

The Art of Fact and Fiction

“...Today's dramatists have a new faith in human beings, a faith not simply that people will endure but that they can talk meaningfully. . .the new theater's characters show their strength in asserting themselves, not as tragic heroes demanding that life make sense, and certainly not as comic figures making an amusing spectacle of themselves, but as men and women on the way to attaining dignity that is rightfully theirs.”

*--Types of Drama Plays, & Essays
5th Edition. Barnett, Berman, Burto*

In the “Author's notes” section, Pearl Cleage credits Flyin' West as “a story of some of the black people who went West.” The play is in essence a story about some of those people, and it is also about the author's *perspective* of those people. *Perspective* means point of view. Perspective shapes a person's opinion and how a person reacts to truth, facts, and reality.

Art can shape historical facts to make a powerful statement about the human condition. In theatre, a play that is based on history is called a “**history play**” or a “**period piece**”. These plays extract the realistic conditions from a certain time period like slavery or World War I, using the **dialect** and **colloquialisms** from that time period, costumes, and technology (e.g. oil lamps instead of electric lamps). A **history play** can also be based on historical figures like a certain president (George Washington/Richard Nixon), a civil rights leader (Mahatma Gandhi/Martin Luther King), a painter (Leonardo DaVinci) or other artists (Billie Holiday/Andy Warhol). As a playwright, the author can either create a story to re-enact only the facts they have researched, or they can take history and shape it to provide a different and deeper meaning.

This is what Pearl Cleage does in Flyin' West. She presents the true to life conditions of pioneers, but also shapes some of the facts to create a perspective about the value of black people, independence, respect, relationships, morality, kindness and the importance of community. Her character, Sophie, is described as having the power to forever retire “the requirement that western archetypes be white and male”.