Crumbs from the Table of Joy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LYNN NOTTAGE

Lynn Nottage was born in 1964 in Brooklyn to schoolteacher and principal Ruby Nottage and child psychologist Wallace Nottage. She attended Fiorella H. LaGuardia High School (which specializes in visual and performing arts), during which time she wrote *The Darker Side of Verona*, her first full-length play. Nottage went on to earn her bachelor's degree from Brown University, followed by an MFA from the Yale School of Drama in 1989. After this, Nottage worked at Amnesty International's press office and went on to write several plays—most notably *Intimate Apparel*; *Ruined*; *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*; and *Sweat*. She earned her DFA from Brown in 2011 and has received honorary degrees from Julliard and Albright College. Nottage is married to Tony Gerber, with whom she has two children; she and Gerber are cofounders of Market Road Films production company. Nottage won Pulitzers for both *Ruined* and *Sweat*, making her the first and only woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama twice. She's also the recipient of a MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowship, a Merit and Literature Award from The Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Guggenheim Grant, among several other awards and honors. Nottage is currently a professor of playwriting at Columbia University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Crumbs from the Table of Joy is set in a period now known as the Second Red Scare, which was characterized by a pervasive fear in the United States of communism and certain progressive liberal ideals. The main concern was that the United States had been infiltrated by covert communists who intended to upend American society with socialist practices and ideas. The hysteria that this thinking sparked is known as McCarthyism and is named after Joseph McCarthy, a senator from Wisconsin who was particularly vocal about the supposed threat of communism. McCarthy accused many liberal people of nefarious dealings, but his popularity began to decrease in the 1950s after it became clear that many of his frenzied accusations were unfounded. Many activists striving for equality and racial justice were accused of being communists, and though this was certainly true in some cases, the accusations were mainly used as a quick and easy way to discredit certain activists in the eyes of the general public, since many Americans subscribed to the notion that members of the Communist Party were inherently dangerous. Godfrey Crumb shares this viewpoint in *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, but this might seem somewhat ironic, since his beloved Peace Mission Movement was actually aligned with the Communist Party in the 1930s. However, Father Divine (who claimed to be God and led the Peace Mission Movement, a religious movement with all the trappings of a cult) renounced the Communist Party during the Second Red Scare. In doing so, he ended up contradicting many values that he had previously put at the center of the Peace Mission Movement.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* features a Black family that migrates from Florida to New York City, it's worth considering it alongside one of Lynn Nottage's other well-known plays, *Intimate Apparel*, which is about a young Black woman who makes her way to New York City in search of success. To that end, the famous playwright August Wilson also wrote extensively about Black characters who traveled north looking for better lives in the 20th century. In particular, Wilson's plays *Gem of the Ocean* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* examine the experience of leaving the South to escape racism and look for new opportunities. In the same vein, Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* features a Black man who leaves the South for New York City, where he—much like the members of the Crumb family—encounters the Communist Party. Similarly, Richard Wright's memoir, *Black Boy*, details the author's move to a northern city and his increasing involvement in the Communist Party.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Crumbs from the Table of Joy
- **When Published:** 1995
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** 1950s Brooklyn
- **Climax:** Godfrey rushes into his apartment with blood on his face after a gang of racists attacked him for being in an interracial marriage with Gerte.
- **Antagonist:** Racism and narrow-mindedness

EXTRA CREDIT

In Decline. As of 2015, there were only 19 known members of the Peace Mission Movement (formerly led by Father Divine), which forbids its members from engaging in sexual intercourse.

Terminator. The premiere of *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* was directed by Joe Morton, an actor who has appeared in many famous films, including *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Seventeen-year-old Ernestine Crumb addresses the audience and explains that grief laid her family flat. When her mother died, her father, Godfrey, was unable to do anything but mourn his wife—until he discovered the teachings of Father Divine, the leader of the Peace Mission Movement. Wanting to be closer to Father Divine (who claims he's God), Godfrey moved his daughters—Ernestine and her sister, Ermina—to Brooklyn, only to discover that Father Divine had relocated to Philadelphia.

Now the Crumbs live in a small apartment in a mostly Jewish neighborhood, where Godfrey works in a bakery. Godfrey keeps a protective watch over Ernestine and Ermina (who's 15), especially trying to impress on them the importance of celibacy, which is one of Father Divine's most important teachings. He also doesn't let them listen to the radio on Sunday. On other days, the sisters go to the movies, which helps them grieve the loss of their mother, since they feel like they can openly cry in the theaters while watching dramatic storylines unfold before them. Other than going to the movies, Ernestine doesn't do much, instead focusing on her studies. Ermina, on the other hand, is eager to spend time with boys her own age, but she rarely has the chance to do so.

One day, Godfrey eagerly awaits the mail, hoping he'll receive a letter from Father Divine, whom he has written to many times. When the mail finally comes, Ermina flips through it and is excited to find a sample of fabric that she and her sister ordered. Ernestine will use the fabric to make herself a **graduation dress**, the sisters explain to Godfrey, who's astounded to hear that his daughter will be graduating. She will be the first person in the family to finish high school, so Godfrey is incredibly proud. When he asks why she didn't tell him before, though, she hints that she *did*, and he embarrassedly jots something down in his **notepad**—something he does frequently throughout the play, explaining at one point that he's writing down questions to ask Father Divine when he finally sees him at the Holy Communion Banquet later that year. After writing in his notepad, Godfrey is elated to discover that he has received a response from Father Divine, in which Divine urges him to be strong in the face of hardship and gives Godfrey and his daughters new names. Godfrey will be Godfrey Goodness, Ernestine will be Darling Angel, and Ermina will be Devout Mary—a name she hates.

Around this time, a woman comes to the apartment and introduces herself as Ernestine and Ermina's aunt. Her name is Lily, and she's dressed in a style Ernestine has never seen a Black woman wear—that is, she's dressed like a stylish white woman. She explains that she buys her clothes from the same stores where white women shop, suggesting to her niece that that looking better than white women is a good way to stand up against racism and discrimination. When Godfrey enters the room and sees Lily, he seems taken aback and hesitant to welcome her, though he later admits that he tried to find her in Harlem when he first arrived in New York City.

It soon becomes clear that Lily intends to stay with Godfrey and his daughters. She expresses her regret that she was unable to be present for her sister's death, but she claims that she promised her mother—Ernestine and Ermina's grandmother—that she would come look after Godfrey's daughters now that her sister is gone. Godfrey doesn't seem happy about this, particularly when Lily pokes fun of him for becoming so devoutly religious. She, for her part, likes to drink alcohol, listen to jazz, and go dancing. When Godfrey tells her that he doesn't allow alcohol in the house, she tries to reminisce with him about their past, insinuating that they used to get drunk in bars together and become romantic with each other. But Godfrey awkwardly avoids the conversation.

In the ensuing weeks, Ernestine starts sewing her graduation dress. She often works on the dress while talking to Lily, who talks about an imminent cultural revolution. She is a member of the Communist Party, but she mainly speaks broadly about equality, raising points that resonate with Ernestine, who decides to write a school essay about the labor movement. Her teacher is not happy with the result, eventually showing it to the principal, who calls Godfrey in and lectures him about teaching his daughter communist ideas. Godfrey is incensed. Because of Lily, he says, everybody thinks he's a communist now—even his coworkers, who won't talk to him anymore. Lily, however, claims that she didn't teach Ernestine anything. Ernestine is just starting to think critically about the world, she says.

Meanwhile, the Holy Communion Banquet is fast approaching. One morning, the Crumbs prepare to go to the Peace Mission building to make sure everything is in order for Father Divine's upcoming visit. Lily, however, won't be going the Peace Mission. She's too hungover from the night before, having been out all night dancing with an attractive Cuban man. As Ernestine and Ermina get ready to leave for the Peace Mission, she tells them about her night, grabbing Ernestine and showing her how to do the mambo. Soon enough, though, Godfrey comes in and puts an end to their fun. When he tries to shame her for drinking, she laughs him off and starts talking about how he used to like to feel her thigh when he was drunk. As they argue, Godfrey desperately tries to send his daughters out of the room. Soon enough, Lily asks if he wants her to apologize, saying that she'd oblige this wish if that's what he wants. She then kisses him, and though he eventually pulls away, he can't help but give in for a moment before cutting it off. After pulling away, he tells Lily that if she's going to live with them, she needs to respect his rules. Before he started following Father Divine, the only thing he could do to handle his grief was drink. But finding the Peace Mission Movement helped him change. Still, he finds great temptation in Lily's presence. As he explains this temptation, he

talks about the smell of sweat and alcohol, grabbing Lily and ecstatically dancing with her for a moment before breaking off and rushing out of the apartment.

Godfrey doesn't return for several days, and when he does come back, he has a new wife. Her name is Gerte, and she's a white German woman he met on the subway. She was lost, so she decided to go with him to the Peace Mission building. They hit it off, and now they're married. As Godfrey introduces Gerte to his daughters, they find it impossible to match his excitement—they can't believe he would remarry even though their mother hasn't even been dead a full year. Perhaps even more shocking, though, is that their father would marry a white woman. And yet, it's not all that surprising in the context of Godfrey's worship of Father Divine, who married a white woman himself. Lily, for her part, is offended by the fact that Godfrey has taken a new wife without considering her as a possibility. However, she continues to stay in the apartment, tolerating Gerte's presence even if she often picks fights with her.

On the day of the Holy Communion Banquet, the Crumps go to the Peace Mission and set out an enormous amount of food in anticipation of Father Divine's arrival. But Father Divine never comes. He apparently got a flat tire in New Jersey, and though Ermina points out that he'd be able to somehow fly to the Peace Mission if he were really God, Godfrey doesn't listen to her—he just tells her to be patient, assuring her that Father Divine will find a way. When it becomes clear even to him that Father Divine won't be coming, though, he moans about all the questions he has for him. He needs Father Divine's answers, he says, otherwise he won't be able to "move on" with his life.

In the coming weeks, Ernestine continues to work on her graduation dress. She and Ermina have not warmed up to Gerte, who tries hard to get them to open up. As Ernestine works on her dress and Gerte chops cabbage one day, Lily stumbles in drunk and starts an argument with Gerte, who points out that Lily hasn't been talking much these days about going to the Communist Party's headquarters. And it's true: Lily has been spending most of her time drinking and partying. Lily responds by criticizing Gerte's worldview, implying that she doesn't understand what it's like to be a Black person in the United States. Gerte tries to claim that she doesn't see race, but Lily, Ernestine, and Ermina all make it quite clear that this is a ridiculous thing to say—something only a person who has never experienced racism would say. Upset, Gerte leaves the room. But the conversation has also frustrated Lily, who takes her anger out on Ernestine by criticizing the lace she's sewing onto her dress—lace that Ermina stole for her because it's so perfect and because their mother always wanted her to have a beautiful graduation gown. Deeply hurt, Ernestine rips the lace off the dress.

Soon after, a group of white racists attack Godfrey on the subway. The white men were insulting him and Gerte, and when he made it clear to them that Gerte was his wife, they became enraged and smashed a Coke bottle on his head. Godfrey and Gerte now rush into the apartment, and Gerte has to restrain Godfrey from running back outside to track down his attackers. Gerte is astounded and can't believe that such a thing has happened, but everyone else understands that being in an interracial relationship is—unfortunately—dangerous in 1950s American society. Ernestine finally loses her temper and yells at Gerte, telling her that she hates her and that she's the reason this happened. Godfrey tries to tell her to stop, but Lily jumps in and defends Ernestine. Godfrey counters by criticizing Lily's progressive worldview, but she points out that this is perfectly emblematic of everything that's wrong in the United States: a Black man is bleeding from the head for being married to a white woman, who sits next to him completely unharmed. The argument continues until Godfrey tells Lily that she needs to leave—he can't maintain his life or his marriage to Gerte if she stays.

At the end of the play, Ernestine directly addresses the audience and explains that she graduates high school and then goes to Harlem, wanting to track down Lily. When she can't find her, she asks around, asking people about where she should go to join the revolution. One bartender gives her an address, which turns out to be the address of City College. Ernestine enrolls and graduates, going on to become a civil rights activist. Ermina, for her part, has a baby before Ernestine graduates college. She's also the one who ends up identifying Lily's dead body, learning that their aunt died of drug abuse. Lastly, Godfrey stays married to Gerte and continues to live in Brooklyn.

CHARACTERS

Ernestine Crump – Ernestine is a 17-year-old girl who has recently moved from Florida to Brooklyn with her father, Godfrey, and her younger sister, Ermina. Throughout the play, Ernestine—who is Black—acts as a narrator of sorts, often directly addressing the audience to explain her various reactions to the things happening around her. A quiet, reserved young woman, she loves the movies and likes going to the cinema in New York, where she feels like she can openly weep about the dramatic films without attracting attention. This is especially appealing to her because she and her sister are still mourning the death of their mother, who died not long before Godfrey decided to move the family to Brooklyn. Although her father has devoted himself to a religious leader named Father Divine, Ernestine is skeptical of her family's new religious affiliations, feeling rather constricted by her father's overbearing attempt to protect his daughters from sin. At the same time, though, Ernestine is also somewhat of an introvert, spending most of her free time sewing a **dress** for her upcoming graduation, which is a momentous event because she

will be the first person in the family to finish high school. As time passes, Ernestine grows closer to her aunt, Lily, who arrives unannounced one day and moves in with the family. Much to her father's dismay, Ernestine is moved—albeit somewhat confused—by Lily's revolutionary and communist ideas. In particular, Lily's progressive ideas about racism and sexism in the United States resonate with Ernestine, who eventually follows her aunt's advice to stand up against prejudice and discrimination by making herself "essential," eventually going to college and becoming an activist in the civil rights movement.

Godfrey Crump – Godfrey Crumb is Black man who has recently moved from Florida to Brooklyn with his daughters, Ernestine and Ermina. Godfrey was inspired to travel north after his wife's death, which sent him into a spiral of grief. The implication is that Godfrey turned to alcohol after his wife's death, but then he came into contact with the teachings of Father Divine, a (real-life) religious leader. Inspired by Father Divine's message of love, peace, and faith, Godfrey stopped drinking and moved to New York, thinking that's where Father Divine's movement (the Peace Mission Movement) was situated. It was only after arriving in New York that Godfrey learned Father Divine had moved to Philadelphia, but he decided to stay, taking a job in a bakery. He, Ernestine, and Ermina now live in a small apartment in a mostly Jewish neighborhood. Godfrey seldom lets his daughters out of the apartment, worrying that the outside world is full of evil and danger. He spends most of his time thinking about questions he wants to ask Father Divine when he finally meets him in person. Whenever a difficult topic comes up, he takes out a **notepad** and writes something down, explaining at one point that he's keeping track of the many questions he wants to pose to Father Divine. When he marries a German woman named Gerte, he effectively follows Father Divine's example by marrying a white woman but refraining from sexually consummating the marriage. The marriage upsets Godfrey's daughters, but it especially rankles Godfrey's former sister-in-law, Lily, with whom Godfrey seems to have a romantic history. But Godfrey ends up standing by Gerte, prompting Lily to disappear from his life.

Lily – Lily is Ernestine and Ermina's aunt and Godfrey's late wife's sister. An independent, progressive Black woman involved with the Communist Party, she arrives unannounced at the Crumbs' apartment in Brooklyn not long after they've arrived in the city. Godfrey is surprised to see her, and though he reluctantly welcomes her and lets her stay, he's uptight and nervous around her, largely because he feels tempted by her presence. The implication is that they have some sort of romantic history, as Lily often makes subtle remarks about the times they used to spend together in bars in the South. What's more, Godfrey no longer approves of drinking and makes a point of not keeping alcohol in the house, but Lily frequently stays out late and comes home drunk. She also talks to Ernestine about the idea of equality, urging her to think critically about the race and gender dynamics that directly impact her life—ideas Godfrey doesn't want Lily talking about, fearing that his family will be associated with communism. Lily, for her part, often talks about how influential she is in certain intellectual circles, but it's never quite clear whether or not this is truly the case. For the most part, she spends her time partying, especially after Godfrey brings home his new white wife, Gerte—a move that deeply vexes Lily, who seems to have thought she and Godfrey might eventually get together. In the end, Godfrey asks Lily to leave the apartment, and they don't hear from her again. Years later, Ermina is the one to officially identify Lily's corpse, which is "poked full of holes," suggesting that she succumbed to an intravenous drug addiction. And yet, her legacy lives on through Ernestine, whose work as an activist is the result of her aunt's initial teachings.

Ermina Crump – Ermina is Ernestine's younger sister, a 15-year-old Black girl who has just moved to Brooklyn from Florida. Unlike Ernestine, who is relatively shy and reserved, Ermina is extroverted and eager to meet boys her own age—something that her father, Godfrey, strictly forbids, since his newfound religious views champion the idea of chastity. When Ernestine and Ermina find a beautiful lace sample in a department store, Ermina steals it so that her older sister can sew it onto her **graduation dress**, since their late mother wanted her to have a beautiful gown for the occasion. Ermina ends up getting pregnant at a relatively young age, when Ernestine is still in college, ultimately suggesting that her father's overprotective ways did nothing to prevent her from pursuing romantic affection. Ermina is also the one who officially identifies Lily's dead body years later while visiting her grandmother in the South.

Gerte – Gerte is a white woman from Germany who meets Godfrey on the New York City subway. When they happen to meet, Godfrey is in the midst of feeling overwhelmed by his conflicting desires to embrace Lily's affection and stay true to his religious beliefs. Gerte, for her part, has just arrived in the United States and asks for Godfrey's help navigating the subway system, asking if New Orleans if far away—a good indication that she's quite unfamiliar with the country, which she later reveals she has idealized after learning to love American jazz. Gerte and Godfrey end up getting hastily married, which doesn't go over well in the Crump family. Both Ernestine and Ermina can't believe their father would not only remarry less than a year after the death of their mother but also marry a *white* woman. Lily is also shocked by this development, apparently having thought she and Godfrey might eventually rekindle their romantic feelings for each other. Gerte, however, finds it difficult to understand why it matters if a Black man marries a white woman, revealing a certain inability to grasp the tense and complex dynamics

surrounding race relations in the United States. When racists attack Godfrey for being with a white woman, she is more shocked than anyone in the family, once again failing to recognize the ugly reality of American racism. She has a tense relationship with everyone in the Crump family, but Godfrey stands by her, eventually asking Lily to leave in order to protect his marriage to Gerte.

Father Divine – Father Divine was the leader and founder of the Peace Mission Movement, a real-life religious movement that reached its prominence in the mid-20th century. Father Divine claimed that he was God and sang the virtues of celibacy, which is partially why the Peace Mission Movement only had 19 remaining members as of 2015 (since its members can't procreate). While the movement was—by most measures—a cult, it's worth noting that Father Divine was a strong advocate for the civil rights movement and structured his teachings around the idea of racial equality. It's somewhat ironic, then, that Godfrey doesn't want Lily to teach his daughters her progressive and communist ideas about equality, considering that Godfrey himself covets the teachings of the Peace Mission Movement, which was officially aligned with the Communist Party at one point and was so concerned with issues of racial equality.

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.

FAITH, DEVOTION, AND HOPE

Crumbs From the Table of Joy is a play that explores the impact a strong sense of faith can have on a person's life. For Ernestine Crumb's father, Godfrey, religious faith is what helps him feel centered and grounded in the face of sadness and uncertainty. In the aftermath of his wife's death, he devotes himself to the Peace Mission Movement (a real-life movement led by a Black man named Father Divine, who claimed to be God). Throughout the play, Godfrey writes down questions he wants to ask Father Divine when he finally sees him, illustrating the extent to which he has allowed religion and the Peace Mission Movement to inform his life—so much, it seems, that he is hesitant to think for himself, instead wanting constant guidance. In contrast, his dead wife's sister, Lily, is highly critical of organized religion, instead aligning herself with the Communist Party and filtering her thoughts through a communist lens—thoughts that she shares with Ernestine.

Although Lily and Godfrey are highly critical of each other's beliefs, the faith they place in their respective worldviews are actually quite similar, since they both invest themselves in ideas and organizations that give their lives a sense of purpose. Simply put, both characters believe in the importance of things that are bigger than themselves. The play thus explores the human impulse to find meaning and hope in belief systems or institutions that help make sense of the world. It effectively dramatizes this impulse by highlighting Ernestine's gradual gravitation away from her father's religion and toward her aunt's political activism.

RACISM AND OPPORTUNITY

Crumbs From the Table of Joy deals directly with the harsh reality of racism in the United States and the seemingly ever-present threat it poses to Black Americans. Set in the 1950s, the play spotlights the Crumb family's attempt to escape the injustices of the Jim Crow (racial segregation) laws by traveling from the South to New York City. And yet, the play suggests that escaping racism isn't as easy as simply leaving the South, as Godfrey and his daughters Ernestine and Ermina still face bigotry and prejudice in the North—an indication that hatred and bigotry are unfortunately pervasive throughout the country.

It is precisely because of this pervasiveness that Ernestine and Ermina's aunt Lily wants to teach the girls about the need for a cultural "revolution," trying to show them that they should strive for power and a sense of independence, which Lily implies is the only way Black Americans will be able to push back against the racist power structures that have historically oppressed and disenfranchised them. Lily tells Ernestine that she should find a job that will make her "essential," since this will make it more difficult for people to discriminate against her. According to Lily, it's important for young Black women like Ernestine to actively seek out opportunity, success, and power instead of passively letting life "happen" to them. Change, in other words, isn't just going to come about on its own. Ernestine seems to come to this conclusion for herself after her father is attacked by racists for having married Gerte, who's white. Although Godfrey and Gerte clearly want to believe they live in a society in which interracial marriages don't attract hatred and violence, Ernestine sees once and for all that this isn't the case. The play therefore advocates for pragmatically recognizing the unfortunate reality of racism and then working to counteract it—which is what Ernestine does by pursuing an education and becoming a civil rights activist.

GRIEF, LOSS, AND MOVING ON

Crumbs From the Table of Joy follows the Crump family's mourning process, as each family member struggles to move on from the death of Ernestine and Ermina's mother. The play presents the loss of a loved one as something capable of completely halting and even derailing a

person's life. In the first scene, for instance, Ernestine narrates what it was like for the family to lose her mother, explaining that the grief "wouldn't leave [them] be." But then her father, Godfrey, moved the family to New York City in an attempt to live closer to Father Divine, whose teachings helped him funnel his sorrow into something else—namely, a deep sense of religious faith and devotion. However, the play implies that even the most seemingly rewarding and meaningful distractions from grief are still just *distractions* and, thus, are no substitute for genuinely working through and processing such sorrow. Ernestine hints at this when she first meets Godfrey's new wife, Gerte, pointing out in shock that her mother hasn't even been dead for a full year. The implication here is that Godfrey hasn't given himself time to fully mourn his wife's death, instead trying to address his grief with the quick fix of marrying somebody new. At the same time, though, the play doesn't necessarily cast doubt on the authenticity of Godfrey's love for Gerte (he genuinely seems to care for her), nor does it propose what, exactly, is the best way for people to move on after a loved one dies. In turn, the play simply outlines the extreme difficulty of coping with loss, ultimately suggesting that moving on is painful and challenging no matter *how* a person goes about it.

CRITICAL THINKING AND OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Crumbs From the Table of Joy examines how people respond to perspectives that differ from their own. Godfrey, for instance, has a strong negative reaction whenever he comes into contact with his late wife's sister, Lily's, progressive, communist worldview. His intense backlash is tied to the anti-communist sentiment that was especially strong in the United States during the 1950s (when the play is set). To be branded a communist came with grave social consequences, as evidenced by the fact that Godfrey's coworkers stop talking to him when his daughter Ernestine writes a school paper that makes her teacher think the Crumb family is communist—a good indication of just how quickly people in Godfrey's community judge one another for having even the slightest association with communist ideas.

And yet, Lily points out that Ernestine's essay doesn't mean she's a communist—it just means she's thinking critically about the world. Her essay isn't even specifically about communism; it's about the labor movement in the United States. What Ernestine is most interested in is the simple goal of fairness and equality, but her father still forbids Lily from talking to her anymore about such matters, effectively subjecting his daughter to the same narrow-minded, intolerant worldview that everyone around him has modeled. In the end, though, Ernestine continues to think critically about the world, becoming a civil rights activist instead of adhering to her father's restricted worldview. The play celebrates her open-minded exploration of challenging and unpopular ideas, but it also illustrates how difficult it can be to think this way, considering that Lily—a staunch communist, feminist, and racial justice advocate—is harshly judged for her beliefs and ends up dying alone. The play thus spotlights the benefits of open-mindedly engaging in critical thought while also underlining the unfortunate hazards of doing so in a society that often rejects and vilifies people who challenge the status quo.

SYMBOLS

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

THE GRADUATION DRESS

The graduation dress Ernestine sews for herself symbolizes the sense of self-sufficiency and confidence that she learns to cultivate. Lily teaches her that this kind of willpower and independence is necessary for Black women to embody if they want to take a stand against the racist power structures at play in the United States. In the very beginning of their relationship, Lily suggests to Ernestine that self-presentation matters because it's a way to challenge the assumptions white people make about Black people—which is why Lily makes a point of buying clothes from the stores where wealthy white women shop, since outdressing these women can be a "subversive" act. In keeping with this, it's noteworthy that Ernestine makes her own graduation dress. The effort she puts into it comes to represent the kind of self-made drive that she later applies to her college career, given that going to college in the first place was something that was out of reach for many Black women in the 1950s. And yet, Lily also says in a moment of anger that it doesn't matter what Ernestine wears to graduation—a dress in and of itself, she argues, won't make Ernestine successful. What *will* make her successful, though, is the self-sufficiency and personal agency that drives Ernestine to make her own dress in the first place. In turn, the dress comes to stand for the resourcefulness and resilience that ultimately enable Ernestine to break down racial barriers and strive toward unprecedented success.

THE NOTEPAD

The notepad Godfrey uses to write down questions symbolizes an escapist desire to look toward other people or belief systems as a way of avoiding confronting hardship head-on. Throughout the play, Godfrey frequently pauses in conversation to write something down, especially when he's having an uncomfortable conversation. It's eventually revealed that he's writing down questions that he wants to ask Father Divine when he finally meets him. This

might seem harmless, but it soon becomes clear that Godfrey uses this habit to *run* from his problems. By writing in his notepad, he delays the actual act of dealing with whatever has just come up, effectively putting himself at ease with the idea that Father Divine will eventually answer all his questions. In this way, Godfrey doesn't actually have to deal with anything himself. But when Father Divine fails to show up at the Holy Communion Banquet, Godfrey feels lost because he realizes he still has all of these unanswered questions. He even says that he needs Father Divine's answers in order to "move on," making it quite clear that he has devoted himself to the Peace Mission Movement as a way of coping with the loss of his wife—a loss from which he hasn't yet managed to "move on," since he hasn't actually been doing anything other than investing himself in the idea that somebody *else* will help him put his life back together. The notepad thus represents the dangers of investing too much faith in any single person or belief, since doing so can take away the motivation to address certain challenges on one's own.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *Crumbs from the Table of Joy and Other Plays* published in 2003.

Prologue Quotes

Death nearly crippled my father slipping beneath the soles of his feet and taking away his ability to walk at will. Death made him wail like a god awful banshee. (*Godfrey wails like a god awful banshee.*) Like the 12:01 steam boat mooring. (*Godfrey continues to wail.*) Death made strangers take hold of our hands and recount endless stories of mommy. In church, at work, strolling, laughing, eating [...]. Death made us nauseous with regret. It clipped daddy's tongue and put his temper to rest. Made folks shuffle and bow their heads. But it wouldn't leave us be, tugging at our stomachs and our throats. And then one day it stopped and we took the train north to New York City.

Related Characters: Ernestine Crump (speaker), Ermina Crump, Godfrey Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

The play opens with Ernestine Crumb directly addressing the audience and describing how the grief of losing her mother impacted her family. Her mother's death took an especially terrible toll on her father, Godfrey, who seemingly lost his willpower to do anything in life—including stand or "walk at will." More importantly, Ernestine explains that the sadness surrounding her mother's death was basically ever-present, describing it as something that was constantly "tugging at [their] stomachs and [their] throats." In other words, grief saturated every aspect of their lives, often seeming to reside within their very own bodies, almost as if it were a physical ailment.

And yet, Ernestine also says, "And then one day it stopped and we took the train north to New York City." This sets the stage for the rest of the play, which takes place after the Crumb family has moved. Although Ernestine says that the family's grief suddenly "stopped," it's reasonable to assume this isn't actually the case—after all, the sadness was so pervasive in their lives that it's unlikely it would simply disappear. The implication, then, is that this is what Godfrey *wants* his family to think: he wants them to believe that they've healed and moved on from their terrible loss, but the play goes on to show that this is an unrealistic expectation. To that end, the rest of the play will challenge the idea that Godfrey's newfound coping mechanisms (including his religious devotion) have actually helped him move on from losing his wife.

Father Divine.... Ever since Mommy passed on, he stands between us and our enjoyment. Daddy discovered Father Divine when he was searching to cure "the ailments of the heart," those terrible fits of mourning that set in. (*Godfrey begins to weep, loudly.*) Father Divine, the great provider, sent his blessing via mail. And shortly there after Daddy was cured.

Related Characters: Ernestine Crump (speaker), Father Divine, Godfrey Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Speaking directly to the audience, Ernestine explains how her father's devotion to Father Divine and the Peace Mission Movement has impacted the family as a whole. Father Divine was a real-life figure who founded the Peace Mission Movement and claimed to be God. Such a powerful message seems to have spoken directly to Godfrey, who at the time was struggling with "ailments of the heart." In other words, Godfrey felt heartsick and lost after his wife died, so he was especially susceptible to the teachings of charismatic leaders like Father Divine. For Ernestine and

her younger sister, Ermina, though, Father Divine's teachings don't bring much emotional relief. To the contrary, the Peace Mission Movement's merciless rules and restrictive worldviews seem quite stifling, which is why Ernestine says that Father Divine is always getting in the way of her ability to "enjoy[]" life.

For Godfrey, Father Divine's teachings act as a soothing balm that helps him address his grief. For his daughters, though, these teachings seem a lot less profound. When Ernestine says that her father was "cured" shortly after receiving a blessing in the mail from Father Divine, it's implied that she doesn't actually believe this, ultimately underscoring how unrealistic it is for her father to think he can move on from his grief so quickly and easily.

❝ ERNESTINE. […] Divine was God, and God was liable do as he pleased, but you see Daddy was just a poor colored man — (*Godfrey looks up from his newspaper.*)

GODFREY. (*With Ernestine.*) from Pensacola, and I gone out my way to keep trouble a few arms lengths 'way. I don' want to wind up like them Scottsboro boys, but you wouldn't remember. (*Godfrey speaks, Ernestine mouths the words:*) Terrible mess, terrible mess.

Related Characters: Ernestine Crump, Godfrey Crump (speaker), Father Divine, Ermina Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

As Ernestine speaks to the audience and narrates her father's personal history, she talks about Godfrey's tendency to keep his distance from white people. Even though the white couple living above the Crumps in Brooklyn are kind to Ernestine and Ermina, Godfrey doesn't want his daughters going upstairs to visit them, reminding the girls that their neighbors are white. Ernestine, for her part, knows that Father Divine—whom Godfrey worships—married a white woman, but she points out that Father Divine claims to be God and that, because of this, Godfrey doesn't question his decisions. As Ernestine continues to talk about her father, Godfrey himself jumps in and takes over, explaining that he's from Pensacola, Florida, and that he has always tried to "keep trouble a few arms lengths" away. And he has done this, he implies, by avoiding white people as much as possible, since he knows all too well how dangerous it can be as a Black man to interact with white people.

To illustrate this danger, he references the Scottsboro Boys, a group of nine Black teenagers who were wrongfully accused of raping a white woman in Alabama in the 1930s. The Scottsboro Boys were imprisoned and many of them were even sentenced to death row, though their sentences were later commuted and none of them died by execution. Still, their lives were completely upended—and arguably ruined—by the entire ordeal. Godfrey's reference to the Scottsboro Boys thus illustrates just how aware he is of what racist white people are capable of doing to Black people.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ GODFREY. You graduating? (*Ernestine nods. Godfrey breaks into a smile.*) Nah…. A first. You really gonna graduate? You're gonna be a high school graduate like Percy Duncan, Roberta Miles, Sarah Dickerson, Elmore Sinclair, Chappy Phillips and Ernestine Clump. (*Ernestine bashful covers her face.*)

ERNESTINE. Not quite yet!

GODFREY. Why didn't you say something?

ERNESTINE. Didn't I? (*A moment. Godfrey embarrassed takes out his note pad.*)

GODFREY. … The *New Day* come?

Related Characters: Godfrey Crump, Ernestine Crump (speaker), Ermina Crump, Father Divine

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

When Ermina goes through the mail one day and excitedly tells Ernestine that she finally received a sample of fabric they ordered for her graduation dress, Godfrey is astounded to learn that his eldest daughter will soon be graduating high school. Proud and impressed, he talks about how Ernestine will be the first person in the Crumb family to earn a high school diploma, listing off a handful of people he knows who have made this achievement. The fact that Godfrey lists these names suggests that he respects these people; it also subtly hints that he doesn't actually know very many people who have graduated high school, which is why he can remember these names off the top of his head.

In short, he recognizes that it's a big deal for his daughter—a Black teenager living in a racist society rigged against her—to finish high school.

At the same time, though, Ernestine also implies that she has already told her father she'll be graduating. When she makes this implication, Godfrey is embarrassed, since it highlights the fact that he's somewhat distracted. And yet, he responds not by apologizing or continuing to talk about the graduation, but by taking out his notepad and writing something down, once more disappearing into his worship of Father Divine, since the notepad is full of questions he wants to ask Divine. He thus disappears into his own little world of religious devotion instead of engaging with his daughter.

GODFREY. (*Flabbergasted.*) We're now part of his flock, we're capable of entering the Kingdom. (*Godfrey, still in the heavenly daze, reaches into his wallet and counts out his money.*) This is just about the best news I've heard.

Related Characters: Godfrey Crump (speaker), Father Divine, Ernestine Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

After Ernestine talks to her father about how she'll soon graduate from high school, Godfrey receives a letter from Father Divine—a letter he has been anticipating for a very long time. In the letter, Father Divine gives Godfrey and his daughters new religious names like Godfrey Goodness and Darling Angel. Because they have these names, Godfrey explains with utter delight, they are now part of Father Divine's "flock" and will now be able to "enter[] the Kingdom" of heaven. His happiness in this moment is a good illustration of just how much he cares about Father Divine and devoting himself to the Peace Mission Movement. However, his reaction also underscores something more important—namely, that he allows his religious devotion to overshadow his role as an engaged and supportive father. After all, he has just finished talking about how proud he is to have learned that Ernestine will soon graduate high school. But then he goes on to say that receiving new names from Father Divine is the "best news" he has heard, thus implying that he cares more about joining the Peace Mission Movement than he cares about his own daughter's accomplishments.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

Ya like my suit? (*Ernestine nods.*) I bought it on Fifth Avenue, sure did, to spite those white gals. You know how they hate to see a Negro woman look better than they do. It's my own little subversive mission to out dress them whenever possible. Envy is my secret weapon, babies. If ya learn anything from your Auntie let it be that.

Related Characters: Lily (speaker), Ernestine Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

When Lily comes to the Crump apartment for the first time, she notices Ernestine staring at her. Ernestine has already said to the audience that Lily is the first Black woman she has seen dressed in clothes that a white woman might wear. Lily now directly addresses the fact that Ernestine has noticed her style, saying that she bought her outfit in the stores where white women shop. She did this on purpose, she suggests, "to spite" white women who are made uncomfortable when Black people outdress them. Showing white women up like this, Lily says, is her "own little subversive mission." By saying this, she gives Ernestine—and, in turn, the audience—a glimpse into her courageous unwillingness to let society discount her power as a Black woman. There are many ways, she implies, to challenge everyday racism, as it's possible to take something as seemingly simple as style and turn it into a "subversive" tool that undercuts the racist power structures at play in the United States.

Go on say it, tongue won't fall out. The communist party, amongst other things. (*Ermina giggles.*) Oh you find that funny? (*Earnestly.*) I ain't laughing. I suppose ya happy with what you got, a bit of nothing. Sure I was happy at your age "a little pickaninny" selling hot cakes to the fishermen. Taking pennies from poor people ain't a job it's a chore. This may be New York, but this still the basement. Don't none of those crackers want to share any bit of power with us. That's what it's about. Red scare, should be called black scare.

Related Characters: Lily (speaker), Ermina Crump, Godfrey Crump, Ernestine Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

When Godfrey asks Lily if she's still involved in the Communist Party, he hesitates to actually say "Communist Party," prompting Lily to make fun of him for acting like it's dangerous to even *talk* about communism. After she says this, though, Ermina nervously laughs, perhaps because she knows her father disapproves of the Communist Party so adamantly. In turn, Lily becomes quite serious and talks about how there's nothing funny about advocating for justice, equality, and labor rights. She points out that Black people like the Crumps have very little to be thankful for, since they are still quite disenfranchised and don't have many resources available to them. Although Godfrey might feel like he's able to support his family because he has a stable job, Lily emphasizes the fact that he's still living in a basement apartment. For her, then, getting involved with the Communist Party is a way to push back against racial inequality in the United States. Needless to say, there's nothing sinister about striving for equality, but Lily acknowledges that Americans have villainized the Communist Party, which is what she means when she talks about Red Scare. Given that the Communist Party promotes equality and racial justice, she argues, the widespread resistance to the Party itself is—in many ways—yet another form of racism, as powerful white people fear the ways in which the Communist Party might empower Black people.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

❝ ERMINA. Why'd you lose your job?

LILY. Well babies, a Negro woman with my gumption don't keep work so easily. It's one of the hazards of being an independent thinker.

Related Characters: Ermina Crump, Lily (speaker), Ernestine Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

After Lily has been living with the Crumps for a little while, she tells her nieces that she has lost her job as an etymologist (someone who studies words' origins and meanings). It's worth noting that she never said much about this job in the first place—when her nieces wanted to know what, exactly, an etymologist *does*, Lily quickly changed the subject, claiming that she didn't want to bore them. This is a possible sign that she didn't actually have a job as an etymologist, though this reading runs the risk of undermining her professional abilities in the same way that racists might try to undercut her accomplishments. Either way, the thing that matters most in the play is what Lily says in this scene, as she tells Ernestine and Ermina that Black women with "gumption don't keep work so easily." What she means is that Black women who are "independent thinker[s]" are often discriminated against in the workplace (and beyond), since American society tends to favor disenfranchised people who are willing to unquestioningly go along with their own disempowerment. To stand up against injustice, though, is to invite all kinds of scorn.

❝ Nobody ask me.... Besides I never plan to marry. How you like that? I'm exerting my own will, and since the only thing ever willed for me was marriage, I choose not to do it. And why take just one man, when you can have a lifetime full of so many. Listen up, that may be the best advice I give you babies. And you needn't share that little pearl of wisdom with your daddy.

Related Characters: Lily (speaker), Ernestine Crump, Ermina Crump, Godfrey Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Lily spends time with Ernestine and Ermina while doing their hair in the kitchen. As she works on Ermina's hair, the sisters ask Lily why she has never been married, and she tells them that nobody has ever proposed to her. This, however, isn't necessarily the only reason she's single—rather, it's because she doesn't "plan to marry" *at all*. Lily recognizes that this sentiment is, in and of itself, rather transgressive in the context of 1950s American society, which is why she slyly says, "How you like that?" She can tell that Ernestine and Ermina have never even considered the possibility that they don't *have* to get married, especially since their father is so adamant about upholding strict religious values. In fact, although Godfrey believes that his daughters should remain virgins for their entire lives, he almost certainly still wants them to get married. His viewpoint, then, starkly juxtaposes Lily's worldview, in which remaining single opens the door for a woman to enjoy *many* lovers throughout her entire life. This scene thus spotlights the extent to which Lily's progressive views clash

with Godfrey's conservative views, ultimately showing Ernestine and Ermina that their father's restrictive outlook isn't the only way to live.

> [...] I wondered had her revolution already begun? So I went down to the Public library round my way, "Revolution, American, Revolutionary War, Revolution, French." But no Negro Revolution. I did find twenty entries on communism in the card catalogue, but no books on the shelves. The teacher said, "select a topic that's close to you." My essay was entitled "The Colored Worker in the United States," the mistake was using the word "worker" too liberally. The principal called in Daddy Goodness and told him to stop mingling with the Jews at his job and everything would be all right. Daddy didn't bother to tell him that his co-workers were all colored. And the Jews on our block won't speak to us.

Related Characters: Ernestine Crump (speaker), Lily, Godfrey Crump

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Speaking directly to the audience once again, Ernestine explains how Lily's talk about an imminent cultural revolution in the United States inspires her to seek out information about communism and the idea of a revolution in general. Her limited knowledge in this realm leads her to interpret Lily's words about a coming revolution a bit too literally, assuming that the social change her aunt is referring to has already materialized into a fully formed, cohesive movement. Of course, this isn't the case, so it's no wonder that she's unable to find anything in the library about the "Negro Revolution" her aunt talks so much about. She does, however, find plenty of literature about communism and the labor movement in the United States. She ends up writing an essay about the labor movement (which advocated for workers' rights), and though she doesn't intend to espouse communist ideas, her teacher and principal overlook her actual points and assume she has been learning about communism through her father and his experience working with Jewish people. (As a side note, it was quite common for anti-communist Americans to make the anti-Semitic assumption that Jewish people were communists who posed a threat to American society in the mid-20th century; this is why the principal tells Daddy to "stop mingling" with Jewish people at work.) This entire story illustrates just how close-minded many Americans were at the time, constantly vilifying any sort of critical thinking about the power structures at play in society.

> Well hell Godfrey I ain't said nothing about nothing. I can't help it if that child got eyes and ears, and a mind that ain't limited to a few pages in the bible.

Related Characters: Lily (speaker), Godfrey Crump, Ernestine Crump

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

After Ernestine gets in trouble at school for writing an essay about the labor movement, Godfrey is very angry and embarrassed. He explains to Lily that everybody thinks he's a communist now, since the school principal accused him of teaching his daughter communist ideas. Godfrey, for his part, blames Lily for filling Ernestine's head with such ideas. In response, Lily insists that she hasn't been teaching Ernestine about communism, saying that it's not *her* fault that Ernestine has "eyes and ears, and a mind that ain't limited to a few pages in the bible." By saying this, Lily does two things. First, she celebrates Ernestine's ability to have thoughts of her own, implying that she shouldn't be punished simply for thinking critically about the world around her. And by saying this, Lily also ends up challenging Godfrey's limited worldview, suggesting that Godfrey funnels everything in his life through his religious beliefs. In fact, she further implies that Godfrey's perspective is so narrow-minded that he doesn't even make use of the entire Bible, instead restricting himself to "a few pages." The idea here is that Godfrey has latched onto a select few religious ideas to help him get by in the world. And though that might work fine for Godfrey, Lily tries to help him see that Ernestine deserves to branch out in her thinking if that's what she wants to do.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

I left Florida for a reason, couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do nothing but go to work, make my dime and drink it down on Friday night. Then I found something that gave me inspiration, gave me strength to make a change. May not be like your change, revolution! Oh but it do feel that big to me. It soothed my pain and that's all I want right now. It took all the strength I had to take these gals on a train out their wooden doors and place 'em here in brick and concrete.

Related Characters: Godfrey Crump (speaker), Lily, Ernestine Crump, Ermina Crump, Father Divine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation in which Godfrey tries to explain to Lily why she has to follow his rules while living in his apartment, he sheds a light on why he chose to move to Brooklyn in the first place. In the aftermath of his wife's death, he felt incapacitated by grief—he "couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do nothing but go to work" and then spend his free time drinking. He was, in other words, wallowing in despair. By finding Father Divine's teachings and the Peace Mission Movement, though, he was able to latch onto something that felt meaningful, something that gave him the "strength to make a change." He recognizes that this might not seem so profound to Lily, who's more interested in revolutionary societal change than the idea of personal growth. But to Godfrey, simply finding something to help him manage his grief was extremely meaningful.

What's perhaps most significant about this passage is that it humanizes Godfrey, who is otherwise a somewhat challenging character in the play because of the restrictions his views place on Ernestine and Ermina. Now, though, the audience has a chance to empathize with Godfrey and try to understand why, exactly, he has devoted himself to religion. When he says that it "took all the strength" he had to move Ernestine and Ermina to Brooklyn, it becomes clear that his religious reformation was largely for the sake of his daughters, as he's only doing what he thinks is best for them—which, in this case, means doing whatever he can to pull himself together after his wife's death so that he can be a supportive father.

And I think I deserve some respect and you're trying me, you're trying me. (*Sniffs the air. Lily smiles seductively.*) I smell the liquor and the sweat. I see the juke box swirling and the cats laughing. (*He begins to laugh, lost in the memory.*) I can hear the big sister on stage hollering out her song. Go on sing! (*He stomps his feet.*) But I ain't going there. Taste my lips puffing on a Cuba, talking out my ass. (*He pulls Lily close to him and does a few quick dance steps, then releases her.*) Feel my hands 'round a woman's hips, swaying to the beat. But I ain't there! (*He storms out the door.*)

Related Characters: Godfrey Crump (speaker), Lily, Ernestine Crump, Ermina Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining to Lily how lost he felt after his wife's death and why he embraced religion, Godfrey tries to outline why he feels disrespected by her refusal to live by his rules while staying in his apartment. He thinks he deserves "respect" for the sacrifices he has made in order to be a stable and dependable father—sacrifices that Lily might not necessarily approve of, but sacrifices nonetheless. But there's also another reason that he feels he can no longer tolerate Lily's behavior: he feels tempted by her presence and her enticing lifestyle. In fact, he's *so* tempted by the idea of embracing Lily and spending his nights drinking, dancing, and smoking with her that just talking about it momentarily causes him to let down his guard. When he puts his arms around her and starts dancing, it's quite clear that Godfrey is still full of desire. The play implies that Godfrey could easily embrace Lily's lifestyle and abandon his religious convictions. However, he is determined to keep himself from doing this, and the simple fact that he's capable of losing himself in a mere fantasy is the precise reason he is so strict with himself about staying true to his religious commitment.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

Wait! I...I still got all of these questions I wanted to ask Sweet Father. My pockets are stuffed full of paper. (*The banquet table is removed leaving Godfrey sitting alone. Godfrey pulls handfuls of paper from his pocket. Ermina exits.*) But, he promised and now I got to wait another year before I get the answers. Oh No! If he is the God he proclaims to be I need his answers now, I need him to help me move on.

Related Characters: Godfrey Crump (speaker), Father Divine

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40-1

Explanation and Analysis

Godfrey spends the first half of the play looking forward to meeting Father Divine at the Holy Communion Banquet, where he plans to ask Divine the many questions he has written down in his notepad. However, Father Divine never ends up coming to the banquet, as he supposedly gets a flat tire in New Jersey. As everyone clears the food off the table, Godfrey has trouble accepting that Father Divine won't be coming, lamenting that he still has so many questions he needs to ask him. "I need him to help me move on," he says, ultimately emphasizing the extent to which he sees his devotion to Father Divine and the Peace Mission Movement as a way of overcoming his grief about his late wife and "mov[ing] on" with his life. In turn, the questions he has been writing throughout the play take on a new significance, symbolizing the dangers of relying too much on other people to provide guidance. The questions themselves remain unanswered, and this represents how lost Godfrey feels without someone to give meaning and substance to his life.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

LILY. [..] What? I don't generally do this, but I've been nervous as of late.

GERTE. (*Sarcastically.*) Just how is your … "revolution?" Working hard? You're spending a lot of time up at the headquarters in Harlem. Where is it exactly?

LILY. Lenox Avenue.

GERTE. That's right, Lenox Avenue. I haven't heard you mention it in quite some time. (*Lily stands.*)

ERNESTINE. Yeah, you ain't said much.

LILY. 'Cause it's liable to end up in one of your essays. You got too much imagination to keep a simple secret.

Related Characters: Lily, Gerte, Ernestine Crump (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

While verbally sparring with Gerte, Lily pours herself a glass of whiskey and claims that she needs it because she has been "nervous as of late." Gerte jumps on this opportunity to patronizingly talk about the "hard" work Lily has supposedly been doing for the Communist Party. By this point in the play, it's pretty clear that Lily has become a lot less involved in social activism as she'd like others to think, most likely because she spends most of her time drinking. Even Ernestine, who generally sides with Lily over Gerte, admits that Lily hasn't been talking much about communism and the impending revolution she usually talks so much about. It makes sense that Ernestine would notice this change, since Ernestine herself has gradually developed an interest in her aunt's ideas. In this moment, then, the play subtly hints that Lily is in something of a downward spiral, ultimately losing touch with the things that matter most to her as she starts to drink more and more. There's also a certain contrast at play here, since Ernestine is just beginning to become socially conscious even as her aunt's political engagement is waning. In turn, Ernestine perhaps begins to intuit that life can be hard for people who go against mainstream belief and stand up for themselves—a challenge that Lily doesn't seem to be responding very well to.

GERTE. Can't you forget our differences behind this closed door. When I see you I see no color. I see Lily. (*She lights a cigarette.*)

LILY. Well when I see ya I see a white woman, and when I look in the mirror I see a Negro woman. All that in the confines in this here room. How about that? What do you see Ernie? You see any differences between us?

ERNESTINE. Yeah.

LILY. There you go.

GERTE. May I say to you both, I have seen what happens when we permit our differences—

LILY. (*Enraged.*) Don't lecture me about race. You are the last person on earth I'd look to for guidance.

Related Characters: Gerte, Lily, Ernestine Crump (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In an argument between Gerte and Lily, Gerte accuses Lily of always twisting her words around to make her sound racist. She then essentially insists that she doesn't see race, saying, "When I see you I see no color. I see Lily." As Lily makes clear, this isn't the progressive, open-minded sentiment Gerte thinks it is—rather, it's a problematic and naïve viewpoint that only someone who has never experienced racism firsthand (that is, a white person) could possibly set forth. Lily tries to get Gerte to see that race is a very real thing and that ignoring the color of one's own skin isn't something a Black person can do, since the constant hatred and injustice that Black people experience is an ugly, ever-present reminder of how society discriminates based on race.

Gerte, for her part, tries to respond by making a comparison between racism in the United States and the persecution of Jewish people by Nazis during the Holocaust, but Lily cuts her off. This is a ridiculous comparison to make, since it's not as if Black Americans are the ones "permit[ing their] differences" with white people to come between them; rather, Black people are forced to deal daily with the horrible history of racism in the United States. And there's no point, Lily implies, in pretending that this history doesn't exist. This exchange thus underscores Gerte's failure to fully recognize the difficult position Black people occupy in the United States and her problematic impulse to downplay the hardships Black people continue to face.

❝ LILY. […] You expecting too much from that blanched mess of fabric. What's it gonna get you?

ERNESTINE. I'm gonna graduate in it. I'll be grown.

LILY. Grown. You think 'cause you got a diploma you grown. You'll be ready to step out that door in your white dress and get a job or a husband.

Related Characters: Lily, Ernestine Crump (speaker), Gerte

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

After Lily gets into a long argument with Gerte, she sits on the couch and drinks, eventually taking her anger out on Ernestine. More specifically, Lily has just heard that Gerte likes the lace that Ernestine has sewn onto her graduation dress, and because Lily is eager to go against anything Gerte says, she ends up insulting the dress itself. In particular, she suggests that it doesn't *matter* what the dress looks like, since a dress won't do anything to make Ernestine into the person she wants to be—she won't, Lily says, suddenly be an adult just because she's wearing a nice dress, nor will she be an adult because she has a high school diploma. Everything she says in this moment goes against the things she has already taught Ernestine. One of the first things Lily told Ernestine, after all, was that dressing well can be "subversive" when it comes to challenging society's white power structures. She has also suggested that education is an important way for Black women to gain power and influence that is generally unavailable to them otherwise. In this moment, then, Lily lets her anger and pettiness get the better of her, attacking her niece instead of supporting and uplifting her.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

❝ GERTE. So where are the warriors in your revolution now? Why don't they help us? How are we to lead our lives if we can't go out for a … a picture show on a Saturday night.

LILY. Welcome to our world, […]. You ain't supposed to period! Stop! Thought you knew about all these things being from Germany and all.

Related Characters: Gerte, Lily (speaker), Godfrey Crump

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

After a group of racist white people physically assaults Godfrey for being married to a white woman, he and Gerte rush into the apartment. Godfrey is bleeding from the head and wants to go back outside to track down his attackers, but his family keeps him from doing so. In the chaos, Gerte angrily turns to Lily and asks her where the "warriors in [her] revolution" are now—that is, why the Communist Party hasn't made more progress in stamping out racism. This is a patronizing thing to ask, since Gerte's tone clearly implies that Lily's activist efforts have all been for nothing.

At the same time, though, Gerte also expresses utter shock that such a thing could possibly happen. Her surprise once again sheds light on her failure to truly grasp the harsh reality of racism in the United States, which is why Lily fires back by welcoming her to the reality of life for Black people in American society. Gerte wants to know how she and

Godfrey are supposed to go about their lives as an interracial couple if there's so much danger and hatred lurking around them. Lily seizes on this opportunity to finally show Gerte that racism is stifling, merciless, and unrelenting, ultimately telling her that she and Godfrey *aren't* "supposed" to go about their lives as an interracial couple, at least not in the eyes of the many racists living in the United States.

❝ You see Ernestine that's your America. Negro sitting on his couch with blood dripping down his face. White woman unscathed and the enemy not more than five years back. You can't bring order to this world. You can't put up curtains and pot plants and have things change. You really thought you could marry a white woman and enter the kingdom of heaven, didn't ya?

Related Characters: Lily (speaker), Ernestine Crump, Godfrey Crump, Gerte, Father Divine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Amid the commotion after Godfrey comes home after getting attacked, Lily takes the opportunity to show Ernestine the unfortunate reality of living in the United States as a Black person. She emphasizes the fact that Gerte, a white woman, is completely fine—she's sitting on the couch "unscathed" while Godfrey has "blood dripping down his face." Although Lily ostensibly points this out in order to educate Ernestine, it soon becomes clear that she's *really* talking to Godfrey himself, as she wants to impress upon him just how foolish she thinks it was for him to marry a white woman while living in such a violently racist society. "You really thought you could marry a white woman and enter the kingdom of heaven, didn't ya?" she asks, clearly addressing Godfrey and implying that Godfrey married a white woman as a way of solving all of his problems. This implication most likely stems from the fact that Father Divine married a white woman, too, so Lily seems to think Godfrey was trying to emulate Divine. Whether or not this is true remains unclear, but Lily's overall point stands: namely, that 1950s American society is dangerously intolerant of interracial marriages, meaning that Godfrey has put himself at risk simply by marrying a white woman.

❝ GODFREY. I'll make a note to speak to her later.

GERTE. STOP! You've assembled lists that run miles and miles. There's an entire closet crowded with paper and scribbles of things you need to know, things you want to do, questions that must be answered. It would make three lifetimes to get through all of it.

[...]

GERTE. If you'd pay attention to the world around you, you wouldn't have so many questions to ask.

Related Characters: Gerte (speaker), Lily, Father Divine, Godfrey Crump

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

After Lily storms out of the apartment because Godfrey has suggested that perhaps she should leave, Gerte further urges him to kick her out of the apartment for good. She says that Lily is interfering with their marriage, which is why Godfrey must tell her she can no longer live with them. Although Godfrey previously suggested the very same thing to Lily, it seems that this was just something he said in the heat of the moment, since he hesitates when Gerte urges him to officially kick Lily out. Instead of agreeing to do so, he says that he'll "make a note to speak to [Lily] later," taking out his notepad and jotting something down. But Gerte stops him, finally saying that he relies too much on his notepad. What he needs to do, she implies, is face life on his own terms. If he didn't always retreat into his own thoughts by writing in his notepad and thinking about questions he wants to ask Father Divine, Gerte suggests, he wouldn't *have* so many questions in the first place. The idea here is that Godfrey has used his devotion to Father Divine as an excuse to retreat from his problems, allowing his religious commitment to take away his personal responsibility to respond in real-time to the problems that he and his loved ones encounter.

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.

PROLOGUE

Seventeen-year-old Ernestine Crump sits on a park bench in Brooklyn with her 15-year-old sister, Ermina, and her father, Godfrey. Directly addressing the audience, she explains that the grief of her mother's death laid her father flat. Godfrey cries out in sorrow as Ernestine explains how their family mourned her mother's death. The loss especially changed how Godfrey moved through the world, making him quiet and reserved. And then one day, Godfrey simply stopped wailing with grief, packed the family up, and moved them from Florida to Brooklyn.

From the very beginning of the play, it's clear that Crumbs from the Table of Joy *will explore the difficulties of moving on from grief and loss. After Ernestine and Ermina's mother died, their family was weighed down by their grief—especially Godfrey, who was seemingly incapable of doing anything at all. And when he finally* did *do something to move on from this terrible loss, he made a rather drastic move by uprooting his family and relocating to Brooklyn. It seems, then, that Godfrey's response to hardship is somewhat desperate, as grief has led him to completely change everything about his life.*

Ernestine explains to the audience that her father got a job at a bakery in Brooklyn. He left for work after dinner each night and came back in the early morning, nodding on his way in and out to a hanged photograph of a man named Father Divine. While he was gone, Ernestine and Ermina would go to school, where the other girls made fun of them for their southern upbringing and the rural way they dressed. Ermina often fought the girls, furious because of their remarks. But the two sisters found refuge in movie theaters, where they could go and watch dramatic films while sitting right next to white viewers. They could weep at the movies, and nobody would say anything.

The fact that Ernestine and Ermina seek refuge in movie theaters hints at a desire to escape their own lives, as if watching a movie helps them see beyond their own bleak circumstances. What's more, the girls' awareness of their proximity to white viewers in the theater highlights the cultural shift they've experienced by migrating from the South to the North. Whereas their home in the South was highly segregated, New York City is not. This takes some getting used to, as they're now tasked with learning all of the social codes and practices of the North, where racism is less apparent but still very much alive.

It's the 1950s, and everybody around Ernestine and Ermina is talking about the threat of communism—except, that is, for their father, whose main concern is whether or not Father Divine has written back to him. Godfrey has been writing to Father Divine, the leader of the Peace Mission Movement. Godfrey turned to the teachings of Father Divine when he was in the throes of sorrow after his wife's death. Father Divine ended up blessing Godfrey via mail, which suddenly "cured" Godfrey's grief and made it possible for him to move on. Godfrey was so grateful that he decided to move closer to Father Divine, which is why he took the family to Brooklyn—only to discover that the Peace Mission Movement had relocated to Philadelphia.

The Peace Mission Movement was an actual religious movement that reached its height in the first half of the 20th century. Its leader was Father Divine, who claimed he was God and taught his followers to abstain from sexual intercourse. Although the Peace Mission Movement was essentially a cult, it's worth pointing out some of Father Divine's most central teachings were about the importance of racial equality, ultimately aligning the group with the civil rights movement and even—at one point in the 1930s—the Communist Party. This is because the Peace Mission Movement actually practiced a form of "communal socialism," in which the community pooled its resources and shared the profits of various movement-related businesses.

On a Sunday evening, Ernestine and Ermina want to listen to the radio, but Godfrey won't let them. He reminds them that it's Sunday and that Father Divine wouldn't approve, so they beg to go upstairs to visit their neighbors, an elderly Jewish couple who often gives them money on the weekends to turn on various appliances—like, for instance, the television. But Godfrey doesn't want his daughters spending so much time with white people. Ernestine finds this hypocritical, since Father Divine himself married a "spotless white virgin." Still, Godfrey doesn't want anything to do with white people, saying that he doesn't want to end up like the Scottsboro Boys.

The Scottsboro Boys were a group of nine Black teenagers who were falsely accused of raping a white woman. The trials that followed this accusation were long and attracted quite a bit of attention from the general public, and the entire event drastically altered each defendant's life. Although several of the teenagers eventually went on to lead rewarding lives outside of prison, the entire ordeal largely ruined the defendants' lives. The fact that Godfrey references the Scottsboro Boys underscores just how frightened he is of the harsh reality of racism in the United States—so frightened, it seems, that he doesn't want to take any chances, instead opting to avoid white people as much as possible. Even just helping Jewish neighbors by turning on electrical appliances on the Sabbath (a day when many Jewish people refrain from using modern technology) seems potentially sinister to a Black man living under the constant threat of racist aggression.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

As Ermina sorts through the mail one day, Godfrey impatiently asks if Father Divine has finally responded to him. But Ermina is more interested in a square of fabric that Ernestine mail-ordered for a dress she's making. It's a dress for her high school graduation, and Ermina notes that their mother had promised Ernestine a beautiful dress for the occasion. Godfrey, for his part, is shocked to hear his daughters talk about this dress—he didn't even know Ernestine was going to graduate. He's suddenly overcome by pride, talking about how Ernestine will be the first person in the family to graduate high school. He also asks why Ernestine didn't mention this achievement, but she hints that she did. Embarrassed, Godfrey takes out a small **notepad** and writes something down.

That Godfrey didn't already know his daughter would soon be graduating high school is a good illustration of how wrapped up he is in his own affairs—so wrapped up, it seems, that he overlooks some fairly important developments in Ernestine's life. When she subtly suggests that she has already told him about her upcoming graduation, he seems somewhat ashamed of his oversight, but then he starts writing in his notepad. This ultimately highlights the way he tends to disappear into his own thoughts instead of engaging with the world around him.

Ermina continues sorting through the mail and comes across a letter from Father Divine. Godfrey is overjoyed, eagerly opening the envelope but then passing it to Ernestine, who is better at reading. Father Divine's message says that he was moved by the honesty in Godfrey's previous letters, which is why he decided to respond. He tells Godfrey to stay strong as a Black man living in poverty, adding that segregation and Jim Crow laws were invented to "punish those who are in touch with God." Father Divine adds that he doesn't ask much of his followers, other than that they remain celibate and pious. He insinuates that Godfrey can rise above adversity by resisting temptation and remaining pious.

Father Divine's remark that segregation and Jim Crow laws were invented to "punish those who are in touch with God" frames the push for racial equality as something that is righteous and pious. This makes sense, considering that the Peace Mission was a religious movement that emphasized the importance of equality. In turn, Father Divine's words help Godfrey view his own struggles as a Black man living in a racist society as part of something bigger than himself.

In his letter, Father Divine decides to give Godfrey and his daughters new names. Henceforth, Godfrey will no longer be Godfrey Crump, but Godfrey Goodness. Ernestine will be Darling Angel, and Ermina will be Devout Mary. Before signing off, Father Divine urges Godfrey to join the Peace Mission Movement at its Holy Communion Banquet, reminding him that, although "life is a feast," it's still necessary to pay for food—and Father Divine knows Godfrey won't let the Peace Mission Movement starve.

Father Divine's implication at the end of his letter is that he wants Godfrey to provide an ample amount of food for him at the upcoming Holy Communion Banquet, despite the fact that seemingly all of Godfrey's letters to Divine have been about how hard life has been for him as a poor Black man who recently arrived in Brooklyn. This is a good indication that Father Divine is perhaps less interested in helping Godfrey than Godfrey would like to think. Instead, Father Divine just wants to gain followers and support himself and the Peace Mission Movement, ultimately satisfying people like Godfrey with relatively bland, generic words of encouragement.

Godfrey is elated by Father Divine's letter, but Ermina doesn't like the sound of her new name. She wonders how she'll ever get the attention of boys her age with a name like Devout Mary. According to Godfrey, though, this shouldn't be a problem: Father Divine would not approve of Ermina fraternizing with boys anyway. Still buzzing with excitement, Godfrey talks about how he and his daughters are now part of Father Divine's "flock" and will be able to enter the kingdom of heaven with their new names. As he says this, he pulls out his money and starts counting it, and though Ernestine imagines him giving them some cash to go to the movies, he just sits there counting and recounting the bills until it's time for him to leave for work.

That Godfrey spends so much time counting and recounting his money serves as a reminder that the Crumb family doesn't have very much money—this is probably all of it, or at least the vast majority. And yet, Godfrey is so excited that he and his daughters are now officially part of Father Divine's flock that he will most likely spend what little they have on the Peace Mission Movement. Because Father Divine's teachings gave Godfrey a sense of hope in the aftermath of his wife's death, then, he's willing to support the Peace Mission Movement even if it means putting a financial strain on the family.


ACT 1, SCENE 2

One day, a woman dressed in stylish clothes arrives at the apartment. Ernestine and Ermina reluctantly let her in, though Ermina has no idea who she is. Ernestine explains to the audience that this is their aunt, Lily, who's the first Black woman she and her sister have ever seen dressed like a white woman. Lily shocks the two sisters by sitting down and showing her legs as she talks about how her stockings kept her warm while she was waiting on the street for the girls to let her in.

As soon as she enters the play, Lily represents a way of life that contrasts starkly with Godfrey's strict, cautious, and overprotective behavior. Whereas Godfrey avoids white people whenever possible for fear of falling prey to racist aggression, Lily outwardly challenges the status quo by dressing like white women—something Ernestine immediately notices.


Godfrey enters the room and is shocked to see Lily, but she takes his surprise in stride. Before long, Godfrey warms up to her and even speaks to her somewhat flirtatiously, admitting that she's looking "smart" and that he's pleased to see a familiar face after having been around so many strangers since moving to Brooklyn. But when Lily responds by flirtatiously suggesting that Godfrey's tongue still has a "taste of honey," he immediately avoids her eye contact.

Lily's presence seems to unlock something in Godfrey, who is normally so reserved. It's clear that they have some kind of history together, though the exact nature of their connection remains to be seen. As soon as Lily starts openly flirting with him, though, Godfrey immediately shuts down again, perhaps realizing that he has forgotten his newfound commitment to religion and—for that matter—celibacy.

To break the awkward silence that has filled the apartment, Godfrey tells Lily that they tried to find her when they moved to Brooklyn. They knew she lived in Harlem, but they had no way of tracking her down—Harlem isn't like a small town, where everybody knows each other. To stop Lily from talking too much about the time they used to spend together, Godfrey offers her a seat. As she moves into the room a bit more, though, she sees her sister's picture hanging on the wall and apologizes for not making it to the funeral.

Godfrey is anxious about reminiscing about the old days with Lily, suggesting that he doesn't want his daughters to hear about their history together. His reticence in this regard also implies that he wants to leave his past life behind—he's a devout religious man now, and it's clear that his former lifestyle didn't adhere to the rigid standards he now has for himself and for his daughters.

Godfrey notices that Ernestine is staring at Lily, so he tells her to stop. But Lily doesn't mind. She asks if her niece likes the suit she's wearing, saying that she got it on Fifth Avenue, where all the white women shop. She bought it to "spite" them, she says, since white women don't like when Black women manage to outdress them or look prettier than them. As the conversation progresses, she says that she has become an etymologist. She had to study hard to do this, but she suggests that it was worth it to break into a field full of white men. When Ermina asks what an etymologist does, though, Lily simply says that she won't bore them with the details.

It's evident that Lily is interested in breaking down boundaries. She's not one to simply accept arbitrary rules about who can do what, which is why she makes a point of outdressing white women. It's also why she works to become an etymologist. It's difficult to interpret her eagerness to change the subject when Ermina asks what an etymologist is—as Lily develops as a character throughout the play, it comes to seem as if she might exaggerate some of her credentials, so it's possible that she isn't *actually an etymologist. And yet, this reading runs the risk of undermining her abilities and ultimately subjecting her to the same restrictive, prejudiced mindset that she so admirably challenges. Either way, it's obvious that Lily is a free-thinking, independent Black woman whose way of responding to injustice stands in stark contrast to Godfrey's.*

Lily makes a comment about how hungry she is, and though she half-heartedly tells Godfrey and Ernestine not to go to any trouble on her behalf, she quickly accepts an offer to stay for dinner. Before Ernestine goes to find some food, though, Lily asks her to come give her a kiss, and when she's in arm's reach, she pinches her behind and comments on how big she has gotten. "And look at those boobies!" she says, telling Ernestine to watch out because she might end up drawing the attention of adult men. Bewildered, Ernestine hastily retreats to the kitchen, covering her breasts with her arms.

Again, it's overwhelmingly clear that Lily is not the type to adhere to Godfrey's strict and overprotective values. Whereas Godfrey is serious and somewhat sexually repressed, Lily is full of life and willing to speak openly about romance and attraction. Her free-thinking attitude will later bring itself to bear on Ernestine's worldview and ultimately challenge the restrictive worldview Godfrey has tried to force upon his daughters.

Lily asks Godfrey to take her bags in from the hall. He's surprised she even brought bags in the first place, but it soon becomes clear that she intends to stay. Sitting down, she asks Godfrey for a drink, and he gravely informs her that they don't keep alcohol in the house—prompting her to make a joke about him becoming religious. She soon realizes, however, that this is no joke: Godfrey *has* become very religious. She notes the picture of Father Divine on the wall and puts the pieces together, asking if Divine is still preaching and presenting himself as God to his followers. Godfrey defensively explains that Father Divine's words reached him when he was in a pit of despair in Florida, and that this is what motivated him to move the family to Brooklyn.

Godfrey is protective of Father Divine and his teachings, since he essentially restructured his entire life around those teachings. For Godfrey to second-guess Father Divine, then, would be like second-guessing the ideas that now define his existence. In turn, Godfrey has no stomach for Lily's sarcastic tone, since any challenge to the Peace Mission Movement is like a challenge to Godfrey's entire way of being.

Lily tries to get Godfrey to rehash memories of old times they spent together in various bars, but he refuses to participate. Instead, he shifts the conversation, asking if she's still involved in the Communist Party. She makes fun of him for talking about it like it's a frightening organization. She simply wants true equality, she explains, pointing out that capitalism puts Black Americans in especially disenfranchised positions. Although everyone refers to the threat of communism as "Red Scare," she says, they should really call it "black scare."

Although it was vilified in the United States during the 1950s, the Communist Party fiercely advocated for justice and equality. As such, many progressive Americans were sympathetic to the communist cause. In fact, the Communist Party even helped provide some of the Scottsboro Boys (whom Godfrey mentions in the play's prologue) with legal representation, so the audience might think that Godfrey, too, would have a soft spot for the Party. However, Godfrey is clearly like the many Americans who make a point of denouncing communism. To that end, many people who resisted social change in the 20th century often unfairly accused activists and progressives of engaging in nefarious communist activity, using this as a quick and easy way to besmirch a person's name in society. This kind of hysteria came to be known as "Red Scare," and since the Communist Party was outspokenly in favor of racial justice and equality, Lily suggests that "Red Scare" could easily be called "black scare," implying that the country's fear of communism is rooted in racism.

Godfrey doesn't like Lily talking about communism in front of the girls, but Lily tells him to relax. She claims to have promised her own mother that she would come look after the girls in her sister's absence. Godfrey loosens up a bit, but when Lily smiles at him, he quickly looks away and writes something down in his notebook. She asks what he's writing, and he explains that he's just jotting down questions he wants to ask Father Divine when he comes to New York for the Holy Communion.

Godfrey is so devoted to Father Divine that he wants the man's opinion on seemingly every aspect of his life. He wants, in other words, to refract everything he encounters through the lens of the Peace Mission Movement, desperately looking for guidance. It thus becomes clear that Godfrey feels somewhat incapable of finding his own way forward in life—a good indication that the loss of his wife has completely upended his ability to move through the world on his own.

Godfrey begrudgingly goes into the hall to get Lily's bags while Lily talks to Ernestine and Ermina. When he returns, he asks if she's going to stay, and she says, "Only if you insist." Ernestine then turns to the audience and talks about how a minister in Florida once gave a long sermon about the end of the world after one of his female congregants came back from New York smoking cigarettes and wearing makeup. Now, though, Ernestine feels as if she has encountered sin up close for the first time, and it doesn't seem all that bad.

Ernestine suggests that Lily is a living, breathing embodiment of sin—or, at the very least, a representation of the supposedly sinful lifestyle that Ernestine has been taught to avoid. Now that Ernestine has a chance to interact with somebody who has embraced sin, though, she doesn't see what the big deal is: Lily is just a human being, and there's nothing particularly ominous or harmful about her. The fact that Ernestine feels this way hints at her later gravitation toward Lily's independent, free-thinking ways.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Ernestine explains to the audience that she, her sister, and her father now share two single beds pushed together so that Lily can have her own place to sleep. She, Ermina, and Lily are now sitting in the kitchen as Lily straightens Ermina's hair. The girls ask Lily about her job, which she has apparently lost. She says that determined, confident Black women often aren't able to keep their jobs, noting that this comes with the territory of being an "independent thinker."

More than anything, Lily shows her nieces that American society is suspicious of anyone who pushes back against their own disenfranchisement. Lily is an "independent thinker," but because she's a Black woman living in a racist and sexist society, it's not all that easy for her to find stability and success. And yet, she doesn't suggest that this means Black women like her should simply back down and follow the status quo—to the contrary, she implies that the cost to pay for independence and personal freedom is ultimately worth it.

Ermina tells Lily that Ernestine wants to be a movie star, so Lily teases her about trying to be like the famous white actresses of the day. The conversation then turns to Lily's love life, as the girls ask why she never got married. She tells them that she hasn't been asked. But she also doesn't plan to get married, not wanting to settle with just one man when she could spend a lifetime enjoying the company of *multiple* men. She says that this is a good thing to keep in mind, though it's probably best if the girls don't mention such an idea to their father.

Although Lily's views on marriage and romance might not seem all that cutting-edge to contemporary audiences, it's worth remembering that the play takes place in the 1950s, when the common expectation was that women would get married early in life to a man who would provide for them. Lily, however, rejects the idea that this is something she has to embrace, ultimately suggesting that embracing her sexuality on her own terms has been very empowering—an idea that certainly goes against Father Divine's restrictive beliefs surrounding love and marriage.

Lily often talks about a "revolution," causing Ernestine to wonder when, exactly, this cultural push for change will take place. Ernestine envisions the revolution as an actual battle. If so, she wonders if she'll have to leave school to fight by Lily's side. Curious about what will happen, Ernestine goes to the library and tries to find information about the revolution. She doesn't find much. Still, she writes an essay for school entitled "The Colored Worker in the United States." Her principal ends up summoning Godfrey and telling him not to talk to his Jewish coworkers, implying that he has been bringing home communist ideas—ideas that are, according to the principal, working their way into Ernestine's worldview.

The reaction that Ernestine's principal has to her essay is a good illustration of just how paranoid many Americans were about the supposed threat communism posed to quintessentially American ways of life. Of course, Ernestine is just interested in learning about how Black people are treated in the American workforce, but because her essay most likely explores the many injustices Black Americans face in everyday life (and especially in their work lives), her principal sees the ideas as a threat to the entire American system—a system that ultimately serves white people and disenfranchises Black people.

In reality, all of Godfrey's coworkers are Black, and none of the Jewish people on his block even talk to him. But he doesn't explain any of this to Ernestine's principal, simply remaining silent until he gets home, at which point he angrily tells Lily that she has put him in a very difficult position. Everyone thinks he's a communist now. His coworkers won't even talk to him anymore. But Lily refuses to apologize, insisting that she didn't teach Ernestine anything about communism—it isn't *her* fault, she says, that Ernestine is capable of observing the world, nor is it her fault that Ernestine has "a mind that ain't limited to a few pages in the bible."

Although it's reasonable to conclude that Ernestine might not have written her essay if Lily hadn't opened her eyes to the many injustices Black people face in American society, it's also the case that Ernestine isn't necessarily advocating for communism—she's just thinking critically about the world around her. This, it seems, is what Lily wants her niece to do: question the injustices other people take for granted. Instead of limiting herself to a rather narrow religious worldview, Lily has simply encouraged Ernestine to broaden her horizons.

Godfrey insists that Ernestine will have to go back to school and apologize for writing about communist ideas in her essay. Lily thinks this is absurd, claiming that Godfrey is punishing his daughter for thinking for herself. Ernestine, for her part, turns to the audience and recites her apology, saying that she didn't mean to endorse communism—she simply wanted to write about the labor movement, which is a movement dedicated to making working conditions better for the average American.

Again, it's quite clear that Ernestine's intention wasn't to sing the praises of communism. Instead, she has just started to ask questions about the world around her, which has led her to think critically about how Black people are treated in the American workforce. Unfortunately, though, her teachers don't encourage this kind of open-minded, inquisitive thinking. Instead, they punish her for daring to ask questions that might challenge the unjust power structures at play in the United States.

Ernestine notes that her father might have actually benefitted from reading her essay. If he had, he might have stood up for himself when he got passed over for a promotion at work. The only time he has ever stood up for himself, she says, was when he got drunk in the South and got into a fight. He later accused the white bartender of selling him alcohol and, in doing so, letting the devil work its way into him. Thankfully, Ernestine's mother calmed him down, getting him to sleep until his drunken anger finally passed.

Ernestine's narrative aside gives the audience a bit of insight into what Godfrey's life was like before his wife died and before he devoted himself to religion. First of all, this story reveals that he didn't used to be so opposed to alcohol. More importantly, though, it shows that he has rarely stood up for himself in his life—the only notable time, it seems, was when he got drunk and challenged the white bartender. He therefore doesn't have much experience with advocating for himself, since the only time he did so was in an admittedly futile situation, since blaming somebody else for one's own drunkenness isn't very productive. In turn, his disdain for Lily's tendency to take a stand against injustice makes sense, since he himself has never had success doing so.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

One morning, the family prepares to visit the Peace Mission to make sure everything is ready for Father Divine's upcoming visit. Ermina is in the living room when Lily bursts into the apartment and stumbles into a mannequin, upon which Ernestine has started sewing her **graduation dress**. Lily is drunk and has been out all night, but she manages to catch the mannequin before it falls to the ground. She then drunkenly tells Ermina and Ernestine—who has entered—about her night, detailing how she danced for hours with a handsome Black man from Cuba, their bodies pressing tightly together.

Needless to say, Lily's drunkenness and her stories about dancing with handsome men are out of place in the Crumb household, since Godfrey is so strict. For Ermina and Ernestine, then, Lily's presence is like a window to the external world, as they can vicariously experience her free, uninhibited lifestyle by listening to her stories.

Ernestine asks about the dance Lily did with the Cuban man, and she explains that it was the mambo. She then demonstrates the mambo, taking Ernestine's hand and pulling her through the moves. As they dance, Lily talks about how handsome the Cuban man was, and Ernestine feels overjoyed and thrilled—until, that is, Godfrey appears in the room and angrily tells his daughters to go into the hall.

Unsurprisingly, Godfrey disapproves of Lily's behavior. He doesn't want her teaching his daughters about what it's like to live unencumbered by strict religious rules. Instead, he wants to protect his daughters and ensure that they lead safe, pious lives.

Godfrey reprimands Lily for drinking, but she laughs him off and starts talking about the drinking they used to do *together*. She distinctly remembers him enjoying alcohol, "groping in the darkness," and becoming "friendly" with her thigh. Enraged, Godfrey tells her to be quiet and once again tells his daughters to leave the room. He also says that Lily would understand his way of thinking if only she came with them to the Peace Mission, where she would learn that alcohol and "loose moral character" only work against Black people.

In this moment, it becomes clear that Godfrey and Lily do, in fact, have some sort of romantic history. But the play doesn't dwell on this detail, mainly because Godfrey is so eager to get Lily to stop talking about their past in front of his daughters. Instead of speaking openly with Lily about their history, then, he changes the subject by urging her to come to the Peace Mission, once again dealing with his own discomfort by thinking about religion and its ability to steer people toward what he believes are better ways of life.

Godfrey and Lily start arguing about the past, with Godfrey trying to guilt Lily for not being by her sister's side when she died. Lily, however, claims to still have felt the grief of her sister's death. Still, Godfrey accuses her of having been too preoccupied with her life in New York—and her involvement in the Communist Party—to support her sister. But Lily refuses to be shamed, saying that she left the South because she didn't want to stay somewhere she was constantly mistreated. Her comment prompts Godfrey to point out that he himself wasn't so happy in the South, either.

Although their lives look much different from each other these days, both Godfrey and Lily left the South in an attempt to seek out better lives. And yet, they've gone down such different paths that it's difficult for them to find common ground, with Lily leading a progressive, free-thinking life while Godfrey embraces religion.

As their argument comes to a head, Lily asks if Godfrey wants her to apologize. If he does, she says, then that's what she'll do. She then leans forward and kisses him. For a moment, he relaxes into the kiss. When it's over, though, he explains that he only wants the best for his daughters so that they can lead better lives than both him and Lily. As long as she's living with them, then, she has to respect the rules of the house, which means respecting Father Divine.

The fact that Godfrey relaxes into Lily's kiss shows that he still has feelings for her—or, perhaps, that he's desperate for some kind of human connection. However, his devotion to religion and the Peace Mission Movement keeps him from fully giving himself over to his desires, which is why he eventually pulls away and reorients himself by telling Lily to respect Father Divine as long as she's living in the apartment. In doing so, he essentially reminds Lily—and himself—of the unbending commitment he has made to religion.

Godfrey explains that before he devoted himself to Father Divine, all he could do was drink and wallow in sorrow. But following Father Divine's teachings gave him the courage to make a change. Now that Lily is living in his apartment, though, he's surrounded by temptation. He speaks poetically about the sound of the music she plays and the smell of alcohol and sweat coming off of her. Losing himself in these sensations, he talks about what it would feel like to go back to a bar and drink and have a good time. He grabs Lily and dances with her for a moment before abruptly letting go and saying that he won't give in. Then he storms out of the room.

Even after trying to ground himself once again in his religious devotion, Godfrey can't help but get lost in the idea of embracing Lily and her enticing lifestyle. For him, then, Lily represents the strong temptation to abandon his religious convictions—convictions he has, until this point, been adamant about keeping. It is precisely because he wants so badly to give in to Lily, though, that he ends up rushing out of the apartment, clearly recognizing that his desire for romance and pleasure is as at least as strong as his determination to be pious and celibate.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

Godfrey disappears for days on end. He rides the subway while he's away, hardly looking up at his surroundings. At one point, a German woman named Gerte asks him for help, wanting to know if she's in the Bronx. He's wary of her, since she's white, but he eventually gives her some help. She has the address of somebody in New Orleans and wants to know if it's very far away, so he tells her that it's quite far. Still, he asks if she's trying to get him in trouble, explaining that he's not "like those adventurous colored fellas." She doesn't understand what he means, and soon enough he realizes that she's just hungry and lost, so he offers to bring her to the Peace Mission.

Godfrey thinks Gerte assumes he wants to flirt or sleep with her because she's white, which is why he tells her that he's not "like those adventurous colored fellas"—meaning that he wouldn't take the risk of courting a white woman in public, which could put him in danger of attracting racist aggression. Again, his earlier mention of the Scottsboro Boys—who were falsely accused of raping a white woman—sheds light on his tendency to exercise caution when it comes to how he conducts himself in the racist context of American society. He understands that it's all too easy to become the victim of racist hate, so he tries to keep his distance from any situation that might put him in danger.

ACT 1, SCENE 6

Back at the apartment, Godfrey timidly enters the living room and looks around. His daughters are hesitant to embrace him, wanting to know where he has been. But he manages to endear himself to Ermina by giving her a cookie and explaining that he simply needed to clear his head. Things get tense again, though, when Gerte steps into the room and Godfrey introduces her as his new wife. Ermina can't help but exclaim that Gerte is white, and Ernestine says that their mother wouldn't like this new development—after all, she hasn't even been dead for a full year. Gerte tries to sympathize by saying that she lost her mother at a young age, too, but Ernestine simply yells that she doesn't want Gerte in the apartment. Meanwhile, Lily stands in the doorway and asks Godfrey what's going on.

It's surprising that Godfrey has married Gerte, especially considering his initial reticence to even talk to her on the subway. And yet, it's also worth noting that he eventually suggested that she come with him to the Peace Mission, meaning that the very beginning of their relationship took shape within the context of his newfound religious devotion. What's more, it has already been mentioned in the play that Father Divine himself married a white woman, so Godfrey's decision to marry Gerte isn't quite as unprecedented as it might seem—to the contrary, Godfrey is essentially doing his best to emulate Father Divine, once again looking to the Peace Mission Movement to figure out how to conduct his life.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Ernestine and Lily are in the living room preparing to leave for the Holy Communion Banquet at the Peace Mission, where Godfrey will finally get to ask Father Divine his questions. Dressed all in white, Ernestine addresses the audience and talks about how she keeps waiting for the "revolution" Lily always talks about—and still it hasn't come. Meanwhile, Lily does her makeup. She won't be going to the Peace Mission with the rest of the family. Taking out a flask and sipping at it, she says that Father Divine wouldn't appreciate the "mystique of [her] pretty face."

Although Lily is still living in Godfrey's apartment, she makes it clear that she wants nothing to do with the Peace Mission Movement. The fact that Ernestine is still at the apartment with her while the others are already at the Peace Mission subtly hints at her waning interest in religion and her gravitation toward other ways of thinking. The fact that she wonders when the revolution Lily talks so much about will happen is another sign that she has started to think about things that have nothing to do with her father's religion.

Meanwhile, Godfrey and Gerte are at the Peace Mission preparing for the banquet. Godfrey is busy trying to decide which question he should ask Father Divine first, but Gerte is more preoccupied with how much food has been laid out on the table—it seems almost obscene to her. At the same time, Ernestine continues to address the audience, suddenly imagining that Gerte jumps up on the table in a black cocktail dress and starts dancing and singing. But, of course, this doesn't actually happen. Instead, Ernestine explains to the audience that the family spends the evening sitting around waiting for Father Divine, all of the food going to waste because he supposedly got a flat tire in New Jersey.

Ernestine's daydreams spotlight her desire for a different, more exciting life. When she imagines Gerte jumping up on the table and dancing in a black cocktail dress, she essentially fantasizes about having a life in which everyone isn't so solemn all of the time. In reality, though, her father is deeply serious about his devotion to the Peace Mission Movement. Godfrey's devotion makes Father Divine's failure to attend the Holy Communion Banquet all the more disappointing, perhaps implying that even the thing Godfrey turns to for stability and peace of mind isn't as dependable as he'd like to think.


Ermina asks why, if Father Divine is God, he can't just fly to the banquet. But Godfrey ignores her, simply saying that Father Divine will certainly find a way to get there. "Trust me," Godfrey says, "he won't let us down." But, Ernestine tells the audience, that's exactly what Father Divine does. At the end of the night, the family clears away the food while Godfrey laments that he still has so many questions to be answered. Now he has to wait another year for Father Divine to answer his questions, which feels nearly impossible, since he needs Father Divine's help to "move on."

When Godfrey says he needs Father Divine's help to "move on," he effectively acknowledges that his involvement in the Peace Mission Movement is fueled by a desire to process past hardships so that he can move forward in life. In other words, Godfrey seems to recognize that his newfound religious devotion is directly tied to the loss of his wife, whom he still seems to be mourning (despite the fact that he now has a new *wife). Instead of trying to sort through his grief on his own, then, he feels as if he needs Father Divine, which is why he's devastated when he learns that he'll have to wait until next year to finally meet him.*


ACT 2, SCENE 2

In the coming months, Ermina takes an interest in boys and starts imitating the slang she hears in the neighborhood. She also makes fun of Ernestine for being uptight, though even Ermina dislikes it when the other kids make fun of them for living with a white woman. And yet, Ermina can only defend Gerte so much, since she herself doesn't like that her father married a white woman. If she had her way, she tells Ernestine, she would pay a local boy's formerly incarcerated cousin to break Gerte's kneecaps—something that recently happened to somebody else in the neighborhood. Ernestine can't believe her ears, but Ermina simply pushes on and says that it's simply not right for their family to live with a white woman.

One of the difficulties that people in interracial marriages faced in the 1950s was the fact that such relationships often attracted anger and scorn from both white and *Black people. Ermina experiences the disapproval of her peers, who taunt her and Ernestine because their father married a white woman, thus betraying (in their peers' eyes) the Black community. To add to this, it will later become clear that Godfrey's marriage to Gerte doesn't just invite disapproval from Ermina's peers but is actually something that actively puts Godfrey in danger because of racist white people who don't think Black men and white women should be together.*

Back at the apartment, Gerte chops cabbage as Ernestine works on her **graduation dress**. Meanwhile, Ermina interrogates Gerte, asking her if she's anti-Semitic like the Nazis. The question offends Gerte, who demands to know where Ermina got such an idea, but Ermina leaves the room. Gerte then tries to bond with Ernestine, who generally doesn't speak to her. They end up realizing that they both like going to the movies, but Ernestine declines Gerte's invitation to go together, since she wouldn't want people to see them.

Neither Ermina nor Ernestine wants to form a relationship with Gerte. It's difficult for them to welcome her into the family because they're still grieving the loss of their mother. What's more, though, Godfrey's marriage to a white woman has put the girls in a difficult position within the Black community, since seemingly everyone around them disapproves of the marriage.


Gerte tries to fill the silence by turning on the radio, but Ernestine reminds her that Godfrey doesn't like music in the apartment on Sundays, so she shuts it off. Just then, Lily stumbles in after a long night of drinking. Gerte gives her some water for her hangover, and then Lily turns the radio back on and dials it to a station playing jazz. She waxes poetic about how jazz musicians take old songs and make them new, prompting Gerte to admit that before she moved to the United States, she thought all Black people either "played jazz or were laborers." One of the reasons she wanted to travel to the United States was to meet the people who make such wonderful music.

Gerte reveals her lack of knowledge about Black Americans in this moment. She doesn't seem to recognize that what she's saying might be offensive, not hesitating at all to reveal that she has made very broad generalizations about Black people. Given that everyone in the household (except Godfrey) already resents her, it's unlikely that saying this will help her cause, ultimately emphasizing her naïve perspective on race—a perspective that surely makes Ernestine, Ermina, and Lily that much less likely to connect with her.

After speaking admiringly about jazz, Gerte goes over to the radio and turns it off, noting that Godfrey doesn't like it when they play such music in the apartment. Lily, for her part, remarks that Godfrey doesn't like *anything*, especially things he "can't control." But Gerte likes Godfrey's dependability—he always comes home at the same time with a pocketful of sweets from the bakery. Lily remains unimpressed and pours herself a glass of whiskey. She offers some to Gerte, but Gerte refuses because it's still early.

Earlier in this scene, Gerte turned on the radio to fill the awkward silence between her and Ernestine—but Ernestine told her to turn it off because Godfrey doesn't approve. Now, though, Lily turns on the radio and Gerte is the one to reprimand her, reminding her that Godfrey doesn't want such music playing in the apartment. In this way, Godfrey's strict lifestyle imposes itself on everyone in the family, and different people essentially weaponize his rules against each other, ultimately using his faith as an argumentative tool.

Gerte asks Lily about how she spends her days. She hasn't heard Lily talk about the "revolution" much. Ernestine chimes in to say that Lily *has* stopped talking about her work in Harlem with the Communist Party, but Lily claims that she simply says nothing because she doesn't want to get in trouble with Godfrey for filling Ernestine's head with new ideas. When Gerte mentions that she came across a job opening that Lily might be interested in, Lily says that "nobody wants to hire a smart colored woman."

The implication in this exchange is that Lily has become less involved in the Communist Party, perhaps because she has been spending her time drinking and partying. By asking about how she spends her time, Gerte subtly suggests that Lily leads an idle and unsavory lifestyle. But Lily strikes back by suggesting that it's not as easy for her to get a job as it would be for Gerte—after all, racism is still very much alive in New York City, even if Gerte is blissfully unaware of its scope. What's more, Lily clearly resents the idea that she should take any old job, since she's very intelligent. And yet, this is exactly the problem: white employers, she implies, are hesitant to hire strong, independent Black women for fear that they might push for change.

Gerte, for her part, insists that she doesn't see color when she looks at Lily, but both Lily and Ernestine challenge this—when they look at Gerte, they certainly see a white woman, and when they look in the mirror, they see Black women staring back at them. Gerte tries to say that she has seen how dangerous it can be for people to let their differences come between them, but Lily cuts her off, saying that the last thing she needs is to listen to Gerte talk about race.

Gerte essentially tries to claim that she doesn't see race, but this idea is inherently problematic. What both Lily and Ernestine understand very well is that, though people perhaps shouldn't be defined *by the generalizations or assumptions that society makes about race, the fact of the matter is that it's impossible to simply ignore race altogether. Only white people—who have never experienced the harsh reality of racism firsthand—are afforded the privilege of pretending race doesn't exist. For Lily and Ernestine, though, race is* very *real: the color of their skin directly impacts their everyday lives, since they live in a racist society.*

Gerte asks Ernestine to get her a bowl, but Lily tries to stop her niece, reminding her that she's not Gerte's servant. Plus, Gerte didn't say "please." Gerte then complains about how Lily always twists her intentions around, adding that she's Ernestine and Ermina's stepmother, meaning that she *does* have some authority in the household. This leads to a broader argument, in which Lily insults Gerte's marriage to Godfrey by asking what it's like to be with a man who refuses to touch her. Gerte loyally explains that Father Divine doesn't approve of marital sex.

Lily doesn't want Ernestine to feel obligated to do anything for Gerte. By telling her niece not to get the bowl, she not only tries to undermine Gerte's position in the household—she also tries to instill in Ernestine a sense of independence, showing her that she doesn't always have to do what other people expect of her. This lesson will prove important to Ernestine's overall development as she gets older.

When Ernestine comes back (after having gotten Gerte a bowl), Lily turns the radio back on and explains to her niece that the jazz coming out of the speakers belongs to them. The music descends from communal practices in African villages, she says, where each community had its own set of rhythms—but then the music cuts out and Ernestine turns to the audience, saying that she only *wishes* Lily had spoken this way. In reality, her aunt doesn't say anything about the beautiful communal nature of music. Instead, Lily sits down, drinks whiskey, and insists that there are certain social circles who revere her for her ideas.

The play subtly implies that Lily is both an important figure in Ernestine's life and *a somewhat tragic figure in decline. Lily has made a point of teaching Ernestine the importance of thinking for herself, which is an invaluable lesson that will serve Ernestine for the rest of her life. However, Lily seems less and less engaged with the important lessons she imparts to her niece, instead spending most of her time drinking and telling (potentially exaggerated) stories about how important she is.*


Gerte has left the room, so Ernestine asks Lily if she thinks her mother would have liked the **graduation dress** she's making. The dress is nearly perfect, though she had some trouble sewing the collar—but that's all right, since she's using some very fine lace around the collar, so it will cover up the imperfection. The lace is beautiful, but Lily is in a bad mood, so she disparages the material, especially after hearing that Gerte likes the lace Ernestine is using. Lace, Lily says, makes the dress look too "prissy" and "country."

Even though Lily wants to empower Ernestine and teach her to be independent and self-confident, she now turns on her. Because Gerte said she likes the lace on Ernestine's dress, Ernestine finds herself in the crosshairs of Lily's scorn. What Lily fails to recognize, though, is that the graduation dress itself is deeply meaningful for Ernestine, since it symbolizes not just her academic accomplishments (which align with Lily's ideas about independence and free-thinking) but also the memory of her mother, since Ernestine's mother had promised to make her a beautiful graduation gown.


Addressing the audience, Ernestine says that she and Ermina went to the department store to admire the lace every day until Ermina finally worked up the courage to steal it. Their mother, Ermina had said, would have wanted Ernestine to have it. Now, though, Lily continues to insult the lace, insisting that it'll make Ernestine look "girlish," which is exactly how white people *want* her to look. She tells Ernestine not to care so much about her dress, and when Ernestine reminds her that she'll be graduating in it, Lily undercuts the importance of getting a high school diploma. It's not as if Ernestine will suddenly become an adult simply because she has graduated, Lily says. Deeply hurt, Ernestine rips the lace off the dress and says that she doesn't like the way alcohol makes Lily talk.

It's clear that Lily is just taking her anger toward Gerte and Godfrey out on Ernestine. After all, Lily has previously suggested that it's important for Black women to educate themselves so that they can more easily break down the many barriers society has put up to keep them out of certain fields. And yet, she now disparages the idea that graduating high school will make any difference in Ernestine's life—a clear sign that she's saying things she doesn't really believe, ultimately letting her frustration with Gerte and Godfrey overshadow all else.



ACT 2, SCENE 3

Ernestine is in the living room one day when Godfrey and Gerte burst in. Godfrey is bleeding from the head, and Gerte's dress is covered in blood. Godfrey snatches up Ernestine's sewing scissors and makes for the door, but Gerte stops him, begging him to stay inside. They were on the subway when a group of white men started heckling them. Godfrey told them not to speak to his wife, and then the white men became even more unruly, eventually calling him the n-word. A fight ensued, and the racist men smashed a Coke bottle over Godfrey's head. Meanwhile, everyone looked on as if the racists were doling out justice.

The play has already hinted at the various dangers that unfortunately come along with a Black man marrying a white woman in 1950s American society—a society that is extremely intolerant about the idea of Black men having intimate relationships with white women. The Crumb family has now experienced just how intolerant and narrow-minded their surrounding society can be in this regard.

In the commotion, Godfrey knocks over Ernestine's sewing mannequin and angrily asks why it's there. Meanwhile, Gerte wishes Godfrey hadn't even responded to the white men. She also wants to call the police, but Lily tries to explain that the police wouldn't do anything. In response, Gerte angrily asks where Lily's "revolution" is now, complaining that a Black man and his white wife can't even mind their own business on a Saturday evening without encountering trouble. Lily just welcomes Gerte to the real world—this, she suggests, is the reality of living in a racist society. But Gerte still doesn't understand why or how this happened.

Gerte's disbelief highlights her naïve ideas about racism in the United States. She clearly thinks that intense racial discrimination and violence is a thing of the past. The play's Black characters, though, know all too well that this isn't the case. Just because Gerte herself has never experienced or witnessed overt racism doesn't mean it's nonexistent—a lesson Gerte has now learned the hard way, though she still seems eager to believe that this incident was nothing more than a fluke that can be remedied by calling the police. Even after the attack, then, she has unrealistic ideas about racism.

Ernestine erupts into anger, saying that she hates Gerte and that she's to blame. Godfrey tells her not to say such things, but Lily defends her niece, suggesting that Father Divine inspired Godfrey to marry a white woman without urging him to consider the real-world consequences. She tells Ernestine that this is a perfect representation of American culture: Godfrey is bleeding from the head, but Gerte—his white wife—is completely unharmed.

Lily suggests that Father Divine's example of marrying a white woman led Godfrey astray, since Father Divine never acknowledged the potential perils of doing such a thing while living in a racist society. By saying this, Lily effectively challenges Godfrey's entire worldview, since criticizing Father Divine means criticizing the things Godfrey holds closest to his heart. In turn, Lily's words invite everyone—including the audience—to consider the downsides of unquestioningly following a religious leader like Father Divine.

Godfrey responds by sarcastically apologizing that he can't meet Lily's high standards, suggesting that maybe she should find a place where she'll be with like-minded people. When Lily asks if he's telling her to leave, he simply says that he won't "sacrifice" his own needs for hers. She then asks if she isn't good enough for him, and when he says that she's "plenty good," she asks why, in that case, she isn't the one sharing his bed with him. He tries to tell her that they're on different paths, since she's a communist. She tries to get him to reminisce about their past together, but he cuts her off, saying that he isn't the same man as he used to be.

Finally, Lily explicitly acknowledges her desire to be in a romantic relationship with Godfrey. It's clear that she originally came to the apartment with this in mind, but Godfrey maintains that they could never be together because they've grown apart. Of course, he's right that their paths have diverged, but it's worth noting that they actually have quite a bit in common—after all, they've both devoted themselves to things that are bigger than themselves: Godfrey has given himself to God and the Peace Mission Movement, and Lily has committed herself to activism and the Communist Party. Because Godfrey has embraced a fairly restricted lifestyle, though, he could never embrace Lily's progressive, free-thinking worldview.

Godfrey criticizes Lily for filling his daughters' heads with bad ideas. In response, Lily says she's tired of being blamed for everything—she's sorry about what happened to Godfrey and Gerte on the subway, but she will never apologize for who she is. In fact, she feels as if Godfrey owes *her* an apology, and when he doesn't give her one, she storms out of the apartment.

Lily stands her ground in this conversation. She recognizes that her beliefs don't align with Godfrey's, but she refuses to renounce those beliefs simply to please him. After all, she has already made it clear that she's a free-thinking, independent person, so she would never undermine her values for someone else's sake.

After Lily leaves, Gerte says that although she has nothing against Lily, she thinks it's unfair that Lily is always standing between her and Godfrey. She says that Godfrey has to make a choice, and when he uncomfortably points out that asking Lily to leave would be like leaving behind "everything that came before" in his life, Gerte points out that this is exactly what she herself has done. Godfrey then pulls out his **notepad**, but Gerte stops him, saying that he spends too much time writing down questions. She grabs boxes of paper hiding beneath the furniture and starts flinging the many questions into the air, telling her husband to pay attention to the *real* world—if he does that, she says, he won't have so many questions.

Although Godfrey has made it very clear to Lily that they will never be together, he has trouble leaving her completely behind, since doing so would be like erasing everything about his past—suggesting that he still has a soft spot for the person he was and the life he led before finding the Peace Mission Movement. The entire conversation is so distressing to him that he tries to retreat into his religious devotion by writing down questions in his notepad, but Gerte finally stops him from doing so, showing him that he uses his commitment to Father Divine as a way of running from his own life.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Later, Ernestine cleans up the pieces of paper that have been scattered about the living room. As she does so, she reads the questions Godfrey wrote down for Father Divine, which largely implore Father Divine to give him guidance—he came to New York with his daughters but feels like life is largely the same as it was in the South, so he wants to know what to do. In another question, Godfrey asks Father Divine what he should do about the fact that his boss calls him the n-word in front of the other workers. He also mentions that Lily has been living with his family and he doesn't know how much longer he'll "be able to look away."

Godfrey's questions illustrate the uncertainty he feels as he moves through life. In short, he's looking for constant guidance, trying to run from the difficult prospect of actually confronting life head-on and dealing with its many challenges. This scene thus confirms the idea that Godfrey uses religion as an escapist outlet—one that helps him turn away from real life while still feeling like he's doing something to address his troubles.

Lily comes back with a bottle of whiskey and tells Ernestine that she's leaving. She says she has been invited somewhere upstate, where she'll give a lecture. "They've recognized that I'm an expert on the plight of the Negro woman," she says. Ernestine says that Lily is lucky, but her aunt reminds her that she'll be graduating in just a few days. She also tells Ernestine that she can't sit around waiting for life to *happen* to her. Similarly, she shouldn't spend her time picking up her father's mess—Godfrey should do that himself.

Lily once more urges her niece to think and act for herself. Although she briefly turned against Ernestine in a moment of anger while arguing with Gerte, she now resumes her supportive role in her niece's life. It's unclear whether or not Lily was actually *invited to give a lecture upstate. Given that she has been spending her time partying instead of visiting the Communist Party's headquarters, it seems unlikely that she's as involved in activism as she once was (or as she claims to be). Nonetheless, she instills in Ernestine a sense of independence and power.*

Ernestine asks Lily to pour her a glass of whiskey, and though Lily notes that Godfrey wouldn't approve, Ernestine says that her father isn't there to stop her. As they drink, Ernestine talks about how nobody wants to be her friend. She's lonely, so she asks if she can become a communist like Lily. Lily laughs and tells her niece that she had trouble when she first came to New York City from the South, too. She originally left the South after enraging everyone by interrupting a minister's sermon about the evils of Jim Crow to suggest that everyone should take their concerns to the city hall instead of complaining about them in church.

The main message Lily imparts to Ernestine is the importance of standing up and advocating for oneself. This is the same message she tried to convey to her fellow community members when she interrupted the minister and urged them to bring their complaints directly to the city hall. This kind of self-empowerment and independence, she implies, isn't something that necessarily comes with popularity—to the contrary, standing up for oneself often attracts criticism and scorn, but that doesn't mean people like Ernestine should shy away from speaking their mind.

If Ernestine wants to further the revolution, Lily says, she should simply find herself a good profession. By doing this, she'll make sure that she's always "essential" and important, even if people speak badly about her or try to exclude her.

Lily suggests that finding a good job will help Ernestine position herself as an important and empowered member of society—somebody who can't be ignored or pushed around. By saying this, Lily urges Ernestine to develop a sense of self-sufficiency that will ultimately make it harder for people (especially racists and sexists) to discount her value.

Gerte enters the living room, so Lily offers her a drink. For a moment, Ernestine imagines Gerte accepting the drink and then dancing exuberantly with Lily—but this is only what she *wishes* would happen. Instead, Gerte refuses the drink and then goes back to bed. Ernestine then goes to bed herself. Before Lily leaves, she rips some lace off her own clothes and starts sewing it to Ernestine's **graduation dress**.

The fact that Ernestine wishes her aunt and her stepmother would drink and dance together suggests that she wishes the two conflicting areas of her life could fit seamlessly together. She wants to embrace the free-thinking independence that Lily has taught her, but she knows that doing so will mean going against her father's wishes. She thus faces a choice between a sheltered, restricted lifestyle with her family and a more independent but fulfilling existence.

EPILOGUE

Ernestine is wearing her **graduation dress** and holding her diploma. She has just graduated. Back at the apartment, Godfrey, Gerte, and Ermina throw a celebratory party for her. As they celebrate, though, Godfrey reveals that he has gotten Ernestine a job at the bakery. When Ernestine says she's uninterested in working at the bakery, Gerte tells her that it's a good, steady job, and Godfrey says that he already accepted the position on her behalf.

Godfrey thinks he's doing something wonderful for his daughter by getting her a job, but he ultimately oversteps by accepting the position on Ernestine's behalf. This doesn't align with the independent lifestyle Ernestine wants to lead. Plus, working in a bakery isn't what she imagines herself doing, as she seems to have more elaborate plans for her future. Sure enough, then, she will need to make a choice between following her own path and making her father happy.

Godfrey doesn't understand why Ernestine doesn't want the job at the bakery. When she tells him that she's going to Harlem, he thinks she's just chasing Lily. In reality, though, Ernestine wants to go for *herself*. She turns to the audience and narrates her future—a future in which she goes to Harlem and tries to find Lily and the Communist Party's headquarters. Nobody knows what she's talking about, but they remember Lily, so they send her to a bar, where she tells the bartender about her eagerness to devote herself to the communist cause. Listening to her speak, he says he thinks he knows the place she's looking for. He gives her an address, and when she goes there, she sees that it's not the Party headquarters—it's City College.

When Ernestine got in trouble for writing a school essay that made her teacher think she was a communist, Lily defended her by suggesting that she was simply thinking critically about the world. Interestingly enough, now that she actually wants to become involved in the Communist Party, she ends up making her way to college, where she will certainly continue to think critically about the world around her. She doesn't end up joining the Communist Party, then, but instead pursues the ideas that drive the Communist Party's belief in justice and equality—a pursuit that Lily, wherever she is, would certainly approve of.

Years later, Ernestine narrates, she will return to Brooklyn to visit Godfrey, Gerte, and Ermina. Ermina will give birth to her first child before Ernestine has graduated college. Ermina will return to the South to visit their grandmother, and she'll also be the one to identify Lily's dead body, which will be "poked full of holes." Ernestine will read important works of theory and literature, and through those pages she'll feel connected to Lily again. Even later, Ernestine will become a Freedom Rider during the bus boycotts of the civil rights movement. She'll also get married and have two sons—one will go to college and the other will die from a drug overdose. For now, though, she simply plans to walk through Harlem as she begins her new life.

The implication here is that Lily dies from complications related to intravenous drug use. Her story is thus a tragic one, as her independent, free-thinking attitude ultimately left her alone in life. But the play doesn't suggest that such a mindset is what leads to tragedy. To the contrary, the play ends on a somewhat hopeful note, implying that Ernestine has been empowered to lead a life that was perhaps inaccessible to her aunt, who belonged to a generation and time period that was ruthless in its discrimination and alienation of free-thinking Black women. Ernestine, on the other hand, has the chance to advocate for herself and for other Black people by participating in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Although Lily's life ended sadly, then, her legacy lives on in Ernestine's strength and agency as a Black woman fighting for justice and equality.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Crumbs from the Table of Joy.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Apr 2022. Web. 30 Apr 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Crumbs from the Table of Joy.*" LitCharts LLC, April 30, 2022. Retrieved April 30, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/crumbs-from-the-table-of-joy.

To cite any of the quotes from *Crumbs from the Table of Joy* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Nottage, Lynn. Crumbs from the Table of Joy. Theatre Communications Group. 2003.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nottage, Lynn. Crumbs from the Table of Joy. New York: Theatre Communications Group. 2003.