Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUGUST WILSON

Wilson and his five siblings were raised in a poor, predominately Black neighborhood of Pittsburgh. After his mother and father divorced in the 1950s, Wilson and his family moved to Hazelwood—a mostly white, working-class section of Pittsburgh. They faced overt bigotry in this community, as racist white people threw bricks through the windows of the Wilsons' new home. Wilson himself dropped out of high school during his sophomore year because he was falsely accused of plagiarizing an essay about Napoleon I. At this point, he started working odd jobs and made great use of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library, which eventually gave him an honorary high school diploma because of how much time he spent reading in the stacks. Best known for his plays *Fences*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson once said that his work was most influenced by "four B's": blues music, the writers Jorge Luis Borges and Amiri Baraka, and the painter Romare Bearden. Wilson wrote 16 plays, 10 of which make up what's known as his Pittsburgh Cycle—a cycle in which nine of the ten plays take place in the Pittsburgh's Hill District. Wilson died in Seattle at the age of 60, leaving behind a legacy as one of most important playwrights of the 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom showcases the discriminatory, exploitative practices of the American music industry in the first half of the 20th century. Between 1920 and 1940, the industry focused on selling "Race Records"—albums recorded by Black musicians and specifically marketed to Black listeners. By putting such a heavy emphasis on race when it came to marketing music, the music industry essentially reflected the nation's widespread racial segregation: records by Black artists were sold in Black stores, whereas records by white artists were sold in white stores. Worse, white executives purposefully took advantage of Black musicians by offering small recording fees but keeping the royalties for themselves. Although Black musicians made small amounts for recording their music, then, they made nothing from record sales or radio plays. The white executives that ran the recording companies, on the other hand, made huge profits because they owned the rights to the songs—many of which became wildly popular, as more and more white listeners started buying albums made by Black musicians. Some of the best-known and bestselling artists of the 1920s thus saw very little money for their famous albums, while the white people who took advantage of them just got richer and richer.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a playwright, August Wilson drew inspiration from famous Black American writers like Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Amiri Baraka. In particular, it makes sense to consider Amiri Baraka's book *Blues People* alongside *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, since it considers the history of blues music and how that genre has intersected with Black culture. The other plays in August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle are also relevant to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. For instance, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Fences* similarly explore the fraught, racist dynamics between white people and Black people in a post-slavery United States. To that end, contemporary plays like Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* or Antoinette Nwandu's *Pass Over* build on this focus, bringing many of Wilson's concerns about racism into the 21st century.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Ma Rainey's Black Bottom
- **When Published:** Premiered on April 6, 1984
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Chicago in 1927
- **Climax:** After learning that Sturdyvant has no intention of recording his music, Levee lashes out at his bandmate Toledo, pulling a knife on him because Toledo stepped on his shoe.
- **Antagonist:** Sturdyvant

EXTRA CREDIT

Black Bottom. "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is an actual song by Ma Rainey. The title refers to a dance known as the "Black Bottom," which Black performers popularized in early 20th-century New Orleans.

Kidnapping Bessie. There is a well-known—but false—tale claiming that Ma Rainey kidnapped another famous blues singer named Bessie Smith and forced the young musician to join her touring act. Even though this is a tall tale, it *is* the case that Rainey and Smith shared the stage and had a personal relationship with each other.

PLOT SUMMARY

In Chicago in 1927, two white music industry executives prepare for a recording session with Ma Rainey, a popular Black singer. As they set up the studio, Sturdvyant tells Irvin to

keep Ma "in line," saying that she's difficult to work with. Irvin assures him everything will work out, but when the band arrives, Ma isn't with them. Irvin asks Cutler where she is, but he doesn't know. Worried, Irvin sends Cutler, Slow Drag, and Toledo downstairs to rehearse the songs that will go on the record.

In the band room, Cutler and the others talk about the band's trumpet player, Levee. Levee is running late because he's out buying fancy shoes, which they think is foolish. When Levee arrives, he falls into conversation with Toledo, who speaks philosophically about how things are always changing. Meanwhile, Slow Drag and Cutler try to get the band to rehearse, with Slow Drag noting that the faster they work, the sooner they'll get paid. Levee criticizes him for caring more about money than art, but the rest of the bandmembers emphasize that Levee is just an accompanying musician—his job is to play whatever Ma tells him to play, regardless of his lofty ideas about art.

Levee thinks he has real talent, and he's eager to make exciting new music. Sturdyvant even agreed to record his songs. Instead of rehearsing, then, he wants to finish a couple of his own songs, so he tells the band to practice without him. However, the others convince him to play along, but when they start the first song, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," they stop because Levee doesn't follow their lead. Instead, he plays his own arrangement, and Cutler tells Levee that his job is to play what he's told.

When Irvin comes downstairs, Cutler asks which version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" they should rehearse. Irvin confirms that they want to record Levee's version. Levee gloats when Irvin leaves, but Cutler notes that Ma will have the final say. Toledo, for his part, criticizes his bandmates for looking to white men for approval.

When Slow Drag crosses the room to get a new string for his bass, he steps on Levee's shoe on his way, throwing Levee into a fit. Once again, the bandmembers mock Levee for caring about his shoes. But Levee argues that to make good music and dance well, a man needs nice shoes. Toledo finds such an idea problematic—Black people, he says, are too concerned with having a "good time." What they should focus on, he says, is improving living conditions for Black people. In order to bring about real change, Black people have to work together.

Levee continues to criticize Toledo, who eventually gets frustrated and calls him the devil. Slow Drag then jumps in and tells a story about Eliza Cottor, a man he knew in the South. Eliza used to be a humble farmer, but then he sold his soul to the devil and started living a lavish lifestyle. He even murdered a man and was never convicted. He now goes from town to town, offering people $100 to sell their souls. Levee says he wishes he could find Eliza, since he would gladly sell his soul—a statement that angers Cutler.

Ma finally arrives upstairs, accompanied by Dussie Mae, her nephew Sylvester, and a police officer, who claims that Ma and the others stole a car and were responsible for a traffic accident. They were actually driving Ma's car, and they claim to have been hit, but the officer doesn't believe them. When Irvin takes the police officer aside and slips him some money, though, he agrees to forget the entire matter.

After the police officer leaves, Ma orders Irvin to make sure her car—which was damaged in the accident—is in perfect working order by the time the recording session is over. Irvin agrees and then gives sandwiches to Toledo, who brings them downstairs. Levee takes more than his fair share, prompting Toledo to remark that there are never "leftovers" when Levee is around. He then launches into a philosophical rumination, suggesting that once white people have gotten what they want, they cast Black people aside like "leftovers."

The band then rehearses Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Ma hears them from upstairs and says she won't record Levee's arrangement. Irvin tells her Sturdyvant thinks Levee's version will sell better, but Ma doesn't listen. She's going to do the song the way she wants, and if Sturdyvant doesn't like that, she'll leave. Irvin agrees, and then Ma takes her nephew downstairs to introduce him to the band, since she wants him to do a spoken-word intro when they record the song—even though he has a noticeable stutter.

Levee is beside himself when Ma announces they won't be playing his version of the song. As the band rehearses "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" yet again, Sylvester tries to do the intro but surprises the musicians with his heavy stutter. This infuriates Levee all the more. But then, Sturdyvant comes downstairs. Levee jumps up, calls him "sir," and excitedly gives him his songs. Sturdyvant promises to take a look at them as soon as he can.

When Sturdyvant leaves, the bandmembers make fun of Levee for being "spooked" by white people. But Levee claims he doesn't care what white people think—smiling at people like Sturdyvant is just a way of building up power. When he was a child, a group of white men broke into his house while his father was away and raped his mother. Upon his return, Levee's father decided to move the family. Before he left, he went around and shook his neighbors' hands, smiling at one of the men who assaulted his wife. After moving, though, he snuck back and killed half the men involved in the incident. The remaining rapists caught Levee's father and lynched him. But this taught Levee a valuable lesson: being polite to white people can be a way of biding time and waiting to undermine them.

Later, the band prepares to record in the studio. Cutler takes Irvin aside and tells him Sylvester can't get through his part without stuttering, so Irvin tells Ma they'll have to do Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Ma, however, rejects this—the band will play the song her way. She also refuses to work until she gets a Coca Cola, so Sylvester and Slow Drag run

out to buy her one. Meanwhile, Ma reprimands Cutler for telling Irvin that Sylvester can't do his part—those decisions are up to her. She also talks to him about what it's like to be a Black singer in the music business, explaining that the white studio executives only care about her because she makes them money. As a result, though, she can wield power over them by threatening to withhold her music.

When Sylvester and Slow Drag return, they finally start recording, but Sylvester keeps stumbling through the intro. After several takes, he finally gets it right, but Sturdvyant tells the band to do it again—the microphone wasn't properly plugged in. Sturdyvant and Irvin need 15 minutes to fix the problem, so the band goes downstairs again, where Levee criticizes his bandmates for not striving toward new horizons. He, on the other hand, is always looking for new opportunities and keeping an eye out for people like Eliza Cottor, hoping he can sell his soul to the devil. Levee's blasphemous talk again upsets Cutler, but his anger only eggs Levee on, prompting him to yell that God doesn't care about Black people. At this, Cutler punches him in the face. Levee pulls out a knife and slashes it through the air, screaming at the ceiling as if addressing God directly, demanding know where He is.

Soon enough, the band goes upstairs and finishes recording. The musicians congratulate one another, but Ma criticizes Levee for improvising too much. When he argues back, she fires him. Then, down in the band room, Sturdyvant tells Levee he doesn't want to record his music, though he'll pay him five dollars per song just to own the rights. The musicians quietly pack their instruments as Levee fumes, and then Toledo steps on Levee's shoe. Levee is so infuriated that he stabs Toledo. Frantic, Levee screams at Toledo to get up, but the older musician just lies there with his eyes open. Levee begs Toledo to stop looking at him, but he receives no response.

CHARACTERS

Levee – Levee is a young Black trumpet player in Ma Rainey's band. A confident, ambitious man, he's unsatisfied with his role as an accompanying musician. He thinks the style of Ma Rainey's music isn't exciting enough, so he tries to push the band to new heights by playing in a more modern, "fresh" style. His actions create tension not just with Ma, but also with Cutler, who tries to tell Levee that his lofty ideas about music and art don't matter—according to Cutler, Levee just has to play what he's told. But Levee doesn't like being told what to do, and his headstrong attitude keeps him from collaborating well with his bandmates. Instead of rehearsing with the others, for instance, he spends his time writing his own songs, since Sturdyvant promised to look at them and possibly even record them when Levee puts together his own band. As they all wait for Ma Rainey to arrive at the studio, Levee repeatedly gets under his bandmates' skin, often making fun of them for acting like uncultured farmers from the South. He thus reveals his disdain for anything he views as outdated or unexciting. In particular, he frequently clashes with Toledo, who thinks Black Americans need to come together and acknowledge their traumatic history in order to make a place for themselves in American society. Levee, on the other hand, ignores the importance of history or tradition, fixating instead on moving forward and finding personal success. Unfortunately for him, though, his obsession with success eventually gets him fired from the band, and then Sturdyvant tells him he has no intention of recording his music. Angry and disappointed, Levee ends up taking his anger out on Toledo in a violent, irreversible way, suggesting that his individualist attitude causes him to lash out at the very people with whom he might otherwise find camaraderie.

Ma Rainey – Ma Rainey was a real-life Black musician famous for singing the blues in the early 20th century. Often hailed as the "Mother of the Blues," she was an important artist in the genre's development and popularity. In the play, she is very aware of her own influence and knows how to use it to her advantage. For example, although Sturdyvant wants to exploit her talent, she recognizes that he can't make any money off her if she doesn't let him record her songs. She therefore threatens to leave the studio whenever he and Irvin try to make her do something she doesn't want to do. As such, she manages to maintain creative control over her music, even if the white studio executives will eventually profit off her songs. And she's not just attuned to the power dynamics at play between her and people like Sturdyvant—she also makes sure that her musicians respect her as the bandleader, which is why she ends up firing Levee for refusing to play the way she wants him to. After she and the band finish recording, Ma almost leaves the studio without signing the release forms for her music. By putting this off until the very end, she maintains the dominant position in her relationship with Sturdyvant for as long as possible. In doing so, she flips the imbalanced power dynamic that usually characterized relationships between Black musicians and white executives in the 1920s.

Cutler – Cutler is a Black guitar and trombone player in Ma Rainey's band. He is the group's unofficial leader, making sure the band plays whatever Ma wants. Unlike Levee, he believes in simply doing whatever he's told, insisting that the point of this band is not for the individual musicians to shine, but for them to accompany Ma. Because of his selfless outlook, he takes issue with Levee's idealized notions about art and musicianship, trying to get him to see that, as long as he's in Ma's band, the only thing that matters is what Ma says—not Levee's grand ideas about art and music. A serious man, Cutler also dislikes Levee's tendency to speak blasphemously. But Levee doesn't care about offending Cutler; in fact, he even seems to *purposefully* get under his skin by suggesting that God doesn't care about Black people. Cutler eventually punches Levee in

the face because of his blasphemous statements, prompting Levee to take out a knife and swipe it through the air—a precursor to his violence toward Toledo at the end of the play. In a way, Cutler tries throughout the play to help Levee avoid trouble by urging him to stop behaving with such selfish confidence, but he ultimately fails to impress the importance of this message on the young musician.

Toledo – Toledo is a Black musician in Ma Rainey's band. A piano player who enjoys speaking philosophically about life and what it's like to be Black in the United States, Toledo is the only literate member of the band. As he and the other musicians pass the time in the band room, he frequently challenges the others by urging them to think about things like change, history, and tradition. In particular, he emphasizes the idea that Black Americans have been cut off from their cultural history, since enslavers forcibly took their ancestors out of Africa. To rebuild a sense of culture, then, Toledo believes that Black people have to work together to improve their position in American society. Levee, on the other hand, is more concerned with making a name for himself in the music business than uniting with people like Toledo. There is, then, an inherent sense of friction between the two men. Toledo believes in history, tradition, and coming together, whereas Levee thinks only of himself—a dynamic that eventually leads to a violent encounter at the end of the play.

Slow Drag – Slow Drag a Black musician in Ma Rainey's band. A bass player, he seems slow and unobservant but is actually quite intelligent. Like Cutler and Toledo, he's content to play whatever Ma tells him to play, but he's also eager to simply get the job done and go home. To that end, he often tries to get his bandmates to focus on rehearsing, reminding them that practicing the songs will help them avoid having to spend all day and night in the studio. And the sooner they finish recording, the sooner they'll get paid. His practical, workmanlike approach to music jars Levee, who thinks more about making innovative art than about earning money. But Slow Drag doesn't have such lofty ideas about innovation—he just wants to make a living.

Sturdyvant – Sturdyvant is a white executive in the music industry. Although it's never explicitly stated in the play, he seems to own the recording label that puts out Ma Rainey's music. Despite the fact that he makes his money by selling Black artists' music, though, he's quite racist when it comes to interacting with Ma. He tells his associate, Irvin, to keep Ma "in line" during the recording session, condescendingly acting like Ma is an erratic, untrustworthy person. When he tries to lord his power as a white man over Ma, though, she challenges him by threatening to withhold her music. Because Sturdyvant knows he'll suffer financially if Ma doesn't let him record her, he acquiesces to her demands. But he's still quite exploitative of Black musicians, as is evident when he tells Levee that he'll record his songs but then revokes this offer once Levee gives him the music. Instead of allowing Levee to play his own music, Sturdyvant offers to buy the rights for the songs without actually recording them, meaning that he Sturdyvant can reap 100 percent of the profits if he ever decides to put these songs on an album. These exploitative practices were quite common in the music industry at the time, and they deeply dishearten Levee. Sturdyvant thus plays an integral role in Levee's violent breakdown at the end of the play.

Irvin – Irvin is a white executive in the music industry. He works alongside Sturdyvant, though he's technically Ma Rainey's manager. However, he spends at least as much of his energy trying to please Sturdyvant as he does working for Ma, often acting as a neutral party between Sturdyvant's racist condescension and Ma's strong will. Ma recognizes that, although Irvin is her manager, he only cares about her because her music makes him money. He often talks to her about "sticking together," but it's clear to her that he just wants to make sure he doesn't lose her as a client—not because he actually has her best interests in mind. Still, though, she holds a lot of power in their relationship, forcing Irvin to advocate for her by threatening to leave the recording session.

Sylvester – Sylvester is Ma's nephew. Ma brings him to the recording session and announces that he will be performing a spoken-word intro for the song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." The band is skeptical about Sylvester's ability to correctly deliver the introduction, though, since he has a noticeable stutter. In particular, Levee is infuriated by Ma's decision, since it means the band won't be playing *his* arrangement of the song. After several takes, Sylvester manages to successfully perform the intro, but Levee remains upset about having to record the song in Ma's traditional, old-fashioned style.

Dussie Mae – Dussie Mae is a young woman who travels with Ma. Although it's never explicitly stated in the play, it's implied that Dussie Mae and Ma are romantically involved. However, Dussie Mae remains open to Levee's multiple romantic advances, though she tells him that she won't truly let him court her until he has his own band and starts selling his own records. Nonetheless, she and Levee kiss in the band room while Ma is upstairs in the studio—one of several ways in which Levee undermines Ma's power and authority in the band.

Eliza Cottor – Slow Drag tells his bandmates a story about Eliza Cottor, a man he knew in Alabama. Eliza used to be a regular man who made his living by putting shoes on mules and horses, but then he sold his soul to the devil and started leading a rich, lavish life. He went on to commit murder, but the police and courts let him walk free. Slow Drag claims that he now roams the country with a large sack, which is full of the bloody fingerprints of anyone who agrees to sell their soul to the devil. Wherever he goes, Eliza offers people $100 for their souls. Levee responds to Slow Drag's story by saying he wishes he could find Eliza, since he'd gladly sell his soul for that amount—a blasphemous comment that enrages Cutler.

Police Officer – When Ma, Sylvester, and Dussie Mae get into a car accident on their way to the studio, the police officer racially profiles them by assuming they're driving a stolen car. He also blames the accident on them and claims that Ma pushed over a nearby cabdriver, even though Ma herself insists the driver fell down on his own. Because Ma tells him she's famous, though, the officer agrees to bring her to the studio on the way to the police station, clearly thinking somebody might bribe him to look the other way. Lo and behold, Irvin offers him money to forget about the incident, so he leaves without giving Ma any more trouble.

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.

POWER AND EXPLOITATION

The musicians in August Wilson's play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* are forced to navigate complex power dynamics. As Black artists in the exploitative entertainment industry of the 1920s, they're subject to racist manipulation at the hands of greedy white studio executives. For instance, Sturdyvant treats Ma Rainey poorly, talking about her as if she's an untrustworthy child who needs to be kept "in line." Despite his distrusting and racist attitude, though, he still profits off her music. Worse, he offers her meager compensation, paying her one-time recording fees while keeping the royalties all to himself—a practice that was common at the time and that prevented some of the period's most famous Black musicians from earning what they deserved. But Sturdyvant doesn't hold *all* the power in his relationship with Ma. In fact, Ma recognizes that she can use her music's popularity to her advantage by threatening to withhold her songs. By refusing to let Sturdyvant record her unless he treats her well, Ma subverts the racist power imbalance that often existed between Black and white people in the 1920s. The play thus explores tensions surrounding creative control, indicating that artistic talent can give otherwise disenfranchised people a sense of authority. And this authority, the play suggests, can be wielded to challenge oppressive and exploitative practices.

Instead of treating Black musicians with respect, Sturdyvant treats the artists he records like laborers who exist solely to profit him. For instance, his sole focus is to get Ma to produce popular music that will benefit *his* record label. His selfish attitude is made evident by the stage note included at the beginning of Act One, which indicates that he's "preoccupied with money" and "insensitive to black performers." The word "insensitive" is particularly telling here, as it hints that Sturdyvant only thinks about his own interests and doesn't care about the actual people whose labor he profits from. In other words, he treats Black performers as if they're nothing but business assets.

Worse, Sturdyvant actively takes advantage of Black performers. For example, he strings musicians like Levee along: first, he says he likes Levee's musical style and wants to record him, but when Levee shows him his songs, Sturdyvant changes his mind, suddenly claiming that he doesn't think they'll sell "like Ma's records." But Sturdyvant isn't telling the truth here—after all, he already told Irvin at the beginning of the play that Ma's records are outdated and aren't selling well in places like New York City. Levee's music, on the other hand, is fresh and new. And yet, Sturdyvant downplays how marketable Levee's songs really are, and then he says, "But I'll take them off your hands for you." His intention, then, is to pay a small amount for the rights to Levee's highly profitable songs. He's able to exploit Levee like this because Levee is an undiscovered musician in the racist, opportunistic world of the music industry in the 1920s. In other words, Sturdyvant leverages his power as a successful white executive to take advantage of his clients.

However, the play suggests that it's possible for Black performers to protect themselves from racist, exploitative practices by recognizing the value of their own talent. For example, Ma knows that until Sturdyvant secures the rights to her songs, he has no real power over her. If she doesn't let him record her, he'll have nothing to sell. Likewise, if she doesn't agree to sign the release forms, Sturdyvant can't legally market her album. As such, she repeatedly threatens to abandon the recording session whenever Sturdyvant or Irvin try to make her do something she doesn't like. When they try to convince her to play an alternate arrangement of her own **song**, for instance, she informs them that she doesn't care what they want: "What you all say don't count with me," she says. Given the racist power dynamics at play in the United States during the 1920s, Ma's refusal to do what Sturdyvant or Irvin say is somewhat remarkable, giving her a sense of authority that she might otherwise lack when interacting with white men. Simply put, if these white men want to work with her, they have to do so on *her* terms. Ma also maintains an upper hand in her relationship with Sturdyvant by not signing the release forms for her songs until the very end of the session. As a result, she can ensure that she and the other musicians get paid fairly—which works out, as Sturdyvant *does* try to take advantage of Ma by suggesting that Sylvester's pay will have to come out of her share. The only reason he tries to manipulate Ma in this way, though, is because he thinks he's already gotten what he wanted: her music. To his surprise, though, Ma reveals that she hasn't actually signed the release forms, which gives her bargaining power; if Sturdyvant doesn't do what she says, he won't be able to sell her music.

Unlike Ma, Levee leaves himself with nothing to leverage, since he eagerly gives Sturdyvant his songs without striking a formal deal. After all, he has already given over his creative talent, which—at least to Sturdyvant—is his most valuable asset. By refusing to work with Levee but still buying the rights to his songs, Sturdyvant sets himself up to profit off of Levee's music without having to share any of those profits. Prematurely relinquishing creative control therefore puts Levee in a position of complete powerlessness. His unfortunate experience in the music industry illustrates that, although artistic talent could sometimes be used to upend the racist power dynamics at play in the 1920s, Black musicians still had to be extremely vigilant about not letting white executives take advantage of them.

RACE AND IDENTITY

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom takes place roughly 60 years after the United States abolished slavery, but the play's Black characters still grapple with racism and discrimination. Because they're in Chicago, they don't necessarily face the prejudices they would find in the Jim Crow South (where segregation was legal), but they certainly don't enjoy the same privileges as white Northerners, either. For instance, when Ma gets into a car accident on her way to the studio, the police officer who arrives on the scene assumes she's in a stolen car—an assumption based entirely on the fact that she's Black. Such glaring instances of racism clearly shape how the Black characters in the play view the world and, more specifically, their place in it. For Levee, living in a racist society means appeasing white people, but only as a way of subtly building up power by winning important music executives' favor. Toledo, on the other hand, urges his bandmates to stop modeling themselves on white culture, arguing that Black Americans need to stop seeking "approval" from white people. Only by living on their own terms, he argues, will Black people carve out a desirable place for themselves in American society. By highlighting these contrasting viewpoints, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* illustrates that people don't always view their oppression in the same way—rather, people process discrimination differently, responding to prejudice according to their own life experiences.

Levee deals with racism and disenfranchisement by seeking out wealth and success. Because he's not famous like Ma, though, it's harder for him to advocate for himself, which is why he treats influential white executives with so much reverence. For instance, when Sturdyvant comes into the band room to make sure the musicians are rehearsing, Levee's demeanor completely shifts. Although he previously refused to rehearse with his bandmates, now he suddenly jumps up and does whatever he can to please Sturdyvant, acting like he's eager to practice the songs. The other musicians later criticize him for calling Sturdyvant "sir" even after Sturdyvant used the condescendingly racist word "boys" to refer to the bandmembers, who are grown men. But Levee doesn't care, instead clinging to the idea that attaining success is the best way to respond to racism—even if this means catering to bigoted white people.

One reason Levee is so willing to placate white people is because of his personal history, which instilled in him the belief that he can secretly garner power this way. When he was a child, a group of white men raped his mother. His father responded by moving the family to a new town, going around to the white men and bidding them farewell with a smile on his face. He then returned and killed as many of them as possible before getting lynched himself. From watching his father placate white people shortly before taking his revenge, Levee comes to see submissiveness as something that can actually lead to a form of empowerment. The fact that this belief grew out of his own life is important, as it suggests that personal experience is what determines how a person thinks about and responds to racism. Consequently, Levee puts up with racism and condescension from white people like Sturdyvant, believing all the while that this will help him become successful.

Unlike Levee, though, the other musicians worry about what it costs Black people to make the sacrifices necessary to become successful in a racist society. This is best exemplified by the story Slow Drag tells about Eliza Cottor, a Southern Black man who lived a normal rural lifestyle until suddenly starting to wear expensive clothes and lead a lavish lifestyle. According to Slow Drag, Eliza gained his wealth by selling his soul to the devil. In certain ways, Slow Drag's story vilifies the very idea of Black success, making it seem like financial and social advancement is only possible for Black people who are willing to embrace evil or immorality. At the same time, though, the story also acknowledges that gaining success as a Black person in a racist country often means making sacrifices and compromises. Ma is a good example of this: she's successful, but only because she has agreed to let exploitative white executives like Sturdyvant profit off her talent. In a way, then, she really *has* sold part of herself. And Levee wants to do the exact same thing, hoping his relationship with Sturdyvant will bring him good fortune. Toledo, on the other hand, worries that catering to white people actually does Black people a disservice. Acquiescing to white expectations, he suggests, keeps Black people from establishing their own sense of self in the United States: "As long as the colored man look to white folks […] for approval…then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about." For Toledo, catering to white people is similar to selling one's soul to the devil: it's a sacrifice that isn't worth making, as it deprives Black people of their own cultural identity.

On the whole, the play presents Toledo and Levee's opposing viewpoints to illustrate the fact that people rarely experience the effects of bigotry in the exact same way. And yet, Levee ends up getting manipulated by Sturdyvant and having a violent

breakdown in which he stabs Toledo. This outcome suggests that although appeasing white people might be a way to secretly gain power, it can also take a serious emotional toll and even turn Black people against one another. Accordingly, the play subtly implies that strategically submitting to racist white people is a dangerous and emotionally destructive way of responding to bigotry.

COLLABORATION VS. INDEPENDENCE

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom examines the difficulties of creative collaboration. As a young, ambitious trumpet player, Levee has trouble accepting his role as an accompanying musician. He resents having to simply play whatever he's told, instead wanting to give the music his own flair. Because of his individualistic attitude, he often finds himself at odds with Cutler, whose job it is to make sure the other musicians play how Ma wants them to. Everyone else in the band has no problem doing what they're told, thinking not about their own individual artistry, but about working together to make the band sound good—or, more specifically, to make it sound the way Ma wants it to sound. And yet, the play doesn't necessarily cast Levee in a completely negative light for pursuing his artistic ambitions. Although his individualistic behavior is certainly disruptive, the play frames him as something of an innovator. While the band merely rehashes old blues styles without considering new approaches, Levee strives for something fresh and new. Considering that Sturdyvant offers to buy his songs, it even seems that Levee is onto something interesting and worthwhile. In the end, though, his headstrong ideas about art do little more than turn his bandmates against him and get him fired from the band. The play therefore suggests that there's an inherent tension between artistic independence and collaboration—the same fiery passion fueling innovation can also alienate artists from their collaborators.

The play makes a distinction between two types of musicians, suggesting that there's an important difference between dutiful accompanying musicians and creative bandleaders. Except for Levee, everyone in Ma's backing band accepts that they have one job: to play the songs in whatever style Ma wants. Although it certainly takes skill to properly accompany another musician, the play implies that this skill doesn't necessarily involve much creativity or artistic inspiration. Instead, musicians like Cutler approach their role very straightforwardly, not thinking much about the music beyond the simple act of playing the songs however they've been told to play them. The stage note introducing Cutler hints at this, indicating that his "understanding of his music is limited to the chord he is playing at the time he is playing it." In other words, Cutler focuses solely on the individual building blocks of a song without considering broader, more artistic ideas about style or creative interpretation.

But Levee has trouble limiting himself to these practical considerations, instead coming up with grand ideas about art. His personal goal isn't to just competently execute his part as an accompanying musician, but to do so in an innovative way. He therefore takes issue with his bandmates' approach to music, especially disliking Slow Drag's desire to quickly record the album so he can get paid sooner. Levee resents Slow Drag's focus on money, which he finds unartistic, but Cutler challenges Levee's lofty ideas, telling him to "just play the piece." Cutler also says, "You wanna be one of them…what you call…virtuoso something, you in the wrong place." His point here is that regardless of Levee's creative talent, none of his artistic ideas matter in this specific context, which is all about supporting Ma. There's no need for a virtuosic trumpet player in the band; as long as Levee can play what's asked of him, it doesn't matter what he thinks about art.

The play suggests that while there's nothing fundamentally wrong with the fact that Levee has his own ideas about music and artistic expression, he lets these ideas interfere with the band's collaborative process. The play doesn't condemn Levee for thinking critically about his music. To the contrary, there's the subtle sense that Levee is the only musician in the band who isn't stuck rehashing the same artistic style over and over. His desire to make the music livelier even proves that he has a good sense of where popular culture is headed, considering that the mid-20th century saw an explosion of songs that were fast and upbeat.

The problem, though, is that not all environments are fit for the kind of creative flourishing Levee aims for. After all, Levee is in Ma's band, not his own, and his attempt to explore new musical avenues ends up putting him in the spotlight and taking attention away from Ma. Consequently, Ma fires him after the recording session, confirming what his bandmates have already tried to tell him: namely, that the only thing that matters in this band is whether or not he plays what Ma wants. His failure to follow this artistic direction is, in the end, a failure to collaborate. Even though his ambition might actually touch on something fresh and new, this just isn't the right environment for artistic exploration. Levee is thus left all on his own, perhaps implying that even the most groundbreaking and impressive artists need to know when and how to set aside their creative drive in order to simply collaborate. Otherwise, they might find themselves completely alone with their lofty ideas about art.

HISTORY, TRADITION, AND CHANGE

Set in Chicago in the 1920s, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* unfolds during a period of significant cultural change. In particular, Levee's attempt to push his bandmates toward new musical horizons reflects the transformations taking place in the music industry at the time—transformations that people like Ma Rainey and Cutler resist. For them, the blues is a rich musical tradition that

doesn't require embellishment or innovation. Levee, on the other hand, yearns to make music that is "fresh." In fact, he's so preoccupied with the idea of creating "exciting" new music that he shows outright contempt for more traditional approaches, acting like his fellow musicians are inferior because their playing isn't innovative. He even turns his disparaging attitude on *anything* he sees as outdated or out of touch with the times. In contrast, Toledo has a deep appreciation for history and tradition, trying to get his bandmates to see that Black Americans have been cut off from their own cultural history. Because slavery took Black people out of Africa, Toledo argues, Black Americans are no longer in touch with the rich customs of their ancestors. Given that Levee's fierce desire to move forward without looking to the past eventually leads to violent chaos, the play seems to endorse Toledo's belief in the importance of history, implying that the best kind of change grows *out* of tradition—not in opposition to it.

The play focuses on the evolution of the blues as a way of exploring how certain Black cultural traditions have made their way into the present, and how the play's characters either embrace or reject those traditions. Ma addresses this in a conversation with Cutler, in which she implies that white people often fail to consider the blues' origins. "They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there," she says. The idea here is that many white people hear the blues and take it at face value, simply listening to it without considering the cultural and historical context from which it emerged. That history is intertwined with Black culture, since the blues is believed to have been developed by formerly enslaved Black people who drew inspiration from hymns and field songs while working on plantations. The blues therefore encompasses the hardship and suffering that Black people have experienced in the United States—but Ma suggests that white people tend to overlook this, instead approaching the blues as if it's any other kind of music.

Levee, however, is completely uninterested in the origins of the blues, which he thinks is—as a musical form—stagnant and tired. He doesn't care about its historical or cultural roots, instead wanting to find new ways to build on it—or, more accurately, new ways to *depart* from it. In fact, he even goes out of his way to insult Ma's traditional approach to music, disparagingly calling her style "tent-show nonsense." The fact that Levee uses the term "tent-show" as an insult illustrates how uninterested he is in exploring the roots of blues music, which *did* gain some of its popularity through traveling vaudeville shows that took place under large tents and featured singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Instead of rehashing this history, Levee wants to do something new, insisting that listeners want "something that's gonna excite them"—a clear sign that he himself yearns for an exciting sense of change.

While Levee's interest in exploring new horizons might seem like a good way to enrich and propel Black culture, though, the play hints that there's value in paying attention to history and tradition. Toledo, for his part, urges his bandmates to think about their cultural history in order to better understand their present-day position as Black Americans. He reminds them that Black people were taken from Africa and brought to the United States, thus severing them from their customs and societal practices. And now, Toledo argues, Black Americans have forgotten about their roots and modeled themselves on white people. "We done sold ourselves to the white man in order to be like him," he says. "Look at the way you dressed…That ain't African. That's the white man." His main point is that, although dressing like distinguished white men seems like an improvement when compared to the life Black people led during slavery, it doesn't necessarily count as true cultural progress; it's just another sign of how much white culture has forced itself upon Black people. For Toledo, this lack of distinctly Black American traditions is exactly why things like the blues are so culturally important. After all, the blues is unique to the Black American experience.

Because Levee doesn't appreciate the significance of his own cultural traditions, his attempt to forge an entirely new kind of music feels forced and unnatural. Obsessed with the idea of being innovative, he discounts the power of drawing from history, and it is perhaps because he tries to make such an abrupt artistic departure that nobody in the band is willing to work with him to reach new heights. Furthermore, he thought his ambitious ideas would impress white executives like Sturdyvant, but Sturdyvant ends up refusing to record his new songs. In response to this defeat, Levee careens into a violent rage, taking his anger out on Toledo by stabbing him. It's especially significant that Toledo is the one to feel the brunt of Levee's anger, since he has already tried to get Levee to see that old traditions have a lot to offer. Levee, however, has failed to internalize this idea, instead wanting to leave history behind. In a sense, then, the fact that he lashes out at Toledo emphasizes his rejection of cultural traditions that would *help* him make new art. As it stands, Levee fixates so intensely on the idea of progress that he overlooks the ways in which old traditions drive change. The play thus suggests that if change doesn't evolve organically out of history, it doesn't lead to real progress and is destined to fail.

SYMBOLS

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

SHOES

Levee's obsession with shoes represents his broader ideas about status, success, and

wealth—particularly the idea that Black Americans must embrace modernity and abandon their historical roots if they want to prosper. When he buys flashy shoes with gambling money, the other musicians poke fun of him for wasting his cash on something so impractical. For them, shoes are just a necessity, as Cutler makes clear when he says, "Any man who takes a whole week's pay and puts it on some shoes—you understand what I mean, what you walk around on the ground with—is a fool!" Levee, on the other hand, believes in the power of his fancy shoes to help him dance and play music well. "A man got to have some shoes to dance like this! You can't dance like this with them clodhoppers Toledo got," he says. His comment about Toledo's shoes highlights the condescending view he takes of anyone he thinks is out of touch with the times—an idea that also hints at his disparaging thoughts about simplistic, traditional lifestyles, since the word "clodhopper" originally referred to fieldworkers who used to plow the land.

Similarly, he also suggests at one point that Toledo's shoes make him look like a "sharecropper," or an impoverished farmer toiling away on borrowed land. The history of sharecropping in the United States is interwoven with the country's racist past, since wealthy white people continued to exploit Black laborers under this system in the aftermath of slavery. The fact that Levee calls Toledo a "sharecropper" just because of his practical shoes thus illustrates just how much significance he attaches to shoes in general. Whereas Toledo's shoes symbolize (at least to Levee) that Toledo is stuck in the past and has yet to escape the oppressive yoke of racism in the United States, Levee's own shoes symbolize his desire to leave behind his rural roots as a southern Black man and embrace all things modern.

THE SONG ("MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM")

The band's disagreement over which version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" to record symbolizes the tension in the play surrounding power and creative control. Levee wants to record his own arrangement of the song, which he insists is more "exciting" and modern than Ma's traditional style. Ma, however, insists that because she's the leader of the band, she doesn't have to take Levee's artistic opinions into consideration. The rest of the band follows whatever Ma says, frustrating Levee with their attempts to show him that Ma—and *only* Ma—has the power to make decisions about how the music ought to be played. To complicate things, though, Levee tries to circumvent Ma's authority by appealing to the white studio executives, who agree that the song would be better if the band played it Levee's way. Because there's so much disagreement over how to play "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," the song itself comes to represent the inherent difficulties of creative collaboration, highlighting how different artistic visions can lead to messy power struggles.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Plume edition of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* published in 1985.

Act 1 Quotes

STURDYVANT: I don't care what she calls herself. I'm not putting up with it. I just want to get her in here...record those songs on that list...and get her out. Just like clockwork, huh?

IRVIN: Like clockwork, Mel. You just stay out of the way and let me handle it.

STURDYVANT: Yeah...yeah...you handled it last time. Remember? She marches in here like she owns the damn place...doesn't like the songs we picked out...says her throat is sore…doesn't want to do more than one take...

Related Characters: Sturdyvant, Irvin (speaker), Ma Rainey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Before Ma Rainey and her band arrive at the recording studio, Sturdyvant and Irvin discuss how they plan to make sure the session goes smoothly. Sturdyvant's comments about Ma are disparaging and condescending, as he talks about her like she's an unruly, untrustworthy child instead of a professional artist. He even blatantly dismisses her status as a famous musician, telling Irvin that he doesn't care if she's the "Mother of the Blues"—a name people actually called Ma Rainey in real life.

Instead of showing Ma the respect she deserves as a famous musician, though, Sturdyvant is focused on just one thing: getting her to efficiently record an album, which he can then sell. When he says that he wants the session to go "like clockwork," he reveals his lack of respect for the artistic process. All he wants, it seems, is to exploit Ma's talent, resenting her all the while for acting like an influential—powerful—icon in popular culture.

STURDYVANT: Irv, that horn player...the one who gave me those songs...is he gonna be here today? Good. I want to hear more of that sound. Times are changing. This is a tricky business now. We've got to jazz it up...put in something different. You know, something wild...with a lot of rhythm.

(Pause.)

You know what we put out last time, Irv? We put out garbage last time. It was garbage. I don't even know why I bother with this anymore.

IRVIN: You did all right last time, Mel. Not as good as you did before, but you did all right.

STURDYVANT: You know how many records we sold in New York? You wanna see the sheet? And you know what's in New York, Irv? Harlem. Harlem's in New York, Irv.

Related Characters: Sturdyvant, Irvin (speaker), Levee, Ma Rainey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

When Sturdyvant and Irvin discuss the music industry before Ma Rainey and her band arrive at the studio, Sturdyvant makes it clear that he's only interested in putting out records that will make a lot of money. Consequently, he wants to capture whatever musical style is the most popular, and this means changing along with the times

The play takes place in Chicago in the 1920s, meaning that it's set during something of a creative explosion, as Black musicians recorded a number of highly influential blues albums at this time. Meanwhile, though, jazz was also becoming quite popular, especially in places like Harlem, an extremely artistic Black community in New York City. Instead of rehashing old blues traditions, then, Sturdyvant wants to branch out so that he can reach other markets, which is why he tells Irvin that they need to "jazz it up." However, Sturdyvant doesn't want to reach for new musical heights for artistic reasons—rather, he just wants to make as much money as possible. And since Levee's playing sounds inventive and new, Sturdyvant is eager to hear more of it, clearly hoping he'll be able to harness that sound and use it to his financial advantage.

CUTLER is in his mid-fifties, as are most of the others. He plays guitar and trombone and is the leader of the group, possibly because he is the most sensible. His playing is solid and almost totally unembellished. His understanding of his music is limited to the chord he is playing at the time he is playing it. He has all the qualities of a loner except the introspection.

Related Characters: Cutler, Ma Rainey, Levee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When the band arrives at the studio, the play includes a brief stage note about each musician. Cutler's description indicates not just that he's the secondary leader of the band (after Ma), but also that he has a very straightforward, dutiful approach to music. Unlike Levee, who will later reveal himself to be obsessed with creative innovation, Cutler just wants to execute whatever is required of him as a musician.

The idea that his "understanding" of music is "limited to the chord he is playing at the time he is playing it" highlights this workmanlike approach to his craft, suggesting that he's content to focus on a song one step at a time instead of coming up with grand ideas about art. By establishing this highly practical, dedicated attitude, the play sets up a juxtaposition between Cutler and Levee. In doing so, the play will highlight what it takes to be a good accompanying musician—a skill Levee apparently lacks, since he, unlike Cutler, can't limit himself to simply playing whatever he's told to play.

SLOW DRAG: Come on, let's rehearse the music.

LEVEE: You ain't gotta rehearse that...ain't nothing but old jug-band music. They need one of them jug bands for this.

SLOW DRAG: Don't make me no difference. Long as we get paid.

LEVEE: That ain't what I'm talking about, nigger. I'm talking about art!

Related Characters: Slow Drag, Levee (speaker), Ma Rainey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Levee tries to tell Slow Drag in this exchange that there's no need to rehearse the songs because they're so simple. By making this claim, he condescendingly implies that the songs slated to be on Ma's record are boring and outdated. He uses the term "jug band," referring to bands that used to play on primarily homemade instruments. Jug bands originated in the South and often performed in traveling vaudeville shows (like, for instance, the travelling show that the real-life Ma Rainey made her name performing in). The way Levee talks about jug bands is quite disparaging, making it clear that he thinks the music Ma wants to record is beneath him. He also uses a racial slur to refer to Slow Drag, further establishing that he sees himself as superior to his bandmates.

Slow Drag, on the other hand, doesn't have such lofty—or elitist—ideas about art, instead taking a more practical approach in that he simply wants to play the music so he can get paid. This sentiment doesn't sit well with Levee, who sees his own musicianship as a kind of artistry, not a straightforward job. Their conversation thus calls attention to the fact that Levee has a completely different approach than the rest of his bandmates and has trouble setting aside his grand notions about innovation for the good of the band.

CUTLER: Slow Drag's all right. It's you talking all that weird shit about art. Just play the piece, nigger. You wanna be one of them...what you call...virtuoso or something, you in the wrong place. You ain't no Buddy Bolden or King Oliver...you just an old trumpet player come a dime a dozen. Talking about art.

LEVEE: What is you? I don't see your name in lights.

CUTLER: I just play the piece. Whatever they want. I don't go talking about art and criticizing other people's music.

Related Characters: Cutler, Levee (speaker), Slow Drag, Ma Rainey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

After Levee speaks condescendingly to Slow Drag for focusing too much on money, Cutler puts him in his place. He uses a racial slur to refer to Levee and reminds him that he's just an accompanying musician, not a headliner like the famous jazz horn players Buddy Bolden or King Oliver. His main point is that Levee is too focused on trying to be some kind of virtuosic musician, when in reality he's just yet another trumpet player—a trumpet player who is a "dime a dozen," meaning that Cutler could easily find somebody to replace him.

Needless to say, Levee doesn't think of himself as replaceable, since he has some self-aggrandizing views about his own skill and creativity. But even if Levee truly *is* a uniquely talented and innovative artist, it doesn't change the fact that he's in Ma's band as a supporting musician, which is why Cutler emphasizes the importance of simply playing what he's told. He is, after all, there to make Ma sound good, not to outshine her with his own playing.

CUTLER: Well, until you get your own band where you can play what you want, you just play the piece and stop complaining. I told you when you came on here, this ain't none of them hot bands. This is an accompaniment band. You play Ma's music when you here.

LEVEE: I got sense enough to know that. Hell, I can look at you all and see what kind of band it is. I can look at Toledo and see what kind of band it is.

Related Characters: Cutler, Levee (speaker), Toledo, Ma Rainey

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Cutler and Levee's conversation here highlights their different approaches to music in general. Cutler's main goal is to get Levee to see that he's not supposed to overshadow Ma with his flashy playing, nor is he the one who has the authority to dictate how the band plays. There's a very clear pecking order in place, with Ma holding the most power and then Cutler directing the band so that it sounds the way Ma wants it to. Within this power structure, there's no room for someone like Levee to criticize the group's musical direction and insist on new stylistic explorations—that's why Cutler tells Levee to "stop complaining" about the songs until he has a band of his own, at which point he's free to do whatever he wants.

The way Levee responds to Cutler's criticism is especially revealing, as he makes a snide remark about Toledo, implying that Toledo embodies the boring, traditional, and unimaginative nature of the entire band. He thus takes out

his frustration on Toledo, foreshadowing the confrontation they will have at the end of the play, when Levee once again misplaces his anger and lashes out at his unsuspecting bandmate.

TOLEDO: That's African.

SLOW DRAG: What? What you talking about? What's African?

LEVEE: I know he ain't talking about me. You don't see me running around in no jungle with no bone between my nose.

TOLEDO: Levee, you worse than ignorant. You ignorant without a premise.

(Pauses.)

Now, what I was saying is what Slow Drag was doing is African. That's what you call an African conceptualization. That's when you name the gods or call on the ancestors to achieve whatever your desires are.

SLOW DRAG: Nigger, I ain't no African! I ain't doing no African nothing!

TOLEDO: Naming all those things you and Cutler done together is like trying to solicit some reefer based on a bond of kinship. That's African. An ancestral retention. Only you forgot the name of the gods.

Related Characters: Toledo, Slow Drag, Levee (speaker), Cutler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

When Slow Drag asks Cutler for some of his marijuana, he talks about all they've been through together, trying to convince Cutler to share based on their long personal history. Toledo, for his part, remarks that Slow Drag's attempt to get marijuana from his friend is "African." Although his point is a little vague, the main idea here is that Slow Drag's appeal to Cutler is similar to traditions that appear in some African cultures—cultures in which people "name the gods or call on the ancestors" to grant them what they want. According to this perspective, Slow Drag treats his long friendship with Cutler like a divine force, calling up their history in the same way one might summon ancestral spirits. Above all, Toledo's point establishes a sense of shared "kinship." He reminds his bandmates that they, as Black people, all have the same cultural history, even if—as Toledo will note later in the play—Black Americans have been cut off from this history.

Levee, however, doesn't grasp the fact that Toledo is mainly talking about what it means to share history with another person. Instead of internalizing Toledo's point, he goes out of his way to disparage African people, thus implying that he's eager to establish himself as an American. Similarly, Slow Drag calls Toledo a racial slur and rejects anything relating to African traditions. Levee even uses racist stereotypes to portray African people as primitive and wild, revealing not just his desire to separate himself from his African roots, but also his disdain for anything that doesn't strike him as modern and flashy.

LEVEE: See, I told you! It don't mean nothing when I say it. You got to wait for Mr. Irvin to say it. Well, I told you the way it is.

CUTLER: Levee, the sooner you understand it ain't what you say, or what Mr. Irvin say...it's what Ma say that counts.

SLOW DRAG: Don't nobody say when it come to Ma. She's gonna do what she wants to do. Ma says what happens with her.

LEVEE: Hell, the man's the one putting out the record! He's gonna put out what he wanna put out!

SLOW DRAG: He's gonna put out what Ma want him to put out

Related Characters: Levee, Cutler, Slow Drag (speaker), Irvin, Ma Rainey, Sturdyvant

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

When Levee tells Cutler they're supposed to play his arrangement of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Cutler doesn't believe him. He therefore asks Irvin which version of the song they should rehearse, and Irvin confirms that he and Sturdyvant want to record Levee's arrangement. As a result, Levee boasts about being right, but he also criticizes Cutler for only listening to Irvin—despite the fact that Levee himself urged Cutler to ask Irvin in the first place, thinking that this would surely prove that he's right about which version of the song they're supposed to play.

Regardless, though, Cutler doesn't care what Irvin says, trying to impress upon Levee that the final decision will be

up to Ma. The fact that Levee doesn't want to accept Ma's authority is yet another sign that he's unfit to be an accompanying musician. What he wants is to shine on his own, so he has trouble dutifully carrying out whatever other people tell him to do. Cutler and the other musicians, though, understand that it's important to set aside their ego for the good of the band—a humbling experience that Levee appears incapable of embracing.

TOLEDO: See, now...I'll tell you something. As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say...as long as he looks to white folks for approval...then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing.

Related Characters: Toledo (speaker), Cutler, Levee, Ma Rainey

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

After Cutler and Levee ask Irvin to tell them which version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" they should rehearse, Toledo expresses his concern that Black people defer to white people too much. He says that Black people frequently "look to white folks to put the crown on what" they say, meaning that Black people are quick to seek out white people's approval. Considering the racial discrimination and power imbalance that was prevalent in the U.S. at this time (the 1920s), it's perhaps unsurprising that Black people seek out this kind of approval—after all, it can even be dangerous for Black people to ignore the limitations they face in a racist society.

And yet, Toledo thinks it's necessary for Black people to make their own decisions without catering to white people. Otherwise, he fears that Black people will have a hard time figuring out who they are and how they fit into the United States. The idea here is that the Black cultural identity is modeled too closely on white society, which makes it difficult for Black people to establish their own place in the country.

TOLEDO: Everybody worried about having a good time. Ain't nobody thinking about what kind of world they gonna leave their youngens. "Just give me the good time, that's all I want." It just makes me sick.

SLOW DRAG: Well, the colored man's gonna be all right. He got through slavery, and he'll get through whatever else the white man put on him. I ain't worried about that. Good times is what makes life worth living. Now, you take the white man...The white man don't know how to have a good time. That's why he's troubled all the time. He don't know how to have a good time. He don't know how to laugh at life.

Related Characters: Toledo, Slow Drag (speaker), Levee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

After listening to Levee exuberantly sing and dance, Toledo talks about the dangers of "having a good time." Whereas Levee relishes fun and actively seeks it out, Toledo is suspicious of what it costs to always pursue entertainment. To him, fixating on having fun is something that has the potential to hold Black people back, since it keeps people from "thinking about what kind of world they gonna leave their youngens." His main concern is that fun is a mere distraction from more important matters—like, for instance, making the world a better place, especially for Black people living in a dangerously racist society.

Slow Drag, on the other hand, thinks there's nothing wrong with having a good time. According to him, having fun is a necessary part of surviving hardship. "Good times is what makes life worth living," he says, implying that facing adversity would become too much if people never had a little bit of fun. His viewpoint is interesting because it's halfway between Levee and Toledo's perspectives; Levee just wants to have a good time without thinking about anything else, and Toledo wants to lead a serious life because he worries that people get too hung up on entertaining themselves. But Slow Drag splits the difference, recognizing that it's possible to go through life responsibly while still having fun, since having a good time simply provides Black people with the cathartic release necessary while withstanding the burden of racist oppression.

TOLEDO: It ain't just me, fool! It's everybody! What you think…I'm gonna solve the colored man's problems by myself. I said, we. You understand that? We. That's every living colored man in the world got to do his share. Got to do his part. I ain't talking about what I'm gonna do...or what you or Cutler or Slow Drag or anybody else. I'm talking about all of us together. What all of us is gonna do.

Related Characters: Toledo (speaker), Cutler, Slow Drag, Levee, Sturdyvant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Toledo has already emphasized how important it is to work toward improving Black Americans' lives. When Levee criticizes him for not actively following his own advice in this regard, though, he argues that he can't bring about meaningful change on his own. He notes that "everybody" needs to work toward this goal, since it's unrealistic to think that just one person could possibly bring about actual change when it comes to fighting racism.

What Toledo says here emphasizes the importance of unity, as he urges Levee and the other musicians to come together and work toward equality as a collective. His idea in this moment might seem obvious or straightforward, but it's an important part of the play, since Levee ends up alienating himself from his bandmates and lashing out at Toledo, effectively doing the exact opposite of what Toledo says. Instead of working alongside his fellow Black Americans, Levee turns his anger on people like Toledo, making it that much harder for them to come together to stand up against exploitative white people like Sturdyvant.

The white man knows you just a leftover. 'Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don't know that we been took and made history out of. Done went and filled the white man's belly and now he's full and tired and wants you to get out the way and let him be by himself. Now, I know what I'm talking about. And if you wanna find out, you just ask Mr. Irvin what he had for supper yesterday. And if he's an honest white man...which is asking for a whole heap of a lot...he'll tell you he done ate your black ass and if you please I'm full up with you...so go on and get off the plate and let me eat something else.

Related Characters: Toledo (speaker), Irvin, Sturdyvant, Ma Rainey, Levee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Toledo presents an extended metaphor comparing Black Americans to the "leftovers" from a stew. He talks about how carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables have been ripped out of the ground and tossed into a stew, but he says there's more food than anyone can eat—these "leftover" vegetables floating in the broth are comparable to Black Americans who have been taken from their ancestral homes in Africa and brought to the United States to be enslaved. Now that slavery is over, Toledo implies, "the white man" has very little use for Black Americans.

The overarching idea here is that racist white people only care about Black Americans insofar as they can benefit from them. As soon as they can no longer use Black people to their advantage, white Americans completely disregard them, pushing them to the side as if they're little more than unwanted vegetables. The music industry is a good example of what Toledo says, as Sturdyvant is only interested in working with Black musicians because he's able to profit off their records. As soon as the recording session is over, though, Sturdyvant will have no interest in musicians like Ma or Levee, thus revealing his exploitative agenda to use Black people for his own gain.

IRVIN: Ma, that's what the people want now. They want something they can dance to. Times are changing. Levee's arrangement gives the people what they want. It gets them excited…makes them forget about their troubles.

MA RAINEY: I don't care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain't messing up my song. If he got what the people want, let him take it somewhere else. I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it.

Related Characters: Irvin, Ma Rainey (speaker), Levee

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

As Ma waits for the recording session to begin, she hears

the band playing Levee's arrangement of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" downstairs in the rehearsal room. She immediately voices her anger, declaring that she won't play his version of the song, but Irvin tries to tell her that the music market is changing; people want "something they can dance to." The fact that he tells her that "times are changing" suggests that her music is on its way to becoming outdated.

It follows, then, that Ma doesn't respond well to Irvin, telling him outright that she doesn't care what he says. Considering that she's speaking to a powerful white studio executive in the 1920s, her assertiveness in this moment is quite remarkable, demonstrating that her musical talent has given her authority over Irvin in a way that subverts the standard power dynamics of the era. What's more, she asserts herself as the definitive leader of the band, making it quite clear that nobody can undermine her creative control—and if Levee wants to try to do this, then he can go find a band of his own.

MA RAINEY: I'm gonna tell you something, Irvin...and you go on up there and tell Sturdyvant. What you all say don't count with me. You understand? Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That's what counts with Ma. Now, you carry my nephew on down there...tell Cutler he's gonna do the voice intro on that "Black Bottom" song and that Levee ain't messing up my song with none of his music shit. Now, if that don't set right with you and Sturdyvant...then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour, 'cause I don't like it up here no ways.

Related Characters: Ma Rainey (speaker), Irvin, Sturdyvant, Levee, Cutler

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

When Irvin tries to convince Ma to record Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," she doesn't hesitate to tell him exactly how she feels. Even though she's a Black woman living in the racist environment of the United States in the 1920s, she's not afraid to tell Irvin that what he and Sturdyvant want means nothing to her. "What you all say don't count with me," she says—a statement that belittles both Irvin and Sturdyvant by implying that they don't know what they're talking about when it comes to music.

By making this implication, Ma reminds Irvin that, at least in the context of this recording session, she has the upper hand because she's a popular musician. What's more, she uses her popularity to her advantage, threatening to leave if Sturdyvant doesn't treat her well. In doing so, she leverages her most valuable asset (her musical talent), forcing Sturdyvant to do what she wants or lose his chances of profiting off her songs.

CUTLER: You talking out your hat. The man come in here, call you a boy, tell you to get up off your ass and rehearse, and you ain't had nothing to say to him, except "Yessir!"

LEVEE: I can say "yessir" to whoever I please. What you got to do with it? I know how to handle white folks. I been handling them for thirty-two years, and now you gonna tell me how to do it. Just 'cause I say "yessir" don't mean I'm spooked up with him. I know what I'm doing. Let me handle him my way.

Related Characters: Cutler, Levee (speaker), Sturdyvant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

When Sturdyvant comes downstairs and says that he's glad the "boys" are rehearsing, Levee jumps up and calls him "sir," assuring him that they're working hard on the songs. After Sturdyvant leaves, though, Cutler and the other bandmember mock him for showing Sturdyvant so much respect. Sturdyvant even used the racist term "boys" to refer to the musicians, and Levee *still* treated him with respect, responding by saying "Yessir!"

Cutler and the others make the point that for all of Levee's bluster, he quickly became submissive when a powerful white executive entered the room. At the same time, though, Levee notes that he has the right to treat white people however he wants. He rejects the idea that he's "spooked" by people like Sturdyvant, maintaining that he has his own way of dealing with white people. And though it's not yet clear what, exactly, this method of dealing with white people actually *is*, his insistence that he can behave however he wants suggests that people inevitably respond to bigotry and oppression in different ways.

My daddy wasn't spooked up by the white man. Nosir! And that taught me how to handle them. I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's face...smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning how he's gonna get him and what he's gonna do to him. That taught me how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say yessir to whoever I please. I got time coming to me. You all just leave Levee alone about the white man.

Related Characters: Levee (speaker), Sturdyvant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Because Levee's bandmates make fun of the polite way he responds to Sturdyvant's casual racism, Levee tells a story about how a group of white men raped his mother in front of him when he was a child. When his father found out what happened, he moved the family to a different county. Before leaving, though, he went around and bid farewell to the white neighbors, smiling in their face and shaking the hand of one of his wife's abusers—only to sneak back to town and hunt down the rapists.

Levee took this as a lesson, learning that it's possible to "smile and say yessir to" anyone he pleases while also plotting revenge against them. By appeasing Sturdyvant, then, he intends to use the powerful white man to his advantage. What he doesn't necessarily consider, though, is that dealing with an exploitative studio executive on the executive's own terms will most likely be a losing battle—Sturdyvant, after all, is the one who ends up manipulating Levee, illustrating how hard it is to subvert racist power dynamics.

Act 2 Quotes

MA RAINEY: They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names...calling me everything but a child of god. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then.

Related Characters: Ma Rainey (speaker), Cutler, Irvin, Sturdyvant, Slow Drag, Sylvester

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

As Ma waits for Sylvester and Slow Drag to buy her a Coke, she talks to Cutler about the music business, telling him that she doesn't care if Irvin and Sturdyvant are mad about having to meet the demands she makes as a recording artist. And the reason she doesn't care, she indicates, is that she knows she still has the upper hand—after all, Sturdyvant and Irvin haven't gotten "what they wanted yet." In other words, they haven't yet recorded Ma's music, so they currently have nothing to sell. As such, they have no choice but to do what she wants.

Ma's explanation of this relational dynamic reveals that she's very aware of how the power balance works in the music industry. Although exploitative white studio executives like Sturdyvant are powerful and manipulative, they can't actually carry out their various manipulations unless they have a product to sell, which means that withholding the music is a way of reclaiming a sense of authority.

MA RAINEY: If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley. I done made this company more money from my records than all the other recording artists they got put together. And they wanna balk about how much this session is costing them.

Related Characters: Ma Rainey (speaker), Cutler, Irvin, Sturdyvant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Continuing her and Cutler's discussion about the music industry, Ma talks about how valuable she is to Sturdyvant. Although he might treat her like she's an expendable artist who's just costing him money, the truth is that she has made his record label huge profits, especially since Sturdyvant surely owns all the royalties to her songs. The fact that he has made so much money off of her is rather frustrating, considering that he clearly does so in exploitative ways (by

not giving her a fair cut of the royalties). But it *also* means that she can lord her popularity over him.

As the company's best-selling musician, Ma enjoys a certain sense of authority, since her musical talent is a legitimate business asset that Sturdyvant depends on for success. And because he depends on her for success, she can manipulate him to a certain extent, threatening to not give him what he wants (her music) if he doesn't do things the way she wants him to do them. The only problem, of course, is that this power only goes so far—Ma will eventually lose her bargaining power once she signs over the rights to her songs.

MA RAINEY: White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life.

Related Characters: Ma Rainey (speaker), Cutler, Sturdyvant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation with Cutler about the blues, Ma addresses both the cultural and historical origins of the genre. Although white people like Sturdyvant are perfectly happy to record and sell the blues, Ma suggests that they don't really "understand" it. The implication here is that white people see the blues as nothing more than a form of entertainment, whereas Black musicians understand that it's much more than that.

For Ma, the blues is a deeply expressive artform, one that makes it possible to better understand one's own life. To that end, the blues has deep roots in storytelling, as the lyrics of many of the oldest and most famous blues songs actually tell a tale of some kind. What's more, historians believe that the blues grew out of the hymns, spirituals, and field songs that enslaved or formerly enslaved people sang while working on plantations, suggesting that the blues emerged out of the historical suffering of Black Americans. It's no wonder, then, that people like Sturdyvant don't understand the blues: "They hear it come out," Ma says, "but they don't know how it got there." In other words, they take it at face value and don't understand or respect its origins.

LEVEE: [...] That's what's the matter with you all. You satisfied sitting in one place. You got to move on down the road from where you sitting...and all the time you got to keep an eye out for that devil who's looking to buy up souls. And hope you get lucky and find him!

Related Characters: Levee (speaker), Cutler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation in which Levee's bandmates admit that they wouldn't mind "hauling wood" for a living, Levee accuses them of lacking ambition. According to him, they're all too "satisfied sitting in one place." He, on the other hand, is constantly striving for new horizons, as made clear by his musical aspirations and his desire to play in a way that sounds new and exciting.

The fact that Levee's bandmates are content with simply living their lives therefore irks him and is the fundamental difference between how he and how they move through the world. Whereas someone like Cutler is happy making a living by just playing whatever somebody else tells him to play, Levee wants more than anything to be successful—in fact, he wants this so badly that he would gladly sell his soul to the devil if it meant he could lead a lavish life of riches.

CUTLER: I done told you about that blasphemy. Taking about selling your soul to the devil.

TOLEDO: We done the same thing, Cutler. There ain't no difference. We done sold Africa for the price of tomatoes. We done sold ourselves to the white man in order to be like him. Look at the way you dressed...That ain't African. That's the white man. We trying to be just like him. We done sold who we are in order to become someone else. We's imitation white men.

Related Characters: Cutler, Toledo (speaker), Levee, Sturdyvant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

After Levee says that he wishes he could sell his soul to the devil in exchange for success, Cutler chastises him for

speaking so blasphemously. But then Toledo jumps in and suggests that everyone in the band has done the same exact thing. His reasoning is that Black Americans have given up their historical traditions in order to assimilate into American society.

Of course, the fact that white people took Black Americans' ancestors from Africa and forced them into slavery explains this profound loss of culture, but Toledo still seems to think that Black Americans ought to make a concerted effort to get back in touch with their heritage. Instead of dressing and acting like "imitation white men," he argues, Black people ought to establish their own customs. Levee, however, is eager to do the exact opposite of this, since he wants to please white people like Sturdyvant in an attempt to gain success in white society—a plan that is, at least in Toledo's mind, like making a deal with the devil.

LEVEE: It don't matter what you talking about. I ain't no imitation white man. And I don't want to be no white man. As soon as I get my band together and make them records like Mr. Sturdyvant done told me I can make, I'm gonna be like Ma and tell the white man just what he can do. Ma tell Mr. Irvin she gonna leave...and Mr. Irvin get down on his knees and beg her to stay! That's the way I'm gonna be! Make the white man respect me!

CUTLER: The white man don't care nothing about Ma. The colored folks made Ma a star. White folks don't care nothing about who she is...what kind of music she make.

Related Characters: Levee, Cutler (speaker), Ma Rainey, Sturdyvant, Irvin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation about how commercial success can give Black musicians power, Levee claims that he'll someday manage to leverage his talent to "make the white man respect" him. One reason he makes such a claim is that Toledo has just suggested that everyone in the band is just an "imitation white man," implying that Black Americans have given up their own cultural identity in order to assimilate into white society.

Levee, however, believes that pleasing white people is a way of gradually building up power. He believes, for example, that Ma is able to boss Sturdyvant and Irvin around because they respect her for her musical talent. And yet, Cutler points out that these white men don't genuinely *respect* Ma—they just want to profit off of her popularity. What's more, the only reason Ma is popular in the first place is that Black people buy her music, meaning that she doesn't actually have as much power in white society as it might seem.

LEVEE: [...] Come on and save him like you did my mama! Save him like you did my mama! I heard her when she called you! I heard her when she said, "Lord, have mercy! Jesus, help me! Please, God, have mercy on me, Lord Jesus, help me!" And did you turn your back? Did you turn your back, motherfucker? Did you turn your back?

Related Characters: Levee (speaker), Cutler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

Levee screams at God while fighting with Cutler, who punched him the face because he was speaking blasphemously. Taking out a knife and slashing it through the air, Levee continues to insult God. And though at first it seems like he's just trying to further enrage Cutler, it soon becomes clear that he's genuinely mad at God for failing to help him in life.

More specifically, Levee condemns God for not doing anything when Levee's mother was getting raped by a group of white men. His mother cried out for "mercy," but God "turn[ed] his back" on her. Levee's choice of words here is quite significant, as it suggests that he feels completely abandoned by God. As a Black man trying to make his way in a racist society, he feels utterly alone, which is why he slashes his knife toward the sky and directs his anger at God—a clear indication that he yearns for some kind of support and blames God for his hardships. And yet, his staunchly individualistic attitude has alienated him from seemingly everyone around him, leaving him even more alone.

STURDYVANT: Hey, Ma…come on, sign the forms, huh?

IRVIN: Ma...come on now.

MA RAINEY: Get your coat, Sylvester. Irvin, where's my car?

IRVIN: It's right out front, Ma. Here...I got the keys right here. Come on, sign the forms, huh?

MA RAINEY: Irvin, give me my car keys!

IRVIN: Sure, Ma...just sign the forms, huh? *(He gives her the keys, expecting a trade-off.)*

MA RAINEY: Send them to my address and I'll get around to them.

IRVIN: Come on, Ma...I took care of everything, right? I straightened everything out.

MA RAINEY: Give me the pen, Irvin.

(She signs the forms.)

You tell Sturdyvant…one more mistake like that and I can make my records someplace else.

Related Characters: Sturdyvant, Irvin, Ma Rainey (speaker), Sylvester

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

When the recording session finally ends, Irvin tells Ma that Sturdyvant won't pay Sylvester his own cut, insisting that his $25 will have to come out of Ma's share. Ma doesn't accept this, sending Irvin to talk to Sturdyvant and saying that she'll never make a record with him again if he doesn't pay everyone their fair share. Sturdyvant then emerges and pays Ma the correct amount, claiming to have made a mistake. But Ma knows that what *really* happened is that Sturdyvant realized she hadn't signed the release forms for the songs—meaning that, although he was able to record her, he won't be able to sell the album.

Consequently, Sturdyvant pleads with Ma to sign the forms, but Ma doesn't pay attention, which is why Irvin hesitates to give her the keys to her car, using them as collateral. And yet, Ma manages to get the keys without signing the forms, though she eventually relents. Still, though, keeping Sturdyvant and Irvin on their toes is a way for her to remind them that she's not completely powerless. Although they will ultimately reap the rewards of her music, they won't make *any* money until they own the rights to the songs. She therefore dangles the rights in front of them, making it quite clear that she could walk away at any moment. In this regard, she asserts her authority over them, challenging their exploitative practices by showing them that she, too, is capable of manipulation.

STURDYVANT: Well, Levee, I don't doubt that really. It's just that...well, I don't think they'd sell like Ma's records. But I'll take them off your hands for you.

LEVEE: The people's tired of jug-band music, Mr. Sturdyvant. They wants something that's gonna excite them! They wants something with some fire! I don't know what fellows you had playing them songs...but if I could play them! I'd set them down in the people's lap! Now you told me I could record them songs!

STURDYANT: Well, there's nothing I can do about that. Like I say, it's five dollars a piece. That's what I'll give you. I'm doing you a favor. Now, if you write any more, I'll help you out and take them off your hands. The price is five dollars apiece. Just like now.

Related Characters: Sturdyvant, Levee (speaker), Ma Rainey, Irvin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the play, Sturdyvant lies to Levee by telling him that he doesn't think his songs will sell very well. Accordingly, he has decided not to record them. However, it's obvious that Sturdyvant isn't being honest with Levee. First of all, he previously complained to Irvin about how Ma's records aren't selling very well, so the comparison he makes between Levee and Ma's music is just a way of tricking Levee into thinking his songs are worthless. Second of all, he claims to have had a group of musicians play through Levee's songs, but there's no way he actually did this, considering that he's been at the studio recording Ma all day. What he really wants is to buy the songs from Levee so that *he* can own them. That way, he'll get to keep the royalties if he ever puts out the music, and he won't have to share the profits with Levee.

The entire business interaction surrounding Levee's songs highlights Sturdyvant's manipulative ways, as he acts like he's doing Levee a "favor" by purchasing them. In reality, though, he's actually swindling Levee out of his own intellectual property, preying on the powerless young musician by acting like Levee should be *happy* that there's somebody who wants to take his songs "off [his] hands."

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.

ACT 1

Ma Rainey's manager, Irvin, sets up a microphone in a recording studio. Meanwhile, Sturdyvant—the owner of the studio—talks to him from the control room, instructing him to keep Ma "in line" when she arrives. He doesn't want to deal with Ma's antics, like the time she came to a recording session and argued about what songs to sing. She even refused to do more than one take per song because her throat was sore. She also tripped over a cable and threatened to sue. Irvin assures Sturdyvant that he'll take care of everything, telling him to just stay out of the way.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is a play that centers around Black musicians in the 1920s. However, its opening scene focuses on two white studio executives, Sturdyvant and Irvin. Sturdyvant's disparaging remarks about Ma set the stage for the rest of the play, as he speaks in a condescendingly racist way about her. He implies that she's unpredictable and untrustworthy, as if she's a mere child. Moreover, his sense that she's uncooperative implies that he feels a sense of authority over her—a power dynamic that will lead to tension throughout the play.

Sturdyvant talks about Ma's trumpet player, who he thinks has a fresh new sound—a *sellable* sound. Times are changing, after all, and people want music that sounds new and "wild," not like the last record they made with Ma. Sturdyvant thinks that record was terrible, but Irvin reminds him it made a lot of money. Still, Sturdyvant is upset because it didn't sell well in New York City, since there's so much exciting new music coming out of Harlem. But Ma still makes the record label lots of money, so Irvin thinks Sturdyvant should relax. Grumbling a reminder that Irvin has to keep Ma in check, Sturdyvant drops the matter.

It becomes clear in this exchange that Sturdyvant is concerned about money above all else. Accordingly, he wants to record whatever kind of music he thinks will become popular. Because the music industry is in a state of change, he's eager to capture new styles that will captivate the right audiences. His interest in cornering the market in Harlem hints at the way race intersects with his business interests—after all, Harlem was a predominantly Black neighborhood of New York City during the 1920s (when the play takes place). Sturdyvant doesn't want to record fresh musical styles for artistic reasons, then, but because he thinks these styles will help his record label sell albums in Black neighborhoods.

Cutler, Slow Drag, and Toledo arrive at the studio. Irvin nervously asks these band members where Ma is, but Cutler just says she should be coming soon. Irvin then gives them a list of songs and shows them to the band room, where they can rehearse while they wait for the trumpet player, Levee, to arrive. Once Irvin leaves, Toledo, who's the only one who can read, takes the list of songs and reads them aloud. Cutler is worried because there are some songs on the list that Ma didn't approve, but Slow Drag tells him not to worry, reminding him that Ma will surely get whatever she wants.

Although Sturdyvant thinks he has power over the Black musicians he records, Slow Drag's suggestion that Ma will get whatever she wants implies that she's the one who holds the power. If this is the case, then Ma has managed to subvert the racist power imbalance that usually existed between white and Black people in the 1920s. This begins to suggest that artistic talent and creative control can empower otherwise disenfranchised people.

Levee is late because he's out buying new **shoes** with money he won from Cutler in a game of craps; he thinks these shoes will impress a young woman he met through Ma. He tried to flirt with her at a club the night before, but the young woman had no interest because she could tell he wasn't rich and successful.

Levee's attempt to impress this young woman by purchasing flashy shoes suggests that he believes wealth and success will greatly improve his life. And there's actually some truth to his belief, considering that the young woman he flirted with was uninterested in him simply because she knew he didn't have much money. There is, then, an incentive for Levee to improve his status and public image, as his new shoes symbolize his eagerness to prove himself as a powerful and important man.


Levee finally arrives. A confident man who's younger than his bandmates, he carries a box containing his new **shoes**, and though he boasts about how nice they are, the others make fun of him for spending his money so lavishly. Still, he puts on his shoes and shouts that now he's *really* ready to make music—a statement that, at the very least, pleases Slow Drag, who wants to wrap up the recording session as quickly as possible. Last time, he says, they stayed all day and most of the night just to get the songs right.

The fact that the other musicians make fun of Levee for buying such expensive shoes hints at a crucial divide between him and his bandmates. As a young man, Levee has all kinds of ideas about how to get ahead in the world, whereas his bandmates are more traditional. They're a bit older, so they're a little more sensible and levelheaded—a difference in disposition that foreshadows friction between them.


Looking around, Levee remarks that the studio executives changed the layout of the band room. This sends Toledo on a philosophical tangent about how things are *always* changing—even the air around them. This statement annoys Levee, and he tells Toledo that he reads too many books. But then Slow Drag interrupts and urges his bandmates to rehearse. Levee, however, doesn't want to practice, since it's unnecessary; these songs, after all, are simple and outdated. For Slow Drag, though, all that matters is that they record the songs quickly and earn their money.

The conversation about change here lays the groundwork for the play's exploration of progress and how it impacts various historical traditions. Although Toledo's philosophical thoughts are a bit vague in this conversation, his comments highlight the idea that things are always developing and evolving—an idea that relates to Sturdyvant's previous thoughts about the shift taking place in the music industry, as people want music that's exciting and new.

Taking issue with Slow Drag's focus on money, Levee boasts that what *he* cares about is making art. He criticizes Cutler for including Slow Drag in the band, suggesting that Slow Drag sounds like an uncultured musician from Alabama who doesn't know anything about real art. But Cutler defends Slow Drag—Levee just needs to be quiet and play the songs as they're written. He's nothing but a "dime a dozen" trumpet player, not some kind of "virtuoso."

This exchange indicates that Levee sees himself as a true artist. For him, making music is an end in and of itself, which is why he disagrees with Slow Drag's devotion to money. He even goes out of his way to put Slow Drag down by speaking condescendingly about his Southern roots, insinuating that Slow Drag should be embarrassed about his humble origins. By insulting Slow Drag, Levee reveals a certain amount of disdain for ways of life that don't align with his own desire to become a successful, respected musician. But Cutler tries to put Levee in his place by suggesting that the young man is nothing special—his job, Cutler indicates, is just to play what he's told, regardless of what he thinks about art.



Levee sees himself as much more than an expendable trumpet player. He has real talent, he tells Cutler. He even gave Sturdyvant some of his songs, and Sturdyvant agreed to record them once Levee rounds up a band of his own. All he has to do is finish writing a couple songs, and then he's going to hand those over to Sturdyvant, too. This doesn't impress Cutler, who reminds him that—for now—he's in Ma Rainey's band, not his own. And that means doing what he's told, playing the way Ma wants him to.

Levee has his own agenda: whereas his bandmates are seemingly content to play in Ma's band and then collect their pay, he wants to lead his own band. What's more, Sturdyvant has encouraged him to pursue his ambition, which makes Levee feel like he's superior to the other musicians. And yet, Levee's ambition doesn't change the fact that he's in Ma's band, not his own. Although he might eventually have a group of his own, he still has to do what Ma wants, underscoring the importance of creative control and the power that comes with it.

Cutler's point doesn't faze Levee, who says he knows what kind of band he's in—all he needs to do is look at someone like Toledo to see that he's in a boring, old-fashioned band. Firing back, Toledo bets Levee that he can't even spell "music." They each put down a dollar, and then Levee confidently says: "M-U-S-I-K." Because nobody in the band but Toledo can read, though, they're unsure who won the bet. Toledo thus lets Levee keep his dollar, putting up with the young man's bragging.

Once again, Levee reveals a certain elitism by speaking condescendingly about his bandmates. His disparaging comment about Toledo and the band highlights his desire to make music that's exciting and new. The other musicians, meanwhile, are content to simply play whatever they're told. Levee finds them boring and unimaginative, since he sees himself as a flashy, modern musician with too much talent and creativity to squander on tired musical traditions.

The band gets down to rehearsing, but Levee doesn't want to. He'd rather finish the song he's working on for Sturdyvant. Cutler tells him this is unacceptable—he's in the band, so he has to rehearse just like everyone else. After this conversation, Slow Drag tries to get Cutler to give him some marijuana, reminding him of all the things they've been through together. Toledo notes that this resembles an African tradition of calling upon various gods. If the gods are "sympathetic" to the reasons they're being called, they will help the person. Deciding that he's "sympathetic" to Slow Drag's request, Cutler gives him a joint.

Even though Levee thinks he's too good to waste his time playing older, more traditional styles of music, the fact remains that he's in Ma's band. He might eventually have a group of his own, but for now he's no more important than any of the other musicians—an idea he clearly has trouble accepting. On another note, Toledo's philosophical rumination about African religious traditions shows that he's interested in exploring Black cultural roots. Although his thoughts in this moment might seem a little out of context, they establish that Toledo—unlike Levee—values the past and is interested in how certain traditions have made their way into the present.

Finally, the musicians start rehearsing. But they only get several bars into the song "**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**" before stopping—Levee is playing something entirely different. He impatiently tells the rest of the band that they have to play the song his way, which is more exciting and modern. Irvin even told him that the studio wants his version. But Cutler doesn't care. The band will play what *he* tells them to play, not what Levee says. Levee, for his part, urges them to look at the list of songs Irvin gave them, insisting that it'll specify the version they're supposed to do. But Cutler doesn't look at the list, instead telling Levee to just play whatever he says.

There's a clear power struggle at play in the band, as Levee tries to sidestep Cutler's authority and push the band toward a more modern sound. The entire dispute is complicated by the fact that Levee appeals to the white executives that run the studio, trying to align himself with their power as a way of undermining Cutler. His attempt to seize control is a surefire way to create tension, but Levee doesn't want to overshadow Cutler for purely selfish reasons. Rather, he's so preoccupied with creating exciting new music that he ends up unsettling the balance of power in the band.

Unable to agree how to play "**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**," the band rehearses a different song. But Irvin interrupts to ask about Ma, clearly nervous because of the pressure Sturdyvant is putting on him. Before he goes upstairs, Cutler asks which version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" they should play, and Irvin confirms that Sturdyvant wants Levee's arrangement. Levee gloats about this when Irvin leaves, but Cutler tries to make him understand that it doesn't *matter* what Irvin says—Ma will have the final say.

Sturdyvant has power over Irvin, who in turn has power over the band—but not that *much power, as evidenced by Cutler's assertion that Ma will do whatever she wants, regardless of what Irvin (on behalf of Sturdyvant) says. For this reason, Levee's attempt to shape the band's creative direction by talking to Irvin is not all that effective, even if he gets what he wants in the short term. Even though Ma hasn't even appeared on stage yet, it's clear that she holds the majority of the power in the play. And considering that she's a Black woman in the racist environment of the United States in the 1920s, her authority and ability to override white executives like Sturdyvant and Irvin is quite remarkable.*

Levee doesn't understand why Ma will have the last word. After all, Sturdyvant is the one putting out the record, so surely *his* opinion matters most. Slow Drag sides with Cutler, believing that Sturdyvant will have to make do with whatever Ma gives him. Unsure of what Ma wants, though, Cutler says that—for now—they should rehearse Levee's version.

It's in Levee's best interest to view Sturdyvant as the person in charge, since Sturdyvant likes his music and wants to uplift it. As a result, though, he has to side with a powerful white executive instead of supporting a fellow Black musician—a situation that highlights how questions of power and creative control unfortunately turn the play's Black characters against one another.

Toledo dislikes the way Levee deferred to Irvin and Sturdyvant. He argues that the Black man will never "find out who he is and what he's about" if he always looks to white people for approval. He insinuates that Black people should live for themselves instead of acting however white people expect them to act. Levee, however, insists that he was just telling Cutler which version they're supposed to play. Again, Cutler gets annoyed, since Levee doesn't seem to understand who's in charge. But Levee is perfectly clear—in his own mind, at least—about who's boss: Irvin and Sturdyvant.

For Toledo, deferring to white people is destructive to Black culture at large. When he talks about how the Black man needs to "find out who he is and what he's about," he implies that Black people have to establish a strong cultural identity in the United States, which he implies is a racist and unforgiving place dominated by white people. The underlying idea here is that Black people ought to do what they think is right, not what white culture dictates. Levee, however, stands to gain success and fame from white people like Sturdyvant and Irvin, so he has no problem deferring to them, ultimately prioritizing his own interests over Black culture as a whole.

Before they rehearse Levee's version of "**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**," Slow Drag's bass string breaks. Levee makes fun of him, saying that he would take care of his instrument if he were a true musician. On his way across the room to get a new string, Slow Drag steps on Levee's **shoe**. Furious, Levee instantly starts buffing his shoe with a rag while the others make fun of him for spending his money on something so lavish. A sensible man, Slow Drag argues, would wear shoes like Toledo's. This appalls Levee, since he thinks Toledo's shoes are big and clumsy, like a farmer's—he would never wear them. But Toledo doesn't care. He likes his shoes, and that's all that matters to him.

Again, Levee reveals his condescending view of anyone he thinks is out of touch with the times. The juxtaposition between his and Toledo's shoes symbolizes the fact that he sees himself as superior to his bandmates. Whereas Levee's shoes are flashy, new, and expensive, Toledo's are cheap but practical, and this difference emphasizes the different ways each character has of moving through the world. For Levee, the only thing that matters is looking successful and modern—he's concerned, in other words, about his status, clearly thinking that having nice shoes will show people that he's important and edgy. Toledo, on the other hand, is comfortable with who he is, seeing no need to place so much importance on his footwear.

According to Levee, nice **shoes** help people dance well. But Toledo thinks Black people are too focused on always wanting to have a "good time"—a mentality he finds dangerous, saying that people "get killed having a good time." There has to be more to life than just having fun, he believes. None of the other band members like this idea. But Toledo suggests that this fixation on "good times" keeps people from thinking about how to improve life for Black Americans.

On its most basic level, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom *is a play about what it's like to live as a Black person in the United States. Toledo is particularly attuned to the various societal factors that impact the Black Americans' experiences, which is why he urges his bandmates to stop prioritizing having a "good time" over all else. If having fun is all people think about, Toledo believes, it will be impossible to address the societal challenges—and, more specifically, the racism—that the Black community faces.*

Slow Drag isn't quite as pessimistic as Toledo. He believes that Black people will be all right because they've already survived so much hardship. Having a good time, he says, is just a way to make life feel rewarding. White people, however, don't know how to have fun. Levee jumps on this idea, suggesting that Toledo is like a white person because reading so many books has made him forget how to have fun.

In contrast to Toledo's sobering ideas about how Black people should focus on improving their position in society, Slow Drag acknowledges that sometimes it's necessary *to have a "good time." He implies that facing discrimination is exhausting, so having fun is a good way to alleviate the stressful burden of racism—a burden that might otherwise become heavier and heavier, making it impossible to go on.*

For all Toledo's talk about improving life for Black people, Levee accuses him of not actually *doing* anything to achieve this. He talks about a lot of supposedly important ideas, but he lives essentially the same lifestyle as everyone else in the band. However, Toledo argues that he's just one person—in order to address the problems Black people face, everyone needs to come together. Toledo can't fix everything on his own, which is why everyone has to chip in.

Toledo recognizes the unfortunately vast scale of racism in the United States, which makes it impossible for any single person to meaningfully combat bigotry. But he doesn't just view racism as an impossible, unsolvable problem—instead, he believes it's important to unite with other Black people. Only by coming together and forming a strong community, he implies, will Black Americans manage to stand up against the racism they face on a daily basis.

The band continues to bicker, Levee managing to annoy all of them with his overly confident, stubborn viewpoints. Eventually, Toledo calls him the devil, and Cutler wholeheartedly agrees. Slow Drag chimes in and says that he once knew someone who sold his soul to the devil, then launches into a story about a man named Eliza Cottor from Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. Eliza used to carry around a huge bag of papers—documents bearing the bloody fingerprints of anyone who sold their soul to the devil. As Slow Drag tells this tale, Levee periodically interrupts to ask where he might find this Eliza Cottor. He, after all, wouldn't mind selling his soul—a blasphemous sentiment that upsets Cutler.

Slow Drag's story about Eliza Cottor follows the template of many tales that emerge from Christian folklore—tales in which people sell their souls to the devil in exchange for worldly pleasures. Although the story of Eliza Cottor might seem a bit random or out of place here, it actually engages with the play's exploration of how various historical traditions have made their way into the present and shaped the characters' lives. In this moment, for instance, Slow Drag reveals that he has been steeped in the Christian tradition, as he tells a story that reinforces Christian values that people like Levee clearly don't care about (as evidenced by Levee's blasphemy).

Eliza Cottor used to live on a farm, supporting himself by putting shoes on horses and mules. But after selling his soul to the devil, he suddenly dressed in the fanciest clothes around and lived a rich, lavish life. He purchased a huge house and spent all his time with beautiful women. When a man who worked for him fell in love with one of the women Eliza used to see, Eliza killed him. But the sheriff who came to arrest him simply let him go, and when his day came in court, the judge let him off the hook. Whenever anyone asked why Eliza had changed so much from his farming days, he didn't hide the truth, telling them that he sold his soul to the devil.

The story of Eliza Cottor casts suspicion on the idea of success—or, more specifically, Black people's success. In order to become rich and lead a wealthy lifestyle, Eliza had to sell his soul to the devil. The implication of Slow Drag's story, then, is that finding success in the United States as a Black person requires some kind of sinister compromise or sacrifice.

Cutler wants to know what became of Eliza Cottor, assuming that a man who sold his soul to the devil must have suffered in the end. Toledo, for his part, isn't so sure, since he knows the devil is powerful. Slow Drag confirms Toledo's intuition, clarifying that Eliza is still out there. The last Slow Drag heard, the man had migrated north with his big bag of bloody fingerprints and a pocketful of cash, offering anyone $100 to sell their soul to the devil.

In a way, Slow Drag's story about Eliza Cottor is really a story about what it takes for Black people to make it in the United States. The tale cynically vilifies Black success by implying that it only comes as a result of sinister behavior—and yet, nothing bad befalls Eliza Cottor, perhaps suggesting that compromising with the devil (or, in the context of the play, greedy white studio executives) is worthwhile.

Levee wishes he knew where to find Eliza Cottor. Not only would he sell his soul, he'd also help Eliza get others to do the same. Cutler doesn't like this talk, promising Levee that God will punish him for such blasphemy. But Levee pays this no mind, daring God to do something to him.

Levee is hungry for wealth and success, so he has no problem with the idea of selling his soul to the devil. Cutler, on the other hand, has a more traditional and Christian way of looking at the world, so he finds Levee's response jarring and foolish.

Irvin calls down to tell the band that sandwiches have arrived upstairs in the studio. He then talks to Sturdyvant, who's upset that Ma hasn't come yet and reminds Irvin that he's supposed to be responsible for her. When Toledo appears to grab the sandwiches, Irvin asks about Ma. But then a buzzer rings and Ma enters with a policeman, a young woman named Dussie Mae, and Ma's nephew Sylvester. Ma is infuriated, shouting at Irvin to tell the policeman who she is.

Ma's late arrival underscores that she doesn't view Sturdyvant or Irvin as authority figures. She's the one who holds the power, so she has no problem showing up late to her own recording session. At the same time, though, the policeman's presence hints that it's possible she was late for entirely different reasons—reasons perhaps having to do with racial profiling.

After great confusion and commotion, it emerges that Sylvester was driving Ma's car and got into an accident. The policeman claims Sylvester hit the other vehicle, but Sylvester insists that he, Ma, and Dussie Mae were the ones who got hit, not the other way around. As they talked to the police officer after the accident, Ma tried to hop into a taxi with Sylvester and Dussie Mae, but the cabdriver refused to serve Black people, so he didn't go anywhere. The policeman claims that Ma assaulted the driver, but Ma, Sylvester, and Dussie Mae insist that he simply fell down. The policeman also doubts that the car they were in even belonged to Ma in the first place.

The policeman automatically assumes that Ma is to blame for the entire car accident. To that end, his belief that Ma and the others were riding in a stolen car confirms his bias against them: he thinks they're guilty simply because they're Black. Even though Ma has quite a bit of power as a successful musician, then, it's clear that she's still subject to racism and discrimination.

Irvin takes the policeman aside. The officer was just bringing Ma to the station but decided to stop here as a "favor" to Irvin, wondering if Ma is really as "important" as she claims. Irvin slips some cash into the officer's hand and asks if they can put the whole ordeal behind them, promising to come by the station himself after the recording session. With a wink, the officer takes the money and says there's no need for Irvin to visit the station.

Ma's success as a musician helps her escape this racist encounter, since she has the power to order Irvin—a white man—to handle the situation for her. And yet, the mere fact that she needs Irvin to advocate for her in the first place emphasizes the injustice of the entire situation: she's an important, powerful figure, but she has to depend on a white man to help her protect herself from discrimination.

After the policeman leaves, Irvin greets Ma and tells her to take a seat while the band finishes rehearsing, but she rejects this, instead ordering Irvin to make some calls about her damaged car, instructing him to make sure it's in perfect working order by the time the recording session is over. He quickly agrees, assuring her that he'll take care of everything and that she should relax.

In the interaction with the policeman, Irvin held more power than Ma because he's a white man. Now, though, she asserts herself as the dominant one in their relationship, bluntly ordering him to do things for her. By making these demands, she upends the power dynamic between Black and white people that was common in the 1920s, proving that her success and artistic talent have given her authority she might not otherwise have.

Back in the band room, the musicians fight over the sandwiches, as Levee tries to take more than his fair share. Toledo notes that there will never be any "leftovers" when Levee is around, then delivers a monologue in which he argues that Black people are like "leftover[s] from history." He presents an extended metaphor about the earth producing foods like carrots, peas, and potatoes, all of which eventually come together in a stew. After this stew is made, he says, history is over. And yet, there's more stew than a person can eat—there are carrots and potatoes still floating in the broth. Toledo thinks Black people are these leftovers, suggesting that nobody knows what to do with them; white people will eat them, but once they're full, they'll cast Black people aside.

Toledo's point about "leftovers" encourages his bandmates to think about their cultural history. Like vegetables plucked from the ground, their ancestors were taken out of Africa and brought to the United States, where they were put into a metaphorical "stew" with the rest of the country. Toledo's "stew" plays on the idea of the American "melting pot," a metaphor often used to talk about the assimilation of multiple cultures into American society. The "melting pot" is supposed to be a place where different ways of life come together and form something new. However, what usually happens in the United States is that immigrants (or, in the case of Toledo's metaphor, enslaved people) are simply forced to adapt to white culture. Toledo builds on the "melting pot" metaphor by suggesting that Black people are like the "leftover" vegetables floating in the broth, implying that American society doesn't know what to do with them. And yet, these vegetables have still flavored the broth, which represents the way white society has leeched off of Black culture. This is exactly what white studio executives like Sturdyvant aim to do by exploiting Black musical traditions like the blues.

None of the band members grasp the significance of Toledo's metaphor. When Cutler tries to get them to rehearse again, Levee claims that, because he's nothing but a "leftover," he's going to sit this one out. Plus, he already knows the songs. Finally, though, Cutler convinces him, and they start playing Levee's version of "**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**."

Instead of genuinely engaging with Toledo's thoughts about Black Americans' cultural history and identity, Levee makes fun of Toledo. He also tries to avoid rehearsing with the band, demonstrating his individualistic attitude and his overall unwillingness to productively collaborate.

Upstairs in the studio, Ma takes off her **shoes** and sings about the discomfort of "sharp-toed shoes." Meanwhile, Dussie Mae walks around and inspects the contents of the dimly lit studio. Ma admires Dussie as she wanders, eventually promising to buy her pretty new dresses when they go down to Memphis, since Dussie Mae has to look beautiful if she's going to travel with the band. She'll also buy her new shoes, and she'll make sure they're good ones—Ma, after all, knows what it's like to go around in bad shoes. With this in mind, she puts on some slippers.

Unlike Levee, Ma can actually afford fancy shoes. In fact, she can even afford to buy other *people shoes. But instead of focusing on shoes that look fancy or flashy, she concerns herself with an entirely different matter: whether or not the shoes are comfortable. She thus aligns herself with someone like Toledo, who wears comfortable, practical shoes that Levee finds stylistically appalling. Once again, then, the play uses shoes to symbolize the divide between Levee's lofty, romanticized ideas and the other characters' more down-to-earth, traditional concerns.*

Irvin returns and assures Ma that everything is sorted out with her car, though she warns him that it better look as good as new. She also chews him out because she can hear the band rehearsing Levee's version of "**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**." This isn't the way she wants to record the song, and she won't be convinced otherwise—no matter what Irvin says about how Levee's version is lively and exciting. Instead, Ma is going to have Sylvester do a spoken-word intro, despite the fact that Sylvester has a heavy stutter. Irvin tries to persuade her that times are changing and that listeners want something different, but Ma doesn't care. If Levee wants to play in his own style, he can strike out on his own. Regardless, the band will play what Ma wants them to play.

Once more, Ma asserts herself as the definitive leader of the band. She can not only override what Levee wants, but also what Irvin and Sturdyvant want. Her power in this regard is rather remarkable, considering that Black women have been historically overshadowed in the United States, especially in the 1920s—and in the exploitative music industry, to boot. Her ability to get what she wants confirms that success and artistic talent can help people combat discrimination, ultimately validating Levee's desire to become successful himself.

Irvin doesn't let the matter go. He and Sturdyvant decided that it would be best to go with Levee's version, since that's what will sell. But Ma reiterates how little she cares what Sturdyvant or Irvin think—what they say doesn't matter to her at all. If Sturdyvant doesn't like what Ma gives him, then she'll pack up her things and go on tour instead of cutting the record. Having said this, she takes Sylvester downstairs to meet the band. As she goes, Irvin tells her everything will be ready in 15 minutes, but she rejects this; the session will start when *she* says.

Ma's power over Sturdyvant and Irvin is on full display here. Although she's ultimately at the mercy of exploitative white executives, she knows they can only make money off her by recording her music. Withholding that music, then, is a way of holding onto power for as long as possible. Once Sturdyvant gets what he wants from Ma (her songs), he'll have no reason to treat her well. In the meantime, though, Ma can leverage her artistic talent as a way of getting these powerful white men to do whatever she says.

Downstairs, Ma explains that the band won't be playing Levee's version of "**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**," and she doesn't care about Levee's objections. She simply tells Cutler to teach Sylvester his part, then goes back upstairs, leaving Levee to complain that playing the song the traditional way is just some "old circus bullshit." Nobody in the North will like this "tent-show nonsense." Again, Cutler doesn't care what Levee says. The band will play whatever Ma wants, and Levee's ideas about art and creativity don't matter—he's just here to accompany Ma.

Levee's remarks about "circus" or "tent-show" music shed light on his condescending attitude toward the historical and cultural traditions surrounding the blues. In real life, Ma Rainey made a name for herself by participating in a traveling "tent-show," in which she sang blues-style songs alongside musicians like Bessie Smith. But Levee doesn't care about the context surrounding the blues, instead wanting to reach new musical horizons. Consequently, he insults Ma's version of the song by insinuating that its stylistic origins are boring and tired.

Levee threatens to quit the band, but nobody cares. Toledo even calls his bluff, pointing out that Levee won't quit because he needs money to buy polish for his fancy new **shoes**. The band turns its attention back to rehearsing, as Cutler tries to teach Sylvester his part, which goes: "All right, boys, you done seen the rest…Now I'm gonna show you the best. Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom." When Sylvester tries it, though, he stutters on almost every word. This pleases Levee, but the rest of the band doesn't pay attention to him, instead focusing on rehearsing even through Sylvester's difficulties.

Levee is so concerned with his own success that he'd almost rather quit than simply set aside his grand ideas about art for the good of the band. Although it's not his place to determine the artistic direction of Ma's band, he's incensed by his lack of power, thus illustrating how much he cares about gaining creative control—so much, it seems, that he's willing to profoundly disrupt the band's collaborative process.

Sturdyvant comes downstairs and says he's glad to see that the "boys" are rehearsing. "Yessir!" says Levee, jumping to attention. "We rehearsing, We [*sic*] know them songs real good." Sturdyvant also shows interest in Levee's songs, as Levee gives him the parts he's been working on. Sturdyvant is eager to take a look, promising to get to them as soon as possible. When he leaves, the band makes fun of Levee for sucking up to Sturdyvant and treating him like a powerful enslaver. But Toledo defends Levee, feeling that the young musician is just like everyone else in the band: "spooked" by white men.

Considering that Levee seems to want power (through creative control) so badly, it's a little jarring to see him behave so submissively to Sturdyvant. Unlike Ma, who has no problem asserting her authority while interacting with white men, Levee defers to Sturdyvant. He even calls him "sir," despite the fact that Sturdyvant referred to the musicians as "boys"—a condescending, racially charged term. That Levee responds with so much reverence illustrates just how eager he is to charm and appease Sturdyvant.

Levee doesn't like the suggestion that he's "spooked" by white men. He claims to be ready to lash out at white people if necessary, but the band doubts this—after all, Cutler points out, Sturdyvant called him a "boy," and Levee did nothing but try to please him. According to Levee, though, how he treats white people is none of Cutler's business. He can call white men "sir" if he wants. Still, the band keeps making fun of him for being scared of white people.

The conversation that Levee and Cutler have about interacting with white people illustrates that people respond to racism and bigotry in different ways. There's no set way to process discrimination or prejudice—everyone has their own way of reacting to injustice. And for Levee, this means appeasing people like Sturdyvant, even if this means tolerating his racist remarks.

Hitting his chest and yelling, Levee says nobody in the band knows what he's dealt with in his life. He's been dealing with white people since he was eight years old, when a mob of white men tore into his home and raped his mother. Levee's father was out of town, but he'd told Levee to be the man of the house. As he watched the white men assault his mother, he grabbed a hunting knife and tried to slit one of their throats. He managed to slice through one of their shoulders, but then one of them wrestled the knife out of his hands and slashed him across the chest. Levee lifts his shirt to reveal a long, nasty scar. There was so much blood, he explains, that the white men got scared and left.

Levee's traumatic story further emphasizes that people process the horrors of racism in different ways. More specifically, the way people respond largely depends on their life experiences, which shape how they conceive of their own position in the dangerously racist environment of American society. Given that Levee has undergone such a scarring experience (both emotionally and literally), it's no surprise that he resents his bandmates for making fun of his way of dealing with white people.

When Levee's father returned from his trip, he learned the names of the white men who raped his wife. He didn't do anything at first, instead moving the family out of the county. He even went around and bid farewell to one of the men who had raped Levee's mother, smiling at him as if nothing had happened. But after the family moved, he came back, hid in the woods, and planned to kill the eight or nine men. He managed to kill four before getting captured. The remaining white men hanged him and set him on fire. His father, Levee says, wasn't "spooked" by white men—and neither is he.

Levee's devastating story explains why he has no problem treating Sturdyvant with respect. In the same way that his father smiled at his wife's abuser before hunting him down, Levee doesn't see his own behavior toward Sturdyvant as genuinely submissive—instead, he believes that it's possible to appease white people while still looking out for his own interests.

Levee learned from his father that sometimes it's best to smile and say "yessir," all the while planning to rise above. And this, he says, is why the band should leave him alone when it comes to handling white people. Nobody says anything for a moment, all of them taking in Levee's story. And then, breaking the silence, Slow Drag plays his bass. "If I had my way," he sings, "I would tear this old building down."

For Levee, deferring to white people isn't a sign of weakness—it's a way to secretly build up power. His bandmates' awed silence seems to suggest that they respect him a little more after he tells this story. Slow Drag, for his part, sings an old blues song called "If I had My Way I'd Tear the Building Down," which recounts the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. In this story, Samson's lover, Delilah, betrays him on behalf of his enemies by cutting off his long hair—which gives him strength—while he's sleeping. She then gives him to his enemies as a prisoner, but then he prays to God and miraculously regains his strength, at which point he tears down one of the building's columns, killing both his enemies and himself. The fact that Slow Drag sings this song perhaps suggests that, although appeasing white people might help Levee secretly plan to undermine them, it might also come at a grave cost to himself—like how Samson dies along with his enemies. More simply, though, it could just be that Slow Drag chooses this song because it expresses the desire to destroy powerful institutions of oppression. This would suggest that instead of pleasing white people, it might be better to completely dismantle everything that gives them so much power in the first place.

ACT 2

The band is upstairs in the studio with Ma. As everyone gets ready to record, Ma walks around barefoot and sings to herself. Meanwhile, Cutler pulls Irvin aside and tells him Sylvester can't get through the part without stuttering. Distressed, Irvin decides that, in this case, the band should play Levee's version of the **song**. He then retreats to the control room.

Given that Cutler has been so adamant about deferring to whatever Ma says, it's surprising that he comes to Irvin with this complaint about Sylvester. This decision will surely cause tension, as it undermines Ma's creative control and power over the band.

Catching Levee making eyes at Dussie Mae, Ma tells Cutler to get him in line. Irvin's voice then sounds over speaker system, as he tells Ma they're going to start the session with "Moonshine Blues." But Ma rejects this, saying the band will instead play "**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**," and that Sylvester needs a microphone. After an awkward pause, Irvin breaks the news that they're going to do Levee's version, since the band claims Sylvester can't do his part correctly. This enrages Ma, who says that the band doesn't have say over such matters—after all, it's *her* band.

Again, Ma asserts herself as the undeniable leader of not just the band, but also the recording session. She doesn't care what powerful white executives like Sturdyvant or Irvin say—it's her music, so she's the one who gets to decide how it's played. By reminding everyone that this is her band, she seizes creative control and, in turn, power.

Even though Sylvester stutters, Ma wants him to do the intro. It doesn't matter how long it takes—he'll get it eventually. Irvin tries to say there isn't time to wait for him to get it right, but Ma disregards this. If Sturdyvant and Irvin want to make a record, they'll simply have to make the time to do it the way Ma wants. She can easily go back on tour, she reminds them. Relenting, Irvin sets up a microphone for Sylvester.

Ma is able to maintain her powerful position by threatening to withhold her music. She knows that her voice and her songs are her best asset, and she recognizes that they can be leveraged in her favor. Instead of simply acquiescing to the white studio executives (like Levee might do), she fights for what she wants, proving that—at least in certain contexts—artistic talent and creative control can give otherwise disenfranchised people a sense of authority or power.

The recording session begins, but the band grinds to a halt when Sylvester stutters on the intro. Ma tells him not to worry and that he should take his time. Meanwhile, Sturdyvant comes on over the speaker system and tells Ma not to wait so long before coming in, but she snaps back that he can't tell her how to sing her own song. She then complains that there's no Coca Cola—she always has Coke when she sings, and the studio should know this. Over Sturdyvant and Irvin's objections, she stops the entire session, saying she won't sing until she has her soda. She sends Slow Drag and Sylvester to the store.

The fact that Ma stops the entire recording session just because she doesn't have a Coca Cola underlines just how much power she holds. Her behavior here almost seems like an intentional display of her authority, as if she wants to remind everyone that she's the one in charge. And despite the fact that Sturdyvant and Irvin are both white men who certainly have more privileges in 1920s American society than a Black woman, they can't override Ma's authority in this context because she has something they want: the music.

While the band waits for Slow Drag and Sylvester to come back with the Coke, Ma pulls Cutler aside and chastises him for telling Irvin that Sylvester can't do the part. She's the one who makes those decisions, she reminds him. She also tells him to find somebody to replace Levee when the band gets to Memphis. Cutler tries to defend Levee by noting that he's a good musician who can write music, but Ma doesn't want to hear this—she doesn't *care* if he's good. According to her, he's nothing but trouble. With this in mind, she waves Dussie Mae over and tells her to go sit somewhere out of sight, where she isn't "flaunting" herself in front of Levee.

It's perhaps surprising that Cutler defends Levee, since they've spent most of the play bickering and vying for creative control of the band. Now, though, Cutler seems to have a soft spot for Levee, which could suggest that he appreciates the young man's lively spirit, even if he also finds this spirit exhausting and misguided. For Ma, though, Levee is nothing but a headache, since he challenges her authority and has trouble collaborating with everyone else.

Cutler expresses his concern about one of the other songs on the list, "Moonshine Blues." The singer Bessie Smith recently recorded this song, so maybe it's not a good idea for Ma to do it, too. Ma pays this no mind. She has been singing this song for a long time, and Bessie is just imitating her anyway. She then tells Cutler that she doesn't care what anyone else says. White people are always trying to tell her what to do or how to sing, but she won't take it. People like Irvin and Sturdyvant want to take her voice and profit off it, but they can't do that until they actually have a recording of her. Until then, she holds all the power. After they make the record, though, they'll have gotten what they wanted, and they won't care about her anymore.

Ma explicitly reveals her understanding of just how exploitative the music industry can be. Her understanding of this exploitation enables her to keep some power in an otherwise unfair, manipulative industry. The only problem is that people like Sturdyvant will still profit off Ma in the end, since he'll undoubtedly find a way to keep all the royalties of her songs to himself. This was a very common practice at the time, as studio executives convinced Black artists to sign over the rights to their songs for nominal one-time recording fees, thus ensuring that the executives were the ones to profit off the actual record sales. Ma's assertion that Sturdyvant will eventually get what he wants and then lose interest in her confirms that this kind of exploitation is exactly how he treats Black performers, though this doesn't mean Ma can't hold onto her power for as long as possible.

Downstairs, Levee sings one of his own songs while Toledo reads a newspaper, but then Dussie Mae enters, and he immediately starts flirting with her. This makes Toledo uncomfortable—since he wants nothing to do with Levee stealing Ma's girlfriend—so he leaves. But Levee isn't having much success with Dussie anyway—until, that is, he tells her that he's going to have his own band soon. This impresses her, especially since Sturdyvant is going to record Levee's music. Still, she tells him that she's only interested in men who make good on their promises of wealth and success. Before long, though, they start kissing.

It's generally believed that Ma Rainey was openly bisexual, which is why the play includes this bit about Dussie Mae. Moreover, though, Levee's flirtation (and eventual romantic encounter) with Dussie Mae is yet another way in which he undermines Ma's power. In the same way that he tries to assert himself over her by insisting that the band play his arrangement of her song, he attempts to woo her girlfriend, demonstrating that he has no respect for Ma or her authority.

Meanwhile, Ma waits in the studio and talks to Cutler about the blues, which she thinks white people don't understand. When they listen to it, she says, they have no idea "how it got there." They don't get that the blues is a way for life itself to speak. For Ma, singing the blues is a way of processing and comprehending her own life. Without the blues, the world would be an "empty" place. Toledo chimes in at this point, saying that Ma helps fill this empty space with something vital, something people *need*. She agrees with this, but she knows she didn't invent the blues, even if people call her Mother of the Blues.

Ma's thoughts about the blues underscore its importance as a rich musical tradition. It's not just a form of entertainment, but a vital means of expression. White people, Ma points out, often overlook the expressive nature of the blues, failing to consider where it comes from. Historically speaking, blues is said to have come about on plantations, as enslaved (or formerly enslaved) people sang songs inspired by old spirituals and work tunes. The history of the blues is therefore entangled with Black American suffering, but people like Sturdyvant don't think (or care) about this fact—instead, they just want to sell the blues as an entertaining genre.

Slow Drag and Sylvester return with the Cokes, at which point Slow Drag goes downstairs to find Levee and Dussie Mae locked in a passionate embrace. Slow Drag doesn't say anything, instead just going to get a small sip of liquor to warm up from the cold. When he leaves, Levee tries to pull Dussie Mae toward him again, but she says he's going to get her in trouble and rushes upstairs.

Again, Levee's actions undermine Ma's authority. Slow Drag, for his part, recognizes that Levee has overstepped by flirting with Ma's girlfriend, so he's eager to get out of the band room, clearly not wanting to associate himself with Levee's disrespect of Ma's power as the bandleader.

Back in the studio, everyone is ready to record again. The band does two takes of "**Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**," but Sylvester keeps stumbling through his part. Finally, on the third take, he nails it, and the band is able to play through the entire number. Everyone celebrates when the song is over, but Sturdyvant breaks the news that something went wrong—Sylvester's microphone wasn't working because it got unplugged. As Irvin follows the cord, he says that Levee must have tripped over it and disconnected it. But then Irvin says the cord itself is faulty and that they need a new one, prompting Ma to storm off because everything is so unprofessional.

It's unclear whether or not Levee purposefully sabotaged Sylvester by secretly ruining the cord to his microphone. In some ways, behaving in this manner would align with his individualistic outlook—and yet, he hasn't necessarily shown himself to be outright malicious or spiteful. The ambiguity surrounding his intentions thus invites the audience to think hard about what he might be willing to do in order to get ahead—the play subtly suggests that Levee might actively work against his fellow Black musicians just to get his way.

Irvin rushes after Ma, pleading with her to stay as Sturdyvant yells that her career will be ruined if she leaves. Hissing at Sturdyvant to be quiet, Irvin assures Ma that her records will be hits and that he just needs 15 minutes to fix the cord. She reluctantly agrees.

Once more, Ma asserts her power. Sturdyvant, however, seems at the end of his rope, telling her that he'll ruin her reputation in the music business if she leaves. And yet, this is nothing but an empty threat, since it's clear that what he really wants is to profit off her music—if she leaves, then, he won't be able to make any money. Still, her reluctance to stay hints that she knows she doesn't have quite as much power as it seems. Although Irvin tries to reassure her by saying that her album will be a hit, Ma must know that it doesn't matter how popular they are; after all, Sturdyvant is the one who will profit from the royalties.

The band goes downstairs, where everyone chides Levee for messing up the session. They tell him he should focus on the music, not on Dussie Mae—who is, after all, "Ma's gal." Cutler tells Levee that Ma will ruin his career as a musician if she finds out there's anything going on between him and Dussie. But Levee doesn't listen, insisting he didn't do anything wrong.

Levee once again demonstrates that he has no problem with challenging Ma's authority. Even though the other musicians think it's foolish of him to become romantic with Ma's girlfriend, he doesn't seem to care; he clearly thinks he can do whatever he wants, again revealing his individualistic outlook on life.

Toledo momentarily sympathizes with Levee, since he knows what it's like to act like a "fool" about women. He has behaved this way himself—he even got married and was infatuated with his wife. But then she joined the church, and though he had no problem with this, it gradually turned her against him. Slowly but surely, she got to know respectable religious men and realized Toledo wasn't anything like them. Seeing Toledo as a "heathen," she decided to leave. But Toledo isn't bitter about this. The only thing to do, he says, is take whatever life gives. Levee, objects, however, claiming that he has complete power over his life. Death, on the other hand, is powerful and intimidating.

Although Toledo and Levee get into frequent arguments throughout the play, it's clear that Toledo has nothing against Levee. In fact, he even defends him in certain situations, like when he sympathizes with what it's like to do something foolish for love. However, Levee has trouble accepting Toledo's sympathy, instead disregarding what the kind older man says. It's almost as if he tries to define himself in opposition to his bandmates, even when they agree with him—a good indication of his individualistic attitude.

The band members ignore Levee's talk about death, instead going on to discuss Cutler's brother. Toledo used to farm with him, and he misses that life. There's something calming about the simplicity of farming, Toledo says. He even fantasizes about going back to it one day. Levee makes fun of him for this, but Toledo can't be bothered.

Obsessed with the idea of being a successful modern man, Levee looks down on anything traditional or simplistic. Toledo, on the other hand, appreciates things like farming, recognizing that success and innovation aren't always the most important things in life. The difference between these two mindsets emphasizes why Levee doesn't see eye to eye with his bandmates when it comes to their musical collaboration—whereas they're content with rehashing the traditional blues style, Levee wants to depart from old musical customs.

Toledo goes on to express his belief that Black people will always be dissatisfied, regardless of their circumstances. Levee, for his part, thinks this is reasonable, since Black people have to make do with such poor circumstances in the first place. Living as a Black man in the United States, Levee says, is like only getting to chew on a single bone while somebody else eats an entire pig. But Toledo says that Levee is lucky white people have even made it possible for him to be a musician—after all, they don't *have* to listen to his music. From this perspective, Levee has a pretty nice life, getting to play music instead of doing something like hauling wood.

Toledo's point about white people consuming Levee's music aligns with the metaphor he previously laid out, which compared Black people to "leftovers." In that metaphor, he suggested that white people will eat what they want but then cast everything else aside. Within this framework, the music Levee makes can be seen as the food—as long as white people want to consume it, he can keep on supporting himself as a musician. As soon as white people get their fill, though, they'll toss Levee to the side, and then life will be much harder for him. In other words, Levee's livelihood depends on whether or not white people are interested in his music.

Toledo and Slow Drag both agree that hauling wood is actually a pretty good job—an idea that mystifies Levee. This, he says, is the problem with his bandmates: they're all too easily satisfied with life. They should be searching for new opportunities, always keeping an eye out for someone like Eliza Cottor to come around and offer to buy their soul on behalf of the devil.

Because Levee's bandmates don't have grandiose ideas about success and innovation, they're happy leading relatively simple lives. But Levee doesn't understand how anyone could ever be content hauling wood for a living, so he'll do whatever it takes to get ahead—even if this means selling his soul to the devil, an idea that perhaps aligns with his willingness to appease white people in order to get what he wants (something his bandmates think might ultimately work against him).

Cutler hates Levee's blasphemy and warns him about speaking this way. Toledo, however, points out that Black Americans have—in a way—already sold themselves to the devil by giving up their African traditions and imitating white people. The way everyone in the band is dressed is a good example—"We's imitation white men," Toledo says. Levee detests this idea. He's certainly no "imitation" white man. As soon as he gets his band and cuts his records, he'll be like Ma and will have power over white people.

Toledo once again emphasizes how important it is to stay in touch with one's cultural history. Because Black Americans have been cut off from their ancestral customs and traditions, he argues, they've been forced to take on white society's cultural traits. His point once more connects to the metaphor about stew, reminding the bandmates that the American "melting pot" isn't quite as inclusive as it seems. Rather, white society has simply taken what it wants from Black culture and then forced Black people to acquiesce to white expectations.

Although Levee thinks Ma has a certain authority over white men like Irvin and Sturdyvant, Cutler notes that this isn't *real* power. After all, she can't even hail a taxi in the North. Cutler tries to illustrate his point with a story about a Black reverend who was traveling by train from Tallahassee to Atlanta. At one point, the train stopped in a small town, so the reverend got off to use the restroom. Because Black people weren't allowed to use the station's bathroom, though, he had to walk all the way to a small outhouse—at which point the train left. He knew nothing about the town, and as he tried to orient himself, he noticed a group of white men staring at him.

Cutler makes a good point about Ma's power, underscoring the fact that she has a very specific, narrow kind of authority. Indeed, she's only powerful in the context of the recording studio, where she can leverage her artistic talent and creative control against the exploitative white executives who want to sell her music. Otherwise, though, she's subject to the same racism and discrimination as any other Black person in the United States during the 1920s.

Cutler continues his story, saying that the reverend tried to walk calmly away from the white men. But they followed and shouted at him, eventually firing a gun into the air. When he turned and let them catch up, they asked who he was, then ordered him to dance. As soon as he started, they ripped the cross from his neck and tore up his Bible, accusing him of heresy for dancing with these things. The only way for him to save himself was by dancing. And this, Cutler says, shows that white people don't care about Black people—even if they're respected members of society. The only reason white people care about Ma Rainey is because she can make them money, not because they respect her.

Cutler suggests that white people don't genuinely care about Black people in any situation—except, that is, if they stand to benefit from Black people, in which case they will perhaps show some respect. To be a reverend in the South in the 1920s was to hold a very respectable position, but the white men in Cutler's story clearly don't see beyond the color of the reverend's skin, illustrating just how little regard they hold for his status.

Levee considers Cutler's story and then snidely asks why God didn't rescue the reverend from the white men. Cutler dislikes this question, telling Levee he'll surely burn in hell, but Levee doesn't care—plus, he can answer his own question: God didn't save the reverend because God doesn't care about Black people. He is, Levee says, "a white man's God." Moreover, Levee suggests that God actively hates Black people, which is why Levee doesn't care about religion. "God can kiss my ass," he says.

At this point, it seems as if Levee is blatantly trying to provoke Cutler by speaking blasphemously, once more revealing his divisive, combative nature. At the same time, though, his statements hint that he feels entirely alone in the world. Without a God to turn to, he clearly believes he has to make his own luck, which is perhaps why he has so much ambition and acts so individualistically, always looking out for his own interests because he thinks this is the only way to succeed.

Cutler is beside himself with rage, punching Levee and yelling at him about insulting God. The others yank him off, but then Levee pulls out a knife and screams out to God, imploring Him to protect Cutler. He tells God to save Cutler just like God supposedly "saved" Levee's mother. He remembers hearing his mother scream out for God while the white men raped her, but God didn't do anything. As Levee himself screams, he starts slashing the knife through the air, but instead of waving the blade at Cutler, he points it toward the sky. After a while, he determines that God is a "coward" and puts the knife away.

Levee's traumatic personal history brings itself to bear on his interaction with Cutler. When he yells about what happened to his mother, it becomes clear that he feels abandoned by God. Consequently, he feels alone in the world, which is most likely why he has such an individualistic attitude, constantly prioritizing his own ambition over everything (and everyone) else.

The lights go down, and when they come up again, the band is in the studio finishing the final song of the recording session. Everyone congratulates one another, talking about how good everything sounded. But although Ma compliments the others, she critiques Levee for playing too many notes. He tries to tell her that he was improvising and that his style is what people want to hear, but she's uninterested in what he has to say. All she knows is that his playing distracted her from her own part. Offended, Levee says Ma shouldn't tell him how to play his music, adding that she can fire him if she wants—which is exactly what she does.

Yet again, Levee refuses to submit to Ma's authority. Instead of recognizing that she's the bandleader and that his job is to accompany her however she sees fit, he prioritizes his own ideas about music and innovation. His style, he argues, is what people actually want to listen to, implying that Ma's music is out of touch with the times. Of course, Levee might be right, at least to a certain degree—after all, it is the case that jazz (which features quite a bit of improvisation) became wildly popular in the 1920s. However, the fact that Levee's inspired ideas about music get him fired suggests that there's a time to innovate and a time to simply play whatever's most appropriate. Needless to say, this recording session isn't a good environment for creative experimentation, as Ma sees Levee's playing as a threat to overshadow her own prominence as the bandleader.

Levee storms out of the studio, saying as he goes that he doesn't need the band. Once he leaves and the band starts to pack up, Irvin approaches Ma and tells her that, though he tried to talk him out of it, Sturdyvant insists that he can only pay Sylvester $25, and that this will be taken from Ma's pay. Ma doesn't accept this. If she wanted to give Sylvester $25, she could do it herself. If Sturdyvant doesn't pay up, Ma says, she'll never make a record with him again. When Irvin agrees to see if he can work things out, Ma tells him he better not come back without the money.

Now that Ma has finished recording her album, Sturdyvant tries to take advantage of her. But by saying that she'll never record for Sturdyvant again if he doesn't pay her and the others the correct amount, she holds onto what little power she has left in this exploitative relationship. Once again, she threatens to withhold her music, thereby leveraging her most valuable asset. It remains to be seen whether or not this will work quite as well as it did earlier in the play, though, since Sturdyvant has already gotten what he wanted.

Down in the band room, the musicians sit around and wait for Irvin to pay them. As Levee fumes, the others worry that Irvin will try to pay them with checks instead of cash. They talk about how pointless checks are to Black musicians, since no bank will let them cash checks.

The conversation about checks sheds light on the broader societal racism the bandmates face outside the music industry. Although performers like Ma might have some power in the recording studio, the fact remains that Black people are at a disadvantage in the racist environment of the United States in the 1920s. Even cashing a check as a Black person can be impossible.

Meanwhile, Sturdyvant talks to Ma in the studio, claiming there was a "mistake" and that everything is in order now. Taking her and Sylvester's money, Ma notes that the only "mistake" must have been that Sturdyvant realized she hadn't signed the release forms for the record yet. As she turns to leave, Sturdyvant and Irvin both beg her to sign the forms, and though she hesitates, she eventually obliges.

It's interesting that Ma waits until now to reveal that she hasn't signed the release forms, since it would have made sense for her to mention this when Irvin first told her Sturdyvant didn't want to pay the full amount. However, keeping this information to herself allowed her to hold onto her power over Sturdyvant for as long as possible—after all, he has now paid her in full but doesn't yet own the rights to the songs, putting Ma in a very powerful position. However, she ends up signing the forms, acquiescing at the last minute to the exploitative nature of the record industry in the 1920s, in which white executives made huge profits off of royalties while Black musicians made nominal one-time recording fees.

After Ma leaves, Sturdyvant comes downstairs and pays each of the band members $25. Before he leaves, Levee stops him and asks about the songs he gave him. But Sturdyvant says he no longer thinks Levee's songs will sell—they're not the sort of thing he's looking to record right now. Levee argues that his music is *exactly* what people want to hear. They want new, exciting songs, not the boring old stuff they're used to. Thinking it over, Sturdyvant agrees to give Levee five dollars per song, but this doesn't satisfy Levee because he's less interested in money than he is in recording his music.

Whereas Ma strategically navigates her business relationship with Sturdyvant, Levee eagerly gives Sturdyvant his songs. He has taken Sturdyvant for his word, believing that the white studio executive wants to work with him. What Sturdyvant is really after, though, are the rights to Levee's songs, which is why he refuses to record them but offers to buy them for a small fee. His plan, it seems, is to disappoint Levee so much that he's willing to give up his own songs, as Sturdyvant acts like he's doing Levee a favor. And though Levee seems to believe Sturdyvant when he says the songs won't sell, the historically exploitative nature of the music industry suggests that Sturdyvant thinks the complete opposite: that the songs will be hits, and that if Sturdyvant owns the rights, he'll make a fortune off them. Plus, by cutting Levee out of the entire process, Sturdyvant won't have to share the profits.

Sturdyvant says he had some of his own musicians play Levee's songs, which is when he realized they weren't right. According to Levee, this must be why Sturdyvant doesn't want them—after all, Levee has to be the one to play them. Still, Sturdyvant remains steadfast, saying the songs won't sell as well as Ma's records. "But I'll take them off your hands for you," he adds. And if Levee ever writes any *other* songs, he'll buy those, too. Before Levee can respond, Sturdyvant stuffs money into his pocket and quickly exits.

Sturdyvant is being dishonest when he says that Levee's songs won't sell as well as Ma's. After all, at the beginning of the play, he complained to Irvin at length that Ma's records haven't been selling well in places like Harlem because they aren't exciting and new. Levee's music, on the other hand, is fresh and modern, so it would surely do well in such markets. Unfortunately, though, Levee doesn't have much power in this situation: he's an unrecognized musician who has just been fired from his place in Ma's band, so he has nothing to turn to. As a result, Sturdyvant moves in, preying on Levee's powerlessness.

After Sturdyvant leaves, Levee takes the money from his pocket and throws it on the floor. The others are packing up their things and trying not to look at Levee, but Toledo walks by and steps on his **shoe**. Suddenly, all of Levee's anger focuses on Toledo, who casually apologizes. But this isn't good enough for Levee, who gets in Toledo's face and screams at him, accusing him of "ruining" his shoe. Soon enough, Toledo loses his patience and tries to dismiss Levee, but Levee runs at him with his knife and stabs him.

Levee has been stripped of everything: he not only lost his place in Ma's band but also got swindled out of a lucrative recording opportunity. Left with nothing, he misplaces his anger by taking it out on Toledo. There's some symbolic significance to the fact that he loses his temper over Toledo stepping on his shoe, since that shoe represents his lofty ambitions and his obsession with becoming successful. In a way, those flashy shoes are all he has left, so he simply can't bear to see Toledo step on them with his clunky farming shoes; it's as if his dreams have been crushed. Although Levee believes in the importance of innovation and progress, life seems to have shown him that he's destined to lead the same traditional, simplistic life as his bandmates.

As Toledo crumples to the floor, the confidence and anger in Levee's voice begins to drain. He repeats over and over that Toledo stepped on his **shoe**, asking him why he did that and, when he doesn't get a response, shouting at him to stand up. He even tries to help Toledo up, but Toledo just falls back to the floor, and this renews Levee's anger. He yells at him again, telling him not to look at him like that, his tone becoming increasingly frantic as he now begs Toledo to close his eyes. "Cutler," he pleads. "Tell him don't look at me like that." And then, right as Cutler sends Slow Drag for help, the sound of a trumpet blares a high note, and the lights cut out.

The tragedy of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom *is that Levee's disenfranchisement turns him against his own bandmates, who—like him—are Black musicians facing the exact same disenfranchisement. Throughout the play, Levee alienates himself from the other musicians, so that when he gets swindled by Sturdyvant, he has nobody to turn to. Instead of coming together with Toledo and the others, he lashes out, suggesting that the racist and exploitative nature of American society can sow division in Black communities that would be better off working together and helping each other. This tragic ending circles back to Toledo's prior insistence that Black Americans ought unite in order to improve their living conditions.*

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