

SYNOPSIS

Act 1

Mulatto begins in the Big House on a Georgian plantation, a setting that does not change throughout the play. Colonel Thomas Norwood, the white plantation owner is frustrated that Sallie Lewis, the youngest of his mulatto children due to his African American housekeeper Cora, has not left yet to catch the train that will take her to school for the semester. He discusses his frustration with Sam, his personal African American servant. Another Norwood's mulatto child, Robert, whom Cora calls Bert, is supposed to drive Sallie to the station, but Bert has driven to town to get some radio tubes without Norwood's permission. Norwood says that Bert should be in the fields picking cotton and threatens to have him whipped.

Sallie, a very light-skinned mulatto who could pass for white, comes down to say goodbye to Norwood. She thanks him for sending her to school and he is pleased to hear that she is learning cooking and sewing. She says she wants to become a teacher and Norwood dismisses the idea, saying that he will probably send her north to live with her older sister whom he thinks is a cook. Robert arrives from town and picks up Sallie. At the same time, Fred Higgins, a county politician, arrives and warns Norwood that Robert was causing problems in town. Robert picked up his package of radio tubes, but they had been destroyed in the mail and the post office refused to return his money. When he argued with the white woman behind the counter, the mail clerks threw him out. Higgins is

concerned that Robert is going to rile up other African Americans to think they are as good as whites.

Higgins tells Norwood that he should marry again instead of just sleeping with Cora. He says that it would be more socially acceptable and that having a white woman around the house would help keep Norwood from being too soft on the African Americans on his plantation. Norwood and Higgins leave to go look at Norwood's cotton fields; on the way out, Norwood tells Cora that he wants to talk to Robert. Cora notices a doily that Sallie sewed and points it out to William, the oldest of her mulatto children by Norwood. Billy, William's son, asks if Norwood is his white grandpa and William says that Robert has been broadcasting the fact that Cora's children are Norwood's. Cora and William discuss the first time that Norwood beat Robert, when little Robert called him papa in front of a group of important white visitors. They talk about the fact that Robert is going to get himself and the rest of the African Americans on the plantation in trouble if he does not stop his brash behavior.

Robert returns to the Big House, calling himself Mr. Norwood. However, he drops his act when he sees his mother crying over the distress he has put her through. Robert says that he is half-white and will act like his white half. He says that his six years at school have shown him that not all African Americans have to yield to white people like they do on the plantation. Robert and William get in a fight and Cora breaks it up, sending William into the kitchen so that she can talk to Robert. She tells

Cora scared that Robert's behavior is going to hurt them all in the end and she is even more concerned when she hears about Robert's behavior at the post office that morning. She tells him to be respectful to Norwood when he returns and act like the African American man that he is. Robert tells her that he is not going to work in the cotton fields anymore, and Cora notes that they all have to do things they don't like, such as lying to the Colonel about the fact that Sallie is really studying typewriting, not cooking and sewing.

Norwood arrives in his car and Cora tries to hurry Robert into the kitchen. However, Robert refuses to use any door but the front door, like white people do. As a result, when Norwood comes in through the front door, he almost runs into Robert. Shocked, he threatens Robert with his cane, but Robert stands up to Norwood who drops his cane in fear. Robert stalks proudly out the front door and Norwood, in a rage, grabs his pistol from a drawer. He is too nervous to use it, however.

Act 2, Scene 1

Later that evening, the Colonel requests to see Robert, and Cora tells her son to agree with whatever Norwood says. Robert agrees as long as Norwood does not try to hit him again. Cora returns to her room and Norwood comes into the room to talk to Robert. He asks Robert why he is causing problems, but tells him that before he answers, Robert better speak to him like an African American. Robert says that he is Norwood's son and Norwood says that Robert has no father. Norwood tells Robert to leave the plantation, and when Robert refuses, Norwood

pulls the pistol on him. Robert disarms Norwood and chokes him to death. Cora hears the struggle and comes down, horrified to see Norwood lying on the floor. She tells Robert to escape into the swamps. He grabs the pistol and runs out the front door, narrowly missing two white men who have come to see Norwood. When the two men see that Norwood is dead, they call the sheriff to get a mob of white people to chase Robert. The men leave and Cora talks at Norwood's body. She criticizes Norwood for lying there when she should be helping Robert, his son. She then says that she knows Norwood is faking, that he is not lying there and that he is really out there running after Robert. By her comments, the audience can see that Cora is insane. Cora goes upstairs to make a hiding spot for Robert under her bed.

Act 2, Scene 2

An hour later, Sam and the undertaker discuss Robert's fate and the fact that there are only African Americans left on Norwood's plantation now. The undertaker expresses interest in Cora and has Sam go get her so that they can get some alcohol. However, when Cora comes out, she says that she will only take orders from Norwood and that she is waiting for him to return. The undertaker realizes that Cora has been driven insane. The undertaker leaves and Sam tells Cora she is a fool for acting like that. Then he realizes that with Norwood dead, he is free, and leaves. Livonia, the cook, comes into the room and tells Cora that almost all of the African Americans on the plantation have fled, except for William, who comes to speak with her. William says he is leaving and tries to

take his mother with him, but Cora says she is waiting for Robert and Norwood to return. William is frightened at his mother's crazy talk and leaves. Cora talks to the empty room, remembering how she became Norwood's mistress when she was fifteen. The mob arrives outside looking for Robert and he runs into the house amidst gunfire. He says that he has one bullet left in his gun and that it is for him. Robert runs upstairs and shoots himself before the white mob can capture and hang him.