

Harold Athol Lanigan Fugard's *Blood Knot*

-Prepared by Dr. Tanim Dutta

Blood Knot is a parable centering on two half-brothers, Morris and Zachariah, who share a one-room shack in Korsten, a non-white slum near Port Elizabeth, South Africa, during the apartheid era. The play explores the complexities of racial identity and the "blood knot" that binds them despite the social and physical differences imposed by their skin color.

About the Author:

Harold Athol Lanigan Fugard, born in 1932, is a world-renowned South African playwright, director, actor, and novelist. Raised in Port Elizabeth by a mother of Afrikaner descent and a father of Irish, English, and French heritage, his work is deeply rooted in the complex racial landscape of South Africa. Although he dropped out of the University of Cape Town in 1953, he eventually spent two years working on a steamer ship in East Asia before returning to South Africa to begin his theatrical career.

His path as a dramatist was significantly shaped by his time working as a clerk in a Native Commissioners' Court in Johannesburg in 1958. This experience sensitized him to the profound injustices of the apartheid system, particularly the "pass laws" and racial inequalities that would become central themes in his writing. Fugard became a pivotal figure in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, often coming into direct conflict with the government. Because his plays frequently featured racially mixed casts—such as his long-standing collaboration with black actor Zakes Mokae—many of his works, including *Blood Knot*, were initially banned or restricted in South Africa, and his passport was even confiscated for a time.

Fugard is celebrated for his "psycho-mythological" and political plays, which include *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, *The Island*, and *Master Harold ... and the Boys*. His work is noted for its focus on a small number of characters—often just two or three—who are bound together by blood or friendship while struggling against a "bleak situation". Beyond the stage, he has appeared in prominent films such as *Gandhi* and *The Killing Fields*. Despite his early departure from formal education, he has been awarded honorary degrees from seven universities and is an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Currently, Fugard resides in the United States.

Summary of the Play:

Two brothers, Morris and Zachariah, live a structured, repetitive life regulated by an alarm clock. Morris is light-skinned and literate, while Zachariah is dark-skinned and illiterate. Morris has recently returned to live with Zachariah after years of trying to live as a white man, a practice known as "passing". While Morris keeps the house and manages their meager savings to buy a future farm, Zachariah works a grueling job as a park gatekeeper to support them.

The domestic peace is disrupted when Zachariah expresses a longing for his past life of "jollification," drinks, and women. To satisfy this longing safely, Morris suggests Zachariah find a woman pen-pal. They select a name from a newspaper, Ethel Lange, and begin a

correspondence. However, the brothers soon discover from a photograph and a letter that Ethel is white. Under the oppressive laws of apartheid, particularly the Immorality Act, any interaction between a black man and a white woman is a crime.

Plot Overview:

- **The Correspondence:** Excited by the "crime" of writing to a white woman, the brothers continue the letters until Ethel announces she is coming to Port Elizabeth to meet Zachariah.
- **The Plan to "Pass":** Terrified of the consequences but unwilling to let the opportunity go, Zachariah persuades Morris to use his light skin to pass as a white man and meet her in his place. To do this, they spend all the money they had saved for their farm on a gentleman's outfit for Morris, including a suit, hat, and shoes.
- **The Rehearsal and Reality:** As Morris tries on the new clothes, the brothers engage in role-playing games. Morris begins to inhabit the persona of a superior white man, and the play reaches a psychological climax as the game becomes violent and abusive, reflecting the internalized trauma of racial hierarchy. Morris realizes that whiteness is not just about clothes or skin, but a "white something inside" that he cannot truly adopt without betraying his brother.
- **The Resolution:** The crisis is resolved when a final letter arrives from Ethel. She informs them she is engaged to be married to a man named Stoffel and will no longer be writing.
- **The Ending:** The threat of discovery disappears, but the brothers are left in a state of abject poverty, having spent their life savings on a suit that is now useless. They are left with nothing but each other, tied by the "blood knot" of their shared birth, destined to continue their struggle together in the "hovel" they call home.

Major Themes:

In Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*, the narrative serves as a profound exploration of the human condition under the crushing weight of systemic oppression. The following notes detail the major themes found within the sources.

1. Race and the Injustices of Apartheid/ Critique of Apartheid:

Athol Fugard wrote this play in 1961 as a direct protest against the systemic injustices of apartheid and racial segregation in South Africa. During this era, the all-white government enforced a hierarchy where non-whites were forced into separate living areas, such as the non-white slum of Korsten, and were required to carry documents known as "passes" to authorize their presence in restricted zones. The play specifically engages with the Immorality Act, which prohibited miscegenation or inter-racial relationships. This law creates the central conflict when the brothers realize that Zachariah's pen-pal, Ethel Lange, is a white woman; the mere act of correspondence becomes an "exciting crime," and the prospect of a meeting induces terror in Morris, who fears the violent repercussions from the police and white society.

Race is further explored through the characters' daily lives. Zachariah's job as a park gatekeeper is a cruel irony of the apartheid system; his duty is to prevent other black people

from entering the green spaces reserved for whites, even as he suffers from "inhumanity" and "injury" at the hands of his white overseer. The sources describe how the South African authorities originally banned the play because it featured a racially mixed cast (Fugard and Zakes Mokae), a revolutionary act that forced audiences to witness the shared struggle of two brothers bound by blood but separated by the law. Ultimately, the play demonstrates that under apartheid, race is not just a biological fact but an institutional tool used to control, exploit, and dehumanize.

2. The Complexity of Identity and the "Blood Knot":

The theme of identity is central to the "double-ness" of Morris, a man who is light-skinned enough to "pass" as white but is legally and biologically black. This creates a "double consciousness" wherein Morris is torn between his skin color and his "blood ties" to his dark-skinned brother, Zachariah. Morris previously left Korsten to live as a white man but returned because the "blood knot"—the inescapable bond of brotherhood—pulled him back to his origins. He realizes that he cannot truly "pass" without betraying his own flesh and blood, stating that there was "always you, Zach," wherever he went.

Fugard explores the idea that whiteness is more than just skin color; it is a performance. When Morris puts on the gentleman's suit, he begins to inhabit a "different sort of man," adopting the abusive and superior language of white oppressors. However, Morris eventually concludes that being white is not merely about clothes or appearance, but about a "white something inside"—a specific manner of being that he cannot authentically possess while remaining true to his brother. The "blood knot" also manifests in their shared search for a maternal legacy. They reminisce about their mother, finding common ground in her "soapsuds on brown hands" and her "sore feet," yet they remain divided by the different "songs" she sang to each, reflecting their disparate experiences of the same heritage.

3. Grinding Poverty and Capitalist Exploitation:

The play highlights the abject poverty of black South Africans by setting the entire action in a one-room shack made of "corrugated iron, packing-case wood, flattened cardboard boxes and old hessian bags". This setting, located in a slum surrounded by industrial pollution and the "stink" of a nearby lake, serves as a visual testament to the brothers' penury. Their limited resources are a constant source of tension; they possess no formal clothing and must save for a whole year just to accumulate forty-five rands, which they hope to use to buy a small farm and escape their "hovel".

The theme of capitalist exploitation is illustrated through Zachariah's grueling labor. He works all day in the hot sun as a gatekeeper, returning home with "callouses" and "foot sores". The brothers' discussion about "Schultz's Foot Salts" becomes a metaphor for the economic system; Zachariah realizes that by buying a more expensive, less effective brand of salts, he is essentially handing his hard-earned money back to the white shopkeeper in the form of "profit". He laments, "I do the bloody work... but he goes and makes my profit". The tragedy of their poverty is underscored at the play's conclusion. To fuel their fantasy of Morris meeting Ethel, they spend their entire life savings on a single suit, leaving them at the end of the play with "nothing but each other," their dreams of a farm and a better future effectively destroyed by a single day's shopping.

4. Psychological Escape through Games and Role-Playing:

The brothers frequently escape their "bleak situation" and the "harsh realities" of apartheid by engaging in imaginary games. These games serve as a psychological release for their frustrations and a way to navigate a world that offers them no real mobility. For instance, they reminisce about their childhood by playing a game where they pretend to drive a car to "hell and gone," visualizing the scenery of their youth—trees, animals, and friendly people—as a way to reclaim a sense of freedom and "gladness". The alarm clock serves as a vital prop in these escapes, acting as a "breaker of tension" that eventually brings them back to the reality of their daily chores and poverty.

However, these games often take a dark turn, reflecting the internalized trauma of racial hierarchy. The most significant game occurs when Zachariah persuades Morris to dress in the new suit and rehearse meeting Ethel. What begins as a "rehearsal" quickly blurs into reality; Morris becomes an abusive white "Baas," and Zachariah adopts a "servile" persona. This role-playing reaches a violent climax where Morris insults Zachariah with racial slurs like "Nigger," revealing the deep-seated psychological damage inflicted by the system. Though Zachariah eventually tries to dismiss the incident by saying, "it was only a game," both brothers are left shaken by how easily they were "carried away" into the very patterns of violence and hatred they sought to escape. These games ultimately show that for the brothers, the only way to endure their existence is to fantasize about being someone else, even if that fantasy leads to mutual pain.

Title of *Blood Knot*:

The title of Athol Fugard's play, *Blood Knot*, serves as the central metaphor for the inescapable biological and psychological bond between the two protagonists, Morris and Zachariah. As a parable of two half-brothers—one light-skinned and one dark-skinned—the title refers to the "tangled relationship" and shared traumas of two men born to the same mother but separated by the artificial racial hierarchies of apartheid South Africa. While the Population Registration Act and "pass laws" sought to categorize and divide individuals based on appearance, the "blood knot" represents a fundamental human connection that defies such institutional control.

The significance of the title is most poignantly realized in Morris's internal conflict regarding his identity. Having the ability to "pass" as white, Morris initially left his brother to seek a better life, yet he felt a relentless pull to return to their one-room shack in Korsten. He eventually admits that the biological tie was unbreakable, stating, "Anywhere, any place or road, there was always you, Zach. So I came back". This illustrates that the "blood knot" is both a source of duty and a source of entrapment, as Morris cannot achieve his own freedom while his brother remains oppressed.

Furthermore, the title highlights the symbiosis of brotherhood, where "blood is thicker than water". Throughout the play, the brothers fluctuate between moments of tender care and psychological violence, yet they remain "tied together". At the play's conclusion, after their role-playing game nearly descends into tragedy, Morris explicitly identifies their bond: "It's what they call the blood knot . . . the bond between brothers". Ultimately, the title suggests that

while apartheid can strip men of their wealth and rights, it cannot sever the innate human ties that define their existence.

Character Portrayal:

Morris: The Light-Skinned Dreamer:

Morris is the literate and light-skinned brother who possesses the ability to "pass" as white. Having previously left their home in Korsten to live as a white man, he returned because he was unable to sever the "blood knot" that binds him to Zachariah. He takes on a maternal, domestic role in their one-room shack, meticulously regulating their lives with an alarm clock while cooking, cleaning, and preparing footbaths for his brother.

Morris is portrayed as an introspective dreamer who manages their meager savings with the hope of purchasing a two-man farm to escape their grinding poverty. However, his identity is defined by a "double consciousness"; he is caught between his light skin and his black heritage. This internal conflict reaches a peak during role-playing games where Morris adopts the persona of an abusive white "Baas," revealing the internalized racism of his society. Despite this, he ultimately chooses the bond of brotherhood over the hollow privilege of passing, concluding that whiteness is a "white something inside" that he cannot authentically possess while remaining true to his "blood ties".

Zachariah: The Dark-Skinned Laborer:

Zachariah is the illiterate, dark-skinned brother who bears the full brunt of the physical and institutional "inhumanity" of apartheid. While Morris keeps the house, Zachariah is the sole breadwinner, working a grueling job as a gatekeeper at a park where he must prevent other black people from entering. His portrayal is one of physical suffering; he returns home every evening with callouses and sore feet from standing all day in the hot sun.

Unlike Morris, Zachariah is initially content with a day-to-day existence and has no interest in long-term plans for a farm. He yearns for his past life of "jollification," music, and women, which he feels Morris's arrival has replaced with endless "talking". However, Zachariah displays agency when he initiates the pen-pal correspondence with Ethel Lange, finding a sense of "exciting crime" in writing to a white woman. He is the one who pushes Morris to use his light skin to meet Ethel, effectively using his brother as a surrogate to experience a world forbidden to him. Ultimately, Zachariah is portrayed as the grounding force of the pair, realizing that despite their games and differences, they are "tied together" in a struggle for survival.

Brotherhood:

In Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*, brotherhood is portrayed as a profound biological and psychological bond that transcends the racial divisions of apartheid. The half-brothers, Morris (light-skinned) and Zachariah (dark-skinned), exist in a symbiotic relationship within their one-room shack. Morris assumes a maternal, caregiving role—cooking, cleaning, and preparing footbaths—while Zachariah endures grueling labor as a park gatekeeper to provide for them.

The title's "blood knot" signifies an inescapable tie. Morris, though capable of "passing" as white, eventually returned to the non-white slum because he could not sever his connection to Zachariah. He poignantly observes that regardless of where he went, "there was always you,

Zach". Their shared history is anchored in memories of their mother, symbolized by "soapsuds on brown hands" and her "sore feet".

Brotherhood also provides a psychological refuge through imaginary games, such as play-acting a childhood car trip in an old Chevy to "hell and gone". However, these games reveal the fragility of their bond when Morris adopts the abusive persona of a white "Baas," illustrating how systemic racism can infect even the most intimate blood ties. Despite this friction, the brothers remain "tied together" by their shared heritage.

Ultimately, the play suggests that brotherhood is a source of both survival and entrapment. At the conclusion, having spent their life savings on a useless suit, the brothers are left in penury but find a somber solace in each other. They realize that in a world designed to divide them, their "blood knot" is the only thing that makes their hovel a "home".

Key Symbols:

In Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*, symbols are used to dramatize the "bleak situation" and "tangled relationship" of two brothers living under apartheid. The central symbol is the "blood knot" itself, representing the inescapable biological and psychological bond that persists despite artificial racial categories.

The alarm clock is a crucial prop symbolizing the rigid, repetitive structure of their lives. It regulates Morris's domestic chores and Zachariah's return from labor, but its most significant function is serving as a "breaker of tension". It snaps the brothers back to their "harsh realities" whenever their role-playing games or nostalgia become too violent or consuming.

The gentleman's suit symbolizes the performance of racial identity and the illusion of "passing". While it represents the "white something inside" that Morris initially tries to inhabit, it ultimately becomes a symbol of their shattered dreams. By spending their entire life savings on the outfit, the brothers effectively destroy their hope of buying a farm, leaving them in a state of "abject poverty".

The one-room shack—constructed from a "patchwork of scraps" like corrugated iron, packing cases, and flattened cardboard—is a visual symbol of the "inhumanity" and squalor of the non-white locations. This setting, combined with the "stink" of the nearby lake, symbolizes the brothers' status as "fugitives and vagabonds" trapped in a system of capitalist exploitation.

Finally, colour acts as both a binding and separating factor. Morris wearing Zachariah's coat symbolizes a "symbolic acceptance" of his brother's dark skin, whereas the suit acts as a dividing line that makes a relationship with the white Ethel impossible. These symbols collectively highlight the "injury" of apartheid on the human spirit.

Significance of the Letter Writing Episode:

In Athol Fugard's *Blood Knot*, the letter-writing episode serves as the play's primary catalyst, shifting the brothers' relationship from domestic repetition to a dangerous flirtation with the racial boundaries of apartheid. The episode begins when Morris suggests a woman pen-pal to satisfy Zachariah's longing for his past life of "jollification" and female company. After reviewing three classifieds—Ethel Lange, Nellie de Wet, and Betty Jones—they select Ethel because she is eighteen and "well-developed".

Because Zachariah is illiterate, Morris acts as the scribe, meticulously crafting a letter to "Miss Ethel Lange" to portray Zachariah as a "gent of sober habits" with a "good outlook on life". The humor of the scene, such as Morris suggesting the counter-motto "Too many cooks spoil the broth" to match Ethel's own motto, masks the underlying danger of their charade. The conflict reaches a turning point when Ethel replies with a photograph, revealing she is white. This discovery transforms the correspondence into an "exciting crime" under the Immorality Act, which prohibited inter-racial relationships.

The episode highlights the psychological divide between the brothers: Zachariah is initially thrilled by this act of defiance, while Morris is terrified, especially upon learning that Ethel's brother, Cornelius, is a policeman. This fear eventually drives the plot toward Morris's attempt to "pass" as white to meet her in Zachariah's place. The correspondence concludes abruptly with a final letter from Ethel stating she is engaged to a man named Stoffel and must end the friendship. Ultimately, this episode exposes the futility of their escapism; they spend their life savings on a gentleman's suit for a meeting that never occurs, leaving them in a state of "abject poverty".