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Fragmented Racial Identity in *Funnyhouse of a Negro*

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Abstract

*Adrienne Kennedy, as one of the distinguished playwrights, has composed many plays in her writing career; has addressed the issues related to black women's lives in the US reflecting the intersecting factors that oppress African American women. In her plays, she has pictured how African American female characters are doubly oppressed compared to other groups of women and has illuminated the difference between experiences of black and white women. In this essay, I will be looking at *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, which tells the story of alienated African American female who ends up in committing suicide due to the oppression of society. I aim to shed light on how African American women are more oppressed than other minority groups via the character Sarah in the play who oscillates between polarities as the outcome of identity crisis owing to her race. As well, I will explore the ways Sarah's oppression caused by intersecting dynamics such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, therefore, her traumatic identity crisis needs to be analyzed considering these categories interdependently rather than separately. These categories are shaped through a white ideology that dominates and makes African American women internalize racial hatred toward their own race. Overall, I will examine how Kennedy deconstructs the institutionalized racism by using historical characters and distorted white images to subvert the misrepresentation of African American women on the stage and emphasizes the historical burden on them created by white ideology.*

Keywords: Adrienne Kennedy; black feminism; identity; gender

Since the 1950s, black American playwrights attempted to illustrate the oppressed status of blacks and resist the ideals of whites in their writings. Adrienne Kennedy was a distinguished playwright at that period who deals with racial issues in her Obie-award winning play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.¹ In the play, Kennedy demonstrates the traumatic influence of racial and

¹ Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (New York: Samuel French, 1997).



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gender tensions on black women by situating the racial identity on historical and cultural context to show psychological impacts of history and culture on the construction of African American female identity. She refers to the colonization, slavery, and assimilation to expose psychological traumas of black women in their experience of oppression. Unlike common method of the period's realist approach towards black women's issues as a social problem in literary works, Kennedy subverts the realist method of the period to refer to the black women's issues; she doesn't follow realist dramatical structure through non-linear plot and time, surrealist characterization, stage design and strong lightings. Therefore, Kennedy portrays mixed-race Sarah's internal conflict with her race who embraces white society's standards as ideal to escape from her black heritage and to assimilate into white society. Kennedy aims to show how white ideology psychologically dominated and abused the blacks that were made to internalize racial hatred towards their own race. In this essay, I aim to shed light on Hansberry's critique of historical construction of African American female identity, which is defined by white society, and examine the ways Kennedy deconstruct the institutionalized racism that shape blacks as inferior. She uses historical figures to criticize the impact of history on blacks and shows absurdly distorted images of whiteness on the stage to subvert racial prejudices through symbolism on the stage to illustrate systematic oppression on women of colour to 'break through barriers' aimed 'at a desegregated public'.²

Initially, Kennedy's use of the term 'funnyhouse' in the title means insane asylum to present the mentally damaged state of a 'negro' and suggests society's humiliating vision to the black women's issues by associating their experience with insanity, that is, Sarah's struggle may be real or not, however, she is seen as a pathological subject that needs to be observed in an isolated 'insane asylum'.³ The play's opening scene has a dreamlike atmosphere as 'A WOMAN dressed in a white nightgown walks across the Stage carrying before her a bald head [...] she gives the effect of one in a dream' that Sarah is positioned in the centre to indicate that it is Sarah's dream, rather a nightmare where her inner suffering and obsession with whiteness are reflected (Kennedy, 1997, p. 5). Presenting this setting, Kennedy depicts the traumatic aspects of racial issues in black women's psychologies rather than dealing with it as a social problem. In the play, Negro-Sarah is the daughter of a white mother and a black father whom she sees as the source of evil due to his blackness while idolizing her white mother. Owing to her inner racial conflict, she is psychologically split into four selves; Queen Victoria, Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba who are historically famous figures that can be considered internalized historical factors shaping her identity. In other words, Sarah suffers an ontological crisis due to her race and she is haunted by her black father's figure throughout the play as if his

² Wolfgang Binder and Adrienne Kennedy, 'A MELUS Interview: Adrienne Kennedy', *Ethnic Women Writers IV*, 12.3 (1985), 99-108 < <https://www.jstor.org> > [accessed 27 June 2019] (p. 102)

³ *Vocabulary Homepage* [online]. Available from: <<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/funny%20house>>



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blackness is a threat for her existence and she sees her father as, ‘the darkest one’ who allegedly raped her mother while her mother is, ‘the lightest one’ (Kennedy, 1997, p. 6-7). In the consequence of her racial conflict, her subconscious is fragmented and each fragment represents the identity crisis and leads her psyche to self-destruction as she creates an alternative dream-like sphere where Sarah cannot escape and ends up committing suicide due to racial identity crisis.

Kennedy handles racial issues in a surrealistic representation through symbolism that defies realistic aesthetics of the period because Kennedy aims to explore the psychology of the protagonist as she emphasizes, ‘My plays are meant to be states of mind’ and transforms the stage into the Sarah’s inner psyche via exaggerated symbols, unreal characterization and settings.⁴ Her approach to racial issues are different from other playwrights, she describes internalized racism through surrealistic technique and from different angle by situating her protagonist in a position that doesn’t fit either black or white racial categories since Sarah is a mixed race ‘mulatto’ who, ‘occupies a liminal space between blackness and whiteness’, so Kennedy emancipates her perception of racial issues from binary thinking of Western ideology and questions what actually is black and white.⁵ The play has no linear plot or time and is filled with grim images, disordered speeches, monologues, and symbols mainly in Sarah’s room which is actually Sarah’s subconscious indicating her racial identity crisis and inconsistency between physical body and self. Notably, Kennedy plays with lighting and subverts white images not to disdain whiteness, but to show the absurdity of superiority of any race as she situates blackness vis-à-vis whiteness to stress the same thing with black race, so she presents historical white figures that represents Sarah’s inner fragmentation in a distorted way since both Duchess and Queen’s wear white masks to suggest their unreal whiteness and Jesus is described as if an abused slave rather than a religious figure to indicate Sarah’s ridiculousness in her fantasy over whiteness.

Kennedy mirrors tensions between whiteness and blackness from the opening scene, she presents Sarah’s mother in a ‘white nightgown’ before a closed white satin curtain which is ‘ghastly white’ like of a ‘cheap casket’ and once the curtain is opened, a strong ‘white LIGHT’ on a chamber that ‘resembling an ebony tomb’ while the rest is in ‘unnatural BLACKNESS’, however, the strong white is ‘unreal and ugly’ and ‘black ravens’ are flying over (Kennedy, 1997, p. 5). Furthermore, two imaginary figures Queen and Duchess are in white gowns which is ‘similar to the white curtain’ and whose masks are whitish yellow in a ‘stillness as in the face of death’ (Kennedy, 1997, p. 6). Obviously, Kennedy emphasizes the polarities of black and white, however, she attributes whiteness a macabre facet as an allusion to death to indicate the

⁴ Claudia Barnett, ‘’This Fundamental Challenge to Identity’’: Reproduction and Representation in the Drama of Adrienne Kennedy’, *Theatre Journal*, 48.2 (1996), 141-155 <<https://www.jstor.org>> [accessed 28 June 2019] (p. 141).

⁵ Kimball King, *Hollywood on Stage: Playwrights Evaluate the Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 195.



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‘distorted images of whiteness’ and the suffering that reside in Sarah’s psyche. Kennedy subverts the image of whiteness by associating it with decay and death that traumatize the protagonist.⁶ Moreover, Sarah tries to escape from her black father whom she calls ‘a wild black beast’ and accuses him of raping her mother and claims ‘black is evil’ who continuously returns to her, however, Sarah represses him that illustrate fear of being raped as her mother (Kennedy, 1997, p. 8). In addition to that, throughout the play a ‘knocking’ sound is heard several times indicating father’s struggle to come to Sarah although she escapes from it. This persistent ‘knocking’ comes from out of the stage as if it struggles to enter Sarah’s inner psyche meaning that her black heritage may be suppressed but cannot be entirely removed, it shows her hatred towards her own race and rejection of heritage. Black father is also accused by Mother as she states, ‘Black man, Black man, I never should have let a black man put his hands on me. The wild black beast raped me’ which echoes the stereotypical image of black man as rapist in the eyes of white culture ‘to demonize African American and the historical reality of white slave owners sexually abusing their female slaves’ and alleged rape is heard throughout the play as a threat for Sarah and her white selves, that is, Sarah internalizes white’s perspective of stereotypical image of black man (Kennedy, 1997, p. 7).⁷ Moreover, in a conversation between Sarah’s white self Duchess and Funnyman, Duchess begs, ‘Hide me here so the nigger will not find me’ and calls father as ‘jungle’ which shows that rape is a constant future threat that exist in Sarah’s subconscious even though the accuracy of the accusation is not confirmed (Kennedy, 1997, p. 12). It seems Sarah creates a fantasy of rape as a ‘fetishistic myth’ by a black man that Kennedy criticizes that racism categorize black people and stereotypes them as sexual objects; black man is associated with potential rapist, on the other hand, black women is obedient to sexual abuse which are historically and culturally constructed stereotypes to dehumanize blacks by white ideology.

As an indication of Sarah’s devotion to whiteness, Sarah fills her room with objects related to white Western society such as ‘photographs of old monarchs of England’, statue of Queen Victoria as her ‘idol’ which is in ‘astonishing whiteness’, ‘European antiques’, has white boyfriend, and wants to have only white friends while hating her ‘Negro kinky hair’ since it reminds her of blackness (Kennedy, 1997, p. 8-9). She desires to be integrated in white society which can be read as a sign of her betrayal of her own race; however, she is decentred and displaced character as she says, ‘I know no places’ due to her skin colour that doesn’t belong to white or black race as Boucher suggests Sarah is, ‘de-essentialized, fractured being[s] who [...] oscillate between two polarities’ (Kennedy, 1997, p. 10).⁸ Notably, Sarah wants to define herself

⁶ Rosemary K. Curb, ‘Fragmented Selves in Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*’, *Theatre Journal*, 32.2 (1980), 180-195 (p. 186).

⁷ Quan Manh Ha and Conor Hogan, ‘The Violence of Duality in Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*’, *Anglica*, 27.1 (2018), 121-134 (p. 126).

⁸ Georgie Boucher, ‘Fractured Identity and Agency and the Plays of Adrienne Kennedy’, *Feminist Review*, 84 (2006), 84-103 (p. 85).



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through white ideals by adopting white norms and hates her black heritage. Here, Kennedy criticizes the binary thinking of western ideology which views black people as the opposite to white people and considers blackness as inferior to whiteness as seen in Sarah's status, she internalizes this hatred and ends up in self-estrangement. She emphasizes that Sarah is taught that white is the ultimate good through education since she studied English as her major and she creates different selves to find her a voice against her black heritage as she says, 'I find it necessary to maintain a stark fortress against recognition of myself.', however, it indicates a psychological paralysis that her created selves confine her (Kennedy, 1997, p. 9). To this end, Sarah sees herself 'irredeemably tainted' by birth and creates four different selves to escape from and familial history which brings on an identity crisis due to her race and gender, however, these selves show her internalization and adoption of white supremacy.⁹ To avoid the truth about her black ancestry, she invents a virtual reality by acquiring 'wild black beast' fantasy of white ideology as a sign of a wish for assimilation, however, she cannot integrate into white society and she is displaced (Kennedy, 1997, p. 6). This is seen in the text that Sarah has no physical space on the stage, she doesn't seem to occupy a physical place which indicates that the stage is her inner psyche that she's trapped in the fragmentation she's created; mentally divided and this division is increased via 'BLACKOUT' as they provide transition between her selves.

Obviously, in *Funnyhouse* many historical and cultural images invade the perception of Sarah and through these historical images Kennedy shows the historical construction of stereotypical images and the abuse of black women via a mixed-race mulatto's traumatic experiences and indicates how identity is shaped in the historical process. Historical figures surrounding Sarah which shape her self indicate Kennedy's viewpoint that identity and history interconnected and offers that Sarah's self is shaped according to the white supremacist ideology that refers to the colonialism and Christianity as oppressive tools on black women. Thus, she points to the necessity to question the historical construction of African American identity to interrogate power of history by creating four imaginary selves who represent white supremacy. Kennedy splits Sarah's self into four fragments; Queen Victoria, Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba who are symbols of colonialism, Black Arts Movements and religion that suggest Sarah's divided self is the result of historical, political and religious aspects of Western colonial ideology. Here, Sarah's self is divided into female and male selves to emphasize that not only racial identity is shaped but also feminine identity. Through historical figures, Kennedy shows, 'weight of history on blacks that drive blacks to insanity and self-destruction' takes Sarah's racially and sexually abused mind on historical sphere to suggest absurdness of an

⁹ Barnett, p. 155.



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idealized identity by Sarah's sickly devotion to the white ideals which lead her to self-destruction.¹⁰

Sarah's European female self Queen Victoria indicates her submission to the white supremacy of the Queen who stands for colonialism and imperialism of Western ideology that brings destruction in African continent which Kennedy criticizes it for its role to shape African American identity. Significantly, the Queen is the image of ideal white figure who 'is a symbol of the apex of colonial expansion, [...] a rare example of a powerful woman in the political arena' that Sarah wants to identify with a famous colonial figure shows her obsession with unobtainable whiteness and rejection of black heritage.¹¹ Having a European royal figure residing in her psyche as the 'idol' indicates her internalization of the Western notion of black race as inferior leading to internalized racism that she voices, 'For as we of royal blood know, black is evil and has been from the beginning' (Kennedy, 1997, p. 8). Western colonialists invade African continent by claiming to bring civilization to [un]civilized people as disguise for their real purposes. Seeing African Americans as inferior and imposing the fabrication of an innate racial hierarchy in the way Western binary thinking suggests blacks are deviant while whites are ideal, once adopted, it provokes the self-hatred among colonized subjects that is reflected by Sarah's self-loathing in her unconsciousness. Sarah views Africa, the origin of black culture, as the source of evil associating it with jungle and the place where her mother is raped by black father. It can be read that Sarah internalizes Eurocentric view that the African continent is the place where 'unfortunate black ones' who seem to be animal-like are born into bestiality that she 'wants not to be' in order not to be recognized with that shameful culture (Kennedy, 1997, p. 8). Therefore, she mentally splits her self to integrate to white society, however; Kennedy emphasizes the impossibility for whiteness via presenting Queen Victoria to indicate that the whiteness can only exist in her dream. Her enslaved mind is filled with the imposition of white supremacy, 'Victoria always wants me to tell her whiteness' to show the way colonized subject's mind is enslaved via false white idealism to maintain exploitation (Kennedy, 1997, p. 8). Moreover, upon hearing 'knocking' indicating the black figure's effort to return that Duchess says, 'How dare he enter the castle of Queen Victoria Regina, Monarch of England?' as a sign of intention of colonized subjects attempt to enter colonizer's realm, but in order to be allowed to enter the white realm, one needs to reject blackness and adopt white ideals (Kennedy, 1997, p. 6). Their subsequent dialogue shows racial tensions in Sarah's psyche:

DUCHESS. He is a black Negro.

VICTORIA. [...] before I was born he haunted my conception, diseased my birth.

¹⁰ Ha & Hogan, p. 122.

¹¹ Ibid.



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DUCHESS. Killed my mother. [...] We are tied to him unless, of course, he should die.

VICTORIA. But he is dead.

DUCHESS. And he keeps returning (p. 7)

In the quotation, Sarah's inner clash with her race is reflected on the words that her created selves use since they speak of him as a virus which needs to be prevented. Kennedy condemns Sarah's struggle to be Queen as a way of asserting her identity, she associates Queen's whiteness with death by showing her as distorted, while 'ravens fly about the room' where her chamber 'resembling an ebony tomb' that reflect whiteness as a death sign for Sarah (Kennedy, 1997, p. 5).

Sarah's other female self, the Duchess, who 'look exactly alike with' the Queen is another European figure as an ideal (Kennedy, 1997, p. 6). Kennedy signifies that the cast who represent Queen and Duchess are black performers that have 'wild kinky hair' and wear white 'masks' in order to perform 'a hard expressionless quality' in their faces (Kennedy, 1997, p. 6). Each self represents Sarah's wish for assimilation, however, her created white selves have flaws identified with black women such as 'kinky hair' and wearing white masks indicate that it is impossible for Sarah to completely eradicate her black heritage. In a dialogue between Duchess and Jesus, Sarah's pathological fear of her racial root is shown, 'My father isn't going to let us alone. (KNOCKING.) [...] our father is the darkest of all, [...] I am in between' that the dialogue turns out to be a monologue as both selves repeat the same sentences to indicate Sarah's inability to escape from her fear of blackness despite any attempt (Kennedy, 1997, p. 19). That suggests Sarah can identify with any of the created selves on a physical level through ethnic signs, but she cannot internalize the identity that they symbolize which is seen in their contribution to Sarah's traumatic state. Although Sarah's struggle to resist self-recognition, her African American roots physically emerge on her imaginary selves which suggest the artificiality of Sarah's fantasy over whiteness as masks are used to disguise the real identity, that is, Kennedy seems to suggest each character's blackness is internal and outside whiteness is imaginary unveiling Sarah's identity conflict and racial hypocrisy. Her hypocrisy is also mentioned by Funnyman, who is an inhabitant in the house, acts like a critical figure when Sarah's self, the Duchess is hysterically horrified by the father's blackness, he presents an outer look inside Sarah's character and says, 'Isn't it cruel of you?' to associate her attitude with cruelty (Kennedy, 1997, p. 12). In this scene, Funnyman's 'opening and closing the blinds' emphasized by Kennedy which can be read as a way to give a sense of reality to Sarah's status and it is an attempt to realize Sarah's internal struggle as he opens the blinds as if he wants to examine Sarah's inner world and ends up claiming her cruelty and hypocrisy as Sarah says, '[Father] raped my mother [...] My father is a nigger who drives me to misery [...] suffering', however, she is accused by Funnyman, 'cruel



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you are' to indicate her created fantasies about her father. Here, the term 'blinds' is important because it also connotes the word 'blind' which means not to be able to see as Funnyman opens and closes the blinds several times which may suggest his ability to see Sarah's hypocrisy. Further, white masks over black women's faces might be read as imprisonment or rejection of black women identity by veiling it via white ideals as Kennedy might refer to how black women were denied historical and political place since white masks function to cloak their inside blackness.

Sarah's third self is a black male named Patrice Lumumba whose head is 'split in two with blood and tissue in eyes' is another important political figure as Lumumba was the first leader who was democratically elected in the history of Congo and an important name in the struggle for independence and was assassinated by US supported African people for the sake of their imperial interests (Kennedy, 1997, p. 15).¹² He is seen as a martyr for his struggle against colonial ideology in Africa whose death was, 'a shattering blow to the hopes of millions of Congolese for freedom' and fought to bring African values back by rejecting Western ideology to construct authentic African identity and was assassinated.¹³ Significantly, Kennedy employs Lumumba to illustrate the oppression of African people by Western imperial and colonial ideology. The character Lumumba directly addresses the audience and talks about his intention to protect his race from colonialism and calls Sarah's white selves' dream of living in white Europe as 'vile' to struggle against Sarah's Western ideology, and his existence can be read as Kennedy's condemnation of assimilation and negative stereotyping, since Lumumba is associated with father and is called by Sarah's white selves as 'black beast' while he is a martyr in reality that show Sarah's distorted vision that view black race related to bestiality due to the internalized stereotypical image and her colonized self by white ideology (Kennedy, 1997, p. 15). His brutalized image on the stage which 'split in two with blood' may suggest Kennedy's critique of devastation which is brought onto African continent by colonialists and shows Sarah's racially internal trauma by adopting imposed white ideals that leads self-destruction.

The fourth self is Jesus, the embodiment of the Christianity who is an important historical and religious figure in Western past, however, Jesus in here is not depicted similar to the Jesus in the Bible, rather he is a racist version of Jesus Christ. He is the most hysterical and brutal self of Sarah who frequently 'screams' and looks 'hideous' with his 'bald' head like a distorted version of Christ (Kennedy, 1997, p. 19). Throughout Jesus' speeches, audience realizes that Jesus has the least tolerance to blackness that leads him to become hysterical and murder Lumumba, the source of the blackness to remove any potential relation between blackness and religion.

¹² Edouard Bustin, 'Remembrance of Sins past: Unraveling the Murder of Patrice Lumumba', *Review of African Political Economy*, 29:93/94 (2002), 537-560.

¹³ Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, 'Patrice Lumumba: The Most Important Assassination of the 20th Century', *The Guardian*, January 2011, p. 17.



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Kennedy attracts attention to the role of Christianity in colonisation of African continents by presenting him as Sarah's most violent self. Jesus's monologues, distorted appearance and violent acts supports the idea of religion as a tool for colonisation as Finley mentions, 'Historically, white Jesus has been used to oppress and erase the histories of people of color'.¹⁴ Kennedy emphasizes that Christianity is associated with Jesus' whiteness and it relegates Africans to inferior position in Western culture's exploitation of Africa by claiming to get civilization to savage people to disguise their real purposes. Abuse of Christianity is reflected on the appearance of Jesus who looks like a violated dwarf rather than a religious figure and Kennedy grasps that Jesus' doctrines are twisted by colonialists in order to oppress Africans as the character Jesus confesses rejection of black race via 'raging sermons [...] to escape being black' by using religion as a shield from blackness and justification for exploitation (Kennedy, 1997, p. 21). Obviously, Sarah stresses this subverted Christianity by making Jesus say, 'all my life I believed my Holy Father to be God, but now I know that my father is a black man' to indicate the fear of the blackness that is imposed by Western ideology and she associates blackness with evil that needs to be eradicated (Kennedy, 1997, p. 21). This subverted version of Christianity can be read when Jesus says, 'I am going to Africa and kill this black man [...] I will do in the name of God [...] in the name of Victoria' refers to murder of Lumumba that illustrates religion's violating and destructive role in African continent for he is a symbol of the independence and eventually he is victimized by colonialists. Once Sarah recognizes her blackness, she finds solution in suicide (Kennedy, 1997, p. 21).

Consequently, each of Sarah's selves serves as an alternative imaginary sphere against blackness; however, they push her into ruined state of mind embracing self-hatred towards racial heritage. Kennedy projects Sarah's identity as fluid that her genuine self shuttles between different identity categories to create an imaginary realm away from the realities of life, however, the more she separates herself from people and gets lost in her inner selves, the more she approaches demise and finally suicide. In her journey to escape from her black heritage by embracing white ideals, her genuine racial identity fades away which is shown via her loss of 'kinky hair' through the end, however, her suicide can be read either as a punishment by Kennedy for her desire of assimilation or the ultimate result of being racially and sexually oppressed. The way Sarah kills herself and she is 'hanging in the room' may refer to the lynching rituals as the result of dehumanization and demonization of African American people where they are subject of cultural, sexual and political violence and Landlady's comment on Sarah's suicide shows the apathy due to the dehumanization, 'The poor bitch hung herself' (Kennedy, 1997, p. 24). Kennedy offers an inner image of racially traumatized subject via Sarah's multi-fragmented psyche that is abused by foreign elements in a racist and sexist society by projecting intersectional oppressive tools on a black woman who can't resist and commit suicide as the

¹⁴ Taryn Finley, 'Jesus Wasn't White and Here's Why That Matters', *The Huffington Post*, December 2015, p. 22.



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solution. Further, the play's fluid form suggests a harmony with its content; filled with discontinuities, non-linear time and blurred plot which is divided into five chapters as Sarah's divided self that supports the absurdity of any idea coming out from a 'funnyhouse' since one's identity is unbalanced and untrustworthy in that funnyhouse. To this end, Kennedy aims to demonstrate the reasons that construct the conditions of this 'funnyhouse' and explores the methods in which Sarah finds herself in a racial and gender trauma that captures her identity.

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