

## **Duties to the Community: Societal Influences on Three African-American Female Characters in Nottage's *Intimate Apparel***

### **Deberes para con la comunidad: Influencias sociales en tres personajes femeninos afroamericanos en *Intimate Apparel* de Nottage**

**William Schutz**  
wschutz@cis-spain.com

CIS-Endicott International University

#### **Abstract**

*The three main African American female characters in Nottage's (2001) play Intimate Apparel all attempt to create a life according to their dreams and aspirations; however, these dreams and aspirations are stifled as they clash against the hard and cruel realities of society. In consideration of this role that society plays in an individual's fate, it is important and necessary to be aware of the need to defend the human rights of others, in particular by highlighting Article 29 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) of the United Nations that claims "everyone has duties to the community." In sum, this paper argues that such a concept of having duties to the community is emphasized, through the power of storytelling, in Intimate Apparel and that despite the time period of the story itself the lesson of the need to recognize social injustices for the sake of change is an ongoing lesson for all times.*

**Keywords:** *Human rights, individual, society, community*

#### **Resumen**

*Los tres personajes femeninos afroamericanos principales en la obra de Nottage (2001) Intimate Apparel, intentan todos crear una vida de acuerdo con sus sueños y aspiraciones. Sin embargo, estos sueños y aspiraciones se sofocan cuando chocan contra las duras y crueles realidades de la sociedad. Teniendo en cuenta este papel que desempeña la sociedad en el destino de un individuo, es importante y necesario ser consciente de la necesidad de defender los derechos humanos de los demás, en particular destacando el Artículo 29 de la Declaración Universal de Derechos Humanos de las Naciones Unidas (1948) que afirma que "todos tienen deberes con la comunidad." En resumen, este artículo argumenta que en Intimate Apparel se enfatiza, a través del poder de una historia, el concepto de tener deberes para con la comunidad y que, a pesar del período de tiempo de la historia en sí, la lección de la necesidad de reconocer las injusticias sociales por el cambio es una continua lección para todos los tiempos.*

**Palabras clave:** *Derechos humanos, individuo, sociedad, comunidad*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In Nottage's (2001) play *Intimate Apparel* which is set during the beginning of the twentieth century, the three African American female characters of Esther, Mayme, and Mrs. Dickson all find themselves in predicaments at odds with their dreams and aspirations. Esther, a lonely thirty-five year old seamstress of custom lingerie for well-to-do clients, acts upon her desire for romance and ends up in an unhappy marriage. Mayme, a piano player composer and a prostitute, engages in attempts to establish a meaningful relationship with a man and develop her artistic talent yet ends up accomplishing neither. Mrs. Dickson, a common sense widowed landlady of a rooming house, had envisioned and worked for a different reality than what she ultimately ends up with. In other words, each character endeavors to build some sort of alternate reality, but due in large part to the powerful and controlling societal influences that surround them, their alternate realities allude them. Regarding the impact and role that society can play on an individual's fate, and in specific relation to Article 29 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) of the United Nations which, in part, notes that "everyone has duties to the community," it is critical for us, as citizens of the world, to remain keenly aware of the social injustices that still occur today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, Article 29 notes the following:

- (1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.
- (2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.
- (3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Indeed, we need to both be aware of our duties to the community and to exercise these duties.

Each one of these three African-American women is clearly compromised by their gender and their race. While up against such driving societal forces that control their fate, they are, in large part, at the mercy of nature. Although it could be argued that these three characters take certain actions that are of their own independent accord, and thus their ultimate realities are the consequence of such actions, such an understanding would be limited without having probed into the layered complexities of the situation. Beneath the layers, their actions are more the result of their societal predicament rather than their societal predicament the result of their actions. In other words, regarding the layered complexities in *Intimate Apparel*, it becomes apparent that although, through their actions, Esther, Mayme, and Mrs. Dickson are partially responsible for their final predicaments, their final predicaments are more the result of the controlling forces of nature that surround them.

## 2. OVERVIEW

It does need to be made clear from the start that the term "victim" is not what would accurately define Esther, Mayme, and Mrs. Dickson. The word victim is too often understood negatively or just simply misunderstood or misused. In Miriam Lopez-Rodriguez's (2012) essay "A Stalker, a Serial Killer, and the Women Who Survived Them: Psychological Abuse as a Form of Gender Violence" she stresses this point and also adds: "Whether they fight back or not, whether they manage to survive or not, whether they dare to overcome victimization or not, none of these elements alter the fact that these persons are or have been the target of

someone's abuse" (p. 82). Rather than victim, maybe a more accurate way to view the three African-American females in *Intimate Apparel* is as a "target of someone's abuse." To be more specific, they were not necessarily the target of domestic violence in the play, but rather they were the target of society's abuse.

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