

National Theatre Collection



Blues for an Alabama Sky

Learning Guide

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Introduction

This learning guide supports the National Theatre's production of **Blues for an Alabama Sky** by **Pearl Cleage**, directed by **Lynette Linton**, which opened at the National Theatre on 21 September 2022.

Here you will find all the information you need to enable you to study the production. This includes contextual information, key themes, and a synopsis with timestamps. You will also find pointers for further research.

In addition, education specialist Maylene Catchpole has designed teaching activities to demonstrate how to use the production as stimulus for cross-curricular teaching. For example, students will explore character analysis through monologue writing and connect the play's themes to broader historical and contemporary issues.

This pack is particularly relevant for:

- GCSE and A level drama students who are working on their live theatre review
- GCSE and A Level drama students looking to understand more about costume design
- Teachers and students who are exploring themes including themes of racial identity, fight for equality, ambition, LGBTQ+ experience and Harlem Renaissance.

Please see the Careers Insight: Costume Guide which aims to help students understand more about the roles a costume designer and costume supervisor. This is a separate document which lives on the National Theatre Collection and National Theatre Learning Hub.

Content Warning Details

Including Timestamps

Violence and abuse

Violence and murder

- Leland shoots Sam in the back as he walks up the stairs (2:10:10)

Discrimination

Homophobia

- Leland is openly homophobic towards Guy (1:30:50)
- Two men are holding hands in the street and beaten up for it (0:52:44)
- Guy is attacked (1:23:00)
- During Guy's story about the most romantic thing he's ever seen, Leland is disgusted by men admiring each other and calls it an 'abomination' (1:30:45)
- While speaking to Sam outside, Leland is once again homophobic (1:33:20)
- Leland uses religion to justify his homophobia (1:40:50)

Racism

- **Whole play:** Based in Harlem – underlying themes of racism throughout the production
- **Whole play:** There is some explicit language and racial slurs throughout, indicative of the time and setting.
- Sam tells Delia that, to some people, 'family planning means white women teaching coloured women how to stop having children' (0:49:17)

Death and trauma

Genocide

- When speaking about setting up the clinic, Sam mentions that some people are calling it genocide (0:49:06)

Death / dying

- Leland mentions his wife died during childbirth (0:59:40 – 1:02:00)
- Leland mentions his wife died during childbirth (2:05:45)
- Leland speaks about his son dying in childbirth (2:06:00)
- Sam is murdered by Leland (2:10:10)

Content Warning Details Continued

Pregnancy / childbirth

- Whole play: Ongoing storyline of Delia wanting to open a family clinic.
- Sam and Delia speak about the clinic (0:48:50)
- Angel finds out that she is pregnant (1:44:15)
- Angel tells Leland that she is pregnant with his baby (1:48:11)
- Angel reveals to Guy that she is pregnant with Leland's baby (1:56:05)

Abortion

- Leland is disgusted by birth control and the clinic (1:27:40)
- Leland says that they kill babies in the clinic (1:32:30)
- Angel wants to have an abortion (1:56:40)
- Angel asks Sam to perform an abortion on her (1:58:15 – 2:00:25)
- Angel has had the abortion (2:02:30)
- Angel tells Leland she has had a miscarriage (2:05:05)
- Angel confesses to Leland she had an abortion (2:08:20)
- Delia reads a newspaper article about Angel's abortion (2:12:55)

Explicit Content

Sexual assault

- Angel is the target of a fake 'audition' where the person made unwanted sexual advances (1:14:05-- 1:16:10)

Explicit language

- Whole play: There is some explicit language and slurs throughout, indicative of the time and setting.

Sexual intimacy

- A moment of intimacy between Angel and Leland (1:04:04 – 1:05:00)

Drinking

- Whole play: Set during prohibition. There are multiple instances throughout where the characters are either drunk or drinking.

Guns / Loud and sudden noises

- Leland shoots Sam in the back (2:10:10)

Background Information

Recording Date – 11th February 2025

Location – Lyttelton Theatre, National Theatre

Recommended Age – 14 +

Cast

Angel Allen.....	Samira Wiley
Guy Jacobs.....	Giles Terera
Sam Thomas.....	Sule Rimi
Leland Cunningham.....	Osy Ikhile
Delia Patterson.....	Ronke Adékoluejo
Ensemble.....	Lincoln Conway
Ensemble.....	Eddie Elliott
Ensemble.....	Kimberley Okoye
Ensemble.....	Helena Pipe

Crew

Playwright.....	Pearl Cleage
Director.....	Lynette Linton
Set and Costume Designer	Frankie Bradshaw
Lighting Designer	Oliver Fenwick
Composer.....	Benjamin Kwasi Burrell
Sound Designer.....	George Dennis
Movement Director.....	Kane Husbands
Wigs, Hair & Make-up Designer.....	Cynthia De La Rosa
Voice and Dialect Coach.....	Hazel Holder
Dramatherapist.....	Wabriya King
Associate Sound Designer.....	Johnny Edwards
Staff Director.....	TD. Moyo

Plot Synopsis with Timecodes

Act One, Scene One – 3 am, Sunday Morning (0:00:13)

The show opens with a brief song. Two men are carrying Angel, who is drunk and loud, through Harlem after a wild night ‘celebrating’ her break-up with her boyfriend, Nicky, and getting fired from her job. Guy explains to Delia, who lives in a neighbouring apartment, how Angel got fired and shares his plans to go to Paris. He opens some champagne to toast with Delia and speaks about Leland, the other man who helped to carry Angel home. It turns out that Guy was also fired due to Angel’s incident. Delia also shares her excitement about her plans to start a family clinic in their neighbourhood, to help women access birth control and contraception. Delia and Guy head to their bedrooms.

Scene Two – Sunday, Late Afternoon (0:11:25)

Guy returns home to find Angel still asleep on the sofa. When she wakes up, she feels upset remembering the previous night. Guy had gone to pick up Angel’s things from Nicky’s place and invites her to stay with them until she gets back on her feet. Delia arrives, excited to share some news. While Guy sews, he tells Angel about Leland, and that their friend Sam, a doctor, is coming over. Delia returns with some information on secretarial jobs for Angel and Guy quizzes her on the Reverend Powell, whom she spoke to about her clinic idea in Harlem.

Scene Three – Wednesday, Late Afternoon (0:29:09)

Angel comes downstairs and takes a quick shot of alcohol before Guy arrives home. He tells her he saw Nicky, who feels bad about everything and mentioned an audition for Angel, though Guy is skeptical about it. They plan to go to a friend’s party and take Delia with them.

Angel visits Delia to share the news about the audition and confesses she knows Guy got fired. She also claims that Sam has a crush on Delia, which Delia denies. Angel spots a new dress of Delia’s and asks to wear it for the audition. Sam arrives to help Delia with her speech as Angel heads back to her apartment.

In their apartment Guy and Angel get dressed up for the party and she shares her Sunday plans with Leland.

Delia has been practicing a speech she intends to present to the deacon board about starting the family clinic. Sam, who has fallen asleep during the presentation, wakes up suddenly. He supports the plans for the clinic but starts asking some hostile questions in preparation for the deacon board meeting before leaving.

Plot Synopsis with Timecodes

Scene Four – Sunday Evening (0:51:40)

Guy is sewing on the sofa when Angel arrives and quickly changes into Delia's dress for her date with Leland. Guy tells Angel that Delia's meeting has been moved to that evening, and Sam went along for support. Delia and Sam return with good news.

Leland arrives, impressing everyone with his good looks. Guy, Delia and Sam head to the theatre leaving Leland and Angel alone in the apartment. He tells her that his wife died in childbirth. They ask each other questions and he gives back a scarf which she dropped the other night. She kisses him as the lights fade to black.

Scene Five – Friday Evening (1:04:55)

Delia stands in a colourful silk garment while Guy pins it. They step out onto the porch for champagne, discussing the Harlem drag scene, Guy's upbringing and Delia's landlord issues regarding the clinic. She returns home to sleep as Leland arrives with a gift for Angel.

Leland and Guy go back inside and Guy leaves for a party as Angel comes home, looking distressed and startled to see him. She reveals the audition was a scam, with the owner having unsavoury intentions. Leland confesses his love for Angel and departs. Angel sings a haunting song as the stage fades to black.

Plot Synopsis with Timecodes

Act Two, Scene One – Two Weeks Later, Sunday Afternoon (1:21:34)

Guy returns home after being attacked by local hoodlums and finds Angel wearing the dress Leland gave her. Delia and Sam arrive, soon followed by Leland. They discuss the clinic, the church service, and gossip about their acquaintance, Isabel. Leland expresses disagreement about the clinic's abortion practices. Guy shares a story about men admiring each other which Leland finds offensive, leading to his dismissal from the apartment. Sam and Delia leave, leaving Guy and Angel alone.

Outside Sam and Leland argue about Guy's homosexuality. Leland insists, 'the sooner I get Angel out of there, the better it will be for all of us.' He leaves and Sam goes back inside.

Angel and Guy argue about whether Leland is right for her. As Sam returns, Angel rushes out to catch Leland, while Guy heads to the Kit Kat Klub, visibly upset. Sam visits Delia and they share a kiss.

Angel returns to the front step of the block of flats as Leland comes back, and she notices he has a gun. She tells him her only fear is 'trying to lean on one more weak Negro who can't finish what he started!' and storms back inside the apartment.

Act Two, Scene Two – Two Weeks Later (1:41:49)

Sam is sitting on the front steps when Angel returns home, looking dishevelled. Angel reveals that she is pregnant and that she and Guy have an eviction notice on their door. Guy comes home, and they argue before he leaves.

Leland arrives and asks Angel to marry him. She agrees, and they head out to get the marriage licence.

Plot Synopsis with Timecodes

Act Two, Scene Three – The Next Day (1:48:38)

Delia and Sam return home after someone sets fire to the clinic. Sam suggests moving the clinic to his parents' brownstone. Guy enters with a letter informing them he has a first-class ticket to Paris to work with Josephine Baker, and they all go back to his apartment to celebrate with champagne. Delia and Sam leave to take care of some things as Angel arrives.

Angel is now dressed plainly and wearing no make-up, a stark contrast from her earlier appearance. Guy surprises her by saying he has paid off all their debts and has a ticket to Paris for her too. She confesses that she is pregnant and married to Leland but plans to have an abortion, lying to Leland about a miscarriage. Guy, frustrated, says, 'Sometimes you just wear me out' and he leaves.

When Sam returns, Angel admits that she doesn't want the baby. Sam eventually agrees to help her with the abortion the next morning.

Act Two, Scene Four – The Next Day (2:01:30)

Angel returns to the apartment after her abortion. Leland enters with a rocking chair, and shares his plans for their family, giving her his grandmother's ring as a gift. She reveals she had a miscarriage, leaving Leland distraught. When he tries to comfort her, she rebuffs him and mentions Sam's suggestion for her to go away for a bit, including a trip to Paris with Guy. Leland becomes outraged leading to a heated argument, where Angel bluntly states, 'I didn't lose the baby. I got rid of it.'

Leland realises Sam helped her and storms off to confront him, pulling out a gun and shooting at Sam's back. Angel watches in horror. Delia mourns Sam's death as people leave their condolences on the stairs.

Scene Five – Two Weeks Later (2:11:42)

Guy opens a bottle of champagne as Delia enters. We learn that Angel is missing. They reminisce about Sam, and Guy invites Delia to Paris with him, which she accepts before going to find her passport.

As Guy leaves, Angel returns and she picks up a picture of Sam which she hands to Delia. They say goodbye, and Delia leaves.

Now alone, Angel pours two glasses of champagne and drinks. She looks out the window at a well-dressed man passing by and says, 'Hot enough for you?' The stage fades to black.

Contextual Information

Blues for an Alabama Sky was written by Pearl Cleage in 1995 and is set in 1930s Harlem. The play is centred around the lively and enigmatic character of Angel Allen a jazz and blues singer in her mid -30s who is dealing with the aftermath of being fired. The play explores themes of escapism, economic survival, homophobia and women's reproductive rights.

Historical Context

Harlem was originally established in 1658 as Nieuw Haarlem by Dutch settlers. Named after the city of Haarlem in the Netherlands, Harlem has evolved across the centuries. It became a predominantly African American neighbourhood by the early 20th century and was the heart of the Harlem Renaissance.

What was the Harlem Renaissance?

The Harlem Renaissance was an intellectual, cultural and artistic movement during the 1920 and early 1930s centred in Harlem, that celebrated African American creativity in music, dance, literature and art. This movement was fuelled by the 'Great Migration' and a growing demand for Americans fleeing the segregation and violence of the Jim Crow laws in the deep south. After World War I many African Americans migrated north due to the Great Depression. Northern cities were seen to have more employment opportunities with a growing need for workers in factories, better wages, improved living conditions and less segregation than the rural south. With more affordable housing and better economic opportunities, Harlem became a hub for the black intellectuals, artists and professionals looking for a better life. Harlem with its growing community then became a place free from discrimination so artistic expression and creativity thrived with a growing middle class supporting the arts and education. Harlem then became a destination for wealthy donors, both black and white, to fund emerging art and talent helping to launch many careers and new publications. This hub of money and artistic licence created fuelled a vibrant entertainment scene and nightlife for which clubs like 'Cotton' became famous.

Contextual Information

The Cotton Club

The Cotton Club is an iconic jazz club that launched the careers of many legendary African American performers of the 1920s to 1940s. The club defined the sound of jazz and the blues for generations to come and often saw many original compositions first performed there. Artists who performed there included:

- Duke Ellington, whose orchestra became the house band in 1927
- Cab Calloway, who succeeded Ellington in 1931
- Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, and Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson also performed there

Elaborate and spectacular revues also became popular at the Cotton Club and drew huge audience numbers who came to see the beatifically dressed chorus line dancers. These dancers were often referred to as the 'Cotton Club Girls'. These performances became renowned as they were broadcast nationally on the radio, helping to spread Harlem's music and style across the US.

Although a hub of cultural expression and musical talent clubs like the Cotton Club were still racially segregated and were exclusively for white audiences even though they celebrated and highlighted black culture.



Key themes in the production

Decline of the Harlem Renaissance

Blues for an Alabama Sky captures the characters and their responses to the decline of the Harlem Renaissance and the challenges that presents in fulfilling their personal dreams in the face of economic hardship and social disillusionment. The play refers to key entertainment figures who played pivotal roles in the African American arts community and their influence on its culture. This includes references to Josephine Baker and Langston Hughes.

The Great Depression

The play opens with Angel, who is drunk, being carried home by her cousin, Guy, and an unnamed stranger. She has just been made unemployed – something that also threatens many of the characters' lives, giving instability signally the economic collapse affecting America at that time.

Prohibition era

From 1920 to 1933 the sale and import of alcohol across the United States was banned by Federal government. This ban was led by social and religious groups who believed that alcohol fuelled amoral behaviour, increased crime and violence and did not help people uphold Christian values. Despite this ban, many of the characters in the play are seen drinking and alcohol seems to be readily available in certain social circles. This highlights the escapism the characters want to feel and the contradictions of the society they live in.



Key themes in the production

Reproductive rights

Real-life activist Margaret Sanger inspired the character of Delia, a young social worker who is trying to open a family planning clinic in Harlem. This brings to light the views held on women's reproductive autonomy and the resistance the character faces from those around her.

Homophobia and conservative views

The character Leland Cunningham, a religious man from Alabama, represents conservative southern values which clash with Harlem's more progressive, bohemian lifestyles, as seen through the characters of Angel, Guy and Delia. His inability to accept their beliefs and values stirs up tensions within the already fractured community and asks the audience to question the role religion and gender play in societal norms.

Gender and economic survival

The central protagonist of the story is Angel, a singer at the Cotton Club. As her drunken tirade at work leads to her being fired, she begins the play searching for economic stability. When this proves not to be fruitful – a nod to the Great Depression and its hardships – she then looks to find a stable relationship and marriage. This is loveless relationship on her part and her internal struggles make her question whether to marry for financial certainty. Her story reflects the many hardships women of the time faced when confronted with a system of limiting opportunities.

Dreams vs reality

Many of the characters have dreams beyond Harlem and grapple with their own aspirations coupled with the societal and economic pressures faced in their everyday struggles. The play illustrates how economic constraints can impact our ability to pursue artistic or professional goals and how often we must compromise or make sacrifices.

Suggestions for further teaching activities

These activities will support your teaching around the production and contain suggestions for different focus areas around the show.

Learning outcomes include: deepening understanding of character analysis, finding links and connections through different media, encouraging creative interpretation and empathy.

Character monologues

Objective: Deepen understanding of character motivations and internal conflicts.

Activity: Students should choose a character and write a short monologue from their perspective, reflecting on the character's thoughts, hopes and aspirations.

Suitability: Key Stages 3, 4 and 5 (some moments only suitable for Key Stages 4 and 5)

Ideas for key moments for students to use as stimulus to write their monologues:

Angel

Act 1 Scene 2. Guys apartment -P18 *“They will take me back though, wont they?*

In this extract Angel is talking to Guy. The scene explores Angels' desperation to be get back the job she has lost due to her argument with her boyfriend. Throughout the play Angel is reliant on others (particularly men) for her happiness, social status and wellbeing. Re-watch this scene and write a character monologue exploring Angel's true desires for stability and belonging.

Act 1 scene 3. Delia's apartment- P39 *“Guys a dreamer. He always was and he always will be, but I'm gonna' hitch my star to somebody closer to home.”*

In this scene Angel is expressing her frustration about Guy leaving for France to Delia. The extract explores women's limiting opportunities without male support and often dependency. Re-watch this extract and write a character monologue that investigates Angel's limiting dreams for her own life and how she may attach to others out of necessity rather than love or connection.

Act 1 scene 5. Guy's apartment- P65 *“I am tired of negro dreams. All they ever do is break you heart.”*

This scene highlights Angels views on cultural identity and the battle she faces following her heart and her past trauma. Re-watch this scene and write a character monologue as Angel exposing her pessimistic views of African American aspirations and how art and creativity were often the only outlets for expression.

Character monologues

Guy

Act 1 scene 2. Guy's apartment- P20 *"look even in your current sorry state, you're better off than most negros in Harlem."*

In this extract Guy is commenting on the position of African Americans in Harlem and his outlook on community. Re-watch this scene and write a character monologue exploring Guy's optimistic approach to life creating a vision for a future he sees for his community in Harlem.

Act 1 scene 3. Guy's apartment- P36 *"For prospects you gotta look past 125th street. No law say we gotta live and die in Harlem."*

In this scene Guy highlights the insular view of many who believe they will remain stuck in their situation rather than dream beyond their current circumstances. Re-watch this scene and write a character monologue looking at Guy's dreams and aspirations for his follow friends and what he dreams for them is possible.

Leland

Act 1 scene 4. Guy's apartment-P55 *"I knew somebody..... (A beat.) You look a lot like somebody I used to know back home. "*

In this extract we see Leland and his longings for the past and the beginnings of his yearning for something he cannot get back. Re-watch this scene and write a character monologue for Leland recounting a happy memory of his wife and the life he wished he could have.

Act 1 scene 5. Guy's apartment-P67 *".... you had a run of bad luck, but it's over now. I am going to take care of you."*

This scene illustrates Leland's beliefs about gender roles and his place as protector and provider. This could include the guilt he feels about not being able to protect his previous wife and child. Re-watch this scene and write a character monologue as Leland stating his strong beliefs about gender roles within society and his desire to support Angel.

Extension activity:

Perform the monologues and discuss how each character's dreams, struggles and truths are shaped by their environment.

Top tips for writing a monologue

Know your character

Have a good understanding of the character you are exploring: their desires, fears, and relationships with others.

Ask:

- What does this character want right now? What's stopping them?
- Every monologue should have a clear purpose: to persuade, confess, reflect, or decide.
- This gives the piece direction and emotional drive.

Structure

Think about telling a story in the moment. Beginning: Set the scene or emotional tone. Middle: Build tension or explore conflict. End: Reach a turning point, realisation, or decision.

Language

Write how your character thinks and speaks, not how you write essays.

Include pauses, interruptions, accents or unfinished/broken thoughts to reflect real speech.

Show, don't tell - use imagery, anecdotes, or actions to reveal emotions.

Emotional journey

A good monologue often changes tone and emotion, from anger to reflection, or confusion to certainty. This gives actors a chance to show range.

Keep it focused and concise.

Aim for it to last one to two minutes, unless otherwise specified.

Cut anything that doesn't serve the character's objective or emotional journey.

Read it aloud

Hearing it helps you catch awkward phrasing or unnatural rhythms.

Activity Two: Harlem Gallery

Objective: Link characters to art and find connections through different media.

Suitability: Key Stages 3, 4 and 5

Activity option one

Teacher creates stations with visuals, music, poetry, and short bios of Harlem Renaissance figures. Students rotate round each station and take notes on how the cultural movement influenced the play's characters and its key themes.

Activity Option two

Students find a piece of art / music or poetry from the Harlem Renaissance they believe represents one of the characters and presents the artwork and their rationale back to the group. This could be done individually, in pairs or in groups.

These artworks or media could form the basis for new creative work or form the backdrop or set design for work inspired by the play.

Possible key figures to use and investigate:

Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, The Four Step Brothers, Louis Armstrong, Dorothy Dandridge, Billie Holiday, Ma Rainey, Fats Waller, Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas.



Activity Three: Action Timelines

Objective: Connect the play's themes to broader historical and contemporary issues.

Suitability: Key Stages 4 and 5

Activity:

In groups, students should research key events related to the main themes and issues explored in the play, notably reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ history, and racial justice.

Allocate each group one of the key issues. Then ask them to create a visual timeline from 1930's to present day. The timeline should explore key political figures involved across history, and any laws that have been passed related to that issue. Each group should then present their findings and research to the rest of the class.

Invite the groups to create freeze frames, monologues or dynamic scenes to explore fictional moments rooted in historical accuracy and research.



Activity Four: Re-imagining

Objective: Encourage creative interpretation and empathy.

Suitability: Key Stages 4 and 5

Activity: In small groups, students should rewrite a scene set in a different time or place exploring how the themes of the play are transferable and can be used to highlight complex issues being faced now or through key cultural movements.

- Modern-day London
- 1960s Birmingham
- Roe vs Wade in 1975 United States
- Paris protests over workers' rights in 2021

Discuss how context changes the characters' choices and challenges.

Example:

New Setting: Modern-day London

Opening scene re-imagined:

A male friend is helping home his old university friend, after she has been fired from a prestigious London hotel. The female friend has had a public argument with her boyfriend who is involved with local politics. The argument happened while she was at work and was filmed and posted online. The video will ruin her professional image, goes against the values of the hotel and raises questions about her boyfriend's political views and moral standing in the community. They return to the male friend's tiny, cramped London one bedroom apartment where he tries to settle her temper and behaviour. They attempt to deal with the aftermath of the viral clip in the morning.

Roe vs Wade:

It is the year 2010 in the United States of America and a young lawyer on the cusp of a major promotion finds herself pregnant after a brief affair with a married man. She discovers she is 12 weeks pregnant and muses over her options with one of her closest friends. The friend is pro-life, and they get into a heated exchange about moral responsibility, freedom and religion. If she goes against the law, it will put her career and promotion in jeopardy.

Activity Four: Re-imagining

Discussion points

- How do the characters' dreams reflect their identities and desires?
- In what ways does Harlem function as both a place of opportunity and limitation
- How does Cleage use dialogue and silence to convey power dynamics and emotional tension?
- What role does gender play in shaping the characters' experiences and choices?
- How do the characters respond to societal expectations, and what does this reveal about their values?
- What does the play suggest about the cost of personal freedom in a time of social upheaval?
- How do the themes of the play resonate with issues in today's world?



Find out more

Further reading:

Books on Harlem:

- Harlem Shadows by Claude McKay
- Cane by Jean Toomer
- When Harlem Was in Vogue by David Levering Lewis
- The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (1994), edited by Arnold Rampersad

Articles on cultural identity:

- Opportunity: A journal of negro life Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life - Wikipedia

Articles on Blues for an Alabama Sky:

- Reviews Blues for an Alabama Sky at the National Theatre review: deliciously funny and affecting | The Standard

Plays

- for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem (1977), by Ntozake Shange
- Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1985), by August Wilson

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Thank you