"Master Harold" … and the Boys

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ATHOL FUGARD

Like Hally's mother in *"Master Harold"… and the boys*, Athol Fugard's mother, Elizabeth, owned a general store, the St. George Tea Room in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. In an interview after its publication, Athol Fugard acknowledged that "Master Harold" was written in part to atone for an incident between him and a black friend and mentor really named Sam who worked in his mother's store. When he was 10 years old, young Athol, who also went by the name "Hally" at that time, had an argument with Sam that culminated in his spitting in Sam's face. Athol's father, Harold, like Hally's father in the play was also disabled. He worked as a Jazz pianist. Athol studied Philosophy and Anthropology at the University of Capetown but dropped out before graduating in order to travel. After hitchhiking to northern Africa, he spent two years working on the steamer ship, the S.S. Graigaur, an experience he would later chronicle in his writing. But Fugard credits his time working as a clerk in the Native Commissioners' Court in Johannesburg in the late 1950's and 1960's for giving him a keen awareness of racial injustice. He has written over thirty plays in addition to several novels. His wife Sheila and daughter Lisa are also novelists. He now lives with his wife in San Diego, CA, where he teaches writing at U.C. San Diego.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The establishment of apartheid in South Africa in 1948 sets the political and social context for *"Master Harold"*. The abolition of slavery in the U.S. starting with Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st 1863 and followed by the ratification of the 13th Amendment on April 8th 1864 are relevant historical precursors to the abolition of South African apartheid in 1994. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement, which peaked in the 1960's, saw the expression of many parallel and poignant condemnations of racism and oppression though the institutions of racism—and the battle against them—persist to the present day.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The works of South African writer J. M. Coetzee, including his most celebrated novel, *Disgrace*, also explore the complex racial dynamics of apartheid and post-apartheid era South Africa. Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* takes the dissolution of slavery in the southern United States at the end of the Civil War as its theme, and it too addresses a sea change in the societal structures of racism. Flannery O'Connor's short stories, including "Everything that Rises Must Converge" and "A Good Man is Hard to Find," often feature racial tensions in Jim Crow era southern U.S., and Harriet Beacher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a social novel written in large part to condemn the practice and inherent racism of American slavery. These, like *"Master Harold"… and the boys*, are all works by white authors that address and, to varying extents, seek to subvert racism and prejudice. There is an incredibly long list of stunning works from the other side, works by black abolitionist, socially conscious, and/or activist authors who either directly address issues of race or who, through the context of their stories alone, illustrate and condemn societal prejudices and racism. These works include, but are by no means limited to the novels *Black Boy* by Richard Wright and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the works of James Baldwin, including his collection of essays *Notes of a Native Son*, the poetry and plays of Langston Hughes, and the poetry, plays, and novels of the black South African writer, Zakes Mda.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Master Harold"… and the boys
- **When Written:** 1981-82
- **Where Written:** South Africa
- **When Published:** 1982
- **Literary Period:** Post-Colonial realism
- **Genre:** Play
- **Setting:** Port Elizabeth
- **Climax:** Hally storms out of his mother's shop after demanding that his black friend and would-be mentor, Sam, refer to him henceforward as "Master Harold."

EXTRA CREDIT

First Staging: Because of what the conservative government of South Africa saw as radical racial content, *"Master Harold"… and the boys* was banned from the stage in that country. As a result, it debuted at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1982.

His Own Demons: Despite his social activism, Athol Fugard seems to have felt himself to be the inheritor of white South African racism. He sometimes cast himself to perform as his most vicious and antagonistic white characters in his plays.

PLOT SUMMARY

It is a rainy day in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The year is 1950. Because the poor weather is keeping customers away, the two black waiters at the St. George's Park Tea Room, Sam and

Willie, have some spare time on their hands. Sam reads comic books while Willie practices **ballroom dance**. Sam, who is a little older and wiser, coaches Willie through the foxtrot. Willie is practicing for the upcoming dance competition at the Centenary Hall in New Brighton. Willie complains that his dance partner, Hilda, hasn't been showing up to practice, then confesses that Hilda may be keeping her distance because the last time they practiced he beat her for missing her steps. He thinks that she's been sleeping with other men. Sam advises Willie to quit with the beatings. Hally, their employer's seventeen-year-old son, enters in his high school uniform as Sam demonstrates his more expert dancing.

Sam serves Hally his supper, a bowl of pea soup, and tells Hally that his mother has gone to fetch his father, a drunken cripple, from the hospital. Hally seems perturbed by the news and skeptical because his father's stay is supposed to last three more weeks. Hally is upset by the prospect of his father returning, and he insists Sam must be mistaken. Talk turns to school and the blows Hally received for drawing a caricature of his teacher. Sam starts reading Hally's mathematics textbook, and the term "magnitude" soon leads the two into what both them of them consider to be the more agreeable subject of history. They discuss various "men of magnitude." Hally's favorites are Charles Darwin and Leo Tolstoy, while Sam prefers Abraham Lincoln and William Shakespeare. They both agree that Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin, is a true genius. The three reenact some scenes of education from Hally's boyhood that took place in Sam and Willie's servants' quarters. Sam and Hally alternated the roles of pupil and teacher while Willie took less interest in the lessons.

While reminiscing, Hally remembers a kite that Sam made for him one day. He recalls his embarrassment to be seen flying a shabby, homemade **kite** with a black man, and how his embarrassment melted away after the kite took off. He recalls wanting Sam to stay with him longer as he flew the kite from a bench on a hill. Hally's mother phones from the hospital, and she and Hally argue after she says that, in fact, yes, Hally's father is coming home. Hally is distraught at the news. He begins to take his anger out on Sam and Willie, who resume dance practice.

Hally is momentarily distracted out of his foul mood when he has the idea to write about Willie's dance competition for a school assignment. Sam describes the event in vivid detail, and suggests that the dance floor is a slice of an ideal world, a world without collisions. Hally collapses back into his anger, arguing that their talk of an ideal world is "just so much bullshit." Hally begins to be abusive with Sam, who has gently suggested Hally be more kind when speaking about his father. Hally counters that Sam should start calling him "Master Harold" instead of Hally. Then he tells a racist joke his father has shared with him about "a niggar's arse." He insists the joke is funny to Sam and Willie, who are dumbfounded. After some additional cruelty from Hally, Sam shows Hally his own backside. Then Sam adds some more detail to what, it turns out, was Hally's half-remembered story about the kite. Sam had made the kite to distract Hally after a humiliating scene caused by Hally's drunken father, and Sam left the bench because it was for whites only. Hally says that everything is pointless, and Sam, ever steady, advises him to pause and think things over because a lot of teaching has gone on. Hally leaves the tea room to meet his parents.

After Hally exits, Willie resolves to stop beating Hilda. He's going to practice hard with her and do his best to win the competition. He decides to spend his bus fare on a jukebox song, and the play concludes with the two men dancing together. Sam leads and Willie follows.

CHARACTERS

Hally – Hally, or Harold, is the 17-year-old son of a tearoom and convenience store owner. Hally's father is also a crippled, alcoholic, ad racist World War II veteran. As the play unfolds, we learn that, when he was a younger boy, Hally's troubled family life often drove him to spend time with his mother's black workers, and . Hally is in secondary school, where, he precociously asserts, it is unnecessary to perform well on tests or even to learn all the material. His relationship to white South Africa's built-in structures of racism is murky—he seems at once to be blind to its existence, to unconsciously subvert or go against its demands, and to harbor all its darker aspects within himself.

Sam – Sam is a middle aged black man. A talented dancer, he has pieced together an incomplete education from his time spent talking through his homework and through his own careful observation of the world. He is something of an accidental philosopher and a teacher. Not only does he try to impart, incrementally, his wisdom to Hally, he also spends his free moments coaching his coworker through dance steps. He is compassionate and kind, and compassion and kindness are the main subjects of his lessons.

Willie – Willie is also a middle aged black worker in 's mother's shop. He is a less talented dancer than , and has neither taken it upon himself to learn Hally's school lessons nor has he acquired Sam's wisdom. Though he isn't the fastest learner, Willie is diligent, and by the play's end, thanks to Sam's gentle prodding and, inadvertently, Hally's racist outburst, Willie resolves to cut off the cycle of abuse he thoughtlessly promotes when he beats the women close to him. Willie's resolution to stop beating his dancing partner, Hilda, is among the play's more hopeful moments, a sign that it is possible for things to get better.

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.

RACISM

"Master Harold"... and the boys is a play whose story is wedded to the complex racial relationships among its three characters, the two middle aged black workers, Sam and Willie, and Hally or "Master Harold," their boss's son, a white teenager on the verge of manhood. The racial tension among the characters is, in turn, informed by the play's setting and context. In 1950, South Africa, including Port Elizabeth where *"Master Harold"* is set, was two years into a decades-long governmentally sanctioned system of racial segregation and oppression known by its Afrikaans name of apartheid (literally "apart-hood"). Under apartheid, South Africans were divided into four official racial groups ("black," "white," "coloured," and "Indian"), with different neighborhoods, beaches, parks, and public services provided to each depending on their racial caste, which was, essentially a hierarchy with socially privileged white South Africans at the top and oppressed black South Africans at the bottom. Eventually, black South Africans were even deprived of their South African citizenship. Even before apartheid, however, racial segregation of a less codified and officially sanctioned form had been the norm in South Africa since Dutch colonial rule began there in the latter part of the 17th century.

Given South Africa's history of civically and socially promoted racism, Hally's comments that Sam has "never been a slave" and that "we"—meaning, presumably, "enlightened" white South Africans like Hally—"freed [Sam's] ancestors... long before the Americans," reveal a blind, even pitiful, ignorance. Hally is so unconscious an inheritor of his society's prejudice that he finds it acceptable, as a member of the "elect" white race, even to argue with Sam about who is a more appropriate role model for black freedom and equality. As the play progresses it reveals other blatant examples of racism, such as Hally's proposal that social dances like the foxtrot and waltz have replaced the "savage" tribal dances of the black man's ancestors and the jokes about black people Hally reveals he laughs at with his father, but racism has a range of more subtle expressions, both in Hally's character and in the chief action of the play itself, two black men working for and waiting on a white boy who presumes, often unconsciously, to be their moral, intellectual, and social superior because of a societal standing derived from the color of his skin.

ABUSE, OPPRESSION, AND INEQUALITY

Abuse, oppression, and inequality are among the dominant features of the racism that *"Master Harold"... and the boys* takes as its main theme, but Athol Fugard also shows us that these more general aspects of racism are, to some extent, color blind. We learn very quickly, for example, that Willie's dancing partner, Hilda, has run away because he gives her a "hiding" whenever she misses her steps, and, what's more, his previous dancing partner, Eunice, ran away from him for the same reason. Hally, likewise, is a victim of physical abuse at school, where he's given blows with a ruler when he acts out. Hally's story of being hit with a ruler through his pants, however, prompts Sam to describe how black South Africans are held by the ankles with their pants down and their shirts over their heads to receive "strokes with a light cane" in prison. For good measure, the officers throw in a healthy dose of psychological abuse by "talk[ing] to you gently and for a long time" between each stroke. We imagine he speaks from personal experience, and see that even the systems of abuse are unequal.

Abuse also comes slinking in when the societally sanctioned forms of inequality are challenged: Hally is given "a rowing" when he's caught spending time with Sam and Willie in the servants' quarters, and we, the readers or audience, begin to see a broader picture of how young white children are forcibly shoehorned into adopting the oppressive beliefs of the preceding generations, just as, it's implied, Willie beats Hilda because beatings are the only form of correction he knows. The characters' experiences with abuse and physical punishment even alter the language they use to describe the world, such as when Hally says some great man is going to make society more just and equal by getting up to "give history a kick up the backside and get it going again."

Considering the prevalence of inequality and abuse in the play, it comes to seem all the more urgent to seize on the moments when, through some accident, gross inequality is neutralized. It is a touching feature of the story, a glimmer of hope, and a rare moment of equality among the characters, when Hally, like Sam and Willie, doesn't have the money to play a song on the jukebox. In that instant, the three are on equal footing. But such a moment is also potentially perilous. What happens if Hally decides, because he is white, that he is entitled to more? The play leaves us wondering whether the more significant moment in Hally's life, the period of his childhood when his emotionally and physically crippled father and figuratively crippled family life seemed to provide an opportunity for mutual exchange and education in Sam and Willie's quarters, has been squandered, and the potential for change lost.

IGNORANCE VS. LEARNING, EDUCATION, AND WISDOM

"Master Harold"... and the boys offers its audience and readers various models of education and experience. The official, school education Hally receives and his presumptuous and privileged attitude about it stand in sharp contrast to the self-motivation and humility Sam displays during his private, after-school lessons with Hally. The lines between teacher and student are blurred. Is Sam, the middle aged black man ignorant of his country's geography, Hally's student? Or is Hally, the privileged and often morally and emotionally blind white school boy, the pupil of Sam, a wise philosopher? Willie, meanwhile, seems content to go on as is without having a formal education forced upon him, or taking the initiative to acquire the trappings of a formal educate on his own. But, even in Willie's case, it seems the lessons offered by Sam's wisdom prevail, not Hally's inherited facts.

In the role of philosopher, Sam councils Hally to keep his eyes and ears open, to see the world as the classroom, not the other way around. And when, in dejection, Hally insists that he "doesn't know anything anymore," it is Sam who wisely guides him, and the audience, back to attention when he says, "...it would be pretty hopeless if that were true. It would mean nothing has been learnt in here this afternoon, and there was a hell of a lot of teaching going on... one way or the other." By the play's conclusion, Willie, at least, acknowledges that beating Hilda was wrong and resolves not to do it any longer. This much has been done to weaken the chain of abuse and oppression. But the state of Hally's heart and mind are still uncertain. Will he grow into a good, kind, just, and loving man who stands in opposition to the crimes of his country and culture, or will he become an embittered racist who continues the cycle of oppression? The implication is that we must take up the work that the play has begun; there is still a lot of learning to be done.

CRIPPLES AND BROKEN THINGS

The most readily apparent cripple in the play, Hally's father, isn't just a cripple in body but, it seems due to his alcoholism and attitude, is spiritually crippled as well. He is a broken man unable to give Hally the love and affection he needs, unable to teach him moral lessons. In that respect he is like the apartheid-era South Africa in which the play unfolds. He is unable to provide Hally with much besides the unfair sense of entitlement and privilege that accompany the color of his skin. Hally's education then, like Sam's, is interrupted and broken, albeit for different reasons. Willie too, is a kind of moral cripple, unable to see that beating the women he cares about is the very thing that keeps them away. And though Hally, unlike his father, isn't physically crippled, his ability to empathize (feel with) his friends and mentors—to even see them *as* friends and mentors— has been shattered by his family life, his culture, and his education. Sam, the fleetest dancer of the three, seems also to have the fleetest spirit, though in one respect at least he considers himself a failure—he was unable to fully open Hally's eyes to the injustice and bigotry before them.

DANCE AND DREAM

Social dances like the foxtrot, quickstep, and waltz feature prominently in *"Master Harold"... and the boys*. The action of the play both begins and concludes with dance, and it is punctuated throughout with dancing lessons, and discussions about the significance of dance itself. Dance, it turns out, is an escape from the world as it is into a world without collisions, a world that seems effortless, an ideal, a ***dream***. The significance attributed to dance in the characters' discussions gives the actual dancing in the play a symbolic weight and deep, emotional charge—things, one might argue, inherent in the abstract, liquid gestures of dance itself. A synchronized cultural dance is the kind of dream that might be achieved if the races began to learn from, exchange, and deal with one another equally.

One thing Sam teaches Willie is that dance, though it appears effortless when we see two masters working synchronously, is an internal struggle, a strenuous balance between rigid over-stiffness and sloppy disorder. The grace and beauty of the dance and dancer depend on this tension between internal strain and the outward appearance of graceful ease. Dancers must suspend themselves in between, in between struggle and ease, order and chaos, just as dreamers are suspended in a state in between being asleep and awake. Something very similar could be said for the strain of maintaining a just and equitable society. One of the implicit messages of *"Master Harold"* is that we as a society, like Willie with his dancing lessons, have a lot of work to do, that we need a lot of practice, and one of Sam's arguments is that dreaming is the first practical step toward achieving the thing about which you dream.

SYMBOLS

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

THE KITE

At its most basic, the kite that Sam fashions for Hally is a symbol of the human capacity to rise up and to rise above. The kite's potential for flight is like our potential to transcend both our personal limitations and the broader, more systemic limitations imposed on us by our society and culture. As such, it also represents a kind of joyful freedom. When Sam first presents Hally with the kite, Hally is

embarrassed at the idea of flying a kite with a black man, but, when the kite begins to fly, his embarrassment melts away and is replaced by pure elation. Hally's joy at the prospect of flight blinds him to the fact that Sam is societally excluded from sharing it. Yet, as is later revealed, Hally unknowingly flies the kite from a "whites only" bench. There is an implicit challenge that the story of the kite offers in *"Master Harold" and the boys*: the plays asks us to keep our eyes open enough to see beyond our own joys or sorrows and register when others are abused, maligned, and oppressed. The kind of carefree joy Hally experiences flying Sam's kite should be possible for us each and all.

BALLROOM DANCE

In *"Master Harold"... and the boys* ballroom dance serves both as a symbol of escape from the world as it is and as an ideal, potential world, a "world without collisions." Willie and Sam preoccupy themselves with dance as a way to distract themselves from the humdrum routine of waiting tables at the somewhat shabby St. George's Tea Room. Hally, however, fails to see the beauty and significance of dance. His nonplussed attitude makes sense: as a socially privileged white boy he doesn't face the same kind of oppression and, therefore, has less to escape from, societally speaking, than Sam and Willie. What's more, the world already seems a little more ideal when you're sitting at the top of it. The contrast between an ideal world and the world as it is becomes strikingly evident at the play's conclusion. Willie spends his bus fare on a song so that he can dance, not with a movie star, but with another aging man, yet, for a moment, Sam, Willie, the St. George's Tea Room, and the world's imperfections are transformed into a fluid and ideal beauty.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage International edition of *"Master Harold" ... and the boys* published in 2009.

"Master Harold" ... and the Boys Quotes

SAM: That's your trouble. You're trying too hard.
WILLIE: I try hard because it is hard.
SAM: But don't let me see it. The secret is to make it look easy.

Related Characters: Sam, Willie (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Sam and Willie are at work in St George's tea room, but because there are no customers, Sam has been reading comic books and Willie has been singing and practicing a ballroom dance routine. Willie has asked Sam to judge his dancing, and Sam responds that Willie is "too stiff" and looks like he is trying too hard, advising Willie that "the secret is to make it look easy." This exchange immediately establishes a dynamic wherein Sam, who is slightly older and has more experience of the world, imparts knowledge and advice to Willie. As in this instance, this advice often takes the form of telling Willie the "proper" way to conduct himself.

Note that Sam's words here have a double meaning, born out of the symbolic significance of ballroom dance in the play. It's certainly true that giving the appearance of effortlessness is an important element of dance; at the same time, Sam's advice is also relevant to his and Willie's status as black South Africans in the Apartheid era. Their subordinate social position and role as servants to the white family who own the tearoom means life is certainly hard for them, yet Sam's words suggest that they must not reveal this outwardly. Maintaining a smooth, effortless "performance" is arguably important in order to retain a sense of dignity, or simply to stay employed and out of trouble. Either way, Willie's advice proves that life for black South Africans is akin to a complex dance, requiring skill that must be practiced and perfected via shared knowledge.

Love story and happy ending! She's doing it all right, Boet Sam, but it's not me she's giving happy endings. Fuckin' whore!

Related Characters: Willie (speaker), Sam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Following his advice about making dance look effortless, Sam has told Willie that ballroom dance must look "happy," evoking glamour and romance. Willie has asked what romance is, and when Sam explains that it is a "love story

with a happy ending," Willie responds that his dance partner, Hilda, is giving others "happy endings," and he calls her a "fuckin' whore." Again, this passage emphasizes how Willie's rough and ignorant nature contrasts with the wisdom and restraint shown by Sam. Willie's violent anger towards Hilda suggests he enacts the frustration he feels as a result of his own oppression on her. Indeed, he blames Hilda for the fact that he does not have "happy endings," and his habit of beating her is an example of a cycle of abuse, an important theme in the play.

Tried to be clever, as usual. Said I was no Leonardo da Vinci and that bad art had to be punished. So, six of the best, and his are bloody good.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has started doing homework and Sam has noticed a caricature Hally drew of his math teacher. Sam compliments the caricature, but Hally says that when his teacher found it he "tried to be clever" by saying Hally was no Leonardo da Vinci, and used this as an excuse to give Hally six lashes of the cane. This story suggests that Hally's teacher gets a kind of sadistic pleasure out of punishing him, even making a joke out of it. It also further emphasizes the thematic importance of artistic skill as a metaphor for desirable behavior. Just as Sam criticizes Willie for dancing stiffly, Hally's teacher (presumably) scolds him for drawing badly. These examples show that both Willie and Hally's behavior is constantly being monitored and evaluated.

They make you lie down on a bench. One policeman pulls down your trousers and holds your ankles, another one pulls your shirt over your head and holds your arms... and the one that gives you the strokes talks to you gently and for a long time between each one.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has told Sam about the caning he received from his mathematics teacher at school, and Sam has asked if the teacher made Hally pull his trousers down. Hally responds that he didn't. Sam then explains that when a black man receives lashings in prison, one policeman holds his trousers down while another pulls his shirt up and a final one administers the strokes. Sam's description conveys the fact that Hally's caning at school is just one relatively mild manifestation of the violence that pervades South African society. In both cases, a person in a role of authority uses vicous, seemingly sadistic methods to punish those in a comparatively powerless position.

Sam's comment that the policemen giving the lashing in prison "talks to you gently and for a long time" emphasizes the sense of sadism that underlies his account. By drawing out the punishment, the policeman abuses the absolute power he has over the prisoner. The word "gently" is especially disturbing, and points to the perverse intimacy created in such a violent act. It also suggests that the police operate under the assumption that they are morally justified in administering corporal punishment. Such a view was reflective of the paternalistic colonial attitude white people––and particularly white authorities––held towards black South Africans.

I've heard enough, Sam! Jesus! It's a bloody awful world when you come to think of it. People can be real bastards.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker), Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Having started listening to Sam explain the method the police use to beat black men in prison, Hally suddenly interrupts him, exclaiming that he's "heard enough" and remarking that "people can be real bastards." On the surface, this reveals Hally's childlike innocence and goodheartedness. He is sensitive to the injustices of the world, so much so that he cannot bear to hear about them. At the same time, it also highlights that, because of his race, Hally is shielded from the full extent of Apartheid violence. The fact that he chooses not to hear the rest of Sam's story

is somewhat selfish (and it's notable that he has the *choice*to avoid these realities—a luxury not afforded to Sam and Willie).Despite his age, as someone who benefits from the white supremacist Apartheid regime, Hally arguably has a responsibility to confront the reality of its cruelty.

I know, I know! I oscillate between hope and despair for this world as well, Sam. But things will change, you wait and see. One day somebody is going to get up and give history a kick up the backside and get it going again.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker), Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Having remarked at the awfulness of the world, Hally has conceded that "there is something called progress," saying that at least people aren't burned at the stake anymore. When Sam skeptically points out that there *is*still a death penalty, Hally responds that he too "oscillate[s] between hope and despair," but that "one day somebody is going to get up and give history a kick up the backside." Hally's choice of words conveys the deep level of violence that permeates all aspects of South African society and affects the psychology of all the characters in the play. Note the irony of the fact that Hally cannot even contemplate a more peaceful, compassionate world without framing it in violent terms.

However, this invocation of violence is not the only disturbing element within Hally's comment. His optimism that "things will change" is undermined by his suggestion that "somebody"––i.e. somebody other than Hally himself––will change them. As the play reveals, this passive reliance on the idea of social change tends to lead to cycles of cruelty and abuse, not progress. Hally appears unaware that, as a white South African, the burden of building a better world rests disproportionately on him. Meanwhile, Hally is dismissive of Sam's cynicism and is unable to see why Sam would be more inclined to "despair" than hope.

"...Napoleon regarded all people as equal before the law and wanted them to have equal opportunities for advancement. All ves-ti-ges of the feu-dal system with its oppression of the poor were abolished." Vestiges, feudal system and abolished. I'm all right on oppression.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Sam is looking at Hally's schoolbooks, and has asked Hally what the word "magnitude" means. The two discuss Hally's chances of success in each of his exams; Hally says he will not do well in math, but will "scrape through" in history. Sam reads aloud a passage about Napoleon from Hally's history textbook, noting that he has difficulty with the terms "vestiges," "feudal system," and "abolished," but not with "oppression." There are multiple layers of meaning in this passage. First, note the contrast between Sam's curiosity about Hally's schoolbooks and Hally's distinct lack of enthusiasm about his own education. Sam's limited vocabulary shows that he has not had access to the same educational resources as Hally, yet he remains keenly interested, while Hally childishly views his schooling as a chore rather than a privilege.

The passage that Sam randomly chooses to read is also significant. While the textbook claims that Napoleon "regarded all people as equal" and abolished feudalism, this is not actually correct, and reflects the strong bias of Hally's colonial education. In reality, Napoleon was opposed to feudalism in *France*, but in favor of French colonial rule, including the practice of slavery. Indeed, he sent armed forces to Haiti to restore slavery following uprisings that resulted in the former slave Toussaint Louverture seizing power.

Sam's inability to say many of the terms in Hally's textbook can be interpreted as evidence of the way educational expertise and authority is misused in order to portray colonizing powers in a good light. Meanwhile, Sam's comment "I'm all right on oppression" suggests that oppression is a universal, irrefutable historical fact, and one that Sam is intimately acquainted with through being a black South African.

I tried [referring to reading *The Origin of the Species*]. I looked at the chapters in the beginning and I saw one called "The Struggle for an Existence." Ah ha, I thought. At last! But what did I get? Something called the mistiltoe which needs the apple tree and there's too many seeds and all are going to die except one...! No, Hally.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Having read the passages in Hally's textbook about Napoleon, Sam calls him "a man of magnitude." Hally has disagreed, and when Sam prompts him to name another man who "benefited all of mankind," Hally names Charles Darwin. In this passage, Sam confesses that he tried to read *The Origin of Species*but was unimpressed by what he found. Sam's excitement at finding the title "The Struggle for Existence" highlights his desire to find academic texts that acknowledge and validate his experience. However, this hope is in vain; not only does that title refer to the plant world, but Sam's comment hints at the way in which Darwin's theory of "survival of the fittest" has actually been used as a justification for racism, oppression, and brutality.

> Don't get sentimental, Sam. You've never been a slave, you know. And anyway we freed your ancestors here in South Africa long before the Americans. But if you want to thank somebody on their behalf, do it to Mr. William Wilberforce. Come on. Try again. I want a real genius.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker), Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Sam and Hally are still discussing "men of magnitude." Having expressed dissatisfaction at Hally's choice of Charles Darwin, Sam suggests Abraham Lincoln instead. In response, Hally accuses Sam of being misguidedly sentimental and points out that "we freed your ancestors here in South Africa long before the Americans." He also claims that William Wilberforce, a British abolitionist who played a large role in ending slavery in most of the British empire, would be a better person for Sam to look up to. This exchange exemplifies the ignorant, patronizing attitude with which Hally treats Sam. He dismisses Sam's identification with slaves ("you've never been a slave yourself") while using the pronoun "we" to describe the white colonizers who ended slavery in South Africa ("we freed your ancestors here").

Hally's reasoning reveals just how biased and warped his view of progress really is. Although there are significant differences between the colonial regimes in the USA and South Africa, Hally's suggestion that the Dutch and British rulers were somehow more compassionate or progressive than the Americans is absurd, especially considering that the play is set during Apartheid. Such thinking reveals how little understanding Hally has of the reality of Sam's life, despite their close proximity and friendly relationship. His manner of speaking to Sam further emphasizes his haughty, belittling attitude. Phrases like "you know," and "come on, try again" sound like the language a teacher would use with a student, despite the fact that Hally is in fact a schoolboy and Sam a middle-aged man.

> ...I got another rowing for hanging around the "servants' quarters." I think I spent more time in there with you chaps than anywhere else in that dump. And do you blame me? Nothing but bloody misery everywhere you went.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker), Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Having debated at length about who counts as a man of magnitude, Hally and Sam have finally settled on Alexander Fleming, the inventor of penicillin. Hally boasts that he has "educated" Sam just as Tolstoy educated "his peasants." The two of them recall memories together, and Hally mentions that he was beaten for spending time in the "servants' quarters." Despite its friendliness, this conversation highlights the stark inequality in Hally and Sam's relationship. At the same time, Hally's words reveal the extent to which he has been coerced into assuming a superior social position to Willie and Sam. The fact that Hally is punished for spending time with his family's servants may incline the audience to view Hally more sympathetically.

On the other hand, Hally's reasoning for why he was "hanging around the 'servants' quarters'" in the first place conveys the thoughtless and selfish side of his character. His claim that he was seeking to avoid the "bloody misery" in the rest of his household rudely implies that there is no other reason why he would spend time with Willie and Sam; it also shows his lack of consideration of the different kind of misery Willie and Sam themselves experience as black

South Africans in a position of servitude.

> The sheer audacity of it took my breath away. I mean, seriously, what the hell does a black man know about flying a kite?...If you think I was excited and happy, you got another guess coming... When we left the boarding house to go up onto the hill, I was praying quietly that there wouldn't be any other kids around to laugh at us.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker), Sam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has asked Sam to guess his "best memory," before telling him that the memory began one afternoon when Hally was bored and went to Sam's room, where he found Sam constructing something out of wood. In this part of the speech, Hally describes his shock at discovering Sam was making a kite, and his fear that the kite wouldn't fly and that other kids would laugh at them. Although he is telling the story to please and entertain Sam, he interweaves explicit racism into his account ("what the hell does a black man know about flying a kite?"). Clearly, it does not even occur to Hally to consider how this comment would make Sam feel.

Hally's description of the memory also reveals the bizarre logic of the racism that defines the world around him. The idea that Sam's race would make him unable to make a kite is completely nonsensical, and Hally's use of the word "audacity" shows how restrictive and narrow the expectations placed on black South Africans were. At the same time, the story also highlights the way in which racism has even indirectly harmed Hally himself, by making him ashamed of his association with Sam and anxious that other white children will ridicule him.

> HALLY: You explained how to get it down, we tied it to the bench so that I could sit and watch it and you went away. I wanted you to stay, you know. I was a little scared of having to look after it by myself.
> SAM: *(Quietly)* I had work to do, Hally

Related Characters: Hally, Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has recounted that, despite his low expectations, the kite Sam made flew brilliantly and that it was "the most splendid thing" he had ever seen. He recalls that Sam walked away and explains that he had wanted him to stay, but Sam quietly responds that he had work to do. This is an emotionally climactic moment within the play, exemplifying the complex tensions and pressures caused by the powerful racist forces that dominate South African society. While Sam claims that he left Hally with the kite because he had work to do, in reality it was because he realized they were on a whites-only bench, and thus it was illegal for Sam to be there.

Hally's ignorance of the true reason why Sam left highlights how sheltered he is from the reality of the racist nation he lives in. Importantly, Sam's lie about having work to do proves that he is also forced to be complicit in keeping Hally in this ignorant, sheltered state. There are several possible explanations for why Sam does not tell Hally the truth. One reason could be that it would be considered improper for Sam to discuss racist laws in front of Hally; by not mentioning it, Sam acts in a manner akin to the effortless way of dancing he encourages Willie to adopt. On the other hand, it is also plausible that Sam feels protective of Hally, and wants to preserve his childhood innocence even if this means misleading him about the true nature of the society in which they live.

> Would have been just as strange I suppose, if it had been me and my Dad... a cripple man and a little boy! Nope! There's no chance of me flying a kite without it being strange.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has finished telling the story about the kite, reflecting

that the image of him and Sam flying it together is "strange." Sam has asked if it's strange because he is black and Hally is white; Hally responds that he doesn't know, but that it would have been just as strange to have flown it with his own father because he is a cripple. This passage is likely to elicit further sympathy for Hally; despite the rather thoughtless and offensive way in which discusses both Sam and his father, it is clear that he feels sad and ashamed about not having a "normal" family.

Indeed, Hally's shame highlights an unexpected connection between his cruel, racist father and the much kinder, more fatherly Sam. Although as a white man Hally's father occupies the most privileged social position in South African society, he is nonetheless still stigmatized for his physical disability. Although this is not the same as the racism Sam experiences as a black man, the parallel nonetheless highlights the complexity of prejudice, and emphasizes the fact that everyone––including Sam, Hally, and Hally's father––is affected by the forces of stigma, discrimination, and shame.

> Don't try to be clever, Sam. It doesn't suit you. Anybody who thinks there's nothing wrong with this world need to have his head examined... If there is a God who created this world, he should scrap it and try again.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker), Sam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Hally's mother has phoned to tell him that his father will be coming home from the hospital. Hally begs for this not to happen, but with no success. Furious, he has begun to boss Sam and Willie around, exclaiming that life is a "plain bloody mess" and that people are fools who deserve the bad things that happen to them. When Sam comments that if that's true then Hally shouldn't complain, Hally snaps back at him, telling him not to be clever. Once again, Hally's concern about the state of the world––which on the surface could indicate compassion and sensitivity––is undermined by his otherwise rude and selfish behavior. He treats Sam and Willie in a patronizing, scornful way, and only seems to care about injustice when he personally is affected.

> I've been far too lenient with the two of you. But what really makes me bitter is that I allow you chaps a little freedom in here when business is bad and, what do you do with it? The foxtrot! Specially you, Sam. There's more to life than trotting around a dance floor and I thought at least you knew it.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker), Sam, Willie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has been behaving in an increasingly cruel and strict manner with Sam and Willie, even rapping Willie on the bum with his ruler. Having at first complained that the two men were distracting him from his homework, Hally then abandons his homework and begins strolling around with the ruler in his hands "like a little despot," telling Sam and Willie that he has been "too lenient" with them. The manner in which Hally quickly assumes the role of a pompous, unforgiving ruler is disturbing. Although the chronology of events makes it clear that Hally's obnoxious behavior directly results from his fear of his father, Hally's sudden change of character suggests that compassion and friendship give way all too easily to cruelty.

Regardless of his friendly relationship to Sam, Hally clearly believes that––as a white person––it is natural for him to rule over Sam and Willie, even though they are much older than he is. Indeed, the tone Hally adopts implies that he is wiser and more mature than Sam and Willie, although it is obvious from Hally's behavior that he is still very much a child with a naïve and somewhat foolish understanding of the world. Hally's comment that there is "more to life" than the foxtrot is misguided, considering the dance represents fundamental themes of struggle, harmony, and propriety within the world of the play. It is also ironic that Hally is precociously scolding Sam for taking the foxtrot too seriously, considering the reality of Sam's life is far more harsh and complicated than Hally's.

> There's no collisions out there, Hally. Nobody trips or stumbles or bumps into anybody else. That's what that moment is all about. To be one of those finalists on the dance floor is like... like being in a dream about a world in which accidents don't happen.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Hally

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has mentioned that he has to write about a significant cultural event for his homework, and is considering writing about the ballroom dance competition in New Brighton. Sam has described and reenacted the event along with Willie, and when Hally asks if the dancers are given penalties when they bump into one another, Sam explains that the dance competition is "like being in a dream" in which people don't bump into each other. This passage illustrates the symbolic significance of ballroom dance within the play, and shows why Sam and Willie are so invested in it. Unlike the real world, in the ballroom all people work together in harmony, without "accidents" or conflict. Sam admits that this is only an unrealistic "dream," but remains committed to pursuing it if only in the realm of dance.

It's beautiful because that is what we want life to be like. But instead... we're bumping into each other all the time. Look at the three of us this afternoon... Open a newspaper and what do you read? America has bumped into Russia, England is bumping into India, rich man bumps into poor man... People get hurt in all that bumping, and we're sick and tired of it now.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Sam has described the ballroom dance competition at New Brighton, and explained to Hally that there are no collisions there. He tells Hally "this is what we want life to be like," and reflects that instead, news of the world is filled with conflict: "England is bumping into India, rich man bumps into poor man." Sam's words further emphasize the symbolic importance of dance, especially to black South Africans whose lives are dominated by tension and discord with the ruling whites. Note that the example of England bumping into India makes an explicit connection between ballroom dance and colonialism.

Sam's choice of words is reminiscent of the way adults might teach young children about conflict, using gentle metaphors that obscure the violent reality of such struggles. His statement that people are "sick and tired" of being hurt by "all that bumping" could indicate that black South Africans may be on the verge of revolting against the oppression to which they are subjected; however, the overall impression of his speech seems more to indicate the necessity of escaping this oppressive reality in the "dream world" of dance.

You're right. We musn't despair. Maybe there's some hope for mankind after all. Keep it up, Willie.

Related Characters: Hally (speaker), Willie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has asked Sam if it is enough to throw oneself into the "dream" of ballroom dance, and Sam responds that this dream can be the start of actual progressive action. Hally concludes that the United Nations is "a dancing school for politicians," and announces that he now feels more hopeful about the future of mankind. This sudden change of opinion illustrates the power of art to inspire optimism; however, Hally's newly hopeful mindset soon shatters, implying that this power is somewhat limited. Note the irony of the fact that Sam and Willie remain consistently hopeful while Hally is quick to resort to a pessimistic, resentful attitude. Although all three characters experience struggle, Hally is arguably in a far better position due to his social, racial, and economic status.

HALLY: He's a white man and that's good enough for you.
SAM: I'll try to forget you said that.

Related Characters: Hally, Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Hally has spoken to his mother and father on the phone and grown increasingly upset and furious at the prospect of his father being home again. Sam has tried to comfort him, but this only results in fighting. Hally reminds Sam that Hally's father is Sam's boss, and when Sam protests that his boss is actually Hally's mother, Hally responds that his father is a white man and "that's good enough for you." This exchange emphasizes the ease with which the nuance and complexity within Hally and Sam's relationship can be erased by the overarching racism that governs both their lives. Hally's words serve as a reminder that no matter what else happens, he will always be able to hurt and belittle Sam simply through invoking race.

Sam's response that he will "try to forget" Hally's words highlights the seemingly infinite patience with which he treats Hally. Indeed, throughout the play Hally has oscillated between friendliness and racist cruelty; thus the existence of his and Sam's friendship relies on Sam repeatedly forgetting the offences Hally commits. This deliberate act of forgetting can be seen as the opposite of learning. Hally reveals that he has not truly learned the importance of kindness and justice, and Sam in turn deliberately erases his knowledge of Hally's racist sentiment.

> HALLY: To begin with, why don't you start calling me Master Harold, like Willie.
> SAM: Do you mean that?
> HALLY: Why the hell do you think I said it?
> SAM: If you make me say it once, I'll never call you by anything else again

Related Characters: Hally, Sam (speaker), Willie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Here Hally gets angry at Sam, tells him to stop bossing him around, and orders Sam to start calling him "Master Harold." Shocked, Sam warns Hally that if he is forced to call him that once, he will never go back to calling him Hally. This is a climactic moment in the play, in which Sam and Hally's friendship reaches a dramatic breaking point. Up until this interaction, Hally's treatment of Sam has swung wildly between kindness and cruelty, and so far Sam has mostly tolerated this, deliberately ignoring Hally's callous behavior.

However, Sam's words here point to the fact that calling Hally "Master Harold" would represent an irreparable rupture in their relations, such that their friendship would become another broken thing with no chance of recovery. This claim demonstrates the significance of the word "master," a term that has more potential for damage than all the explicitly racist insults that Hally has thus far used. Sam can perhaps dismiss these insults as childish foolishness; however, by insisting that Sam calls him "Master Harold," Hally positions himself as the authority, and Sam as the inferior.

> If you ever do write it as a short story, there *was* a twist in our ending. I couldn't sit down there and stay with you. It was a "Whites Only" bench. You were too young, too excited to notice then. But not anymore. If you're not careful... Master Harold... you're going to be sitting up there by yourself for a long time to come, and there won't be a kite in the sky.

Related Characters: Sam (speaker), Hally

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Sam has returned to the story of the kite, recalling that the episode happened a few days after Hally's father had drunkenly passed out and soiled himself in the Central Hotel Bar, and that Hally had been severely depressed afterwards. He then reveals that the true reason why he left Hally alone on the bench while they were flying the kite was because it was a whites-only bench, and he warns Hally that if he continues with his current behavior he may find himself sitting alone on the bench "for a long time to come." This speech emphasizes the dramatic change in Sam and Hally's relationship. Sam no longer feels compelled to protect Hally's innocence, and instead forces Hally to confront the reality of the racist world in which they live.

This moment is a powerful example of education. Although Sam has had little formal schooling and thus theoretically is less knowledgable than Hally, the story of the kite reveals how naïve and ignorant Hally really is. Sam, on the other

hand, understands the true nature of the world and has carefully controlled the way in which he reveals this nature to Hally. Up until this point, Sam's patience with Hally can be interpreted as a loving, protective gesture, designed to preserve Hally's childish innocence. However, Sam's words of warning point to the danger of remaining in this "innocent" state in the midst of a deeply unjust world. Although as a white person Hally benefits from structural racism, Sam reminds him that harboring racist views is itself harmful because it prevents connection to other people.

❝ HALLY: I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.
SAM: You sure of that, Hally? Because it would be pretty hopeless if that was true. It would mean nothing has been learnt in here this afternoon, and there was a hell of a lot of teaching going on…

Related Characters: Hally, Sam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

Sam has revealed what really happened on the day of the kite; Hally, dejected, has asked Willie to lock up and goes to leave. Sam has asked if it's possible for them to "try again," but Hally responds that he doesn't know, repeating "I don't know anything anymore." This exchange evokes a tension in the way in which education, ignorance, and power operate. While Sam insists that "there was a hell of a lot of teaching going on" during the course of the afternoon, Hally claims not to "know anything anymore." Keeping in mind the context of Hally's heavily biased, colonial education, this moment seems to imply that for those in positions of power, gaining knowledge can feel like becoming ignorant.

This passage also illustrates the complex nature of the connection between knowledge and optimism. Hally's claim not to know anything seems closely related to his increasingly defeated, pessimistic outlook; meanwhile, Sam says "it would be pretty hopeless" if Hally truly felt he had not learned anything that afternoon. While it is fairly common to associate optimism with a kind of ignorant naïveté, Sam and Hally's exchange indicates that perhaps it might be necessary to have a hopeful attitude in order to acquire knowledge and understanding, even if that understanding in turn reveals the world to be a rather bleak place.

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.

"MASTER HAROLD" ... AND THE BOYS

It is a rainy day and there are no customers in the St. George's Park Tea Room in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, where the black servants Sam and Willie work. Because they have the place to themselves, Willie sings as he cleans the floor with a rag then begins to practice ballroom dancing in preparation for an upcoming competition. Sam reads comic books at a table. Willie asks Sam to judge his dancing, and Sam tells Willie to relax. Willie is frustrated with the difficulty of **dance**.

The play opens with the two black servants, Sam and Willie, at ease. They have a rare opportunity to speak freely at work because the rain has kept away the customers and they are alone. Is it a coincidence that the two men can enjoy such freedom only when their white bosses or white customers aren't around? Dance is presented, from the very beginning, as means of escaping life as it is.

Sam and Willie discuss movie star dancers and romance as a metaphor for **dance**. Willie says he doesn't have any romance left for his dancing partner, Hilda. She doesn't come to practice, he says, and she sleeps with other men. Sam gets Willie to admit he's been beating Hilda when she misses steps and has scared her away.

It is important to note that, just because the play condemns racism, it does not portray its black characters unrealistically: they have flaws just like the whites in the play. Willie recreates racism's oppressive power dynamic when he beats his dancing partner.

In an effort to help Willie with his practice, Sam gives a demonstration of the quickstep. He is a great dancer. Hally, the owner's son enters at the door to see the end of Sam's performance. Willie springs to attention to wait on Hally while Sam is more casual. Sam tells Hally that his mom has gone to pick up his father, who is a crippled war veteran, from the hospital.

Sam is not just a great dancer in the literal sense that he can move well on the dance floor—he is a great dancer in the symbolic sense that dance takes throughout the play as well. He knows how to move gracefully in complex and often trying social situations, and is doing his part to try to make a world without collisions.

Hally is unhappy at the news, and because Sam only overheard his mother talking on the phone, he argues that Sam must be mistaken. Sam serves him soup at the table with comic books on it, and Hally calls them rubbish and has him take them away.

Hally's unhappiness at his father's potential return creates a sense of mystery and foreboding—why is their relationship so strained? What is Hally dreading? This begins to set up the play's main conflict.

Hally and Willie banter about **dance** and Willie accidentally hits Hally with his washrag. Hally tells "the boys" to get back to work and presses for more details about his father coming home. It's clear he's troubled at the prospect. He concludes Sam misunderstood.

Already Hally's latent and, at least partially, unconscious racism begins to show. Does Hally not trust Sam because Sam only overheard his mother on the phone, because he doesn't want what Sam has told him to be true, or because Sam is black? This ambiguity (all the options are possible, and not mutually exclusive) also begins to build tension among the characters.

Hally starts to do his school work at the table and Sam grabs a mathematics book of Hally's. He laughs at a caricature Hally has drawn of his mathematics teacher. Hally tells how he received six strokes on the backside for the drawing. Sam asks if it was with his trousers down, and, when he learns the answer is no, describes how black men are brutally beaten with a cane in prison. Hally tells him to stop with the description, it's too gruesome.

Sam quickly demonstrates his thirst for learning and education, while Hally's caricature of his teacher shows that Hally has taken his learning for granted. The beatings described are grossly unequal. Hally's attempt to censor Sam's description of the very real racist oppression happening in South Africa clues us in to his moral blindness. Hally, it's clear, is morally lazy.

Hally says that progress is possible and society might one day be changed for the better thanks to the help of yet unknown social reformers. Sam reads from Hally's mathematics textbook and asks for the definition of "magnitude," which Hally defines as "how big [something] is." They discuss some other math terms and joke about Hally's poor performance on math exams. Hally argues that great geniuses have often failed to distinguish themselves in school.

Hally, though lazy, is not unintelligent. But he is vain. Despite his poor performance in school he wants to imagine himself as a great man. Does he take it for granted that he is or will be great in part because he is white? Hally seems to think that societal problems can only be solved by solitary great figures. He doesn't consider the possibility that mutual cooperation and smaller efforts by ordinary people might be what's required.

Now Sam takes the history textbook from Hally's school case. He turns at random to some lines about the French General and later Emperor Napoleon. The lines concern his social reforms. Sam describes him as a man of magnitude. Hally disagrees, but admits his disagreement might only be because the Napoleon section is long and crammed with dates he's required to memorize.

Hally's refusing to acknowledge Napoleon as a "man of magnitude" because the section on him in his history book is a couple pages long is rather comical. It provides some shading to Hally's arrogance. Meanwhile, we see Sam continue to pursue his education in his own, subtle way.

Sam asks Hally whom he would choose as a man of magnitude, and Hally says Charles Darwin. Sam disagrees. He found the bit of reading he did in *The Origin of the Species* to be tedious. Sam isn't sure he believes in it. Hally asks Sam for a counterproposal and Sam names Abraham Lincoln. Hally tells Sam he's being sentimental because he was never a slave and that a better social reformer to admire would be William Wilberforce.

From the way Sam poses questions to Hally, it seems that Sam is taking upon himself the role of Hally's teacher. Hally's ignorance, entitlement, and arrogance in telling a black man which white abolitionist—Lincoln or Wilberforce— he should prefer are so deftly woven into the story that it would be easy for the first time reader to miss their full weight. Its interesting that Sam doesn't believe in Darwin's theories as some have used those theories, under the name Social Darwinism, to argue that white economic and political power is a product of white racial superiority.

Sam suggests William Shakespeare, but Hally says Sam's only read the play *Julius Caesar* and that the language in Shakespeare should be brought up to date. Hally proposes Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, because he was both an author and a social reformer. Sam suggests Jesus, and Hally argues with him not to get religious. Sam suggests the scientist Alexander Fleming, who discovered penicillin, and the two agree he is a great man. Hally brags that he has educated Sam.

Hally is so cocksure, so blind to history, he thinks that the poetry of Shakespeare could and should be improved with a contemporary rendering. Hally's atheism is pronounced, and it's clear he is intolerant of other religious or spiritual beliefs. It seems odd, that of all the men the two mention, they agree on the greatness of Alexander Fleming. Perhaps there is an underlying statement being made about pragmatism. Penicillin, after all, has done direct good for millions of people since its discovery. Yet its notable that Hally sees their agreement as a product of him having educated Sam.

Sam recalls his first lesson, a lesson in geography he was able to get from Hally when Hally had come to his and Willie's servants' quarters at the back of the Jubilee Boarding House Hally's mother used to run. The three now reenact scenes of geography lessons as well as Hally's mother's coming to find him. Hally says he'd get "a rowing" for being caught with them. Then he recalls two girls, prostitutes, who used to live at the boarding house.

The precedent and history of the education and exchange between Hally and Sam is established in this section. Sam, in his late 30s in the time of the memory, knew nothing of his country's basic geography. This is one of the many things his country has withheld from him by virtue of the color of his skin, and is a powerful metaphor for the way white men have separated black men from their own land in South Africa. As a child, apparently, Hally didn't draw the racial distinctions he has come more and more to embrace through his adolescence.

Hally spent so much time with Sam and Willie there that he recalls having walked in on Sam with a girl by accident. Hally says he isn't interested in girls. Hally recreates the old room using chairs as props for the beds and tables. The three play themselves. Sam cuts his toenails while Hally beats Willie at checkers. Willie says that Sam and Hally cheated at checkers and chess, but they say, no, they were just better.

This, and the other plays within the play, is a nod to the works of Shakespeare, whose genius Hally earlier questioned. Shakespeare's plays frequently employed this play-within-a-play device. The checkers games establishes Hally and Sam as equally smart, and the moral tension of the story is therefore between the two of them.

Hally tells Sam to guess his favorite memory, and goes on to recall coming into Sam's room and finding Sam in the process of making him a **kite**. Sam took him to fly it on a hill, he remembers, and Hally was afraid other children would see him and laugh at him for flying a kite with a black man. Sam says he remembers Hally's embarrassment and Hally describes how shabby the homemade kite was.

One of the play's main symbols, the kite, is introduced. Here we get the first half of the kite story, Hally's version of the story, the half of the story that he could see from his vantage as a white person. Even as a child, when Sam and Willie were his main companions, Hally was keenly aware that the two men were of a different race and class than his own.

Next, Hally tells how Sam told him to run and remembers how his embarrassment and anxiety melted away when the **kite** took off flying. He describes it as "the most splendid thing he had ever seen" and says that he was sad when Sam left him alone. Sam responds quietly that he had work to do. When Hally asks Sam why he made the kite, Sam says he can't remember why.

The kite takes over as a metaphor for transcending racial differences. After experiencing the elation of flight, Hally forgets his embarrassment and wants Sam to remain with him. Sam's quietness (explicitly written in the stage directions) foreshadows that there is more to the story about the kite.

Hally says that a black man and white boy flying a **kite** is strange. Sam asks him why, and Hally counters that it would have been just as strange to fly a kite with his crippled father. He says it would make a nice short story, but they would have to find a twist for the ending. As it is, he says, it's too straightforward and lacks drama.

Hally is unable to explain why a white boy flying a kite with a black man is "strange"—instead, he complains that he has been dealt a poor hand in life. Of course, Hally doesn't see that he has it better than both his crippled father and , in his society, any black man, just as he doesn't see the true drama of the story of the kite.

Hally's mother phones from the hospital. Sam answers and gives the phone to Hally. When he learns she *is* bringing his father home, Hally tells her to order his father back into bed. He begs her to keep his father in the hospital. When he finishes the conversation, he tells Sam and Willie to do the windows when they're done with the floor. He says his father can get better care at the hospital than at home.

In this section, Hally reveals the extent of his anxiety over seeing his father. He seems at once to be terrified of his father, too lazy to help with his care, embarrassed for him, and afraid of him. Once angry, Hally immediately lashes out at Sam and Willie, making himself feel better by asserting his mastery over them, barking orders and commands when before the three had been getting along like friends.

Hally tells Sam and Willie they heard right, his father is coming home. His mother won't be able to convince him to stay in the hospital. When Sam comments that at least his father will have Hally and Hally's mother at home, Hally complains that they'll also have him. Anytime something is going along all right, Hally says, someone or something will come along and spoil everything.

Sam, displaying his experience and wisdom, tries to get Hally to see the good aspects of what Hally sees as a terrible situation. Won't Hally be able to positively influence his father, to help his father get better? Rather than recognize the truth in Sam's words, Hally dismisses Sam, at least in part because Sam is black.

Sam asks Hally about his homework. The assignment is to "Write five hundred words describing an annual even of cultural or historical significance." Hally complains that it's boring. Hally tells Sam and Willie to get back to work.

Among his many roles, Sam takes on the part of father figure or parent to Hally, trying both to get his mind off the "bad" news and to coax him through his schoolwork.

Sam waltzes over to Willie and Willie practices the same steps. Sam says that maybe Hilda will come back that night, but Willie says, no, he beat her too badly. He considers withdrawing from the contest or, alternatively, taking leave from work to practice with a new partner every day. Sam gets frustrated with trying to talk sense into Willie and says he gives up. Willie blames Sam for setting him up with Hilda as a dancing partner.

Sam dances as if to keep himself afloat above Hally's rising temper. Having failed with Hally, he tries to spread his positivity to Willie, but Willie, also, persists with his bad attitude. Finally, Sam starts to get frustrated with his companions' childish behavior. The idea that it's Sam's fault that Hilda left Willie is simply absurd, and yet the absurdity of Willie blaming Sam makes it clear that Hally blaming Sam is just as absurd.

Sam sings a song about Willie dancing with his pillow, and, losing his temper, Willie charges at Sam. Hally yells at the two men to stop fooling around and hits Willie in the backside with a ruler. Willie tells him to hit Sam, too. Hally complains that a customer might have seen the two of them fighting and concludes that he has been too lenient with them. He helps himself to ice cream and a cool drink from behind the counter. He says there is more to life than "trotting around a **dance** floor."

Hally passes along the aggression he was subjected to at school by striking Willie. He resorts to violence to give himself a sense of control and make himself feel better, at the expense of his less powerful black friends. Then Hally comes up with the excuse that a customer might have seen the men dancing to justify and explain away his aggression. He eats ice cream and drinks a cool drink, oblivious to how doing so only displays his own hypocrisy.

Sam says dancing is a harmless pleasure, and Hally says it's a simple-minded pleasure that doesn't challenge the intellect. Sam says it does other things, like make people happy. Hally complains that his efforts to educate Sam have clearly failed because Sam takes dancing seriously. Sam asks what's wrong with admiring something beautiful, to which Hally responds that a foxtrot isn't beautiful.

As if he's angry that Sam and Willie don't share his dejection, Hally begins to begrudge them their one small pleasure, dance. Why should they be allowed to dance while he is miserable? Again, Hally reveals his own glib ignorance when he calls Sam ignorant for thinking that dance can be beautiful.

Hally says that **dance** isn't art and that art is "the giving of meaning to matter" or "the giving of form to the formless." Sam, deferential, says that maybe it's not art, but it's still beautiful. He says if Hally needs proof he should come see the competition at the Centenary Hall in New Brighton. The championships, says Sam, aren't just another dance.

It is mind boggling that Hally can't see that dance gives form to the motions of a body in space. To Sam, what is beautiful—what moves you as a person—is more important than what is art, which is a somewhat artificial designation made by society (and as the apartheid in South Arica shows, society's dictates aren't always good or just).

Sam begins to describe the festive atmosphere at the **dance** hall, the lights, the excitement, the music by Mr. Elijah Gladman and his Ochestral Jazzonians, and the climax of the evening when the winners are announced. Hally begins to ask more questions about the event, where it's held, how often, and concludes that, though he'll be stretching the assignment by calling ballroom dance a "cultural event" he going to write about it for his paper.

Sam is such a great story teller, so accomplished at creating environment and scene, that he soon has Hally hanging on his every word. Hally, meanwhile, doesn't recognize that dance, despite the fact that none is going on before his eyes, has already entranced him. He is blind to the backhanded insults he is dealing Sam and Willie by refusing to acknowledge their art as art or their culture as culture.

Hally says his English teacher will argue with him because he "doesn't like natives," but, Hally says, he will point out to his teacher that the culture of primitive black society includes singing and dancing. He begins to press Sam for facts, asking how many finalists there are (six couples) and for a description of the final **dance**.

Hally is more interested in arguing and showing off than the truth. He decides to write about the dance competition not because it perfectly fits the assignment or because he likes it, but because writing about black people will upset his teacher. Perhaps he even agrees with his English teacher's racist views.

Sam pretends to announce the final couples, including Willie, and Willie calls for music from the jukebox to create the atmosphere. Sam says he only has bus fare and, if he plays the jukebox, he won't be able to take the bus, and Hally thinks about taking some money from the till (cash register) but decides against it. They'll just have to imagine it, he says.

Sam continues to spread positivity and to empower his friends by giving Willie an opportunity to imagine himself in the final round. It is a rare moment of equality between the three characters, here, when Hally, because of his youth, and Sam and Willie, because of the way their exploited because of the color, don't have the money even for a song on the jukebox.

Hally asks if there are any penalties for stumbling or doing something wrong. Sam and Willie laugh. Sam explains that the finalist's **dance** is a kind of ideal world, "a world without collisions." Sam says "it's beautiful because that is what we want life to be like." When Hally asks him if watching six couples dream about the way it should be is enough, Sam says he doesn't know, but that's where it starts.

One reason Hally might discourage Sam and Willie from dancing is simply that he knows less about it than they do. Hally dismisses, consciously or not, anything he knows less about than a black man as something not worth knowing. Sam articulates a metaphor about dance as the idealized expression of an ideal world.

Sam says there are a few people who have got past just dreaming about it and are actually doing something right, like Mahatma Gandhi. Hally says when it comes down to it the United Nations is like a dancing school for politicians.

For Sam, dreaming isn't just an impractical kind of goofing off, it's the first practical step toward making the world a better place to live. He is so convincing that Hally forgets his father and allows himself to get lost in the dream.

Hally's mom phones again, this time from a private telephone—presumably, her home phone. She has brought his father back home. Hally complains and tells her he hopes she knows what she's gotten the two of them into. He says he's sick and tired of emptying chamber pots full of phlegm and piss. He reveals that his father has borrowed money Hally needed for his school books in order to buy alcohol and warns her to hide her bag again to keep his father from stealing from it.

Just when Hally is beginning to see things from Sam's perspective, he is interrupted. Hally still thinks dreaming is an impractical all or nothing activity, rather than part of a process. His conversation reveals some of the burdens involved with caring for his father, who demands, at least to Hally, a tremendous amount of physical and psychological care.

After protesting, Hally speaks to his father and we can see that Hally is genuinely conflicted. He is gentle and kind when speaking to the man. His mother comes back on the line and tells him to remember to bring a bottle of brandy home. He tells her he's locking up the store and getting ready to go.

Hally's abrupt shift in register when talking to his father reveals another side of him—perhaps he is more than just a spoiled brat, maybe he can overcome the prejudices he has been consciously and unconsciously adopting and grow up to be a decent man.

Hally is disconsolate and silent after hanging up the phone. Sam tries to comfort him, and Hally tells Sam to mind his own business. Sam tries to distract Hally with more talk of the **dance** competition, but Hally tears up the page he had been writing on. Hally calls all their talk of a world without collisions "just so much bullshit." He goes to pack up the comic books and brandy for his father, but smashes the brandy bottle on the floor. He says that what's wrong with Sam's dream is that it leaves out the cripples who make people trip and fall on their backsides.

Sam tries to show Hally that to be a decent man, he will have to stop seeing the world as all or nothing, black and white. Yes, reality comes knocking on the door, but does this mean he should rip any bit of progress to shreds? Hally's destructiveness continues when he smashes the brandy bottle. He is both channeling his own frustration and, perhaps futilely, trying to keep his father away from his harmful addiction. Now Hally has no empathy for cripples and hates broken things.

Sam tells Hally to be careful of the things he's saying, warning him not to speak ill of his father. This advice sends Hally over the edge. Hally yells at Sam and tells Sam he is the one who needs to be careful. He tells him to shut up and finish his work, to mind his own business. He tells Sam he is a servant and that Hally's father is his boss. Sam corrects that Hally's mother is his boss.

Hally's arrogance—his refusal to see himself as wrong—probably more than any of his other traits, bleeds into racism. Hally relies on being "the boss" whenever Sam tells him something he doesn't want to admit is true. Now Hally's hypocrisy—and the full extent of his racism—begin to show in full force.

Hally tells Sam that his father's being a white man should be enough for him, and Sam says he'll try to forget Hally said that. Sam cautions Hally again and says that they need to be careful what they say to each other. Hally tells Sam to stop telling him what to do and to start calling him Master Harold, just as Willie does.

It is fine for Hally to insult and speak ill of his own father, but it is not OK with him if Sam speaks the truth. Hally sees the truth as an insult. Unable to tolerate the idea of being wrong, he submerges himself in a racism that holds that a black man can't be right.

Hally says his father will be glad to hear about the lesson he has given Sam in respect, and tells one of his father's jokes: "It's not fair is it, Hally? —What, chum? —A nigger's arse." He says they both laugh at it. Sam asks Hally how he knows it's not fair if he's never seen one. Then he drops his trousers and underpants and presents Hally his backside. He tells Hally that now he can make his father even happier when he goes home with the report that the joke about a black man's ass is true.

Rather than acknowledge Sam's wisdom and gentle lesson in humility, Hally rushes to the defense of the father he had just been insulting. Not only is Hally's father's joke exceptionally racist—it hinges on an irrelevant, trivial pun. Hally and his father laugh, not because the joke is funny, but to revel in their sense of superiority. Sam, though humble, also knows when to take a stand.

Hally spits in Sam's face and Sam starts calling him Master Harold. Sam warns Master Harold that he has hurt only himself. He asks Willie if he should hit Hally, and Willie tells him not to because it won't help and he'll only hurt himself. Hally, Willie says, is a little boy, a little *white* boy.

Sam bears his oppression with so much dignity that, whenever he calls Hally Master Harold, it sounds like an insult rather than a term of respect. Willie sees the injustice of the situation clearly. He believes Hally should be hit, but also knows that the beating Sam would end up getting would be ten times worse.

Sam tells Hally that Hally doesn't know what he's done. Hally has made him, Sam says, feel dirtier than he has ever felt in his life and convinced him that he is a failure. Sam then reveals the rest of the story about the **kite**: how Hally's father got drunk, passed out, and soiled himself on the floor of the Central Hotel Bar and Hally had come to Sam to help carry him out. He even had to ask permission to let a black man in the bar.

Sam reminds Hally of who his father is and how he has been blind to the privileges he gets just for being white. Sam feels like a failure because he has been striving to educate Hally, to be a role model for him, and Hally has not even seen it. He has forgotten the most crucial elements of all of his most important lessons.

After the incident, Sam says, Hally was dejected for days. Sam made the **kite** to try and cheer Hally up, and the reason he left Hally on his own once the kite was up and flying was that, without realizing it, Hally had sat down on a "whites only" bench to fly it and Sam *couldn't* sit there. Hally packs up his things and asks Willie to lock up for him.

Hally's racism started as something unconscious; if he wants to counteract it, Sam suggests, he will have to consciously work to undo it. Hally's response could suggest either that he has taken a deaf ear to Sam's lesson or, possibly, that he sees some of the truth in what Sam is saying and needs time to process, reflect, and grow.

Sam asks Hally to wait. He says he has no business telling Hally how to be a man if he doesn't behave like one himself. He says they should fly another **kite** on another day, and that they should both be mindful of all the teaching that went on in the tea room that day. He tells Hally he can stand up and walk away from "that bench." Hally exits.

Sam recognizes that he hasn't been perfect as a role model, and takes the first step toward un-writing his own (albeit slight) hypocrisy by acknowledging that it exists. Sam wants to lead by example, not with words. As usual, he sees the events of the day as an opportunity to learn. Where Hally sees knowledge as something he is inherently entitled to, for Sam, learning is difficult, but good and necessary, work.

Willie tries to comfort Sam and tells him that he's thought about what Sam said and decided not to beat Hilda anymore, to find her and say he is sorry. He then announces that he can walk home and decides to spend his bus fare on a song from the juke box, and the two men **dance** to a song sung by the singer Sarah Vaughn. Sam leads and Willie follows.

Willie's resolution not to beat Hilda (and thereby not to pass along the oppression he's subject to at the hands of white bosses) is an indication that small steps can be made in the right direction if we are willing to learn from what we see. Sam and Willie's dance is a stunning instance of the beauty that results when the real comes together with the ideal, when dance and dream give form to the formless.

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