



Samantha Dew: Free Woman of Color

Discussion Guide

Originally written by Omope Carter Daboiku in 2003 for Cincinnati's first Tall Stacks Riverboat Festival, "Samantha Dew: Free Woman of Color" is a monologue, reworked with contextual inserts, that illustrates the empowerment of free people of color as negotiators of their own fate. Samantha, a migrant from northern Georgia and a descendant of "masters," is sent to Cincinnati to attend Lane Seminary and expected to return to start a school at the church her family has built. Having signed her papers as SE Dew, the faculty is not aware the applicant is female. The rest of the story unfolds as she marries, starts her own business, buys property and becomes involved in the abolition movement as a Conductor on the Underground Railroad.

The style of the performance could be called "presumptive" fiction, as the writer has taken a slice of time and proposed a specific character within a specific timeline, but a date is never mentioned. She has taken the name of known personal ancestors, but the character is fictional. However, most of the events SE Dew mentions are indeed historical.

Questions for discussion:

I. TIME PERIOD

Samantha never actually says her age, nor her birth year; but she does give historical clues to the timeframe. What are some of the statements she makes that can let the listener create a timeline of events? Using the timeline constructed, estimate her age and the time period she represents.

STATEMENTS

“the little lady that started that big war we had”

“California is about to become a state.”

“Trains now come from West to East.”

“Traveling by steamboat to Cincinnati”

Cholera epidemic in Cincinnati

HISTORICAL TIMELINE / EVENT

1862-65 The American Civil War

In 1849, Californians sought statehood and, after heated debate in the U.S. Congress arising out of the slavery issue, California entered the Union as a free, non-slavery state by the Compromise of 1850. California became the 31st state on September 9, 1850.

The First Transcontinental Railroad (known originally as the "Pacific Railroad" and later as the "Overland Route") was a 1,912-mile (3,077 km) continuous railroad line constructed between 1863 and 1869 that connected the existing eastern U.S. rail network at Council Bluffs, Iowa with the Pacific coast at Oakland, California.

The steamboat era finally ended in the 20th century, largely due to the railroad. "Although steamboats ruled trade and travel in the 1800s and early 1900s, newer and cheaper forms of transportation eventually replaced them. Steamboats began experiencing competition from railroads as early as the 1830s.

The worst cholera epidemic to affect Ohio occurred in 1849. Eight thousand people in Cincinnati died in this epidemic, including Harriet Beecher Stowe's infant son. Many Cincinnati residents fled the city and ended up in Mt. Pleasant, a hilltop community that escaped the illness.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT -- COSTUMING

- I. The writer made a costume decision that included a black dress and knitted shawl held with a scrimshaw wooden pin. She deliberately chose not to wear any pioneer rip-torn clothes nor an apron. What difference does this costuming give in evidence of Samantha's social standing?

[An apron would imply that she is kitchen oriented. Having no apron implies that she holds class distinction and does not identify as "a cook" or servant.]

Samantha wears black because it's the custom of the period that widows wear black to designate their status in the community, which might be charged, to "look after the widows and orphans".]

2. In the opening scene, she is using a crochet needle. Could she have made her own shawl?

[Yes, at this time it was expected that women would have fine needle skills. They would have created personal clothing and items for their own home, like quilts, socks, collars, embroidered hems, etc. This remained the case in the author's maternal Ellis lineage.]

3. What would have been the material of the thread?

[Wool, most likely, for that weight of material. Silk or linen would be lighter in weight.]

4. What is "scrimshaw"? How might Samantha have gotten such an ornament? Remember, her brother is a sailor.

[Scrimshaw is a visual art form of scratching bone or baleen primarily from whales. Since Samantha's brother is a sailor, it is possible that he traveled to British Columbia or the Alaskan Aleutian Islands; or, he may have purchased or traded for it in an urban center like San Francisco. The Transcontinental Railroad crossed Indian Territory from the state of California to the points east of the Mississippi River. The land in between did not yet have enough American settlers to qualify for statehood.]

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT – PERSONALITY

5. Could Samantha have travelled alone by steamboat to Cincinnati? What would have been some of her challenges?

[Yes, it is possible that she could have travelled by steamboat and alone. However, she would have carried some document that would introduce her to the people she was to meet; and, more than likely, a handwritten, notarized, sworn statement about her being free born.]

6. What is it about Samantha's personality that leads her to serve as a Conductor on the UGRR?

[Her willingness to travel alone means she enjoys a sense of adventure. She obviously cherishes the ideal of freedom and wants to assist others procure it for themselves.]

7. How does her entrepreneurship aid her work as an UGRR Conductor?

[She is able to maneuver through town and has client contact with wealthy people who seek her services as a laundress. She earns currency and is able to financially support freedom seekers and the abolition movement.]

PROBLEM / DILEMMA

8. Samantha is charged by her community to gain knowledge in classic Greek and Latin to return and create a church sponsored school. Why would her community of Subligna, GA, want to establish a school?

[To protect their rights of their community and to educate their own children.]

9. Samantha gets side-tracked from her assignment. How does she rectify her decision to remain in Ohio?

[Rather than being bound to her past, she chooses helping others attain their freedom.]

SOLUTION

10. Samantha is able to earn a living and find companionship through marriage. She survives as a land-owning widow. However, the US society has not yet given women the right to vote, and property rights are transferred to husbands in marriage contracts.

How does Samantha keep her property in her own name?

[She remains “Mrs. Josiah” and as a widow retains rights to the land through the marriage contract. This is why she has refused to re-marry.]

PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

11. Are the historical facts correct?
12. Does it matter whether everything is historically aligned or is creative license acceptable?
13. Is theater an acceptable pedagogy for education? Can students learn more deeply by constructing original presumptive fiction productions such as this?
14. What are some historical and current societal issues in your generation that could be addressed through creative writing and theater?