Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Princess & the Hustler

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Plot: Act 1

- Bristol, 1963, in the flat of a Jamaican-British family. Ten-year-old Phyllis "Princess" James plays in her "cupboard room", pretending to be crowned winner of the Weston-super-Mare beauty pageant. Her mother, Mavis, sells curtains and is short of money; her older brother, Wendell "Junior", teases her.
- A knock at the door: it is Wendell "The Hustler" James, Mavis's husband, who left the family years before. Mavis slaps Princess for asking who he is, orders Wendell out and even holds a knife, until he reveals Lorna, his nine-year-old daughter by another woman.
- Lorna and Wendell stay for Christmas lunch, and Princess learns that Wendell is her father. Mavis's white neighbour and friend, Margot, interrupts. At the docks, Junior, who resents his father deeply, clashes with him, and Wendell pins him to a wall, saying he has come back to be a good father and husband.
- Junior's friend Leon talks about a meeting against the **colour bar** on the buses. Wendell explains that Lorna's mother became ill and he was falsely accused of mistreating her. Princess persuades Mavis to let Wendell and Lorna stay.

Plot: Acts 2 and 3

- Wendell wins Mavis round, gives Junior a camera flash and offers to support the student march for the **Bristol Bus Boycott**. Margot calls the protesters ungrateful, and Wendell accuses her of liking Black people only when it suits her.
- Junior is attacked by white youths on his way home from the march. Lorna tells Princess she won't be attacked because she is "only half" Black. Junior later gives Wendell his savings and asks him to leave to protect the family; Princess overhears and destroys her cupboard world with scissors.
- Act 3: Princess goes missing, having cut off her hair, and Margot finds her hiding in her flat. When Wendell returns, Junior accuses him of stealing the money and Princess calls him a "hustler", but Princess admits she took it to pay for the family's trip to the pageant.

- Wendell has been helping the boycott. He asks Mavis to marry him again; she doesn't say yes, but doesn't refuse. The family pose for Junior's photograph, and the radio announces that the **colour bar** has been lifted.
- In the last scene Wendell crowns Princess in her cupboard, and the stage fills with Black women of every size and nation in a celebration of Black beauty.

Characters, themes and context

- Princess: lively, sensitive and determined; her dream of the pageant is about proving her worth in a society that tells her Black girls aren't beautiful.
- Mavis: proud, hard-working and fierce, holding the family together; slowly she lets her guard down. Junior: angry at his absent father, and growing into an activist with his camera.
- Wendell: charming, unreliable and wounded; the "hustler" who must earn his family's trust. Lorna: **mixed-race**, she shows Princess how colour shapes people's treatment. Margot: warm but nosy, and blind to racism until she helps the family.
- Themes: racism and the **colour bar**; Black beauty and identity, including hair; family, absence and forgiveness; protest and hope.
- Context: in 1963 the Bristol Omnibus Company refused to employ Black and Asian bus crews. A boycott led by Paul Stephenson and the West Indian Development Council ended the **colour bar** in August 1963, and helped lead to the Race Relations Act (1965).
- Chinonyerem Odimba's play was first staged by Eclipse Theatre at the Bristol Old Vic in 2019. Odimba called it a play about how racism robs people of their love and dreams.

Form, structure and language

- Three acts of short scenes, mostly in the family's crowded flat, so the family's private conflicts sit right next to the public struggle outside.
- Princess's "cupboard room" is a **fantasy space**: the play begins and ends there, and destroying it marks her lowest point.
- Lively Jamaican-British speech, humour and arguments make the characters feel real; family photographs and the radio link home life to history.
- The joyful ending turns the beauty pageant into a celebration of all Black women, rather than a contest judged by others.

Key terms

Colour bar	A rule or practice of refusing jobs or services to people because of their race.
Bristol Bus Boycott	The 1963 campaign against the bus company's refusal to employ Black and Asian crews.
Windrush generation	Caribbean migrants who came to Britain after 1948.
Mixed-race	Having parents of different ethnic backgrounds.

Your notes

Fantasy space	A place in a play where a character's dreams are shown.

Quick questions

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

1. Where and when is Princess & the Hustler set?
2. What does Princess dream of?
3. Who is "The Hustler"?
4. Who is Lorna?
5. What is Junior interested in?
6. What does the Bristol Bus Boycott protest against?
7. What happens to Junior after the march?
8. What does Princess do when she hears Junior send Wendell away?

Answers

1. Bristol in 1963
2. Winning the Weston-super-Mare beauty pageant
3. Wendell, Princess's father
4. Wendell's daughter by another woman
5. Photography
6. The bus company's refusal to employ Black and Asian crews
7. He is attacked by white youths
8. She destroys her cupboard world with scissors

What to do next

Practise 11 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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