Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Blues for an Alabama Sky

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Plot

- Harlem, New York, in 1930, as the **Harlem Renaissance** fades into the **Great Depression**. Angel Allen, a blues singer in her thirties, is carried home drunk after losing her job and her boyfriend, Nicky. Her friend Guy, a gay costume designer who dreams of designing for Josephine Baker in Paris, takes her in. Their neighbour Delia, a social worker, plans a family planning clinic to give women **birth control**, helped by Sam, a doctor at Harlem Hospital.
- Leland Cunningham, a newcomer from Alabama whose wife died in childbirth, falls for Angel. An audition Angel hoped for turns out to be a trap. Leland is religious and disapproves of the clinic and of Guy, and argues with Sam.
- In Act Two Angel, facing eviction and pregnant, agrees to marry Leland. Someone sets fire to the clinic. Guy gets a ticket to Paris to work with Josephine Baker, and one for Angel too. Angel secretly has an abortion with Sam's help and tells Leland it was a miscarriage.
- When Angel admits, "I didn't lose the baby. I got rid of it," Leland goes after Sam and shoots him in the back. Guy and Delia leave for Paris together; Angel is left alone, and the play ends as she calls out to a well-dressed man passing by.

Characters

- Angel Allen: charming, funny and desperate; she uses men to survive and chooses security over love, with tragic results.
- Guy Jacobs: loyal, generous and openly gay in a hostile world; his dream of Paris is about freedom and art.
- Delia Patterson: idealistic and principled, working for women's right to control their own bodies. The character was inspired by the real campaigner Margaret Sanger.
- Sam Thomas: a hard-working, kind doctor who helps the community and dies for it.

- Leland Cunningham: polite, devout and old-fashioned; his grief and rigid beliefs turn to violence.

Themes and context

- Dreams and escape: Paris, the clinic, a home with Leland; most dreams are broken by the end.
- Women's rights over their bodies: **birth control**, abortion and Delia's clinic.
- **Homophobia** and acceptance: Guy is attacked and judged, but loved by his friends.
- Survival in hard times: the Depression, unemployment and eviction.
- Pearl Cleage wrote it in 1995. The play mentions real figures of the time, such as Josephine Baker and Langston Hughes.

Form, structure and language

- Two acts of short scenes in a few days at a time, set around two apartments and the steps outside, which makes the friends' lives feel close and connected.
- Warm, witty dialogue full of 1930s slang, with blues singing that reflects Angel's feelings.
- **Dramatic irony** and foreshadowing, such as Leland's gun, build towards the tragic ending.
- The last line, "Hot enough for you?", shows Angel ready to start the same cycle again.

Key terms

Harlem Renaissance	A movement in the 1920s and early 1930s celebrating African American art, music and writing, centred in Harlem.
Great Depression	The economic crash of the 1930s that brought mass unemployment.
Birth control	Ways of preventing pregnancy, which Delia's clinic would offer.
Homophobia	Prejudice against gay people.
Dramatic irony	When the audience knows something a character doesn't.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where and when is Blues for an Alabama Sky set?
2. What is Angel's job at the start?
3. What does Guy dream of?
4. What does Delia want to open?

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5. What is Sam's job?
6. Where is Leland from?
7. What happened to Leland's wife?
8. Why does Angel agree to marry Leland?

Answers

1. Harlem, New York, in 1930
2. A singer who has just been fired
3. Designing costumes for Josephine Baker in Paris
4. A family planning clinic
5. A doctor
6. Alabama
7. She died in childbirth
8. She is pregnant and facing eviction, and wants security

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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