MARGE: You didn’t have to get here so early, mama. Now you got to wait.
MAMA: If I’m goin’ someplace... I like to get there in plenty time. You don’t
have to stay.
MARGE: You shouldn’t wait ‘round here alone.
MAMA: I ain’t scared. Ain’t a soul going to bother me.
MARGE: I got to get back to Ted. He don’t like to be in the house by himself.
(She picks up the bag and places it on the bench by MAMA.)
MAMA: You’d best go back. (smile) You know I think he misses Florence.
MARGE: He’s just a little fellow. He needs his mother. You make her come home!
She shouldn’t be way up there in Harlem. She ain’t got nobody there.
MAMA: You know Florence don’t like the South.
MARGE: It ain’t what we like in this world! You tell her that.
MAMA: If Mr. Jack ask about the rent, you tell him we gonna be a little late on
account of the trip.
MARGE: I’ll talk with him. Don’t worry so about everything. (places suitcase on
floor) What you carryin’, mama... bricks?
MAMA: If Mr. Jack won’t wait... write to Rudley. He oughta send a little some-
thin’.
MARGE: Mama... Rudley ain’t got nothin’ fo himself. I hate to ask him to give
us.
MAMA: That’s your brother! If push come to shove, we got to ask.
MARGE: (places box on bench) Don’t forget to eat your lunch... and try to get a
seat near the window so you can lean on your elbow and get a little rest.
MAMA: Hmmmm... mmmph. Yes.
MARGE: Buy yourself some coffee when the man comes through. You’ll need
something hot and you can’t go to the diner.
MAMA: I know that. You talk like I’m a northern greenhorn.
MARGE: You got handkerchiefs?
MAMA: I got everything, Marge.
MARGE: (wanders upstage to the railing division line) I know Florence is real bad off
or she wouldn’t call on us for money. Make her come home. She ain’t gonna
get rich up there and we can’t afford to do for her.
MAMA: We talked all of that before.
MARGE: (touches rail) Well, you got to be strict on her. She got notions a Negro
woman don’t need.
MAMA: But she was in a real play. Didn’t she send us twenty-five dollars a week?
MARGE: For two weeks.
MAMA: Well the play was over.
MARGE: (crosses to MAMA and sits beside her) It’s not money, Mama. Sarah wrote
us about it. You know what she said Florence was doin’. Sweepin’ the stage!
MAMA: She was in the play!
MARGE: Sure she was in it! Sweepin'? Them folks ain't gonna let her be no actress.
You tell her to wake up.
MAMA: I... I... think.
MARGE: Listen, Mama... She won't wanna come. We know that... but she gotta!
MAMA: Maybe we shoulda told her to expect me. It's kind of mean to just walk
in like this.
MARGE: I bet she's livin' terrible. What's the matter with her? Don't she know
we're keepin' her son?
MAMA: Florence don't feel right 'bout down here since Jim got killed.
MARGE: Who does? I should be the one goin' to get her. You tell her she ain't
gonna feel right in no place. Mama, honestly! She must think she's white!
MAMA: Florence is brownskin.
MARGE: I don't mean that. I'm talkin' about her attitude. Didn't she go to Strum-
ley's down here and ask to be a salesgirl? (risen) Now ain't that somethin'? They
don't hire no Colored folks.
MAMA: Others beside Florence been talkin' about their rights.
MARGE: I know it... but there's things we can't do cause they ain't gonna let us.
(She wanders over to the "White" side of the stage.) Don't feel a damn bit different
over here than it does on our side. (silence)
MAMA: Maybe we shoulda just sent her the money this time. This one time.
MARGE: (coming back to the "Colored" side) Mama! Don't you let her cash that check
for nothin' but to bring her back home.
MAMA: I know.
MARGE: (restless... fidgets with her hair... putting it in place) I oughta go now.
MAMA: You best get back to Ted. He might play with the lamp.
MARGE: He better not let me catch him! If you got to go to the ladies' room take
your grip.
MAMA: I'll be alright. Make Ted get up on time for school.
MARGE: (kisses her quickly and gives her the newspaper) Here's something to read.
So long, Mama.
MAMA: G'bye, Margie baby.
MARGE: (goes to door... stops and turns to her mother) You got your smelling salts?
MAMA: In my pocketbook.
MARGE: (wistfully) Tell Florence I love her and miss her too.
PORTER: (can be heard singing in the distance)
MAMA: Sure.
MARGE: (reluctant to leave) Pin that check in your bosom, Mama. You might fall
asleep and somebody'll rob you.
MAMA: I got it pinned to me. (feels for the check which is in her blouse)

MARGE: (almost pathetic) Bye, Ma.
MAMA: (sits for a moment looking at her surroundings. She opens the paper and begins
to read.)
PORTER: (offstage) Hello, Marge. What you doin' down here?
MARGE: I came to see Mama off.
PORTER: Where's she going?
MARGE: She's in there; she'll tell you. I got to get back to Ted.
PORTER: Bye now... Say, wait a minute, Marge.
MARGE: Yes?
PORTER: I told Ted he could have some of my peaches and he brought all them
Brandford boys and they picked 'em all. I wouldn't lay a hand on him but I
told him I was gonna tell you.
MARGE: I'm gonna give it to him!
PORTER: (enters and crosses to white side of waiting room. He carries a pail of water and
a mop. He is about fifty years old. He is obviously tired but not lazy.) Every peach
off my tree!
MAMA: There wasn't but six peaches on that tree.
PORTER: (smiles... glances at MAMA as he crosses to the "White" side and begins to
mop) How d'ye do, Mrs. Whitney... you going on a trip?
MAMA: Fine, I thank you. I'm going to New York.
PORTER: Wish it was me. You gonna stay?
MAMA: No, Mr. Brown. I'm bringing Florence... I'm visiting Florence.
PORTER: Tell her I said hello. She's a fine girl.
MAMA: Thank you.
PORTER: My brother Bynum's in Georgia now.
MAMA: Well now, that's nice.
PORTER: Atlanta.
MAMA: He goin' to school?
PORTER: Yes'm. He saw Florence in a Colored picture. A moving picture.
MAMA: Do tell! She didn't say a word about it.
PORTER: They got Colored moving picture theaters in Atlanta.
MAMA: Yes. Your brother going to be a doctor?
PORTER: (with pride) No. He writes things.
MAMA: Oh.
PORTER: My son is goin' back to Howard next year.
MAMA: Takes an awful lot of goin' to school to be anything. Lot of money
leastways.
PORTER: (thoughtfully) Yes'm, it sure do.
MAMA: That sure was a nice church social the other night.
PORTER: Yes'm. We raised 87 dollars.
MAMA: That's real nice.
PORTER: I won your cake at the bazaar.
MAMA: The chocolate one?
PORTER: (as he wrings mop) Yes'm... was light as a feather. That old train is gonna be late this even'. It's number 42.
MAMA: I don't mind waitin'.
PORTER: (lifts Pall, tucks mop handle under his arm. He looks about in order to make certain no one is around and leans over and addresses MAMA in a confidential tone.) Did you buy your ticket from that Mr. Daly?
MAMA: (in a low tone) No. Marge bought it yesterday.
PORTER: (leaning against railing) That's good. That man is real mean. Especially if he thinks you're goin' north. (He starts to leave... then turns back to MAMA) If you go to the rest room, use the Colored men's... the other one is out of order.
MAMA: Thank you, sir.
MRS. CARTER: A white woman... well dressed, wearing furs and carrying a small, expensive overnight bag breezes in... breathless... flustered and smiling. She addresses the PORTER as she almost collides with him) Boy! My bags are out there. The taxi driver just dropped them. Will they be safe?
PORTER: Yes, mam. I'll see after them.
MRS. CARTER: I thought I'd missed the train.
PORTER: It's late, mam.
MRS. CARTER: (crosses to bench on the "White" side and rests her bag) Fine! You come back here and get me when it comes. There'll be a tip in it for you.
PORTER: Thank you, mam. I'll be here. (as he leaves) Miss Whitney, I'll take care of your bag too.
MAMA: Thank you, sir.
MRS. CARTER: (wheels around... notices MAMA) Oh... Hello there...
MAMA: Howdy, mam. (She opens her newspaper and begins to read.)
MRS. CARTER: (paces up and down rather nervously. She takes a cigarette from her purse, lights it and takes a deep draw. She looks at her watch and then speaks to MAMA across the railing.) Have you any idea how late the train will be?
MAMA: No, mam. (starts to read again)
MRS. CARTER: I can't leave this place fast enough. Two days of it and I'm bored to tears. Do you live here?
MAMA: (rests paper on her lap) Yes, mam.
MRS. CARTER: Where are you going?
MAMA: New York City, mam.
MRS. CARTER: Good for you! You can stop "maming" me. My name is Mrs. Carter. I'm not a southerner really. (takes handkerchief from her purse and covers her nose for a moment) My God! Disinfectant! This is a frightful place. My brother's here writing a book. Wants atmosphere. Well, he's got it. I'll never come back here ever.
MAMA: That's too bad, mam... Mrs. Carter.
MRS. CARTER: That's good. I'd die in this place. Really die. Jeff... Mr. Wiley... my brother... He's tied in knots, a bundle of problems... positively in knots.
MAMA: (amazed) That so, mam?
MRS. CARTER: You don't have to call me mam. It's so southern. Mrs. Carter! These people are still fighting the Civil War. I'm really a New Yorker now. Of course, I was born here... in the South I mean. Memphis. Listen... am I annoying you? I've simply got to talk to someone.
MAMA: (places her newspaper on the bench) No, Mrs. Carter. It's perfectly alright.
MRS. CARTER: Fine! You see Jeff has ceased writing. Stopped! Just like that! (snaps fingers)
MAMA: (turns to her) That so?
MRS. CARTER: Yes. The reviews came out on his last book. Poor fellow.
MAMA: I'm sorry, mam... Mrs. Carter. They didn't like his book?
MRS. CARTER: Well enough... but Jeff's... well, Mr. Wiley is a genius. He says they missed the point! Lost the whole message! Did you read... do you... have you heard of Lost My Lonely Way?
MAMA: No, mam. I can't say I have.
MRS. CARTER: Well, it doesn't matter. It's profound. Real... you know. (stands at the railing upstairs) It's about your people.
MAMA: That's nice.
MRS. CARTER: Jeff poured his complete self into it. Really delved into the heart of the problem, pulled no punches! He hardly stopped for his meals... And of course I wasn't here to see that he didn't overdo. He suffers so with his characters.
MAMA: I guess he wants to do his best.
MRS. CARTER: Zelma!... That's his heroine... Zelma! A perfect character.
MAMA: (interested... coming out of her shell eagerly) She was colored, mam?
MRS. CARTER: Oh yes!... But of course you don't know what it's about do you?
MAMA: No, miss... Would you tell me?
MRS. CARTER: (leaning on the railing) Well... she's almost white, see? Really you can't tell except in small ways. She wants to be a lawyer... and... and... well, there she is full of complexes and this deep shame you know.
MAMA: (excitedly but with curiosity) Do tell! What shame has she got?
MRS. CARTER: (takes off her fur neckpiece and places it on bench with overnight bag) It's obvious! This lovely creature... intelligent, ambitious, and well... she's a Negro!
MAMA: (waiting eagerly) Yes'm, you said that...
MRS. CARTER: Surely you understand? She’s constantly hating herself. Just before she dies she says it! . . . Right on the bridge . . .
MAMA: (genuinely moved) How sad. Ain’t it a shame she had to die?
MRS. CARTER: It was inevitable . . . couldn’t be any other way!
MAMA: What did she say on the bridge?
MRS. CARTER: Well . . . just before she jumped . . .
MAMA: (slowly straightening) You mean she killed herself?
MRS. CARTER: Of course. Close your eyes and picture it!
MAMA: (turns front and closes her eyes tightly with enthusiasm) Yes’m.
MRS. CARTER: (center stage on “White” side) Now . . . ! She’s standing on the bridge in the moonlight . . . Out of her shabby purse she takes a mirror . . . and by the light of the moon she looks at her reflection in the glass.
MAMA: (clasps her hands together gently) I can see her just as plain.
MRS. CARTER: (sincerely) Tears roll down her cheeks as she says . . . almost! almost white . . . but I’m black! I’m a Negro! and then . . . (turns to MAMA) she jumps and drowns herself!
MAMA: (opens her eyes and speaks quietly) Why?
MRS. CARTER: She can’t face it! Living in a world where she almost belongs but not quite. (drifts upstage) Oh it’s so . . . so . . . tragic.
MAMA: (carried away by her convictions . . . not anger . . . she feels challenged. She rises.) That ain’t so! Not one bit it ain’t!
MRS. CARTER: (surprised) But it is!
MAMA: (During the following she works her way around the railing until she crosses over about one foot to the “White” side and is face to face with MRS. CARTER.) I know it ain’t! Don’t my friend Essie Kitredge daughter look just like a German or somethin’? She didn’t kill herself! She’s teachin’ the third grade in the colored school right here. Even the bus drivers ask her to sit in the front seats cause they think she’s white! . . . an’ . . . an’ . . . she just says as clear as you please . . . “I’m sittin’ where my people got to sit by law. I’m a Negro woman”!
MRS. CARTER: (uncomfortable and not knowing why) . . . But there you have it. The exception makes the rule. That’s proof!
MAMA: No such thing! My cousin Hensly’s as white as you! . . . an’ . . . an’ he never . . .
MRS. CARTER: (flushed with anger . . . yet lost . . . because she doesn’t know why) Are you losing your temper? (weakly) Are you angry with me?
MAMA: (stands silently trembling as she looks down and notices she is on the wrong side of the railing. She looks up at the “White Ladies Room” sign and slowly works her way back to the “Colored” side. She feels completely lost.) No, mam. Excuse me please. (with bitterness) I just meant Hensly works in the colored section of the shoe store . . . He never once wanted to kill his self! (She sits down on the bench and fumbles for her newspaper. Silence.)
MRS. CARTER: (Caught between anger and reason . . . she laughs nervously.) Well! Let’s not be upset by this. It’s entirely my fault you know. This whole thing is a completely controversial subject. (silence) If it’s too much for Jeff . . . well naturally I shouldn’t discuss it with you. (approaching railing) I’m sorry. Let me apologize.
MAMA: (keeps her eyes on the paper) No need for that, mam. (silence)
MRS. CARTER: (painfully uncomfortable) I’ve drifted away from . . . What started all of this?
MAMA: (no comedy intended or allowed on this line) Your brother, mam.
MRS. CARTER: (trying valiantly to brush away the tension) Yes . . . Well, I had to come down and sort of hold his hand over the reviews. He just thinks too much . . . and studies. He knows the Negro so well that sometimes our friends tease him and say he almost seems like . . . well you know . . .
MAMA: (tightly) Yes’m.
MRS. CARTER: (slowly walks over to the “Colored” side near the top of the wall) You know I try but it’s really difficult to understand you people. However . . . I keep trying.
MAMA: (still tight) Thank you, mam.
MRS. CARTER: (reverts back to “White” side and begins to prove herself) Last week . . . Why do you know what I did? I sent a thousand dollars to a Negro college for scholarships.
MAMA: That was right kind of you.
MRS. CARTER: (almost pleading) I know what’s going on in your mind . . . and what you’re thinking is wrong. I’ve . . . I’ve . . . eaten with Negros.
MAMA: Yes, mam.
MRS. CARTER: (trying to find a straw) . . . And there’s Malcom! If it weren’t for the guidance of Jeff he’d never written his poems. Malcom is a Negro.
MAMA: (freezing) Yes, mam.
MRS. CARTER: (gives up, crosses to her bench, opens her overnight bag and takes out a book and begins to read. She glances at MAMA from time to time. MAMA is deeply absorbed in her newspaper. MRS. CARTER closes her book with a bang . . . determined to penetrate the wall MAMA has built around her.) Why are you going to New York?
MAMA: (almost accusingly) I got a daughter there.
MRS. CARTER: I lost my son in the war. (silence . . . MAMA is ill at ease.) Your daughter . . . what is she doing . . . studying?
MAMA: No’m, she’s trying to get on stage.
MRS. CARTER: (pleasantly) Oh . . . a singer?
MAMA: No, mam. She’s . . .
MRS. CARTER: (warmly) You people have such a gift. I love spirituals . . . “Steal Away,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”
MAMA: They are right nice. But Florence wants to act. Just say things in plays.
MRS. CARTER: A dramatic actress?
MAMA: Yes, that’s what it is. She been in a colored moving picture, and a big show for two weeks on Broadway.

MRS. CARTER: The dear, precious child! ... But this is funny ... no! it’s pathetic. She must be bitter ... really bitter. Do you know what I do?

MAMA: I can’t rightly say.

MRS. CARTER: I’m an actress! A dramatic actress ... And I haven’t really worked in six months ... And I’m pretty well-known ... And everyone knows Jeff. I’d like to work. Of course, there are my committees, but you see, they don’t need me. Not really ... not even Jeff.

MAMA: Now that’s a shame.

MRS. CARTER: Now your daughter ... you must make her stop before she’s completely unhappy. Make her stop!

MAMA: Yes’m ... why?

MRS. CARTER: I have the best of contacts and I’ve only done a few broadcasts lately. Of course, I’m not counting the things I just wouldn’t do. Your daughter ... make her stop.

MAMA: A drama teacher told her she has real talent.

MRS. CARTER: A drama teacher! My dear woman, there are loads of unscrupulous whites up there that just hand out opinions for...

MAMA: This was a colored gentleman down here.

MRS. CARTER: Oh well! ... And she went up there on the strength of that? This makes me very unhappy. (puts book away in case, and snaps lock. silence)

MAMA: (getting an idea) Do you really, truly feel that way, mam?

MRS. CARTER: I do. Please ... I want you to believe me.

MAMA: Could I ask you something?

MRS. CARTER: Anything.

MAMA: You won’t be angry, mam?

MRS. CARTER: (remembering) I won’t. I promise you.

MAMA: (gathering courage) Florence is proud ... but she’s having it hard.

MRS. CARTER: I’m sure she is.

MAMA: Could you help her out some, mam? Knowing all the folks you do ... maybe...

MRS. CARTER: (rubbing the outside of the case) Well ... it isn’t that simple ... but ... you’re very sweet. If only I could...

MAMA: Anything you did, I feel grateful. I don’t like to tell it, but she can’t even pay her rent and things. And she’s used to my cooking for her ... I believe my girl goes hungry sometime up there ... and yet she’d like to stay so bad.

MRS. CARTER: (looks up, resting case on her knees) How can I refuse? You seem like a good woman.

MAMA: Always lived as best I knew how and raised my children up right. We got a fine family, mam.

MRS. CARTER: And I’ve no family at all. I’ve got to! It’s clearly my duty. Jeff’s books ... guiding Malcom’s poetry ... It isn’t enough ... oh I know it isn’t. Have you ever heard of Melba Rugby?

MAMA: No, mam. I don’t know anybody much ... except right here.

MRS. CARTER: (brightening) She’s in California, but she’s moving East again ... hates California.

MAMA: Yes’m.

MRS. CARTER: A most versatile woman. Writes, directs, acts ... everything!

MAMA: That’s nice, mam.

MRS. CARTER: Well, she’s uprooting herself and coming back to her first home ... New York ... to direct “Love Flowers” ... it’s a musical.

MAMA: Yes’m.

MRS. CARTER: She’s grand ... helped so many people ... and I’m sure she’ll help your ... what’s her name.

MAMA: Florence.

MRS. CARTER: (turns back to bench, opens bag, takes out a pencil and an address book) Yes, Florence. She’ll have to make a place for her.

MAMA: Bless you, mam.

MRS. CARTER: (holds handbag steady on rail as she uses it to write on) Now let’s see ... the best thing to do would be to give you the telephone number ... since you’re going there.

MAMA: Yes’m.

MRS. CARTER: (writing address on paper) Your daughter will love her ... and if she’s a deserving girl...

MAMA: (looking down as MRS. CARTER writes) She’s a good child. Never a bit of trouble. Except about her husband, and neither one of them could help that.

MRS. CARTER: (stops writing, raises her head questioning) Oh?

MAMA: He got killed at voting time. He was a good man.

MRS. CARTER: (embarrassed) I guess that’s worse than losing him in the war.

MAMA: We all got our troubles passing through here.

MRS. CARTER: (gives her the address) Tell your dear girl to call this number about a week from now.

MAMA: Yes, mam.

MRS. CARTER: Her experience won’t matter with Melba. I know she’ll understand. I’ll call her too.

MAMA: Thank you, mam.

MRS. CARTER: I’ll just tell her ... no heavy washing or ironing ... just light cleaning and a little cooking ... does she cook?

MAMA: Mam? (slowly backs away from MRS. CARTER and sits down on bench)

MRS. CARTER: Don’t worry, that won’t matter to Melba. (silence. moves around the rail to “Colored” side, leans over MAMA) I’d take your daughter myself, but
Wines in the Wilderness

I’ve got Binnie. She’s been with me for years, and I just can’t let her go... can I?

MAMA: (looks at MRS. CARTER closely) No, mam.

MRS. CARTER: Of course she must be steady. I couldn’t ask Melba to take a fly-by-night. (touche MAMA’s arm) But she’ll have her own room and bath, and above all... security.

MAMA: (reaches out, clutches MRS. CARTER’s wrist almost pulling her off balance) Child!

MRS. CARTER: (frightened) You’re hurting my wrist.

MAMA: (looks down, realizes how tight she’s clenching her, and releases her wrist) I mustn’t hurt you, must I.

MRS. CARTER: (backing away rubbing her wrist) It’s all right.

MAMA: (sits down) You better get over on the other side of that rail. It’s against the law for you to be over here with me.

MRS. CARTER: (frightened and uncomfortable) If you think so.

MAMA: I don’t want to break the law.

MRS. CARTER: (keeps her eye on MAMA as she drifts around railing to bench on her side, gathers overnight bag) I know I must look like a fright. The train should be along soon. When it comes, I won’t see you until New York. These silly laws. (silence) I’m going to powder my nose. (exits into ‘White ladies’ room

PORTER: (singing onstage)

MAMA: (sits quietly, staring in front of her... then looks at the address for a moment... tears the paper into little bits and lets them flutter to the floor. She opens the suitcase, takes out notebook, an envelope and a pencil. She writes a few words on the paper.)

PORTER: (enters with broom and dust pan) Number 42 will be coming along in nine minutes. (When MAMA doesn’t answer him, he looks up and watches her. She reaches in her bosom, unpins the check, smooths it out, places it in the envelope with the letter. She closes the suitcase.) I said the train’s coming. Where’s the lady?

MAMA: She’s in the ladies’ room. You got a stamp?

PORTER: No. But I can get one out of the machine. Three for a dime.

MAMA: (hands him the letter) Put one on here and mail it for me.

PORTER: (looks at it) Gee... you writing Florence when you’re going to see her?

MAMA: (picks up the shoebox and puts it back on the bench) You want a good lunch? It’s chicken and fruit.

PORTER: Sure... thank you... but you won’t...

MAMA: (rises, paces up and down) I ain’t gonna see Florence for a long time. Might be never.

PORTER: How’s that, Mrs. Whitney?

MAMA: She can be anything in the world she wants to be! That’s her right. Marge can’t make her turn back. Mrs. Carter can’t make her turn back. Lost My Lonely Way! That’s a book! People killing themselves ‘cause they look white but be black. They just don’t know do they, Mr. Brown?
ALICE CHILDRESS
(1920—)

Florence (1950)
Wine in the Wilderness (1969)

BIOGRAPHY AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Alice Childress was born on October 12, 1920, in Charleston, South Carolina. At the age of five, Childress boarded a train for New York where she grew up in Harlem under the care of her grandmother, Eliza Campbell. Childress admits that she owes a great debt to her grandmother who empowered her to survive even the harshest conditions. Childress says of her grandmother, “She had seven children and was very poor. There wasn’t any time to do anything, except try to keep the children in clothing and someway fed. Always running out of everything. When I came along, all of her children were grown. We were together all of the time. Her name was Eliza... I put so much emphasis on my grandmother, Eliza, because my father and mother were separated when I was very little. I vaguely remember him. My mother was always working and on the go. My grandmother was a very fortunate thing that happened to me.”

Childress's grandmother inspired her to write, as is evident in her comments, “We used to walk up and down New York City, going to art galleries and private art showings. She used to say to the people in charge, ‘Now, this is my granddaughter and we don’t have any money, but I want her to know about art’. I was storing up things to write about even then... My grandmother was a member of Salem Church in Harlem. We went to Wednesday night testimonials. Now that’s where I learned to be a writer. I remember how people, mostly women, used to get up and tell their troubles to everybody... Everybody rallied round these people. I couldn’t wait for person after person to tell her story.” Childress recalls that when she and her grandmother returned from their excursions, her grandmother always quizzed her and encouraged her to write about people for whom the act of living is sheer heroism.

Armed with a positive sense of self instilled in her by her grandmother, Childress was able to endure many hardships as she struggled to get an
education. She attended Public School 81, the Julia Ward Howe Junior High School, and, for three years, Wadleigh High School, at which time she had to drop out because both her grandmother and mother had died, leaving her to fend for herself. Forced to assume the responsibility of teaching herself, Childress discovered the public library and attempted to read two books a day.

Beginning in the early 1940s, at the conclusion of a first marriage, Childress began establishing herself as an actress and writer, during which time she worked to support herself and her only child, Jean, in a number of odd jobs, including assistant machinist, photo retoucher, domestic worker, salesperson, and insurance agent. She resides in New York City with her musician husband, Nathan Woodard whom she married on July 17, 1957. Childress frequently appears as keynote speaker at international, national, and regional literary conferences. She is at work on a fourth novel and is composing her memoirs.

Alice Childress is the only black woman playwright in America whose plays have been written, produced, and published over a period of four decades. Like a giant in a straightjacket, Childress has remained faithful to the U.S. theater even when it looked upon her with blind eyes and turned to her with deaf ears. Having had plays produced in New York City, across the United States, and in Europe, Childress’s legacy to U.S. theater is monumental. In her forty years of writing for the American stage, Childress says she has never compromised her vision. Though she writes mainly about the genteel poor, a diverse audience looks to her for the truth that she gives in numerous small doses and without adulteration.

Alice Childress has written plays that incorporate the liturgy of the black church, traditional music, African mythology, folklore, and fantasy. She has experimented by writing sociopolitical, romantic, biographical, historical, and feminist plays. Striving to find new and dynamic ways of expressing old themes in a historically conservative theater, Childress has opened doors for other black playwrights, particularly Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange, to make advances in the field of drama.

Childress’s contributions to U.S. theater have been varied and consistent. In the early 1940s, Childress helped to found the American Negro Theater (ANT), a phenomenal organization that served as a beacon of hope for countless black playwrights, actors, and producers, such as Sidney Poitier, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Frank Silvera, and others. Another major achievement of Childress, a long time Broadway and off-Broadway actress and a member of the Author’s League of the Dramatists’ Guild, is that she was instrumental in the early 1950s in initiating advanced, guaranteed pay for union off-Broadway contracts in New York City.

Childress became one of the beneficiaries of her efforts to establish equity standards for off-Broadway productions. Her first two plays, *Just a Little Simple* (1950) and *Gold Through the Trees* (1952), were the first plays by a black woman to be professionally produced, i.e., performed by unionized actors. Three years later, Childress became the first black woman to win an Obie Award for the best original off-Broadway play of the year with her production of *Trouble In Mind* (1955), subsequently produced by the BBC in London. Ten years later, Childress’s *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* (1966) was broadcast nationally on ABC television. *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) was presented on National Educational Television (NET). Other plays by Childress include *Florence* (1950), *Young Martin Luther King* (1969), *Moj: A Black Love Story* (1970), *When the Rattlesnake Sounds* (1975), *Let’s Hear it for the Queen* (1976), *Guilah* (1984), and *Moms* (1987). A versatile writer, Childress has published four novels: *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* (1956), *A Hero Ain’t Nothin but a Sandwich* (1973), which was made into a movie, *A Short Walk* (1979), and *Rainbow Jordan* (1981). Additionally, she is editor of *Black Scenes: Collection of Scenes from Plays Written by Black People about Black Experience* (1971), and author of an impressive host of essays on black art and theater history.

Though she demonstrates skill in a variety of literary forms, Childress considers herself principally a playwright telling her stories about poor, dejected heroines who are morally strong, sometimes vulnerable, but resilient. She portrays these women honestly as they fight daily battles not just to survive but to survive whole.

As a result of Childress’s innovative achievements and commitment to quality theater, she has received a host of awards and honors, including writer-in-residence at the MacDowell Colony; featured author on a BBC panel discussion on “The Negro in the American Theater”; winner of a Rockefeller grant administered through The New Dramatists and a John Golden Fund for Playwrights; and a Harvard appointment to the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study (now Mary Inghram Bunting Institute), from which she received a graduate medal for work completed during her tenure.

**SYNOPSIS AND ANALYSIS: FLORENCE**

This play is set in a railway station in the South where Mama, or Mrs. Whitney, is preparing for a trip to the North. Her daughter, Marge, is eager for her to go to New York City to talk Florence. Mama’s other daughter an unemployed actress, into coming home. Marge “knows her place” in the South and thinks Florence is foolish for pursuing a career traditionally opened to whites only. Though Marge has been helping her mother raise Florence’s son ever since his father was lynched for voting and his mother moved to New York City, she resents having to take care of her sister’s child.

While Mama awaits the train, she meets Mrs. Carter, a white woman who considers herself liberal but who proves to be irrepressibly racist. Mrs.
Carter is pleased to hear that Mama places a great deal of emphasis on family. So comfortable is she with Mama that she confides in her about her brother's troubles. Mrs. Carter's brother is a novelist who writes about black people. She explains that his latest book received poor reviews which led to his depression. She tells Mama that she has come South to nurture him and to boost his ego.

When Mama questions what the book is about, Mrs. Carter tells her it is about a beautiful and talented mulatto woman who commits suicide because she wants to be white. Mama, not at all sympathetic to Mrs. Carter's tears of her brother's failure, quickly tells her that it is a myth that black people kill themselves for wanting to be white. When Mrs. Carter is not convinced, Mama gives her examples of mulattos that she knows who have lived healthy, normal lives without self-hatred.

Reality is too stark for Mrs. Carter, so she tries to ease the tension by asking questions about Florence. When she learns that Florence is trying to make it as an actress, Mrs. Carter begs Mama to convince Florence to give up such a ludicrous notion. She essentially tells Mama that if a white woman like herself cannot get any acting jobs, certainly Florence who is black and poor has no chance of success.

Mama is touched by Mrs. Carter's genuine concern for Florence until she offers to help Florence by putting her in touch with an actress who is in need of a maid. Mama is stunned by Mrs. Carter's low expectations for Florence and black people in general.

When Mrs. Carter goes to freshen up her makeup, Mama decides not to go to New York; instead she asks Porter to mail a letter to Florence with money enclosed. Her message to Florence is, "Keep trying."

Florence is fraught with potent symbols and symbolic gestures that serve as signposts to the play's main idea. Childress's symbols point out that blacks must not turn over to white liberals the responsibility of nurturing young, black dreamers but must encourage their children to fight to reach their fullest potential in spite of racial biases.

One very important symbol are the signs that divide the railway waiting room. "Colored" and "White" signs hang over the doorway entrances to each side. The division is further emphasized by the hanging of "Colored women" and "Colored men" and "White ladies" and "White gentlemen" over the restroom doors.

Racial inequity is signaled by the very use of the words "ladies" and "gentlemen" on the restroom doors designated for whites. These titles, which suggest grace, culture, wealth, or royalty, do not appear on the restroom doors for blacks, an implication that Colored men and women are a cut below White ladies and gentlemen. Another example of Childress's orchestration of this sign-symbol occurs when Porter tells Mama that she need to use the restroom, she must use the Colored men's because the other is out of order. It is illegal for Mama to step into the "White ladies" restroom, so she will have to demean herself and risk having her privacy invaded in the Colored men's restroom.

The out-of-order restroom becomes a symbol of the black woman's historical burden in America, that of struggling to keep together the family that the system of slavery plotted to destroy. This play on words hints that for Colored women, there is no room for rest. Childress implies that the Colored woman, as Zora Neale Hurston once said, is the mule of the world. On another level, Childress's symbol suggests that the American societial structure is out of order, nonfunctioning for African Americans. Childress mirrors a society that is and will remain out of order as long as people are judged by the color of their skin.

In addition to the obtrusive signs that bar whites and blacks from crossing lines, a low railing, dividing the waiting room, serves as a physical and emotional barrier between whites and blacks and is the symbol around which the central idea of the play is developed. Conversations and actions are structured around this dividing line that reminds the audience that there are special limitations placed on blacks and whites. Childress moves both the black and white characters toward or away from this low railing to suggest racial constraints. She ingeniously demonstrates that the railing prevents both blacks and whites from crossing into each other's territory. On one level, the bar symbolizes the need for blacks to fight against the harnesses of racism and to cross the line to secure those privileges in life that belong not just to whites but to all human beings. On another level, the railing suggests that segregation breeds ignorance. Childress illustrates that the Jim Crow laws that were set in place to restrict blacks also kept whites from interacting with blacks. The point is that when whites are barred from firsthand knowledge about blacks, they are forced to imagine, which leads to the creation of stereotypes.

Childress paints a picture of the South as a racist and ignorant place from which to escape. As Marge says her goodbyes to her mother in this little railway station, the low railing serves as a constant reminder of existing racial constraints. Marge unconsciously wanders upstage to the railing but stops as she tells her mother to buy coffee when the waiter passes through the Jim Crow cars because she will not be able to go to the segregated diner. In this instance, the audience is reminded that just as Marge cannot cross the railing, blacks are unable to cross lines in other establishments and can only achieve what is prescribed for them by white supremacists. While still at the railing, Marge pleads with her mother to force Florence to come home.

A while later, Marge nears the railing but stops when she tells Mama that Florence must think she is white, pursuing a career in which typically only whites had succeeded. She also reminds Mama of the time Florence went to Strumley's asking to be a salesgirl, knowing that blacks were not hired for such positions. Marge actually crosses over the line and onto the
“White” side of the stage just as she says, “There’s things we can’t do cause they ain’t gonna let us.” Once on the forbidden side, Marge sarcastically comments that it does not feel any differently. This crossing over suggests that blacks feel harnessed in their struggle against oppression and, perhaps, envious of the privileges and rights accorded whites. Marge steps back over to the “Colored” side just as she tells her mother that she must not give Florence any money but must, instead, bring her back home. This synchronized movement to the “Colored” side symbolizes Marge’s internalization of her designated place in society.

Mama, like Marge, seems to know her place until Mrs. Carter enters and provokes her into realizing that blacks cannot afford to give up the struggle for equality. This struggle is illustrated as Childress catapults both Mama and Mrs. Carter back and forth across the dividing line. Childress seems to be working with a symbol within a symbol, i.e., a trip within a trip. The cross-country trip that the women are going on parallels the cross-cultural trip that they take each time the railing is crossed. These women step in and out of each other’s cultures as they try to communicate their limitations. Childress suggests that the railing, representing segregation, has left Mrs. Carter and white liberals like her ignorant and insensitive to blacks. By the same token, the railing serves as a driving force behind black achievement; racial bars must be torn down in order for blacks to be free to succeed.

The cross-cultural trip begins when Mrs. Carter gradually moves near the dividing line to tell Mama about her brother’s struggle to capture the lives of black people. Almost on the rail, Mrs. Carter boasts of her brother’s novel, “It’s profound. Real ... you know. It’s about your people ... He suffers so with his characters.” Leaning on the rail, Mrs. Carter proceeds to tell of the mulatto who, with tears rolling down her cheeks, jumps from a bridge to her death saying, “Almost! Almost white ... but I’m black! I’m a Negro.” Childress’s disdain for stereotypes is plain, particularly the tragic mulatto. Mrs. Carter’s brother is held up as a white liberal who means well but who knows little about what he writes.

Outraged by the white author’s stereotyping of blacks, Mama tells Mrs. Carter, “That ain’t so! Not one bit it ain’t.” At this point, Mrs. Carter backs away from the railing while Mama, citing cases of mulattos who did not kill themselves, works her way around the bar until she crosses about a foot over to the “White” side and is face to face with Mrs. Carter. Crossing the railing in this instance suggests Mama’s refusal to accept myths about blacks. Mama moves back to the “Colored” side when she looks up and sees the sign “White ladies.” The inference is that only “White ladies” or naive, white liberals would believe that blacks kill themselves for wishing to be white. Also, Childress demonstrates that in 1950 blacks and whites were painfully aware of racial bars. Mama cannot exchange ideas with Mrs. Carter without being reminded that she must remain in her place on the “Colored” side.

Like a skilled checker player, Mrs. Carter hesitantly makes the next move. She approaches the rail to apologize to Mama. This gesture, however, is deflated when Mrs. Carter says, “This whole thing is a completely controversial subject. If it’s too much for Jeff ... well naturally I shouldn’t discuss it with you.” Mrs. Carter does not realize that she is condescending in her assumption that Mama is too simple-minded to understand the issues surrounding the poor reviews given the book. The apology, then, becomes a false sign and instead becomes another indicator of Mrs. Carter’s racism.

Mrs. Carter crosses over to the “Colored” side as she tells Mama, “You know I try but it’s really difficult to understand you people. However ... I keep trying.” When Mama remains unmoved, Mrs. Carter retreats back to the “White” side and offers another sign of her love and respect for blacks, “I know what's going on in your mind ... and what you're thinking is wrong. I've ... I've ... eaten with Negroes.” This gesture is symbolic because it suggests that eating together does not represent equality.

Mrs. Carter insults Mama again during their discussion of Florence’s dream of becoming a dramatic actress. Unaware that she is condescending, Mrs. Carter assures Mama that blacks are far better suited to entertainment, such as singing spirituals like “Steal Away” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Mrs. Carter tells Mama that Florence stands little or no chance in New York, especially since she is without contacts. Mama, genuinely moved by Mrs. Carter’s concern for Florence, asks her to help the struggling actress. Knowing that Mama has in mind an acting job, Mrs. Carter instead offers to contact a director friend of hers who will take on Florence as a domestic.

The dividing line takes on significance once more as Mrs. Carter crosses over to the “Colored” side to give Mama the address and phone number of her director friend and to reassure Mama that Florence will be in good hands if she is dependable and trustworthy. Reaching out, Mama clutches Mrs. Carter’s arm almost pulling her off balance. It is at this point that Mama understands that white liberals should not be counted on for helping blacks in the struggle because racism in America has blinded and desensitized them. Mrs. Carter cannot empathize, nor can she understand Florence’s determination to succeed at acting or at any other career that has been typically open only to whites because she is a product of the railing that has kept her ignorant about blacks. Mama realizes that she, and all blacks, must contribute to the empowerment of her people by offering continued encouragement to their children. Realizing that she is hurting Mrs. Carter, Mama unclutches her and snaps, “You better get on over to the other side of that rail. It’s against the law for you to be here with me.” Mrs. Carter goes scurrying across the line, rubbing her wrist and not fully understanding why Mama has reacted violently.
Keeping her eyes on the dividing line after Mrs. Carter exits to powder her nose in the “White ladies” room, Mama assures Porter that “Marge can’t make her turn back, Mrs. Carter can’t make her turn back.” She writes a note to Florence telling her to keep trying and that she has a right to be or do anything she wants in this world. Mama’s linking Marge to Mrs. Carter is significant because both women believe that Florence does not know her limitations.

One comes away from Florence sensing Childress’s outrage that blacks are forced to live in a world that prescribes positions or careers for them. Childress uses the railing to show that whites are barred from knowing blacks. She insists that blacks are victimized or oppressed by the dominant race because of this unfamiliarity with black life.

SYNOPSIS AND ANALYSIS: WINE IN THE WILDERNESS

The setting is Harlem during a 1964 race riot. The play opens with artist and pseudo-intellectual Bill Jameson chastising Oldtimer, an elderly, uneducated black man, for picking up loot and bringing it into his apartment. Though Oldtimer fears that the policemen might arrest him, he cannot bring himself to throw away the ham, liquor, and a suit that he says he found after the looters left the goods in the streets. Not being able to convince Oldtimer to dispose of the loot, Bill returns to his art project. Oldtimers explains to Bill that he is fortunate to belong to the generation that was given grants and scholarships and explains that in his day he was barred from education and jobs. He questions Bill about his art project, and Bill explains that the triptych will contain three canvases on black womanhood. Bill shows off two of the three paintings, the first of which is “Black girlhood” or innocence and the second is “Wine In The Wilderness” or “Mother Africa” or black womanhood in her noblest form. The third canvas remains blank, but on it he plans to place “the kinda chick that is grass roots... no, not grass roots... I mean she’s underneath the grass roots. The lost woman... what the society has made out of our women... There’s no hope for her.” Oldtimer says he knows the type Bill has in mind and says the description sounds like his ex-wife.

Bill and Oldtimer are interrupted by a phone call from two vapid, affected, pompous, middle-class blacks, Sonny-man and Cynthia, telling Bill that they have found Tommy, the perfect model for his “lost black woman,” a riot victim whom they’ve met in a bar. When Sonny-man and Cynthia arrive with Tommy, she sizes Bill up as a possible husband while he examines her and determines that she will do perfectly as “a messed up chick” for his triptych.

Before she will agree to serve as his model, Tommy insists on food. While the men, Oldtimer, Sonny-man, and Bill go out to get her something to eat, Tommy turns to Cynthia demanding to know what she can do to win Bill’s affection and make him fall in love with her. Immediately, Cynthia realizes that Tommy has the wrong idea about why they are associating with her and tries subtly to tell Tommy that she is aiming too high. Not wishing to be circumvented, Tommy insists upon concrete suggestions. To appease Tommy, social worker Cynthia glibly enumerates ways to empower black men, i.e., to give them their manhood back. She tells Tommy essentially that she must work to make Bill feel like he is in charge in order to counteract the debilitating effects of the “Matriarchal Society” on black men.

Later, when Tommy is alone with Bill, they argue because she does not feel comfortable that he wants to paint her in the mismatched rags the riot has forced her to wear. He insults her and patronizingly tells her that she is like most black women: too eager to emasculate black men. Bill belittles Tommy at every turn, lording his education over her to humiliate her and remind her that she is grass-roots and he is cultured and refined. They nearly come to blows when he screams at her for not being able to make up her mind about whether she’ll model for him. She points to the picture of the white woman on the wall and tells him that she’s certain that when he painted that white woman he was grinning and treating her with respect.

Bill and Tommy exchange a few choice words after Tommy spills a soft drink on her lap. While she is changing behind a screen, Bill gets a phone call. He describes for the caller this magnificent woman with whom he claims he is in love. He says that she is “the finest any woman in the world” and “I’m beginnin’ to have this deep attachment.” Unaware that Bill is describing his painting, Tommy transforms herself into the beautiful woman. Casting off her wig and slipping into an African throw-cloth, Tommy emerges self-assured.

Bill is so taken by Tommy’s metamorphosis that he cannot paint, regardless of how hard he tries to recapture in his head that “lost black woman.” Tommy feels loved, and Bill finds himself being drawn to her. They talk about each other’s past and discover that they are more alike than different. They mutually want each other and morning finds them in bed.

Tommy wakes up singing snatches of spirituals and talking to Bill as she showers. Moments later, Tommy is catapulted into rage when Oldtimer, who comes to retrieve his loot, reveals to her that she is to be “the lost black woman” on Bill’s triptych. As Tommy prepares to leave, Sonnym-an and Cynthia arrive. Tommy, in the performance of her life, tells Oldtimer he is a fool for letting these middle-class blacks treat him like he is invisible because they perceive that they are better than him. Then she lashes out at the three blacks who have disassociated themselves from grass-roots blacks and tells them that they are “phony nigger.” Tommy tells them that when racist whites say “‘nigger,’ just dry-long-so, they mean educated you and uneducated me. They hate you and call you ‘nigger.’” I