



*A Dramaturgical Response to Concerning Elements in Topdog/
Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks*

This memo's purpose is to explain two major elements of Suzan-Lori Parks' script, *Topdog/Underdog*, that have proven to be difficult to rationalize. The two elements in question are the very early point of attack and the parallel to the Lincoln assassination made by naming the depicted characters Lincoln and Booth. Parks devises many clear conventions in this play, but makes the striking choice to uphold those conventions through to the end of the play. With that in mind, the unifying concept I propose to rationalize these elements: to follow the setup. Parks sets up physical and figurative structures that hold the play together without differing examples to create balance. We receive an excess of recurring information and a readily accessible lens for Americans to understand the power struggle between Lincoln and Booth. Parks maintains these structures instead of peripatetically tearing them down.

In each scene, we learn new information about the lives of Lincoln and Booth. However, Parks typically presents it in the same format, with the exception of Scene 4. The brothers are constantly cycling through the life they were handed and never show interest in operating without a scheme. In Scene 5, Booth says, "That's what I'm gonna do. Give my kids 500 bucks then cut them out. That's the way to do it." Booth supports his upbringing by claiming he will follow his parent's example. We see both Lincoln and Booth grasp at tricks and quick, foolhardy solutions throughout the play. Parks expresses this in a pattern across all scenes in the form of literal and figurative games.

The setup of the game is followed by a truth or information. For instance, the Ma and Pa routine in Scene 2 turns into an exchange of stolen gifts that conjure cursory memories, the “did you use a rubber” game in Scene 3 devolves into a contest between Booth’s falsified sexual conquests and Lincoln’s admission to his romanticization of the release of death, and the “you have news, I have news” game in Scene 6 provides genuine and fatal revelations between the brothers. All examples depict false pretext leading a scene that then breaks down into argument and some form of enlightenment.

In Scenes 1, 4, and 5, Parks leads with a literal game, 3-Card Monte. The game, or scheme, operates with very specific rules and codes that keep the dealer and his crew safe in order to maintain the hustle’s efficiency. Parks’ presentation of the scheme consistently demands specific physical and social structures in order to play the game. The playing space remains elevated on milk carts or the bed when depicted in the play. Throughout the play, spanning many weeks within the reality of the text, this pattern persists. Parks established a game built on by the subtle release of truth and uses it to instigate emotionally challenging exchanges between the brothers.

In Scene 4 Lincoln reveals the entire pattern of 3-Card Monte while Booth sleeps—the literal game appears in the text. A few stanzas into Lincoln’s explanation, Booth wakes up and pretends to remain asleep. Lincoln remembers more about hustling than he lets on to Booth, this being the truth released by playing this round of the game, in the exhibition. Booth realizes his brother may be trying to suck him dry. In a shorter span of time, these patterns may not be as clear or readily explainable. However, by waiting until Scene 4 to explain plot devices introduced in Scene 1, they play as more authentic and believable. Parks gives the reader multiple examples to sift through and

recognize patterns than throw recurring actions so close to one another; like packing the information of six scenes into one. When operating under a primarily unchanging framework, Parks works harder to give space for the reader to breathe and string events together on their own time.

Parks concerns herself with genuine interactions and construction of dramatic structure. Building upon those principles, there is less of a concern for the universality of the experiences Lincoln and Booth share, specifically to non-black readers. However, the parallel made between the historical figures allows a larger margin of readers to understand the play and heightens the power struggle between Lincoln and Booth. By drawing this parallel, Parks summons American cultural memory of the Lincoln assassination and the civil war. This allows the reader to super-impose the plot of those historical events onto the plot and conflicts of *Topdog/Underdog* should they need more context than the cultural signifiers which resonate almost exclusively with readers of color, more specifically black-American readers.

Lincoln and Booth are assigned topdog and underdog, respectively, in the preface of the script. Lincoln plays former President Abraham Lincoln in an assassination reenactment booth at a fair. The character Lincoln makes his living in a booth, yet his brother named Booth, the namesake of the former President's assassin, murders him. Lincoln lives and dies contained in booths, like a poetic joke. Support for this assertion comes from how the brothers earn their namesakes. Lincoln reveals that his father told him that he and his brother were named after the historical figures as a joke. That fact makes the choice appear trivial casting it the back of the reader's mind.

Parks makes a deliberate parallel to historical events and follows her setup by not altering the major plot or the motivations of the Lincoln assassination. Parks makes it clear that the differences between the brothers are fundamental within each scene, much like the differences between the historical figures Lincoln and Booth. Booth shot Lincoln because he thought his ideas were better; that he was better. That statement fits both the historical event and the finale of this play. The duality of this story strengthens the dramatic structure Parks lays out. Both stories could stand alone, but the symbiotic relationship Parks establishes nourishes both structures.. In naming these characters Lincoln and Booth, Parks sets up expectations of the reader and follows through on them to deliver a blunt and genuine message.

The Topdog/Underdog structure is a false dichotomy in a sick game setup by social conventions that Parks highlights. I chose these two elements not only because they were the major concerns of the team, but also because they rely on one another to stand. The names bring gravity and clarity to the story Parks sets up, but it requires separate, similar examples to discriminate outliers between the two plots (historical and fiction). Not only does Parks setup these conventions to highlight her focus and direct the play from the page, but she reiterates herself consistently by following through on her missions. *Topdog/Underdog* dramatizes the adage “history repeats itself.” Through that lens, we stand to build a successful interpretation and production of Parks’ *Topdog/Underdog*.