dealer in Three-Card Monte, Lonny would subtly encourage passersby to join the game. However, hustling can be dangerous, and on Lincoln's final day throwing cards, Lonny was killed. This is why Lincoln doesn't want to reenter the life of a conman.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DECEPTION

Acts of deception in *Topdog/Underdog* follow a relatively standardized progression. Indeed, even the most flagrant cons or scams adhere to the same general guidelines. Three-Card Monte, a classic street game played with cards, exhibits this perfectly, as the hustler's performance and banter follow a uniform, step-by-step delivery. When Lincoln teaches Booth how to "throw the cards," he explains this hustler's process, emphasizing the most important step: tricking people into thinking they have a chance at winning even though the odds are stacked against them. What's most critical, Lincoln tells his little brother, is that the mark (that is, the person being conned) must be made to think he is the one convincing the dealer to play the game—when in reality, the dealer is eager to rob the mark of his money, and has painstakingly manufactured the appearance of being unwilling to play. If this step of the hustler's process is effective, the mark suddenly becomes instrumental in his own deception, eager to play a game he can never win. When Lincoln himself employs this exact technique to con Booth, the audience comes to understand that the act of deception is deeply psychological, relying on patterns proven to disarm and take advantage of people. In turn, the play shows that the most important step in a hustler's process of deception is identifying a person's willingness to ignore rationality in the hopes of seeing him- or herself as a winner against all odds.

The standardized process of deception is immediately observable in the way both Lincoln and Booth practice their routines as card dealers. Rather than simply throwing the cards on the table and playing the game, they adhere to something like a hustler's script, which is full of catch phrases and periodic reiterations of the rules of the game. "Watch me close watch me close now," Booth says in the play's opening lines as he practices playing Three-Card Monte. "Who-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-thuh-red-card? I-see-thuh-red-card. Thuh-red-card-is-thuh-winner. […] You-pick-that-card-you-pick-a-loser, yeah, that-cards-a-loser. […] You-pick-that-card-you-pick-a-winner. Follow that card. You gotta chase that card." Compared to Lincoln, Booth's delivery is clumsy and slow, but his commitment to learning this banter emphasizes the importance of the routine. What's more, it's worth noting that this banter involves underlining time and again the difference between losing and winning ("You-pick-that-card-you-pick-a-loser"; "You-pick-that-card-you-pick-a-winner"). This is because the dealer wants to establish a simple distinction: a person is either a "loser" or a "winner." This ultimately instills in the onlookers a sense of competition, an eagerness to prove that they're winners. By explaining the simple rules of the game (there are, after all, only three cards to choose from), the dealer subtly implies to his audience that picking a "winner" isn't actually very hard. As a result, he imbues the mark with a false sense of confidence and a yearning to prove himself, inviting

him to participate in his own deception. As such, Parks spotlights the spoken element of deception, suggesting that a good hustler is one who can verbally plant ideas in a mark's head without ever giving outright encouragement—a crucial step in the art of deception.

Unfortunately for Booth, he himself is susceptible to this kind of deception. Throughout the play, Lincoln acts as if he doesn't want to throw cards with his brother. Booth sees this as nothing more than an unwillingness to play the game, even though Lincoln's reluctance should arouse suspicion—since Lincoln has already explained to Booth that a good hustler never reveals how eager he is to play. "He holds back and thuh crowd, with their eagerness to see his skill and their willingness to take a chance, and their greediness to win this cash, the larceny in their hearts, all goad him on and push him to throw his cards, although of course the Dealer has been wanting to throw his cards all along," he says. When Lincoln finally *does* play Three-Card Monte with Booth, he lets his little brother win. This gives Booth the false impression that he has an unheard-of talent for besting the dealer. Thinking this, he swells with confidence. "Yeah, baby!" he gloats. "3-Card got thuh moves! You didn't know lil bro had thuh stuff, huh? Think again, Link, think again." In response, Lincoln acts convincingly annoyed, saying, "You wanna learn or you wanna run your mouth?" By pretending to be a sore loser, Lincoln only adds to Booth's burgeoning ego. For Booth, the idea that he has outwitted and embarrassed his older brother—an experienced hustler—intensifies his own conviction that he's a winner. In this way, Lincoln coaxes his little brother into ignoring something he should already know about the game: the dealer *always* wins.

The fact that Booth falls for Lincoln's deception illustrates the dangerous influence of his ego on his decision-making. Indeed, his desire to believe in his own virtuosity eclipses everything else, even the lessons Lincoln has taught him about the process of deception itself. When Lincoln finally reveals that he has conned his little brother, he reminds Booth of what his overconfidence has allowed him to forget: "Cause its thuh first move that separates thuh Player from thuh Played," he tells Booth. "And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. Taadaaa! It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you." In this moment, he admits that he's been in control the entire time, manipulating Booth into forgetting that "there aint no winning" against the dealer in Three-Card Monte. This harkens back to something he tells his little brother earlier in the play: "First thing you learn is what is," he says. "Next thing you learn is what aint." In this context, learning "what is" means comprehending that the dealer is always in control of the situation. Learning "what aint" means understanding that the dealer will often create the illusion that the mark has the upper hand. Thus, Lincoln breaks down the process of deception in simple terms: the dealer will always win, but will also always make it seem otherwise. And yet despite having heard this straightforward explanation, Booth *still* falls for Lincoln's con. This is because Lincoln has scouted him out as a perfect mark, someone eager to ignore reality in the name of victory and triumph. It's clear that Lincoln knows his brother well—and therefore knows that he'll readily embrace the idea of himself as magnificent and virtuosic against all odds. Lincoln exploits Booth's most hubristic impulses. As such, Parks demonstrates that the act of deception is a deeply psychological game—one that often depends on exploiting the mark's vanity so that he ultimately plays into his own deception.

MASCULINITY, SEXUALITY, AND VIOLENCE

Masculinity in *Topdog/Underdog* is often cast as unstable and potentially dangerous. Although both brothers speak about their sexual conquests in chauvinistic terms, Booth especially clings to inflated ideas of his own sexual prowess, allowing it to define his sense of manhood. Booth even tries to emasculate Lincoln during a particularly heated argument not only by reminding him that his wife left him because he was impotent, but by revealing that Booth had slept with Lincoln's wife while they were still married. This tactic is a direct result of Booth's own insecurities surrounding his masculinity. However, Booth's revelation falls flat rather than precipitating a crisis for Lincoln, perhaps because Lincoln isn't as concerned as Booth with being an alpha male. By contrasting Lincoln's easygoing, assured masculinity with Booth's tendency to overcompensate sexually and violently for his own shortcomings, Parks exhibits the destructive ways in which certain ideas about masculinity can contribute to a man's behavior and general worldview.

Booth's behavior is in many ways a product of his frustrated and unfulfilled sexual cravings. Although he claims to have passionate sex with Grace, Parks suggests that this is a lie when Lincoln confronts Booth about the stash of semen-covered pornographic magazines he finds underneath Booth's bed. Booth's claims about having sex with Grace seem all the more unlikely when he later reveals that he has killed her because she told him he has "nothing going on." When Lincoln calls Booth's bluff by saying, "You didnt get shit tonight" and revealing that he knows about his younger brother's pornographic stash, Booth justifies his magazine collection by saying, "Im hot. I need constant sexual release. If I wasnt taking care of myself by myself I would be out there running around on thuh town [...] doing who knows what, shooting people and shit. Out of a need for unresolved sexual release." Without "sexual release," Booth thinks he would be "shooting people," a sentiment that not only associates male sexuality with violence, but aligns with the play's title (Topdog/Underdog being a reference to ideas of dominance and submission). Simply put, a lack of "sexual release" makes Booth feel inferior, so he

cultivates an alpha-male persona, overcompensating by bragging about darkly violent predilections and exaggerated roles of dominance.

Because Lincoln doesn't need to constantly affirm his masculine identity—at least not as desperately as Booth—he is better able to put himself in situations in which he's vulnerable. For example, he does this when he sits at the arcade dressed as President Lincoln and allows patrons to simulate his own assassination. Booth, by contrast, can't seem to fathom the idea of turning his back to strangers while they pretend to shoot him. "You ever wonder if someones gonna come in there with a real gun?" he asks Lincoln. "A real gun with real slugs?" This question once again highlights Booth's insecurity. His fear of being made to feel powerless is so pervasive that he can't even imagine himself into Lincoln's position without dreading the possibility of violence. For him, to turn one's back on others is to invite danger and aggression—a fact which seems to reveal more about his own inclination toward violence than any such inclination in others. Lincoln, on the other hand, doesn't think so obsessively about power and dominance, and thus doesn't let the fear of being dominated interfere with his life. As such, he relaxes into a position of vulnerability, accepting that he's at the mercy of strangers but also grasping that this doesn't necessarily mean he'll be attacked. Indeed, it's a distorted line of reasoning to believe that vulnerability inevitably leads to harm—a line of reasoning that arises from Booth's insecurity and results in a constant need to prove his own dominance.

In keeping with Booth's need to assert his dominance as an alpha-male, the play culminates in a tragic act of violence that illustrates the utter toxicity and senselessness of Booth's brand of masculine aggression—in which lashing out in aggression is how he deals with humiliation. When Grace insults him by refusing to be his girlfriend, he kills her. "Who thuh fuck she think she is doing me like she done? Telling me I don't got nothing going on. I showed her what I got going on," he brags to Lincoln. To somebody like Booth, being told that he has "nothing going on" is an insult that cuts straight to the bone, an accusation that can only be met with violence. Likewise, when Lincoln cons Booth out of his money, making him look foolish and proving that he's just as gullible as the average mark, he responds with violence. Humiliation, then, is an emotion which he simply can't countenance. Once again, he proves himself incapable of embracing any kind of vulnerability or weakness. And although for several moments after killing Lincoln Booth talks like a tough guy—saying, "Watch me close watch me close now: Ima go out there and make a name for myself that dont have nothing to do with you"—he eventually collapses over Lincoln's lifeless body and weeps, attesting to the fact that his alpha-male persona is not only useless in protecting him against sorrow and desperation, but is in fact a trap that *leads him* into sorrow and desperation.

HISTORY

Lincoln and Booth are in many ways similar to the men after whom their characters are named. With his cocky bravado and trigger-happy sensibility, Booth's personality recalls John Wilkes Booth, a well-known actor and Confederate sympathizer who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln in 1865 in the hopes of defeating the Union, winning the Civil War, and thereby ensuring the continuation of slavery. Likewise, his brother's levelheadedness and patience resemble Abraham Lincoln's reputation as a thoughtful man with a strong moral conscience. By naming these characters after such famous historical figures, Parks immediately foreshadows the play's ending, in which Booth shoots Lincoln. She also implies that these two men have fundamentally different worldviews, as was the case with the real Lincoln and Booth, who were on opposing sides of the Civil War. More importantly, *Topdog/Underdog*'s engagement with history isn't only a reference to President Lincoln's assassination, but also a way of examining the relationship these two brothers have with their own pasts. In turn, Parks explores how Lincoln and Booth take cues from history—both personal and otherwise—to make sense of their lives.

Lincoln and Booth think about history mostly in terms of their own pasts. Since Booth is uncomfortable acknowledging the painfulness of his own personal history, he wants to erase his past. He reveals this desire when he lies about Grace while bragging to his brother. "She wants me back so bad she wiped her hand over the past where we wasn't together just so she could say we aint never been apart," he says. This optimistic statement seems like wishful thinking, considering that Booth later reveals he has killed Grace, indicating that she most likely *didn't* want him back. Nonetheless, the statement itself provides a convenient window into the way Booth thinks about the difficulties of his past: he wants to simply "wipe" them away. He even announces to Lincoln in the first scene of the play that he wants to change his name from Booth to 3-Card. This is ultimately an attempt to erase part of his childhood, which left him scarred after the painful departure of his parents. To his credit, Lincoln accepts the idea of this name change, even suggesting that Booth assume an African name, something many black people have done as a way of "wiping away" the white slave owners who oppressed their ancestors and gave them Anglicized names. But Booth is interested in changing his name for more personal reasons, and wants to be called 3-Card—a name that has no basis in the past and which he hasn't earned (considering that he has yet to establish himself as a card dealer). In this way, Booth emerges as a character constantly looking into an unrealistic future. Refusing to reckon with his past, he instead projects himself into a make-believe world in which he's a successful dealer named 3-Card. Of course, he never properly learns to play Three-Card Monte, and the fact that he fails miserably suggests that Parks believes

no future is possible that depends on the erasure or ignorance of history.

Lincoln and Booth's family history is another perfect illustration of how these two men are profoundly affected by the past. Metaphorically speaking, the ghosts of their parents hang over them throughout the entire play. This is made especially clear by Booth's reluctance (until the play's end) to spend the $500 his mother gave him before leaving when he was a child. After all these years, he hasn't spent a penny of this money. In fact, he even steals from department stores and other establishments in order to avoid using any of this cash, which obviously represents to him the last thing he has left of his mother. Even the fact that he and Lincoln refer to this money as an "inheritance" in the first place says something about the way they view their family history—after all, an inheritance is usually bequeathed unto somebody by a loved one who has died. Even though Booth's mother merely left to start a new life, he acts as if she has died, treating the $500 as an inheritance rather than a parting gift. In this sense, the money becomes a family heirloom of sorts, un-spendable because it has too much significance. As much as Booth tries to "wipe away" his past in other ways, he inadvertently lets the memory of his mother follow him wherever he goes.

It is unclear whether Booth is aware of the emotional significance of his inheritance money. Lincoln, however, is certainly cognizant of the idea that a person's haunting past can follow him or her throughout life. This, he argues, is precisely what must have happened to their parents; "Each of them had a special something that they was struggling against," he says. "Moms had hers. Pops had his. And they was struggling." He explains that their parents bought a new house and thought that doing so would help them escape their problems, which they hoped "would see thuh house and be impressed and just leave them be." As he says this, Lincoln presents his parents' mindset as naïve, insinuating that it was foolish for them to have thought they could outrun their past simply by moving to a new house. He himself has tried to efface history by burning his father's clothes after the old man left the family behind, but of course this did nothing to diminish the pain Lincoln felt. Thus, he now understands that a person must live with his or her own history. Any measures to blot out bygone eras are pointless, and only lead to increased suffering.

When Booth tells Lincoln to spruce up his Abraham Lincoln act by screaming and writhing when the customers shoot the gun, Lincoln seizes the opportunity to explain to his brother that a person can't intervene in history in this way. "People are funny about they Lincoln shit. Its historical," he says. "People like they historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming." And yet, as Booth's killing of Lincoln at the end of play demonstrates, history often *does* repeat itself, unfolding in ways that are "raggedy and bloody and screaming" rather than "neatly like book." In this way, Lincoln seems to acknowledge that, despite people's attempts to erase or dispel the traumas of history, the past has a way of repeating itself, and unresolved issues have a way of rearing their heads in unexpected and ugly ways. Thus, when Booth shoots Lincoln at the very end of the play, it's as though he is not only reenacting the shared historical trauma of President Lincoln's assassination and the legacy of slavery, but also the age-old story of brotherly competition, as well as the very painful personal history of his parents' abandonment. In Parks' play, then, the only way move forward in life is to face the past, however painful that process may be.

BROTHERHOOD AND COMPETITION

Lincoln and Booth's relationship is complex in that it's both loving and competitive. The mere fact that Booth has opened his home to Lincoln—allowing his older brother to stay with him in the wake of Lincoln's divorce—demonstrates the kindness he's capable of showing. At the same time, though, Booth betrayed Lincoln by sleeping with Lincoln's wife, Cookie—an action that ensured the dissolution of their marriage in the first place. Booth isn't the only one with complicated feelings about his brother; Lincoln kindheartedly tries to keep Booth from entering the life of a card hustler, and yet he also cons him out of the entirety of his inheritance, plotting against his little brother and playing into his ego and lack of foresight. Given the way Lincoln and Booth treat each other, then, Parks crafts an image of brotherhood in which competition and malice are entangled with love and protection.

Lincoln and Booth both seem to be aware of the strain of competition that runs through their relationship. When Booth finally convinces Lincoln to play cards against him, he notes that if he chooses the right card, he will beat his brother "for real." This phrasing hints at a competitive struggle that goes beyond this simple game. Indeed, it seems an acknowledgement of a competition he's been waging against his brother in private throughout the play—now, though, this competition has come to the forefront of their relationship, making the stakes finally "real." Recognizing the greater meaning in Booth's assertion, Lincoln asks, "You think we're really brothers?" In this moment, he feels Booth's desire to undercut him and wonders if this is a natural thing for a brother to feel. Of course, the reason he's so acutely aware of this twisted sense of competition is that he himself is also trying to undermine Booth. Thus, faced not only with Booth's malice for him, but also with his own malice for Booth, Lincoln pauses to recognize the toxic nature of their relationship. After a moment, he throws the cards. The fact that he stops to ponder his relationship with Booth and then proceeds to cheat him out of his inheritance suggests that he considers competition an unavoidable (or at least excusable) aspect of brotherhood.

Although Lincoln betrays his brother by conning him out of his inheritance, his actions are perhaps not purely malicious. Throughout the play, he has been trying to convince Booth not to enter the conman's line of business. Lincoln himself is trying to quit card-throwing, and when Booth wants to go into the card-throwing business, Lincoln warns him, saying, "Throwing thuh cards aint as easy as it looks." In this way, he discourages his brother from stepping into a world of crime, having has witnessed firsthand the dangers of such a lifestyle. Though it may seem at the end of the play like Lincoln abandons this protective attitude when he cheats Booth out of his inheritance, part of why he does so may be to further deter his brother from the life of a conman. This notion is supported by the fact that, upon winning Booth's money, Lincoln emphasizes how clumsy and unfit for playing cards his brother is, saying, "Aint yr fault if yr eyes aint fast. And you cant help it if you got 2 left hands, right? Throwing cards aint thuh whole world. You got other shit going for you. You got Grace." In this moment, Lincoln stresses Booth's lack of talent as well as the fact that there are other things in his life that are worthier of his attention. "You got Grace," he reminds his brother, trying to lure him away from a life of crime and toward a more wholesome existence. In other words, Lincoln's sense of competition with Booth manifests itself in a protectiveness of sorts, ultimately denoting that there's room for love and care even in the most troubled and competitive of familial relationships.

The attitude of competition Booth displays toward Lincoln is even more complicated than the odd but arguably well-intentioned sense of competition Lincoln feels toward Booth. This is overwhelmingly apparent in the moments directly before and directly after Booth kills Lincoln. Gun in hand, Booth shouts at his brother just before shooting him, saying, "Who thuh man now, huh? Who thuh man now!? Think you can fuck with me, motherfucker think again motherfucker think again!" This is a blatantly competitive thing to say, especially when Booth yells, "Who thuh man now, huh?" His use of the word "now" reveals that he has heretofore seen Lincoln as the "man" (or the "topdog") and that he thinks he has suddenly usurped his brother of this dominant role. However, after he kills Lincoln, he hardly feels triumphant or victorious—indeed, it doesn't take long before he falls to the ground and screams in agony over having lost his brother. The play ends on this somber note, displaying the fraught mixture of competition and love that makes Lincoln and Booth's relationship as brothers so complicated.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN COSTUME

The Abraham Lincoln costume that Lincoln wears for his job at the arcade comes to stand for the ways in which Lincoln is forced to live with the difficulties of being a black man trying to make an honest living in a world dominated by white people. His position as an impersonator requires him to dress in a frock coat, a top hat, and a fake beard. It also requires him to paint his face white, an inversion of minstrel theater's use of blackface, when white actors would paint their faces black and portray African-Americans in an absurd and racist manner. Because Lincoln dresses in whiteface, then, his Abraham Lincoln costume is fraught with racial significance—it is the reversal of a racist tradition, and yet Lincoln still struggles against bigotry, as evidenced by the fact that he gets paid less than the person who held his job before him (simply because he's black). On the one hand, Lincoln benefits from dressing up as Abraham Lincoln because it enables him to work a steady job instead of hustling on the streets. On the other hand, though, maintaining this position forces him to acquiesce to being treated poorly because he's black. Furthermore, Booth frequently shows his dislike of the Abraham Lincoln costume. Indeed, he often references Lincoln's "whiteface" while insulting his brother, even calling Lincoln an "uncle tom" (somebody who is overly subservient) at one point. This vehement rejection of the Abraham Lincoln costume arises from Booth's unwillingness to acknowledge and thereby contend with the complexities of a black man transcending racial boundaries, as well as the costume's evocation of a time in American history when black people didn't have rights, an era Booth would rather forget.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *Topdog/Underdog* published in 2001.

Scene One Quotes

Watch me close watch me close now: who-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-thuh-red-card? I-see-thuh-red-card. Thuh-red-card-is-thuh-winner. Pick-thuh-red-card-you-pick-uh-winner. Pick-uh-black-card-you-pick-uh-loser. Theres-thuh-loser-, yeah, theres-thuh-black-card, theres-thuh-other-loser-and-theres-thuh-red-card, thuh-winner.

[...]

You wanna bet? 500 dollars? Shoot. You musta been watching 3-Card real close. Ok. Lay the cash in my hand cause 3-Cards thuh man. Thank you, mister. This card you say?

(*Rest*)

Wrong! Sucker! Fool! Asshole! Bastard! I bet yr daddy heard how stupid you was and drank himself to death just cause he didnt wanna have nothing to do witchu! I bet yr mama seen you when you was born and she wished she was dead, sucker! Ha Ha Ha! And 3-Card, once again, wins all thuh money!!

Related Characters: Booth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Booth speaks these lines at the very opening of the play while he's practicing his skills as a Three-Card Monte dealer. In the stage directions, however, Parks expresses that his movements and speech patterns are clumsy and awkward. Booth's bumbling nature is also apparent in Parks's use of hyphens, which break the words into strange patterns and give Booth's banter a stilted, unnatural feel. What's most important, though, is that these are the play's opening lines and that they immediately establish the fact that playing Three-Card Monte means perfecting (or trying to perfect) a standardized routine. Indeed, these words resurface many times throughout the play, and the audience even hears some of these exact phrases when Lincoln deals cards. This ultimately communicates that the act of deception adheres to a routine, a procedure from which dealers rarely stray. In turn, this notion prepares audience members to anticipate Lincoln's eventual deception of his brother, since it has already been made apparent that a hustler always sticks to his process without exceptions—in Lincoln and Booth's case, Lincoln employs the exact step-by-step con he would use on anybody else, proving once and for all that hustlers rarely stray from their set practice.

I got her this ring today. Diamond. Well, diamond-esque, but it looks just as good as the real thing. Asked her what size she wore. She say 7 so I go boost a 6 and a half, right? Show it to her and she loves it and I shove it on her finger and its a tight fit right, so she cant just take it off on a whim, like she did the last one I gave her. Smooth, right?

Related Characters: Booth (speaker), Lincoln, Grace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Booth speaks these words to Lincoln, explaining that he's going to give his lover Grace a ring on a date the following day. He has just finished explaining to Lincoln that Grace suddenly wants him back after having taken some time for herself, and now he's clearly eager to impress her. However, his conception of authenticity is perhaps a bit lacking in this moment, as he trusts that Grace will be impressed by a fake diamond ring. This attitude is indicative of his characteristic overconfidence when it comes to his ability to deceive other people. In the same way that he overestimates his skills when it comes to hustling marks in Three-Card Monte, he invests an unprecedented amount of faith in the idea that he'll be able to convince Grace that this is a valuable ring. Furthermore, he reveals his possessive nature when he admits that he purposefully bought the ring too small for Grace so "she cant just take it off on a whim." In turn, it becomes obvious that he wants to send a message to other men that Grace is *his* lover, and he wants to make it as hard as possible for her to refute this. The ring, then, is less of a gift to her than it is Booth's way of asserting a stereotypically masculine sense of possession of his lover.

She was putting her stuff in bags. She had all them nice suitcases but she was putting her stuff in bags.

(*Rest*)

Packing up her shit. She told me to look out for you. I told her I was the little brother and the big brother should look out after the little brother. She just said it again. That I should look out for you. Yeah. So who gonna look out for me. Not like you care. Here I am interested in an economic opportunity, willing to work hard, willing to take risks and all you can say you shiteating motherfucking pathetic limpdick uncle tom, all you can tell me is how you dont do more what I be wanting to do. Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!

Related Characters: Booth (speaker), Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Booth describes watching his and Lincoln's mother pack her things before abandoning the family. Rehashing her parting words, he backhandedly suggests to Lincoln that their mother saw Booth as the responsible one in their relationship. Although Lincoln is the older brother who has enjoyed more success in his life, Booth's mother seems to have planted in his mind the idea that he's the one who needs to "look out for" Lincoln. Of course, this doesn't align with reality, since Lincoln has a steady job whereas Booth merely steals and spends his time trying—in vain, the audience eventually learns—to convince Grace to love and respect him. Nonetheless, Booth allows his mother's past words to bring themselves to bear on the present, delivering this sentiment to Lincoln as a way of asserting his own dominance and the idea that he's worthy of respect and responsibility. Of course, this is all a ploy to make Lincoln feel bad for not teaching Booth to play Three-Card Monte, as Booth accuses his brother of "standing in [his] way" and preventing him from reaping the benefits of an "economic opportunity." The insults he hurls at his brother are equally as charged as the content of his memories, and when he calls his brother a "pathetic limpdick uncle tom," he seeks to emasculate Lincoln. To call a black man an "uncle tom" is to imply that he is overly servile and obedient, a person without integrity or a strong backbone. This is in step with Booth's desire to make his brother feel inferior and weak, but his insults register as over the top, ultimately casting him as immature and incapable of levelheadedly confronting Lincoln.

Lincoln
I cant be hustling no more, bro.

Booth
What you do all day aint no hustle?

Lincoln
Its honest work.

Booth
Dressing up like some crackerass white man, some dead president and letting people shoot at you sounds like a hustle to me.

Lincoln
People know the real deal. When people know the real deal it aint a hustle.

Booth
We do the card game people will know the real deal. Sometimes we will win sometimes they will win. They fast they win, we faster we win.

Related Characters: Lincoln, Booth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation occurs when Booth tries to convince Lincoln to teach him Three-Card Monte. Lincoln's assertion that a job isn't a "hustle" "when people know the real deal" draws a stark delineation between the nature of Three-Card Monte and the nature of a more legitimate job (like the one he has as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator). Under this interpretation, as long as everybody is on the same page, nobody is getting conned. When Lincoln impersonates Abraham Lincoln and lets customers shoot him with cap guns, for example, everybody involved understands and accepts what's going on—Lincoln has agreed to dress up as the president, and the customers have agreed to give away their money to shoot this make-believe Abraham Lincoln. In Three-Card Monte, though, the customers part with their money because they think they actually might win, but this is never the case. As such, the dealer is able to hustle them, taking advantage of them because they don't "know the real deal." This is exactly what Booth fails to understand. "We do the card game people will know the real deal," he insists. This notion doesn't acknowledge the fact that the dealer always wins, a lesson Lincoln later teaches Booth. Unfortunately for him, though, Booth ignores this lesson

and retains his naïve conviction that marks can "sometimes" win—a grave mistake that costs him his inheritance money when Lincoln finally decides to use his own ignorance against him.

Scene Two Quotes

Lincoln

They say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that dont make me who I am. Old black coat not even real old just fake old. Its got worn spots on the elbows, little raggedy places thatll break through into holes before the winters out. Shiny strips around the cuffs and the collar. Dust from the cap guns on the left shoulder where they shoot him, where they shoot me I should say but I never feel like they shooting me. The fella who had the gig before I had it wore the same coat. When I got the job they had the getup hanging there waiting for me. Said thuh fella before me just took it off one day and never came back.

(*Rest*)

Remember how Dads clothes used to hang in the closet?

Booth

Until you took em outside and burned em.

Related Characters: Booth, Lincoln (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation passes between Lincoln and Booth after Booth has just stolen new suits for them both. Admiring his new outfit, Lincoln considers the nature of appearances, challenging an old adage upholding that "the clothes make the man." He himself rejects this notion because he's an impersonator. If clothes did indeed "make the man," then, Lincoln would have to reconfigure his own identity, stepping into the unfitting role of Abraham Lincoln, a white man who lived through the Civil War, a time when slavery hadn't yet been abolished. His assertion that he never feels like Abraham Lincoln is an important one because it illustrates that he's able to distance himself from the country's painful history even while reenacting it all day long. This is a useful psychological and emotional ability, especially since both he and Booth have troubling familial histories. Interestingly enough, it seems this outlook has been hard-won, since he once burned the clothing his father left behind after abandoning the family. As such, he understands that the clothes do *not* "make the man"—after all, judging by how frequently Lincoln and Booth's father comes up in conversation, it seems Lincoln's attempt to destroy his memory by burning his clothes did nothing to actually banish him from his mind.

Scene Three Quotes

Grace Grace Grace. *Grace*. She wants me back. She wants me back so bad she wiped her hand over the past where we wasnt together just so she could say we aint never been apart. She wiped her hand over our breakup. She wiped her hand over her childhood, her childhood years, her first boyfriend, just so she could say that she been mine since the dawn of time.

Related Characters: Booth (speaker), Lincoln, Grace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Booth says this to Lincoln after having supposedly met with Grace, though it's never clear to the audience whether or not what he says about her is true, since all of their interactions take place offstage. Taken in conjunction with what becomes evident later—that Grace doesn't want to have sex with Booth and, finally, that Booth kills her because she thinks he has "nothing going on"—it's safe to say his claim that she "wiped her hand over [their] breakup" is at the very least a delusional exaggeration, if not an outright lie. However, Booth's fabrication ultimately provides insight into his conception of love and his approach to the past. Indeed, what he wants most is to be able to "wipe" away anything unsavory that has previously happened to him. This, of course, would include his "breakup" with Grace. In addition, he yearns so badly to be Grace's only lover that he wishes she could erase "her childhood years" and her "first boyfriend" just so he can see himself as the only man she's ever cared to date. Once again, Booth's need to be an alpha-male eclipses his sense of reason, and he tries to convince himself—and Lincoln—that nobody can ever compete with him.

Im hot. I need constant sexual release. If I wasnt taking care of myself by myself I would be out there running around on thuh town which costs cash that I dont have so I would be doing worse: I'd be out there doing who knows what, shooting people and shit. Out of a need for unresolved sexual release. I'm a hot man. I aint apologizing for it. When I dont got a woman, I gotta make do. Not like you, Link. When you dont got a woman you just sit there. Letting yr shit fester. Yr dick, if it aint falled off yet, is hanging there between yr legs, little whiteface shriveled-up blank-shooting grub worm. As goes thuh man so goes thuh mans dick. Thats what I say. Least my shits intact.

(*Rest*)

You a limp dick jealous whiteface motherfucker whose wife dumped him cause he couldnt get it up and she told me so. Came crawling to me cause she needed a man.

(*Rest*)

I gave it to Grace good tonight. So goodnight.

Related Characters: Booth (speaker), Grace, Lincoln

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Booth spews this venomous rant after Lincoln suggests that Booth didn't actually have sex with Grace earlier in the night, as he claims to have done. Lincoln has just revealed that he discovered Booth's pornography stash and that the semen stuck to the magazine pages makes it obvious that Grace isn't actually having sex with him. Somewhat comically, Booth accidentally confirms this notion in his very attempt to refute it, since he says, "When I dont got a woman, I gotta make do," thereby inadvertently confessing that he hasn't actually gotten back together with Grace. More importantly, though, his monologue suggests that he conflates sexuality with aggression and violence. He admits that if he didn't relieve himself sexually, he would "be out there doing who knows what, shooting people and shit." In this way, Parks illustrates the very sinister and dangerous relationship Booth has with sexuality. What Booth says in this passage is stereotypical of a man who wants to assert himself as ultra-masculine, and through his thoughts about "unresolved sexual release" and his attempts to emasculate his brother, he unearths a dangerous side of masculine aggression.

Its pretty dark. To keep thuh illusion of thuh whole thing.

(*Rest*)

But on thuh wall opposite where I sit theres a little electrical box, like a fuse box. Silver metal. Its got uh dent in it like somebody hit it with they fist. Big old dent so everything reflected in it gets reflected upside down. Like yr looking in uh spoon. And thats where I can see em. The assassins.

(*Rest*)

Not behind me yet but I can hear him coming. Coming in with his gun in hand, thuh gun he already picked out up front when he paid his fare. Coming on in. But not behind me yet. His dress shoes making too much noise on the carpet, the carpets too thin, Boss should get a new one but hes cheap. Not behind me yet. Not behind me yet. Cheap lightbulb just above my head.

(*Rest*)

And there he is. Standing behind me. Standing in position. Standing upside down. Theres some feet shapes on the floor so he knows just where he oughta stand. So he wont miss. Thuh gun is always cold. Winter or summer thuh gun is always cold. And when the gun touches me he can feel that Im warm and he knows Im alive. And if Im alive then he can shoot me dead. And for a minute, with him hanging back there behind me, its real. Me looking at him upside down and him looking at me looking like Lincoln. Then he shoots.

Related Characters: Lincoln (speaker), Booth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lincoln explains to Booth what it feels like to work as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator. The most interesting element of his brief monologue comes when he describes the "little electrical box" on the wall in front of him, in which he watches the customers' reflections as they shoot him. The fact that their reflections appear inverted in this fuse box is important because it suggests that Lincoln sees these people from a different perspective than the average person might. This is perhaps because he's in a unique position, one in which he's completely vulnerable. Indeed, this is a job that allows him to interact with people in a very strange way, and there's a bizarrely personal element to the entire exchange—when the customer touches the barrel of the gun to his skin, he or she can "feel that [Lincoln is] warm," that he's alive and breathing. Unlike Booth, who would never put himself in a position of such vulnerability, Lincoln comfortably opens himself up to these strangers, accepting the odd circumstances and observing his

customers from a unique vantage point. Ultimately, his ability to watch their inverted reflections implies that people who embrace moments of vulnerability gain new perspectives on their interactions with others. Whereas somebody like Booth completely closes himself off to any sort of interaction in which he can't assume a dominant role, Lincoln affords himself a more varied view of the people he comes into contact with precisely because he doesn't shy away from the kind of relational intimacy that puts him in a submissive role.

I slump down and close my eyes. And he goes out thuh other way. More come in. Uh whole day full. Bunches of kids, little good for nothings, in they school uniforms. Businessmen smelling like two for one martinis. Tourists in they theme park t-shirts trying to catch it on film. Housewives with they mouths closed tight, shooting more than once.

(*Rest*)

They all get so into it. I do my best for them. And now they talk bout cutting me, replacing me with uh wax dummy.

Related Characters: Lincoln (speaker), Booth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Lincoln says this to Booth, cataloguing the kind of people that visit the arcade and pretend to shoot him while he's dressed like Abraham Lincoln. His list of customers is quite varied, including "kids," "businessmen," "tourists," and "housewives." The wide range of these customers implies that seemingly everybody is interested in acting out a violent act and engaging with a historic moment. It's interesting to note here that Booth refuses several times throughout the play to visit Lincoln at the arcade, rejecting the idea of participating in this violent reenactment. And yet, Booth is the most violent person in the play, the one who kills not only Grace, but also Lincoln, his own brother. If he indulged this kind of aggression and violence in a make-believe context, perhaps he wouldn't be so drawn to it in real life. This, it seems, is the point of Lincoln's job; he provides his customers with a safe outlet for their darker impulses, doing his "best for them" and allowing them to get "into" the reenactment so that they can carry on with their otherwise peaceful lives.

People are funny about they Lincoln shit. Its historical. People like they historical shit a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming. You trying to get me fired.

Related Characters: Lincoln (speaker), Booth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Lincoln says this after Booth tells him that his new arcade routine—in which he dies more realistically after being shot—is disconcerting because it looks too real. Although Booth himself was the one who originally suggested that Lincoln should liven up his act to avoid getting replaced by a wax dummy, now he shies away from the idea because the image of Lincoln writhing on the floor is too visceral and disturbing. In response, Lincoln reprimands his brother for suggesting this in the first place, upholding that, although people come to his booth at the arcade to engage with history, they're unwilling to fully face its gruesome details. Instead, they want their conceptions of the past to be innocuous. They don't want to consider the "blood" and "screams" and other horrors that inevitably accompanied Abraham Lincoln's assassination. They only want to engage with history insofar as it aligns with their own views or fulfills a personal need. Indeed, the businessmen and housewives that shoot Lincoln at the arcade do so as a way of acting out various aggressions in a controlled and make-believe environment. As soon as Lincoln's act becomes too real, they won't be able to "fold" up history so that it fits "neatly" into their lives. As such, Parks illustrates that people are very touchy about history—on the one hand, they want to acknowledge it, but on the other hand, they also want to remain ignorant of its difficult and unsavory implications.

Scene Five Quotes

I think there was something out there that they liked more than they liked us and for years they was struggling against moving towards that more liked something. Each of them had a special something that they was struggling against. Moms had hers. Pops had his. And they was struggling. We moved out of that nasty apartment into a house. A whole house. It werent perfect but it was a house and theyd bought it and they brought us there and everything we owned, figuring we could be a family in that house and them things, them two separate things each of them was struggling against, would just leave them be. Them things would see thuh house and be impressed and just leave them be.

Related Characters: Lincoln (speaker), Booth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

This passage showcases Lincoln's theory that his and Booth's parents tried to run from their troubled pasts by moving to a new house. He explains how they must have thought the things they "struggle[ed] against" would suddenly disappear if they changed their lifestyles. By moving out of a "nasty apartment into a house," they seemed to think economic advancement would exempt them from having to feel the hardships that previously followed them throughout their lives. This recalls Booth's optimism about his ability to erase his past and his attraction to the idea of "wiping away" unsavory memories. Of course, the fact that Lincoln has devised this theory about his parents indicates that he is perhaps the only member of his family who understands that a person must live with and accept the unfortunate past. After all, he himself is comfortable reenacting Abraham Lincoln's assassination, a historical event that sent the nation into mourning and that has remained one of the country's deepest wounds.

Scene Six Quotes

All she knew was you couldnt get it up. You couldnt get it up with her so in her head you was tired of her and had gone out to screw somebody new and this time maybe werent never coming back.

(*Rest*)

She had me pour her a drink or 2. I didnt want to. She wanted to get back at you by having some fun of her own and when I told her to go out and have it, she said she wanted to have her fun right here. With me.

(*Rest*)

And then, just like that, she changed her mind.

(*Rest*)

But she'd hooked me. That bad part of me that I fight down everyday. You beat yrs down and it stays there dead but mine keeps coming up for another round. And the bad part of me took her clothing off and carried her into thuh bed and had her, Link, yr Cookie. It wasnt just thuh bad part of me it was all of me, man, I had her. Yr damn wife. Right in that bed.

Related Characters: Booth (speaker), Lincoln, Cookie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Booth tells Lincoln that he slept with Lincoln's ex-wife, Cookie, right when their marriage was falling apart. As such, he reveals that he ensured the demise of Lincoln's failing romance. To make matters worse, he tells his brother this story in a blatantly aggressive manner, going out of his way to remind Lincoln of his impotency. Once again, then, he actively tries to emasculate his older brother, and when Lincoln doesn't respond, he pushes on, saying, "It wasnt just thuh bad part of me it was all of me, man, I had her." By saying this, Booth shows his brother that his decision to sleep with Cookie wasn't simply rooted in lust—indeed, it "wasnt just thuh bad part of" him that decided to have sex with her. In turn, Booth implies that he made a conscious choice to betray Lincoln, one that was more than a primal longing to have intercourse. By underlining this fact, Booth turns this confession into a combative assertion, clearly trying to provoke Lincoln by saying, "Yr damn wife. Right in that bed."

And ooooh you certainly was persistent. But you was in such a hurry to learn thuh last move that you didnt bother to learning thuh first one. That was yr mistake. Cause its thuh first move that separates thuh Player from thuh Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. Taadaaa! It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you. And when its thuh real deal, when its thuh real fucking deal, bro, and thuh moneys on thuh line, thats when thuh man wont want you picking right. He will want you picking wrong so he will make you pick wrong. Wrong wrong wrong. Ooooh, you thought you was finally happening, didnt you? You thought yr ship had come in or some shit, huh? Thought you was uh Player. But I played you, bro.

Related Characters: Lincoln (speaker), Booth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Lincoln admits that he has hustled Booth, involving his younger brother in a long con by playing on his naivety. Indeed, Lincoln recognized that his brother was so eager to play Three-Card Monte that he wouldn't pause to fully consider the nature of the game. "You was in such a

hurry to learn thuh last move that you didnt bother to learn thuh first one." Throughout the play, Booth begs Lincoln to give him lessons, but he fails to internalize the plain fact that the dealer always wins. This recalls Booth's earlier argument—delivered in an attempt to convince his brother to return to the hustling life—that if they throw cards together "people will know the real deal" because "sometimes" the dealers will win and "sometimes" the marks will win. This, of course, isn't true, but Lincoln picks up on the fact that Booth *thinks* it's true. As such, he's able to obscure to Booth that when the dealer wants the mark to lose, the mark will lose. "It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you," Lincoln says. It's easy to see that this is exactly what Lincoln has been doing to Booth every time the brothers play cards; none of Booth's victories—about which he was always so eager to brag—were the result of Booth's skills. Rather, they were the result of Lincoln's manipulations, and this allowed Booth's confidence to soar, rendering him even more unable to recognize that the dealer always wins.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SCENE ONE

It is Thursday evening and Booth sits alone in his dingy apartment, which contains one bed, an armchair, and a makeshift table made from a cardboard box and old milk crates. He's sitting at this table when he delivers the play's first lines, which he mutters to himself while practicing his routine as a Three-Card Monte dealer. "Watch me close watch me close now," he says. "Who-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-thuh-red-card? I-see-thuh-red-card. Thuh-red-card-is-thuh-winner." As he goes about moving the three cards across the cardboard table, his banter is clumsy and halting. Pitted against an imaginary player (called a "mark"), he wins and pretends to run away to a new street corner, claiming to have seen police officers and thus escaping his make-believe opponent.

In this opening scene, Parks immediately sets the audience up to see Booth as a competitive man who savors the idea of winning. Even though his Three-Card Monte routine is awkward and clumsy, he still imagines himself winning against his opponent. This is an indication that he doesn't even care to entertain the idea of losing, a fact that suggests losing is, for him, unbearable. As such, he focuses all his mental energies on imagining himself as a winner. In the scenes to come, the audience understands that this is exactly the mentality that renders him so susceptible to deception himself.

As Booth practices "throwing the cards," his brother Lincoln enters the apartment wearing an old frock coat, a top hat, and a fake beard. He is dressed as Abraham Lincoln, his face smeared in white paint. Sensing his brother's presence, Booth twirls around and pulls out a pistol, which he points at Lincoln. "Man dont *ever* be doing that shit!" he says. "Who thuh fuck you think you is coming in my shit all spooked out and shit. You pull that one more time I'll shoot you!" Lincoln explains that he was rushing to catch a bus, so he didn't have time to take off his **costume** before leaving the arcade, where he works as an Abraham Lincoln impersonator who sits with his back turned while customers shoot at him with cap guns in imitation of John Wilkes Booth's assassination of President Lincoln in 1865.

The fact that Booth's first interaction with his brother involves pointing a gun at him quickly alerts the audience to his violent and aggressive nature. Furthermore, the tableau of a man named Booth aiming a pistol at a man named Lincoln is reminiscent of America's actual history, since John Wilkes Booth assassinated Abraham Lincoln using a handgun. This image also pits the two brothers against one another, suggesting that—in alignment with their names—they're natural enemies.

Booth tells Lincoln he hates to see him "wearing that bullshit" in his apartment. He instructs his older brother to take off **the Abraham Lincoln costume**, claiming he's going to scare away women. When Lincoln asks, "What women?", Booth says, "I got a date with Grace tomorrow. Shes in love with me again but she don't know it yet. Aint no man can love her the way I can. She sees you in that getup its gonna reflect bad on me." He proceeds by showing his brother a ring he got for her today. "Diamond," he brags. "Well, diamond-esque, but it looks just as good as the real thing." Apparently, he asked for her ring size and then stole this ring, making sure it was one size too small so "she cant just take it off on a whim, like she did the last one [he] gave her."

Booth's determination to find a ring Grace can't take off illustrates how possessive he is when it comes to romantic relationships. Indeed, this is a man so insecure about the possibility of losing his lover to other men that he feels he must claim her in a manner that undermines her autonomy. He exhibits a similar insecurity when he scolds Lincoln for dressing strangely in his apartment, revealing that he has an obsession with surface-level appearances. This is perhaps because he isn't comfortable with who he is—he's terrified of losing Grace to somebody else, so he does everything he can to present himself as desirable, even if it means micromanaging his brother's appearance.

"You boosted a ring?" Lincoln asks. "Yeah," Booth replies. "I thought about spending my inheritance on it but—take off that damn coat man, you make me nervous standing there looking like a spook, and that damn face paint, take it off." Lincoln obeys, and as he undresses, he says that while riding the bus home in the **costume** he caught the attention of a little boy sitting next to him. Excited to see Abraham Lincoln, this rich little boy asked for his autograph, and Lincoln said he would give it to him for $10, but the boy only had $20, so Lincoln lied and told him that he would bring change the following day.

It becomes clear in this moment that both of these brothers are comfortable conning and deceiving people. However, the way they each go about deceiving people differs. While Booth straightforwardly steals, Lincoln's theft is more intellectual, since he cunningly tricks the boy on the bus into parting with his money. As such, Lincoln emerges as the more savvy, intelligent brother, though both of them seem to lack a certain moral compass.

Lincoln sees the makeshift cardboard table and asks if Booth is making bookshelves. In response, Booth lies and says that's exactly what he's doing, saying, "I was thinking we dont got no bookshelves we dont got no dining room table so Im making a sorta modular unit you put the books in the bottom and the table on top. We can eat and store our books. We could put the photo album in there." With this, he takes out a tattered old family album and puts it in one of the milk crates. He then tells his brother to stop calling him Booth, because he's decided to change his name, though he isn't ready to "reveal" the new one yet. Lincoln suggests that he pick "something african," perhaps Shango, "the name of the thunder god."

The brothers' interesting relationship with history—both personal and otherwise—comes to the forefront in this moment. First of all, the photo album emerges as an important representation of a past about which the audience hasn't yet learned, though whatever it contains is clearly significant to Booth and Lincoln, since it's the only book (or book-like object) in the entire apartment. Second of all, Lincoln's suggestion that Booth change his name to Shango suggests that he—Lincoln—is attuned to the effects of the painful history of slavery on a person's identity. After all, many African-Americans have changed their names in the past in order to renounce the Anglicized names given to their ancestors by slave owners. What's more, that Lincoln suggests Booth change his name to "Shango" hints at the nature of Booth's personality, since Shango is typically known for his rage and fury. On another note, the fact that Booth lies to his brother about the Three-Card Monte table indicates that for some reason he doesn't want Lincoln to know that he was practicing dealing cards.

The brothers eat Chinese food, and Lincoln complains about having to sleep in the reclining chair. "Its my place," Booth replies. "You don't got a place. Cookie, she threw you out. And you cant seem to get another woman. Yr lucky I let you stay." Lincoln then points out that Booth's tone is different on Fridays, when Lincoln brings home his paycheck. While clearing the table, Lincoln sees a card on the ground, and Booth lies, saying he's been practicing Solitaire. "How about we play a hand after eating," he suggests to his brother, but Lincoln says, "You know I dont touch thuh cards, man." Booth asks if he'd play if there was money on the line. "You dont got no money," Lincoln replies. "All the money you got I bring in here." In response, Booth points out that he has his inheritance money.

Once again, the audience witnesses Booth lying to his brother, though it's not yet clear why he doesn't want Lincoln to know he was practicing Three-Card Monte. However, one can intuit from Lincoln's strong assertion that he doesn't "touch thuh cards" that he perhaps has a certain distaste for gambling. Furthermore, Booth's eagerness to bet money even when he doesn't have a steady income reveals his foolhardy relationship with gambling and perhaps an overly confident attitude when it comes to his ability to beat his brother.

When Booth mentions his inheritance, Lincoln says Booth might as well not have any money at all, since he never intends to spend it. "At least I still got mines," Booth says. "You blew yrs." After a short pause, the brothers change the subject and finish eating. Eventually, Booth turns his back to Lincoln and continues practicing Three-Card Monte in a hushed voice, but Lincoln hears him and critiques his technique. "You wanna hustle 3-card monte, you gotta do it right, you gotta break it down." Booth urges his brother to show him what he means, but Lincoln refuses. Insisting, Booth says, "You and me could team up and do it together. We'd clean up, Link," but Lincoln merely ignores him, turning the suggestion into a joke by saying, "I'll clean up" as he throws away the Chinese food.

Once again, Lincoln's aversion to Three-Card Monte comes to the forefront, and Booth's insistence that they "team up" provides insight into the nature of their relationship: it's clear their brotherly dynamic includes a power imbalance, since Booth is constantly begging his brother to play cards with him, as if he's a young boy trying to get the attention of a brother he deeply admires. The more Lincoln refuses, it seems, the more Booth wants them to join forces.

"My new names 3-Card," Booth announces while Lincoln cleans. He declares that he'll shoot anybody who refuses to call him 3-card, and though Lincoln finds this ridiculous, he indulges his little brother, saying, "Point made, 3-Card. Point made." Shifting his attention, he starts playing guitar while Booth once more tries to convince him that they should team up and hustle Three-Card Monte on the streets. "We could clean up you and me," he says. "You would throw the cards and I'd be yr Stickman. The one in the crowd who looks like just an innocent passerby, who looks like just another player, like just another customer, but who gots intimate connections with you, the Dealer, the one throwing the cards, the main man. I'd be the one who brings in the crowd."

Lincoln's willingness to go along with Booth's ludicrous name change suggests that he's used to tolerating his younger brother's irrational ideas. Of course, the condescending manner in which he says "Point made, 3-Card" only further reinforces his superiority in their relationship as the older, wiser, and more levelheaded brother. This dynamic only further makes Booth want to work with him, since it positions him as an elder capable of granting approval—something Booth desperately needs. There is, then, a sense of love and appreciation between them, even if this brotherly connection is strained by Booth's absurd notions and Lincoln's patronizing concessions.

Lincoln tries to tell Booth that throwing cards isn't as simple as he has made it sound, but Booth presses on, remarking, "And the ladies would be thrilling! You could afford to get laid! Grace would be all over me again." Upon hearing this, Lincoln points out that Booth previously claimed she's already in love with him, and Booth quickly corrects himself, saying, "She is she is. Im seeing her tomorrow [...]." Quickly changing the topic back to Three-Card Monte, he begs Lincoln to go into business with him, but Lincoln remains steadfast, saying, "I dont touch thuh cards no more."

Finally, Parks reveals that Lincoln has a history of playing Three-Card Monte, as evidenced by both his insider knowledge (his understanding that throwing cards isn't simple) and his statement that he doesn't "touch thuh cards no more." His absolute refusal to return to the world of hustling indicates that there's something painful in his past surrounding his experience with Three-Card Monte, something that has stayed with him to this day, preventing him all the while from returning to his old ways. On another note, this short exchange also suggests that Booth is not being entirely truthful with his brother about his relationship with Grace—his statement about wanting Grace to be "all over him" again *indicates that she's not actually in love with him (as he claimed earlier), and this deception ultimately leaves the audience wondering why Booth feels the need to lie to his brother about his love life.*

After a long pause, Booth abruptly starts talking about the day their mother abandoned the family. While Lincoln was at school, Booth crept back home because he "was feeling something going on, [...] feeling something changing." When he entered the house, he explains, he saw his mother packing her bags, and she told him to look after Lincoln even though he's the older brother. "So who gonna look out for me," Booth says now. "Here I am interested in an economic opportunity, willing to work hard, wiling to take risks and all you can say you shiteating motherfucking pathetic limpdick uncle tom, all you can tell me is how you dont do no more what I be wanting to do. Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!"

The fact that Booth suddenly tells the story of coming upon his mother right before she abandoned the family highlights the extent to which he conflates past trials and tribulations with present-day difficulties. Indeed, faced with his brother's reluctance to hustle Three-Card Monte with him, he can't help but think back on one of the (presumably) most painful memories in his personal history, ultimately involving his brother in the complicated relationship he has with his past. When he blames Lincoln for "standing in [his] way," he sounds like a petulant child, once again reinforcing the strange imbalance of power in their relationship.

Apologizing, Lincoln reiterates that he doesn't want to "hustle" anymore. "What you do all day aint no hustle?" Booth asks, referencing Lincoln's job as an impersonator. Lincoln rejects this insinuation, saying, "People know the real deal. When people know the real deal it aint a hustle." In response, Booth insists that this principle can also apply to Three-Card Monte. "We do the card game people will know the real deal," he says. "Sometimes we will win sometimes they will win. They fast they win, we faster we win." Still, Lincoln refuses, reiterating that he'll never go back to that life. "You aint going back but you going all the way back," Booth spits. "Back to way back then when folks was slaves and shit."

Booth's insistence that "people will know the real deal" even when they're being hustled in Three-Card Monte gives rise to the idea that even a conman follows a standardized process—if somebody can track this process, then they aren't necessarily being taken advantage of, though Booth's reasoning falters here, since nobody who knows the "real deal" would agree to play Three-Card Monte with a hustler in the first place (the entire game is always rigged in the dealer's favor). Booth also reveals his discomfort with Lincoln's job as a historical impersonator in this moment, showing that he can't even fathom dressing up in a way that harkens back to a time when "folks was slaves and shit." Unlike his own personal history—which he finds painful but can apparently examine without harming himself—Booth is unable to even imagine himself into a racist past, blocking it out entirely rather than acknowledging that it happened.

Frustrated by Booth's harshness, Lincoln says, "Dont push me," and Booth tells him he's going to have to move out of the apartment. "I'll be gone tomorrow," Lincoln declares, and then the brothers sit on opposite sides of the apartment. From his reclining chair, Lincoln plays his guitar and sings a song about how his parents left him, how he has no money, no lover, no place to stay. Impressed by his lyrical ability, Booth asks if he made the song up on the spot, and Lincoln says he's had it knocking around his head for a couple days. "Sounds good," Booth admits. After thanking his brother for the compliment, Lincoln tells him why their father gave them their names; "It was his idea of a joke," he says.

A tenderness between Lincoln and Booth emerges in this moment. Even though they've just had an argument, they quickly recover, complimenting one another and—more importantly—talking about their shared past. When Lincoln tells his brother how their father chose their names, he reminds Booth of their shared lineage, a bond that holds them together despite their differences. As such, their brotherly relationship exposes its own complexities: its balance between tension and mutual appreciation.

SCENE TWO

It's Friday evening and Booth enters the apartment wearing multiple layers of clothing. When he sees that Lincoln isn't home yet, he starts taking off each layer, revealing to the audience that he's wearing two beautiful suits, both of which still have price tags affixed to them. After laying one of the suits on Lincoln's chair and one on his own bed, he steps into the outer hallway and hauls a large folding screen through the door. Setting up the screen as a partition between the chair and bed, he pours two glasses of whiskey and sits at the cardboard table. Just then, Lincoln bursts in and yells, "Taaaaadaaaaaaaa!" Booth jumps up excitedly and the two brothers giddily count out the money Lincoln has brought home as part of his paycheck.

Once again, the audience sees Booth's obsession with stealing and with grandeur. Rather than getting a job, it's clear he's content with stealing unnecessarily fancy items like beautiful new suits. And though he steals one of these suits as a gift for Lincoln, the fact that he also brings home a partition indicates his desire to separate himself somewhat from his brother, yet another suggestion that their relationship is tense despite their closeness.

As the brothers prance around and delight in their money, Booth tells Lincoln to look around (wanting him to notice the suit he stole for him). "You rush in here and dont even look around. Could be a fucking A-bomb in the middle of the floor you wouldnt notice." Booth points out that Cookie, Lincoln's ex-wife, could be in his bed and Lincoln wouldn't even notice—"She was once," Lincoln remarks, but Booth directs his brother's attention to the chair, where the new suit is draped. As Lincoln thanks him, Booth says, "Just cause I aint good as you at cards dont mean I cant do nothing."

Booth's casual statement that there could be an "A-bomb in the middle of" the apartment provides insight into the way he views himself in relation to Lincoln. In this moment, it's clear that he sees himself as somewhat of an antagonist in Lincoln's life, an idea reinforced by the fleeting reference to the fact that Cookie—Lincoln's ex-wife—was once in Booth's bed. It seems, then, that Booth has betrayed Lincoln before and that he's surprised Lincoln isn't more suspicious of him for having done so.

Booth brags, saying he's going to look so handsome in his new suit that Grace will ask *him* to marry *her*. Lincoln, for his part, takes pleasure in these new clothes because he's forced to wear an old frock coat everyday at the arcade. "They say the clothes make the man," he says, then asks Booth if he remembers how their father left his clothes hanging in the closet when he—like their mother—abandoned them. Apparently, Lincoln burned them after he left because he "got tired of looking at em without him in em." Returning to his thoughts about his **Abraham Lincoln costume**, he tells Booth that the person who had the job before him simply hung the suit up one day and never came back. When Lincoln got the job, the boss told him he'd have to wear white makeup and accept lesser pay than the previous impersonator.

Although it seems clear that Booth's relationship with Grace isn't very stable, he's apparently comfortable making confident declarations about how much she's going to desire him when she sees his fancy new suit. His statement that she'll propose to him suggests that he wants not only to trick his brother into thinking he has a solid relationship with Grace, but also that he wants to deceive himself. In this moment, it becomes clear that flashy appearances and a boisterous attitude help Booth hide from himself the fact that his relationship with Grace is going badly. As such, by exaggerating his appeal, he deceives himself as a way of protecting himself from feeling inferior and insecure.

After admiring their new suits, the brothers budget out Lincoln's paycheck, setting aside portions for rent, food, alcohol, and utilities. As they do so, Lincoln mentions rumors about cutbacks that are circulating at the arcade. Worried about losing his job, he catalogues everything he likes about the position, but Booth merely says, "Thats a fucked-up job you got." In response, Lincoln says, "Its a living." Booth refutes this, asking his brother if he's *really* living, and Lincoln confirms that he is. "One day I was throwing the cards," he says. "Next day Lonny died. Somebody shot him. I knew I was next, so I quit." He posits that the arcade job is the luckiest thing to have ever happened to him, but Booth points out that he was once "lucky with thuh cards." "Aint nothing lucky about cards," Lincoln corrects him. "Cards aint luck. Cards is work. Cards is skill."

The idea that playing cards is "work" requiring "skill" implies that the act of deception is more complicated than it looks. Indeed, the fact that it involves "skill" means there are a set of techniques and steps a dealer must understand in order to successfully con a person. With his cockiness and overeager attitude, Booth is unlikely to grasp this, instead viewing the process of deception as nothing more than a matter of "luck." Furthermore, he expresses a certain discomfort toward Lincoln's job, a sentiment that perhaps stems from his unwillingness to acknowledge painful histories. In the same way that he ignores Lincoln's earlier suggestion to change his name to Shango (thereby renouncing the fraught racist history that has inevitably shaped his life) he rejects the idea of his brother sitting dressed up in whiteface and pretending to be somebody who lived during slavery. Although Abraham Lincoln championed abolishing slavery, Booth doesn't want to remember the past at all, instead dismissing the matter entirely by calling Lincoln's job "fucked-up."


After disparaging his brother's job, Booth finally suggests that Lincoln "jazz up" his Abraham Lincoln act if he doesn't want to get fired. "Elaborate yr moves," he says. He counsels his older brother to "flail" his arms and leap up when he gets shot. Lincoln likes the sound of this idea, but when he asks Booth to help him practice this new routine, Booth declines because he has to leave for a date with Grace. "Howabout I run through it with you when I get back," he says. "Put on yr getup and practice till then." Before he leaves, Lincoln lets him borrow five dollars. Then, once Lincoln is alone in the apartment, he dresses up as Abraham Lincoln but doesn't put on the white face paint. He practices dying once, then pours himself a glass of whiskey and sits in his chair.

It's not surprising that Booth refuses to practice Lincoln's routine, since he so adamantly dislikes his brother's job because of its acknowledgement of a turbulent racial history—a history that undoubtedly brings itself to bear on his own life. At the same time, though, he does encourage his brother to dress up as Abraham Lincoln and practice his routine, thereby helping Lincoln increase his chances of keeping his job. That Booth tries to help Lincoln save his job even though he's uncomfortable with the job itself once again shows the complexity of their brotherly relationship—despite the fact that Booth wants no part of Lincoln's historically-conscious occupation, he cares for his brother enough to try to help him retain his position. However, this empathy only goes so far, and he can't bring himself to see it through, which is why he leaves before Lincoln can put on the costume.


SCENE THREE

Lincoln awakes in the armchair hours later. Still dressed as Abraham Lincoln, it's clear he's been drinking heavily. He drifts back to sleep, but Booth barrels into the apartment and slams the door, clearly trying to wake his brother, who doesn't move. Pausing, Booth opens the door and slams it again. Lincoln wakes up suddenly and asks if Booth hurt himself. On the contrary, Booth tells him, he's had "an evening to remember," bragging about Grace by saying, "She wants me back so bad she wiped her hand over the past where we wasnt together just so she could say we aint never been apart. She wiped her hand over our breakup. She wiped her hand over her childhood, her teenage years, her first boyfriend, just so she could say that she been mine since the dawn of time."

Once again, Booth's confident swagger when it comes to his romantic relationship with Grace seems somewhat disingenuous, especially since his statement that she "wiped her hand over her childhood" is so blatantly hyperbolic. Only Booth—a man obsessed with being seen as a desirable alpha-male—would be so dramatic as to erase parts of history that don't play in his favor. It's clear in this moment that it's he *who wants to "wipe" all Grace's former lovers from his mind, thereby destroying any competition and gaining a masculine sense of possession over his lover. In this moment, Booth conflates romance with ownership, revealing his desire to be a dominant, controlling man uninfluenced by the past.*


Lincoln asks if Grace and Booth had sex. "Course she let me do it," Booth says. "She let you do it without a rubber?" Lincoln asks, and Booth claims she did, then boasts about how she let him have sex with her "dogstyle" in front of a mirror. However, he tells Lincoln that Grace is going to make him use a condom next time they make love. "Im sure you can talk her out of it," Lincoln says. After a pause, Booth asks his brother what kind of condoms *he* used to use when he was married to Cookie, and Lincoln says they didn't need to use protection because they were married. "But you had other women on the side. What kind you use when you was with them?" Booth asks. "Magnums," Lincoln says. Hearing this, Booth quickly says, "That's thuh kind I picked up. For next time."

Both Booth and Lincoln's misogyny and chauvinist ideals surface in their conversation about sexual conquests. To them, convincing a woman to forgo contraception during intercourse is a defining element of what they think of as good sex. There's a certain power Booth seems to derive from (supposedly) talking Grace out of using a condom, a sense of autonomy and control that reinforces his idea of himself as a desirable alpha-male. And if he does need to use a condom—as he claims he'll have to do the next time he has sex with Grace—he goes out of his way to make sure his brother knows he'll use a Magnum, a condom meant for men with large penises. What becomes painfully obvious in this moment (especially when Booth scrambles to assure Lincoln that he too must use Magnums) is that Booth's conception of sexuality is inextricably wrapped up in stereotypical ideas about manhood, masculine dominance, control, and power.

Booth waxes poetic about his love for Grace, saying she's not like the "fly-by-night-gals" he used to date. He speaks with admiration about the fact that she's in cosmetology school and explains that they were previously dating for two years and then broke up because he had a "little employment difficulty and she needed to think." As he speaks, he lies on his bed behind the dividing partition. Parks's stage direction indicates that he "fiddles with the condoms, perhaps trying to put one on." From the other side of the partition, Lincoln asks what he's doing back there, and he says he's resting because he's tired out from all the sex he had with Grace.

When Parks indicates that Booth "fiddles with the condoms, perhaps trying to put one on," she pokes fun of the fact that he's clearly more inexperienced than he lets on. Indeed, only somebody who hasn't been in many sexual situations would experiment with and practice putting on a condom. It's evident, then, that sex is very much still on Booth's mind, an indication that he has most likely not spent the night making love to Grace, as he claims. As such, Parks insinuates that Booth is overcompensating for a lack of experience by bragging to his brother about his sexual conquests.

Lincoln asks Booth if he'll help him practice his new Abraham Lincoln death routine. Booth declines, and when Lincoln can't convince him, he says, "You didnt get shit tonight." Booth denies this accusation, but Lincoln doesn't relent, saying, "You laying over there yr balls blue as my boosted suit. Laying over there waiting for me to go back to sleep or black out so I wont hear you rustling thuh pages of yr fuck book." He reveals to his brother that he was looking for something under Booth's bed the previous week and found a collection of pornographic magazines, the pages of which are "matted together" because Booth "spunked" in them.

When Lincoln admits that he found Booth's stash of pornography—and that the magazines are covered in Booth's semen—any suspicions the audience might have already had about Booth and Grace's relationship are confirmed. Contrary to his previous claims, it's obvious that Booth isn't receiving sexual or romantic attention from Grace. Furthermore, it's worth noting that Lincoln levels this accusation at his brother only after Booth breaks his promise to help him with his arcade routine. In response, Lincoln purposefully emasculates his brother, undermining Booth's image of himself as a desirable and sexually well-versed man. In this way, sexual conquest (or the lack thereof) factors into the ways in which the brothers compete with one another.

Defending himself for owning pornographic magazines, Booth says, "Im hot. I need constant sexual release. If I wasnt taking care of myself by myself I would be out there running around on thuh town which costs cash that I dont have so I would be doing worse: Id be out there doing who knows what, shooting people and shit. Out of a need for unresolved sexual release." He continues on this tirade, verbally abusing his brother and making arguments about his own sexual rapaciousness. "You a limp dick jealous whiteface motherfucker whose wife dumped him cause he couldnt get it up and she told me so," he levels at Lincoln. "Came crawling to me cause she needed a man."

For Booth, a lack of "sexual release" leads to violence and aggression, further supporting the idea that sexual conquest defines his sense of what it means to be an alpha-male. In this statement he also inadvertently confirms that he has, in fact, been lying about his relationship with Grace—if he were truly having sex with her, he wouldn't need to "take care of [himself]." And once again, these fraught ideas about sexuality and male dominance work their way into Booth and Lincoln's brotherly relationship, as Booth responds to Lincoln's emasculating remarks by reminding his brother that Cookie "came crawling to [him]" because "she needed a man," an insult implying that Booth is more masculine than Lincoln.

A long silence passes between the brothers. Eventually, Booth looks beyond the divider to see if Lincoln is sleeping and the two men make eye contact. Lincoln tells Booth that he can play Three-Card Monte without him, and Booth says this is exactly what he plans to do. "I could contact my old crew. You could work with them," Lincoln says. Booth waves this off, saying he can make his own connections, but Lincoln ignores him. "Theyd take you on in a heartbeat," he says. "With my say. My say still counts with them. They know you from before, when you tried to hang with us but—werent ready yet." Adding to this, he remarks, "Youd be passable." At this, Booth's attention peaks, and he says, "I'd be more than passable, I'd be the be all end all."

That Lincoln offers to help his brother play Three-Card Monte seems out of step with the nature of their most recent conversation, in which Booth gravely insulted Lincoln. However, this tonal shift is simply part of their relationship as brothers—they fight often, but they're also able to quickly shift gears, which illustrates that their relational dynamic encompasses both competition and affection. At the same time, though, it's also worth noting that Lincoln has heretofore been more or less against the idea of Booth becoming a hustler. Having experienced the hardships of this lifestyle himself, he seemed weary of letting his younger brother start throwing cards. Now, though, he encourages the idea, so although the tonal shift in the brothers' conversation can certainly be attributed to the complicated nature of their relationship, a cynical interpretation of Lincoln's newfound encouragement might suggest that he no longer wishes to protect his brother from a dangerous lifestyle, instead responding to Booth's venomous words by emboldening him to go forth and bring upon his own demise.

Lincoln points out that Booth will have to get a gun if he wants to start hustling, saying the pistol he currently owns isn't good enough. When Booth asks what his brother knows about guns, Lincoln says he's around them at the arcade—"They've all been reworked so they only fire caps but I see [them] every day." At this, Booth says, "Maybe I *could* visit you over there. I'd boost one of them guns and rework it to make it shoot for real again." Lincoln rejects this, telling Booth the guns are useless anyway, since they only shoot blanks. "Yeah," Booth says, "like you. Shooting blanks." After another pause, Booth asks Lincoln if he's ever afraid a customer will bring a real gun and shoot him in earnest, but the thought has never crossed Lincoln's mind—he says he can't spend time "worrying about the actions of miscellaneous strangers."

Once again, Booth can't resist the opportunity to emasculate his brother, this time unnecessarily insulting him by reminding him that he "shoot[s] blanks." Fortunately enough, Lincoln's able to stand these petty insults, and it's Booth who reveals himself as deeply insecure. Indeed, when he asks Lincoln if he's ever afraid of being shot in earnest at the arcade, Booth provides insight into his own insecurity as person who can't imagine ever turning his back to strangers and allowing them to shoot him, even if it's all make-believe. Even the mere idea of miming getting shot threatens his dominant ego, whereas Lincoln doesn't try to control "the actions of miscellaneous strangers" because he doesn't mind allowing himself to be vulnerable in front of other people.

On the topic of these "miscellaneous strangers," Booth asks what kind of people come to the arcade and pretend to shoot Lincoln, but Lincoln can't answer because he doesn't turn around to look at the shooters. However, he explains that he can see the reflections of the customers in a dented fuse box on the wall opposite where he sits. In this reflection, the customers appear upside-down. Lincoln describes hearing the customer approach, seeing him appear inverted in the box's reflection, feeling the gun against his head—"Winter or summer thuh gun is always cold. And when the gun touches me [the customer] can feel that Im warm and he knows Im alive. And if Im alive then he can shoot me dead. And for a minute, with him hanging back there behind me, its real."

What Lincoln describes in this moment is the feeling of giving oneself over completely to vulnerability. When the gun is against his skin, he allows the customer to feel powerful and dominant. Whereas this would unnerve Booth, who is obsessed with power, Lincoln is content to simply watch the customer's reflection in the dented fuse box. The imagery of this is significant, as each reflection appears upside-down, as if Lincoln gains an alternate perspective of the world by placing himself in a position of vulnerability. Opening himself up to other people and their dormant aggressions—their taste for blood, however imaginary it is—he sees the world anew, suddenly able to see things from fresh angles. His brother, on the other hand, has a pigeon-holed perception of the world because he's narrowly focused on trying to be dominant and powerful. This mentality—and the ways in which it influences Booth's relationship with deception—is important to keep in mind as the play progresses.

Lincoln's boss wants to replace him with a wax dummy. Hearing this, Booth insists again that Lincoln enhance his act to prove his worth. He finally helps his brother practice his routine, pretending to shoot him and then telling him to curse and scream and wriggle around on the floor. On the third attempt, Lincoln writhes violently and convincingly, screaming all the while. Afterward, he asks Booth what he thinks, and Booth says, "I dunno, man. Something about it. I dunno. It was looking too real or something." Upon hearing this, Lincoln curses his brother, saying that Booth's advice to liven up the act will get him fired. "People are funny about they Lincoln shit," he explains. "Its historical. People like they historical shit in a certain way. They like it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming."

Lincoln's assertion that "people like they historical shit in a certain way" speaks to Booth's unwillingness to fully examine his own past. Similar to how Lincoln's customers want to "neatly" "fold" history away, situating it in their minds so that it's innocuous and manageable, Booth wants to "wipe" away the unfavorable things of his past. The difference, of course, is that Lincoln's customers don't try to ignore history altogether—instead, they willingly interact with it, reenacting Abraham Lincoln's assassination in a manner that perhaps helps them conceptualize such a brutal and historically charged act. Booth, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with history, thus trying to live in a timeless present—an obviously unachievable endeavor.

Booth reminds Lincoln that, if he does indeed get fired, they can join together as brothers and hustle Three-Card Monte. "Just show me how to do the hook part of the card hustle," he begs. "The part where the Dealer looks away but somehow he sees—" Cutting him off, Lincoln tells Booth that he couldn't remember this move even if he wanted to. With that, he rolls over on his recliner and goes to sleep. Meanwhile, on the other side of the partition, Booth reaches for his pornographic magazines.

Any desire Lincoln may have had to teach Booth Three-Card Monte seemingly dissipates in this moment, when he rolls over and refuses to show Booth his moves. No doubt disappointed by his brother's sudden disinterest, Booth reaches for his pornography stash, an action that once again highlights the ways in which he turns to "sexual release" in moments of let-down and frustration.

SCENE FOUR

On Saturday, Lincoln wakes up before Booth and takes off his **costume**. In doing so, he rips the fake beard, then starts talking to himself about how his boss is going to criticize him and take money out of his next paycheck for damaging the costume. He fantasizes about quitting in that moment, throwing the beard down and strangling his boss. He soon calms down, though, reminding himself that this is a good "sit down job" with benefits. Nonetheless, he's thrown into a reverie about his bygone days as a hustler, reminiscing about how good at throwing cards he used to be. He narrates to himself the story of his rise to power as a card dealer, about how he "woke up one day" and suddenly "didnt have the taste for it no more."

Lincoln allows his personal history to crop up in this scene by finally examining his past as a Three-Card Monte dealer. Unlike his brother, he seems to have matured, leaving behind any desire to con unsuspecting people. At the same time, though, he finds himself struggling against the difficulties of a more legitimate job, where he's a lowly worker instead of a virtuosic and revered hustler. Indeed, his boss seems eager to ignore his value, as evidenced both by his desire to replace Lincoln with a wax dummy and his eagerness to dock Lincoln's pay for trivial reasons. Nonetheless, Lincoln clearly believes this job is respectable, indicating his belief that it's better to suffer the tribulations of everyday life than to lead a life of deception.

Talking to himself, Lincoln comments on his own decision to stop hustling and his realization that he wanted to stop throwing cards. "Like something in you knew it was time to quit," he says. Ignoring this feeling, though, he went out to play one last time, and this was the day his good friend Lonny died. This is why he left Three-Card Monte behind for good, he tells himself, getting a stable job at the arcade. "And when the arcade lets you go yll get another good job. I dont gotta spend my whole life hustling. Theres more to Link than that. More to me than some cheap hustle."

Once again, Lincoln frames a life of deception as "cheap" and unworthy of respect. It's clear he wants to be able to feel good about what he's doing with his life, as evidenced by his statement that there's more to him than his skills as a hustler. Even if he loses his position at the arcade, he plans to "get another good job." In turn, the audience comes to understand that Lincoln embodies the kind of determination and moral compass that Booth lacks.

Just for fun, Lincoln sits down and practices his Three-Card Monte moves. His banter has much more fluidity to it than Booth's, and his hands are fast across the cardboard table. As he mumbles his routine, Booth wakes up and listens. After finishing an imaginary round, Lincoln puts down the cards, stands up, and walks away from the table, eventually sitting on the edge of his reclining chair. No matter where he moves throughout the apartment, though, he can't stop looking at the cards.

It's strange that, after saying so many times that he doesn't "touch thuh cards," Lincoln breaks down at this moment and practices his moves. What's especially odd is that he does so after having stated that there's more to him "than some cheap hustle." It's as if he's delivered this monologue because he needs to convince himself not to return to a life of hustling. In this way, Parks shows how appealing the conman's life can be, suggesting that the act of deception can be addictive, enticing even intelligent people like Lincoln who fully understand the "cheap[ness]" of the trade.

SCENE FIVE

It's Wednesday night, and Booth's apartment no longer looks squalid and dirty. Instead of the makeshift cardboard box setup, there stands in the center of the room a table covered by a nice tablecloth and set with silver wear for a romantic meal. Alone in the apartment, Booth sits at this table looking nervous. Seeing one of his pornographic magazines poking out from under the bed, he jumps up and tries to stuff it out of sight. Talking to himself, he says, "Foods getting cold, Grace!! Dont worry man, she'll get here, she'll get here." He then sits on the bed, smoothing two dressing gowns that spread out over the mattress. The gowns, the audience sees, have "His" and "Hers" written on them.

Throughout the play, it has become increasingly obvious that Booth actively tries to trick Lincoln into thinking his relationship with Grace is going well. However, this is the first time the audience comes to understand that Lincoln isn't the only person Booth has been trying to convince—indeed, he has been deceiving himself, too. It has already been made clear that Grace hasn't actually been having sex with Booth (a fact supported by his statement about needing to relieve himself), but nonetheless, he deludes himself into thinking that their relationship is so solid and stable that they might one day share matching pajamas. This is, of course, rather delusional, a notion reinforced by the fact that Grace doesn't even care enough about Booth to come to his fancy dinner on time.

Lincoln suddenly tries to open the door, but Booth darts over and keeps him from entering. "The casas off limits to you tonight," he tells his brother. Lincoln tries to argue this by saying that when they were kids living in a two-room house, he frequently heard their parents having sex and would sing in his head to block out the sound. Thinking Grace is also on the other side of the door, he calls out, "Hey, Grace, howyadoing?!" After Booth tells him she hasn't arrived yet, Lincoln reveals that he lost his job at the arcade. "I come in there right on time like I do every day and that motherfucker gives me some song and dance about cutbacks and too many folks complaining." To make matters worse, Lincoln's boss has decided to order the wax dummy as his replacement.

Lincoln's story about hearing his parents have sex is perhaps a tactical move to convince Booth to open the door—knowing his brother is a person who likes the idea of "wip[ing] away" the past, he references their troubled childhood, perhaps trying to disarm Booth. When that doesn't work, he resorts to a more straightforward tactic: admitting that he has lost his job. Still, though, Booth doesn't let him in right away, which once more points to the notion that he's comfortable opposing his older brother. Whereas most siblings would instantly comfort one another after a fresh hardship, Booth holds his ground against Lincoln, yet again reinforcing the competitive and combative streak that runs through their relationship.

Lincoln muses aloud about returning to the arcade the following day and begging for his job back, but Booth strongly objects, saying, "Link. Yr free. Dont go crawling back. Yr free at last! Now you can do anything you want." By this point, Lincoln has made his way past Booth and into the apartment, where he collapses into his reclining chair. He promises that he'll leave when Grace arrives. "How late is she?" he asks, and Booth tells him that she was supposed to arrive at eight in the evening. "Its after 2 a.m.," Lincoln points out, but Booth doesn't say anything. The brothers change topics, talking about the fancy silver wear, dishes, and tablecloth, all of which Booth stole. "How come I got a hand for boosting and I dont got a hand for throwing cards?" he wonders. "Maybe yll show me yr moves sometime."

For Booth, a steady job like Lincoln's position at the arcade curtails freedom, whereas living the life of a hustler—a life full of deception—is liberating. Of course, he himself is totally unbound by any sense of permanence, and he only survives because Lincoln shares his paychecks. This is yet another complicated aspect of Lincoln and Booth's relationship as brothers—Booth critiques Lincoln for being responsible while simultaneously depending on his income. When he says, "Maybe yll show me yr moves sometime," he backhandedly frames his own inability to do anything but steal as something that falls to Lincoln to remedy. In this way, Booth relies on Lincoln while constantly trying to prove otherwise—this is perhaps why he's often so eager to emasculate or demean his older brother.

While Booth looks for Grace out the window, Lincoln sips from a bottle of whiskey and reminisces about their childhood, talking about a house they moved into with their parents when they were young. "We had some great times in that house, bro," Lincoln says. "Selling lemonade on thuh corner, thuh treehouse, summers spent lying in thuh grass and looking at thuh stars." Confused, Booth points out that they never did any of these things. Nonetheless, Lincoln retains his nostalgic tone, saying, "But we had us some good times." It's now after three in the morning, and Booth steps away from the window and pours himself a glass of whiskey. As he does so, Lincoln tells him he's already spent the entirety of the severance package the arcade gave him.

Lincoln's fabricated memories are strangely at odds with his normal acceptance of the painful facts of history. Indeed, in most other scenes he appears to understand that the past can't be altered and that people must live with and embrace the ways in which their personal histories have shaped their lives. At the same time, his impulse to make his and Booth's childhood sound more idyllic than it actually was does align with his earlier comment about how people like their history to "fold" up "neatly." In the same way that the arcade customers are willing to acknowledge the painful national history of Abraham Lincoln's assassination only when it's presented in an appealing manner, Lincoln permits himself in this moment to think about his childhood by superimposing a sense of exaggerated happiness on it.

"Why do you think they left us, man?" Lincoln asks Booth, referring to their parents. When Booth doesn't give him a satisfying answer, he provides his own hypothesis, conjecturing that each of their parents "was struggling against" some secret pain from their pasts. When they bought their house, Lincoln guesses, they thought these struggles would suddenly leave them alone. "Them things would see thuh house and be impressed and just leave them be. Would see thuh job Pops had and how he shined his shoes [...] and just let him be." Trying to maintain a sense of optimism, Booth says, "Least we was grown when they split," but Lincoln refutes this, remarking, "16 and 11 aint grown." Still, Booth talks about their abandonment as if it wasn't so bad, noting that at least both their parents didn't leave at the same time.

Lincoln's nostalgia—and his inaccurate portrayal of his childhood—only lasts for a short time before he asks his brother a difficult question about why their parents left them. This suggests that painful histories can't simply be fabricated to be more appealing or palatable. Although Lincoln tries to present his upbringing as idyllic, he quickly acknowledges that his parents abandoned him and his brother. Booth, on the other hand, tries to downplay the negative elements of his past, seemingly protecting himself from admitting the pain his parents' departure caused him.

Holding fast to his notion that their childhood wasn't so bad, Booth says, "They didnt leave together. That makes it different. She left. 2 years go by. Then he left." Furthermore, he says he doesn't blame them for leaving behind such a normal, boring life. "You dont see me holding down a steady job," he says. "Cause its bullshit and I know it. I seen how it cracked them up and I aint going there." He then states that he no longer wants to make himself into "a one woman man just because [Grace] wants [him] like that." As he speaks, he grows angrier and angrier at the idea that Grace might suddenly waltz into the apartment and act like she can get him to "sweat."

Once again, Booth conceptualizes a responsible, "steady" lifestyle as something that inhibits a person's capacity to live freely. Freedom, it seems, is very important to him, despite the fact that he is completely financially reliant on his brother. To prove that he deserves the kind of freedom he so desires, he announces that Grace can't force him into a monogamous relationship—a somewhat humorous assertion, considering that Grace doesn't even seem to like him enough eat dinner with him, let alone demand his fidelity.

Hearing his brother's tirade about Grace, Lincoln reveals that their mother told him to never get married, and Booth confirms that she told him the same thing. "They gave us each 500 bucks when they cut out," Lincoln states, and Booth replies by saying that he's going to give his kids this money and then leave, just like their parents did. He explains that when their mother left, she gave him his $500 rolled up in a nylon stocking and told him not to tell anybody—including Lincoln—about it. Two years later, their father left, but before he did, he gave Lincoln $500 dollars in a handkerchief and told him not to tell Booth.

The origins of the brothers' competition with one another reveals itself in this moment. Indeed, it becomes evident that their parents pitted them against one another, giving them both money but instructing them not to tell one another, thereby implying that they can't trust each other. Although the brothers have clearly told one another about their inheritances, their parents' divisive instructions have nonetheless still affected their relationship.

As Lincoln and Booth sit drinking whiskey and reminiscing, Booth says, "I didnt mind [our parents] leaving cause you was there. Thats why Im hooked on us working together." After a short pause, Lincoln tells his brother that throwing cards is more complicated than it looks. "When you hung with us back then," he says, "you was just on thuh sidelines. Thuh perspective from thuh sidelines is thuh perspective of a customer." To prove his knowledge, though, Booth launches into an explanation of the scheme Lincoln and his fellow hustlers used to run—Lonny would convince marks to come play Three-Card Monte as they passed on the street. The game would look like it was already in progress, but the players would be co-conspirators pretending to be strangers. Meanwhile, Lincoln would deal the cards quickly and hope his "hands would be faster than [the] customers eyes."

Once again, a tenderness reveals itself in Booth and Lincoln's relationship. Although they frequently argue and sometimes exchange quite hurtful words (especially in Booth's case), they're also capable of showing appreciation for one another. As such, Parks yet again demonstrates the complex and multifaceted nature of brotherhood, showcasing the kind of bond that both produces and eases tension between these two men. On another note, Booth's explanation of Three-Card Monte serves as an explanation to the audience about how hustlers meticulously manufacture circumstances so that passersby think they're entering into a casual atmosphere, when in reality they're stepping into a highly rehearsed routine.

When Lincoln hears Booth use the word "customer," he instructs his brother that hustlers call the customer a "mark." "You know why?" he asks, and Booth proves his knowledge by saying, "Cause hes thuh one you got yr eye on. You mark him with yr eye." Lincoln pauses, digesting what Booth has said, until Booth prods him, saying, "Im right, right?" Suddenly, Lincoln says, "Lemmie show you a few moves," and Booth quickly disassembles the fancy dinner table, taking off the table cloth to reveal that it was only covering the makeshift Three-Card Monte cardboard box. Sitting down at the Monte table, the brothers set to work.

It's worth noting in this moment how quickly Lincoln gets Booth to forget about Grace simply by finally letting his little brother feel like he's "right" about something. Indeed, when Booth correctly explains why customers are called "marks," his confidence balloons, and he suddenly has no problem completely dismantling the fancy dinner table he had set for Grace. In turn, Parks reveals Booth's priorities: above all, he'll chase the feeling of being "right," of being seen as knowledgeable and credible. Even his preoccupation with Grace is secondary to this fundamental struggle to prove himself both to his brother and to himself.

Lincoln instructs Booth, saying, "Theres thuh Dealer, thuh Stickman, thuh Sides, thuh Lookout and thuh Mark. I'll be thuh Dealer." Booth volunteers to be the Lookout because he has his pistol in his pants. Lincoln is startled to hear his brother has his gun on him at that moment, and Booth tells him that he always carries it. "Even on a date?" Lincoln asks. "In yr own home?" In response, Booth says, "You never know, man." Before they begin to play, Lincoln makes Booth give him the pistol, saying that they don't need a lookout to stand watch for the cops because there aren't any in the area. As such, Booth declares that he'll be the stickman, but Lincoln rejects this, saying that the stickman "knows the game inside out" and that Booth is unprepared to take on this role.

That Booth says, "You never know, man," when Lincoln asks why he carries a gun in his own home indicates how little he trusts his brother. And the fact that he has been carrying the pistol in preparation for a date with Grace suggests once again that he conflates violence and dominance with romance and sexual encounters. Whereas violence would be the farthest thing from the average person's mind before a romantic dinner date, Booth arms himself in preparation for Grace's arrival.

"I'll be thuh Side," Booth determines, and finally Lincoln agrees. Commencing with the lesson, he says, "First thing you learn is what is. Next thing you learn is what aint. You dont know what is you dont know what aint, you don't know shit." At this point he pauses, staring at Booth until his little brother asks him what he's looking at. "Im sizing you up," he says, a statement that puts Booth on his guard. "Oh yeah?!" he retorts, but Lincoln merely states that the dealer always sizes up the crowd. Still, Booth protests this notion, pointing out that they're supposed to be on the same team. "You save looks like that for yr Mark," he adds. Nonetheless, Lincoln maintains that the dealer must always size up *everybody*, including the Side, who is inevitably part of the crowd.

It's no surprise that Booth is instantly uncomfortable about getting "sized up" by his brother. After all, this is a man who's so ill at ease even in his own home that he carries a gun in preparation for a romantic dinner. It's no wonder, then, that he detests being surveyed by Lincoln, his older brother with whom he already feels competitive. Booth is so concentrated on how his brother is treating him that he seemingly fails to listen to Lincoln's advice about what "is" and what "aint"—a failure worth keeping in mind as the play progresses and the brothers continue their discussions of Three-Card Monte.

After having sized up the crowd, Lincoln says, "Dealer dont wanna play!" Booth explodes at this, reminding his brother that he promised to teach him how to play Three-Card Monte. By way of explanation, Lincoln says, "Thats thuh Dealers attitude. He *acts* like he dont wanna play. He holds back and thuh crowd, with their eagerness to see his skill and their willingness to take a chance, and their greediness to win his cash, the larceny in their hearts, all goad him on and push him to throw his cards, although of course the Dealer has been wanting to throw his cards all along." Next, he explains that there are two parts to throwing cards: "thuh moves and thuh grooves, thuh talk and thuh walk, thuh patter and thuh pitter pat [...], what yr doing with yr mouth and what yr doing with yr hands."

When Lincoln explains to Booth that the dealer always gives marks the impression that he doesn't want to play, he essentially describes an essential truth about the nature of deception: the easiest kind of person to deceive is an overeager person who loses touch with reality. Indeed, these people end up taking on instrumental roles in their own deception because they're eager to play a game that has been rigged against them from the beginning. This, it seems, is merely part of the dealer's routine, a notion Lincoln underlines when he talks about the "patter" and the "pitter pat" a hustler delivers whilst dealing the cards. As such, Parks shows that, contrary to what an unsuspecting spectator might believe, deception is a highly ordered process designed to disarm marks and invite them to participate in their own undoing. It's also worth noting that Booth seems susceptible to such deception, since he takes Lincoln's act so seriously.

Lincoln instructs Booth, telling him that a mark pays attention to the dealer using two "organs": the eyes and the ears. "Leave one out you lose yr shirt," Lincoln says. "Captivate both, yr golden." As such, he tells Booth to always watch his eyes, not his hands, because the dealer tracks the position of the correct card with his eyes. Fitting this into his previous lesson, he breaks it down as such: his eyes are what "is," his hands are what "aint." In their first practice round, in which Lincoln moves the cards without speaking, Booth selects the correct card. He gushes with excitement, calling himself a "champ" while Lincoln remains "mildly crestfallen" (as the stage direction indicates).

For perhaps the first time in the entire play, Booth manages to attain the upper hand over his brother. Though his triumph comes only in the form of a practice round—and one in which Lincoln isn't even performing the entirety of his routine, at that—he still seizes the opportunity to gloat. By calling himself a "champ," he once again reveals his emotional need to be seen (and to see himself) as a winner, as somebody capable of besting a naturally confident person like Lincoln.

In their second practice round, Lincoln adds banter to his routine, speaking quickly and saying things like, "Who see thuh black card who see thuh black card I see thuh black card black cards thuh winner pick thuh black card thats thuh winner pick thuh red card thats thuh loser [...]." Once again, Booth identifies the correct card and explodes with triumph. "Yeah, baby! 3-Card got thuh moves!" he says. "You didnt know lil bro had thuh stuff, huh? Think again, Link, think again." Annoyed, Lincoln says, "You wanna learn or you wanna run yr mouth?" Ignoring him, Booth goes on with his antics, poking fun at his older brother for thinking he has such unstoppably "fast hands." Once again, Lincoln critiques his confidence, saying, "Thats yr whole motherfucking problem. Yr so busy running yr mouth you aint never gonna learn nothing! You think you something but you aint shit."

Once again, Booth eagerly snatches the opportunity to brag about himself, capitalizing on this rare moment to cast himself as a winner. When he says, "You didnt know lil bro had thuh stuff, huh?", it becomes clear that he himself thinks Lincoln sees him as inferior. In turn, this belief fuels his sudden delight at beating his brother, and the competition between them once again comes to the forefront of the play's relational and emotional considerations.

Now Lincoln gives Booth the cards. As Booth slides them around the table, his hands move awkwardly and his banter is stilted. Lincoln breaks into laughter, telling his brother he's too "wild with it." As he laughs, Booth stands, puts on his coat, and puts his pistol in his pocket. Refocusing, Lincoln tells Booth to take a lighter touch, "like Graces skin." Suddenly, Booth remembers how late Grace is—"Bitch," he says. "*Bitch!*" Lincoln suggests that perhaps something has happened to her, but Booth thinks she's just trying to make a "chump" of him. Lincoln offers to call her from the corner payphone, but Booth rejects the idea, saying, "Thuh world puts its foot in yr face and you dont move. You tell thuh world tuh keep on stepping. But Im my own man, Link. I aint you." With this, he leaves the apartment, slamming the door on his way.

The difference between how Lincoln and Booth see the world is apparent in their respective reactions to Grace's absence. While Lincoln worries that something has happened to her, Booth thinks she's intentionally trying to make him look stupid. Here again, his insecurity informs how he responds, this time in an ominous way, considering that he puts his gun in his pocket before leaving the apartment (presumably to track down Grace). His parting words only serve as further evidence of his desperate attempts to make himself look like a confident and dominant man. "Im my own man," he says, making a concerted effort to accentuate the fact that he can act independently of his brother (a notion that he has not yet necessarily proved, since he lives off of Lincoln's income).

SCENE SIX

The following night, Lincoln barrels into the apartment, drunk and in high spirits. Pulling a wad of money from his pocket, he counts the bills and talks to himself, saying, "You didnt go back, Link, you got back, you got it back you got yr shit back in thuh saddle, man, you got back in the business." He takes pleasure in rehashing his evening, which he spent in the local bar buying drinks for everybody after a successful day of hustling people in Three-Card Monte. "And thuh women be hanging on me and purring," he says, recalling the night's escapade with three women in the bathroom of the bar—"3 of them sweethearts in thuh restroom on my dick all at once and I was *there* my shit was there. And Cookie just went out of my mind which is cool which is very cool."

As Lincoln brags to himself about his earnings and his success in returning to the streets as a hustler, the audience recognizes the same kind of cocky bravado Booth displays throughout the play. However, there's a difference between the brothers' arrogance. While Lincoln allows his pride to swell in private, Booth's pride is strictly performative. In other words, he's boasts because he wants to convince other people of his greatness. In turn, he himself might actually believe he's worthy of praise. Lincoln, on the other hand, simply brags in this moment for the sake of enjoying the moment. Furthermore, it's also worth noting that Lincoln conflates success with sexual prowess, believing that his sexual adventures with the three women in the bathroom is a measure of his accomplishments.

As Lincoln brags to himself, Booth silently emerges from behind the partition between the bed and the reclining chair (he has apparently been sitting in the dark the entire time). Upon seeing him, Lincoln asks his brother how his night has been, and Booth says, "Grace got down on her knees. Down on her knees, man. Asked *me* tuh marry *her*." As such, he continues, he's going to have to ask Lincoln to move out of the apartment so that Grace can move in. "No sweat man," Lincoln says. "I can leave right now."

The audience senses in this moment that things are perhaps not going as well for Booth as he claims, considering that he's been sitting in the dark all by himself and has just overheard his brother's boasts about having had a successful day playing Three-Card Monte. It's no surprise, then, that he would make up that Grace "got down on her knees" before him, an image that exalts his importance and makes him look like the dominant one in their relationship; he is, in other words, once again compensating for his fragile ego and competing with his brother's success.

As Lincoln finds a suitcase and begins packing, Booth says, "Just like that, huh? 'No sweat'?! Yesterday you lost yr damn job." In response, Lincoln says he doesn't need to worry because he found a new job as a security guard. "Security guard. Howaboutthat," Booth says. When Lincoln asks his brother what he's going to do for work now that he's getting married, Booth merely says, "I got plans." Skeptical, Lincoln pushes on, saying, "Shes a smart chick. And she cares about you. But she aint gonna let you treat her like some pack mule while shes out working her ass off and yr laying up in here scheming and dreaming to cover up thuh fact that you dont got no skills."

Booth is offended that Lincoln doesn't care about getting kicked out of the apartment. After all, Booth seems to have fabricated the fact that Lincoln needs to leave in the first place, a lie told for the purpose of insulting his brother. As such, Lincoln's easygoing response is a further blow to Booth's ego, ultimately sending the message that there's nothing he can do to faze his older brother. To make things worse, Lincoln reminds Booth that he doesn't have any "skills," further exacerbating Booth's feelings of inferiority when it comes to their brotherly competitiveness.

After asserting that Grace is "cool" with who he is, Booth watches Lincoln pack and wonders aloud why their father didn't take his clothes with him when he left all those years ago. He then mentions that their mother was having an affair before she left. Lincoln isn't surprised to hear this and adds that their father also saw other women. "Sometimes he'd let me meet the ladies," he says. And sometimes, he says, their father would let him watch him have sex with these women. "He made it seem like it was this big deal this great thing he was letting me witness but it wasnt like nothing," he says. "One of his ladies liked me, so I would do her after he'd be laying there, spent and sleeping and snoring and her and me would be sneaking it."

Yet again, the tension between Lincoln and Booth segues into another topic entirely, eventually dissipating as the brothers inevitably relate to one another despite their differences. In this case, they focus on their shared personal histories, analyzing their parents' respective departures and sharing information with one another about the situation. In doing so, they each gain a new perspective on their own past. This is perhaps the only way history can be truly altered—though elsewhere Parks suggests that the past must be acknowledged and accepted (even when it's painful), in this moment she shows that the one mutable element of history is the lens through which a person remembers it. In this moment, the brothers stop narrowly reviewing their pasts, ultimately opening themselves up to one another and allowing their memories to merge, thereby enhancing and altering their conception of their own family history.

As Lincoln packs his **Abraham Lincoln costume**, Booth admits he's going to miss seeing his brother come home in the "getup." "I don't even got a picture of you in it for the album," he says, so Lincoln puts it on and Booth takes a photograph of him. Booth asks him what he used to do to pass the time at the arcade, and Lincoln says he'd just sit there. "And think about women," Booth guesses. "Sometimes," says Lincoln. "Cookie," Booth says. "Sometimes," Lincoln replies again. "And how she came over here one night looking for you," Booth continues. Lincoln goes along with the memory, as Booth says, "All she knew was you couldnt get it up. You couldnt get it up with her so in her head you was tired of her and had gone out to screw somebody new and this time maybe werent never coming back."

Unfortunately, the tender moment Lincoln and Booth share whilst sharing memories of their parents quickly turns sour when Booth starts encouraging Lincoln to examine in vivid detail the decline of his marriage. Indeed, Booth seems to have strung Lincoln down an ominous and hurtful path when he says, "And how she came over here one night looking for you." He then launches into yet another attempt to emasculate his older brother, reminding Lincoln that he "couldnt get it up" with Cookie. Once again, then, Booth can't help but compete with his brother, even after they've just shared a nice moment.

Booth continues to narrate the night Cookie came to the apartment, revealing that she wanted to get back at Lincoln by sleeping with another man, and when Booth encouraged her to do so, she made it clear that she wanted to sleep with *him*. "She said she wanted to have her fun right here. With me," he says. "And then, just like that, she changed her mind." After a pause, he adds, "But she'd hooked me. That bad part of me that I fight down everyday. You beat yrs down and it stays there dead but mine keeps coming up for another round. And the bad part of me took her clothing off and carried her into thuh bed and had her, Link, yr Cookie. It wasnt just thuh bad part of me it was all of me, man, I had her. Yr damn wife. Right in that bed."

Booth is blatantly combative in this moment. Although his words may at first appear confessional because he says it was "the bad part" of him that slept with Lincoln's wife, his message is ultimately intended to provoke his older brother. Indeed, he challenges any goodwill Lincoln might still feel toward him when he says, "It wasnt just thuh bad part of me it was all of me, man, I had her." By saying this, he leaves little opportunity for Lincoln to practice forgiveness. Instead, he frames himself as a man driven by a need for "sexual release" who also has no problem wronging his brother, since it's not just "the bad part" of him that made the decision to sleep with Cookie, it was "all" of him, meaning that even his rational mind—his conscience—permitted him to go behind his brother's back. And as if this sentiment isn't already vicious enough, he rubs Lincoln's face in the truth by adding, "Yr damn wife. Right in that bed."

Lincoln tells Booth he doesn't think about Cookie anymore. Booth then criticizes him, suggesting that Lincoln pales in comparison to the man he used to be, a successful and desirable person. In response, Lincoln tells him that he's out of his mind. "Least Im still me!" Booth insists, to which Lincoln says, "Least I work." Booth then claims he has plans, and Lincoln admonishes him for thinking he'll be able to find success as a Three-Card Monte dealer. "You a double left-handed motherfucker who dont stand a chance in all get out out there throwing no cards," he says. "You scared," Booth replies. "You scared you gonna throw and Ima kick yr ass," he taunts. He then determines to set up the Monte table, daring Lincoln to play a round.

Finally, the competition between Lincoln and Booth comes fully to the forefront of their relationship, as Lincoln gives in and starts hurling insults back at his brother by calling him a "double left-handed motherfucker." Of course, his words do nothing but egg his little brother on, and because Booth doesn't want to be seen as inferior, he escalates the situation by accusing Lincoln of being afraid to play cards against him. By framing the situation like this, he makes himself look like the alpha-male, the one who holds the power. In reality, the audience understands that Lincoln has the upper hand in this relationship, but Booth is eager to prove otherwise, yelling, "Ima kick yr ass," an unsubstantiated but nevertheless provocative claim.

"I'm gone," Lincoln says, heading for the door. Suddenly, his brother screams "Fuck that!", startling Lincoln into staying. "Damn," he says. "I didnt know it went so deep for you lil bro. Set up the cards." Booth scrambles to set up the Monte table, and Lincoln sits down and starts throwing the cards. On the first round, Booth chooses the correct card and starts bragging while Lincoln turns over the other cards, staring at them as if perplexed. "Who thuh man, Link?!" Booth yells. "I got yr shit down." Lincoln accepts this, merely saying, "Right." At this point, Booth reveals that he knows Lincoln was out playing Three-Card Monte that day on the streets. Lincoln insists he was going to tell him anyway, then admits that his brother's getting pretty good.

It's worth noting here that, although Booth's ability to identify the correct card in Three-Card Monte is perhaps a bit surprising given his lack of experience, he seems to be forgetting one of the key lessons Lincoln taught him about playing cards: the dealer always acts as if he doesn't want to play. In step with this, Booth literally has to scream "Fuck that!" at Lincoln in order to convince him to throw the cards. As such, though Booth seems to be in a position of power over Lincoln, it may indeed be the other way around.

After receiving Lincoln's compliment, Booth tells him to throw the cards "for real." Lincoln upholds that he already *was* throwing them "for real," but Booth says it didn't feel authentic. "We're missing the essential elements," Lincoln suggests. "The crowd, the street, thuh traffic sounds, all that." Booth then mentions the final element they're missing: the money. Knowing Lincoln won $500 that day, he urges his older brother to put it on the table. Hesitant, Lincoln surrenders it to the bet and starts dealing, but Booth stops him, accusing him of holding back by moving too slowly. In protest, Lincoln says he was only getting started, but Booth holds to his claim, saying, "You was gonna do thuh pussy shit, not thuh real shit."

By this point, Lincoln has Booth raring to play Three-Card Monte while he himself retains a certain skeptical reluctance, acting as if he's unsure about actually playing the game with his brother, whom he makes out to be unprecedentedly talented at besting the dealer. Because Lincoln has already explained that the dealer never acts like he wants to play, the audience begins to grasp that he's most likely conning Booth by imbuing in him an unfounded sense of confidence. Quite significantly, Lincoln never mentions money—he points out that they are "missing the essential elements" that make Three-Card Monte feel "real," but he only lists external factors like traffic sounds, allowing Booth to be the one to bring up the fact that they haven't put any money on the line. This technique draws Booth even further into the idea that he's the one calling the shots, ultimately giving him the notion that he has more power than he actually does.

Lincoln refutes Booth's claim that he's holding back, since he bet money and "money makes it real." "But not if I dont put no money down tuh match it," Booth says. Lincoln reminds him that he doesn't *have* any money, but Booth corrects him, saying he has his inheritance, which he fetches from a hiding place. Holding the nylon stocking containing the cash, he launches into a memory about how he used to catch his mother and her lover when he cut school—he'd walk home and listen to them talking, and one day he came into the kitchen and saw them having sex. Then, on the day she left, he came home and found her alone as she packed clothes into plastic bags, at which point she gave him his $500 inheritance. Finishing his story, he places the nylon stocking on the table and says, "Now its real."

The more involved Booth becomes in playing Three-Card Monte, the clearer it is that Lincoln is manipulating him. At every turn, he manages to manufacture the game so that it's Booth making the official decision; it's Booth's idea to play in the first place, it's Booth's idea that Lincoln should put money down, and—finally—it's Booth's idea that he should bet his own inheritance. In this way, Parks demonstrates that an act of deception works best when a mark can be convinced into conning himself. Blinded by confidence, Booth thinks he's acting independently when in reality he's falling perfectly into the scheme Lincoln has laid out to dupe him.

Looking at Booth's inheritance, Lincoln says, "Dont put that down," but Booth urges him to throw the cards. "I dont want to play," Lincoln says. "Throw thuh fucking cards, man!!" Booth screams. After a pause, Lincoln begins. On the first round, Booth chooses the correct card and celebrates with a loud laugh. "One good pickll get you in 2 good picks and you gone win," Lincoln says. "I know man I know," Booth says, and the brothers play another round. After his long card-throwing spiel, Lincoln pauses, and Booth reiterates the terms of the deal, saying, "I pick right I got yr shit." He also adds that if he wins, he will "beat [Lincoln] for real." In response, Lincoln asks, "You think we're really brothers?"

When Lincoln says, "I dont want to play," he practically makes a direct reference to the lessons he gave Booth earlier in the play, when he said, "Thats thuh Dealers attitude. He acts like he dont wanna play." Despite how strictly Lincoln adheres to this principle, Booth still fails to recognize that he's being played. This is because he's obsessed with beating Lincoln "for real," a notion that aligns with the fact that Booth has been waging a competition against his brother for the entire play. Now, it seems, he's anxious to finally act out this competition so that he can prove his own worthiness as an opponent by besting his brother. Lincoln, for his part, picks up on this dynamic and pauses to consider the messy nature of their relationship, asking, "You think we're really brothers?" He asks this partly because Booth's eagerness to overtake him is so blatantly malicious, but also partly because he recognizes his own twisted desire to cheat his little brother.

Booth tells Lincoln he thinks they are, indeed, brothers, and after a very long pause, Lincoln urges him to choose the card. Booth points to one, and when Lincoln flips it over, it turns out that he chose incorrectly. "I guess all this is mines," Lincoln says, raking the money toward himself across the table. "Aint yr fault if yr eyes aint fast," he says. "And you cant help it if you got 2 left hands, right? Throwing cards aint thuh whole world. You got other shit going for you. You got Grace." Booth is sullen, but Lincoln ignores him, chuckling to himself and telling his brother that he isn't laughing at him, but "just laughing" in general. He sits in his reclining chair and goes about trying to open the nylon stocking, which is tightly knotted. As he does so, Booth watches and broods.

When Lincoln finally beats Booth, he condescendingly reminds his little brother that "Throwing cards aint thuh whole world." This is an interesting statement because it functions on two levels. In one sense, this is a patronizing remark because it makes light of a situation in which Booth has lost not only all the money he owns, but the only thing left of his mother. In another sense, though, Lincoln's suggestion that Booth focus on something other than Three-Card Monte carries with it a certain protective attitude. By forcing his brother to admit he's bad at playing cards, Lincoln discourages Booth from entering the life of a hustler, thereby keeping him away from a lifestyle he Lincoln knows to be dangerous. In this way, Lincoln's deception of Booth can be understood as both malicious and beneficent, an action that arises as much from love and brotherly care as it does from greed.

"Woah," Lincoln says, struggling with the nylon stocking, "she sure did tie this up tight, didnt she?" Booth agrees that their mother did tie a tight knot and admits that he's never opened it. "Yr kidding," Lincoln says. "500 and you aint never opened it?" Booth says he's been saving it, but Lincoln remains flabbergasted by the fact that his brother never even opened the stocking to make sure their mother actually gave him the $500 she claimed to. As he tries to untie it, Booth begs him not to open the stocking. "We *know* whats in it," he says. "Dont open it." Lincoln pays no heed to his brother's protests, contemplating cutting the stocking but deciding not to because it would "spoil the whole effect."

The fact that Booth has never opened the nylon stocking his mother gave him suggests that he puts his faith in family members even when they might not deserve it. Indeed, he knows his mother was unfaithful to his father and to the family as a whole, and yet he's never questioned whether or not she told him the truth about his inheritance. Likewise, he competes with Lincoln but never actually stops to think that Lincoln might con him out of his money. This is ironic, since he himself has wronged his brother by sleeping with Cookie, and yet he seems to believe that family members never do anything bad to each other. In this way, Parks portrays Booth as ignorant, a man too wrapped up in his own deceptions of his loved ones to realize that he too can be the target of similar deceptions.

Once again, Lincoln express how baffled he is that Booth never once opened the stocking to count the money. "She coulda been jiving you, bro," he says. "Jiving you big time. Its like thuh cards. And ooooh you certainly was persistent. But you was in such a hurry to learn thuh last move that you didnt bother learning thuh first one. That was yr mistake. Cause its thuh first move that separates thuh Player from thuh Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. Taadaaa! It may look like you got a chance, but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you." Having said this, Lincoln finally reveals that he conned his little brother out of his inheritance. "Fuck you," Booth yells. "Fuck you FUCK YOU *FUCK YOU*!!" Lincoln merely shrugs this reaction off and resolves to cut the stocking.

Any doubts the audience may have had about Lincoln's motives are put to rest in this scene when he explains to Booth that nobody can ever truly win against the dealer in Three-Card Monte. By convincing Booth that he had the ability to "pick right," Lincoln manipulated his little brother into believing that he was in control when, in truth, Lincoln was leading him along the entire time. As such, Booth is encouraged to act as the agent of his own deception.

Right as Lincoln is about to cut the stocking, Booth says, "I popped her." Lincoln pauses in confusion, and Booth goes on. "Grace," he says. "I popped her. Grace. [...] Who thuh fuck she think she is doing me like she done? Telling me I dont got nothing going on." Upon hearing this, Lincoln tells Booth he's going to give him back the inheritance money, but Booth isn't listening. Instead, he tells Lincoln that he's tired of him calling him his little brother, tired of being called Booth. "That Booth shit is over," he says. "3-Cards thuh man now." Again, Lincoln tries to give back the stocking, but Booth forges onward, saying, "Who thuh man now, huh? Who thuh man now?! Think you can fuck with me, motherfucker think again motherfucker think again! Think you can take me like Im just some chump some two lefthanded pussy dickbreath chump [...]."

Although Booth has lost to his brother, he tries to assert himself as the dominant man in their relationship. Ignoring all evidence to the contrary, he shouts, "Who thuh man now?", as if Lincoln has underestimated him—and indeed he has, at least regarding Booth's violent predilections. In this moment, then, Booth forces his way into a position of power, playing upon his violent temperament in order to dominate Lincoln. Of course, this is yet another overcompensation for the fact that he's not, in fact, worthy of such power, and his attempt to intimidate his brother only further exposes his petulant nature and deep insecurity.

Lincoln tries to convince his brother to take back the stocking. Booth refuses, suddenly insisting that Lincoln cut it open—"*OPEN IT!!!*", he screams. Watching his younger brother, Lincoln brings the knife to the stocking. Just as the blade touches it, though, Booth runs behind the reclining chair and takes Lincoln in a headlock, pressing the pistol to his neck. "Dont," Lincoln pleads, but Booth pulls the trigger, sending Lincoln toppling to the floor. Pacing across the apartment, Booth talks aloud to himself, saying, "Think you can take my shit? […] Ima go out there and make a name for myself that dont have nothing to do with you. And 3-Cards gonna be in everybodys head and in everybodys mouth like Link was." Stooping to pick up the money, he collapses on the floor. Sitting over Lincoln, he hugs his brother's corpse and issues a sorrowful scream.

That Booth continues to talk himself up even after killing Lincoln demonstrates once again his desire to emerge victorious in their brotherly competition. It's clear in this moment that he's constantly measuring himself up to Lincoln, a dynamic he clearly detests, as evidenced by his assertion that he's going to make a name for himself that has "nothing to do with" his brother. Of course, this bombastic monologue does nothing to actually give Booth a sense of power, and he seems to realize this when he suddenly collapses over his brother's body, wailing out because he realizes that, though he has killed his main competitor, he has also killed the only person with whom he had a close relationship. In this way, Parks shows that Booth's obsession with being an alpha-male and besting his brother is a futile preoccupation that only leads to sorrow and hardship.

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