

**Reading Comprehension Questions for *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan Lori-Parks**

**Assignment 1: Annotate the following patterns** (and anything else you think will help you understand the book, or that will help you gather quotes to write about)

1. **Basic Pattern: *Clothes*.** Think about their significance in shaping someone’s identity.
2. **Advanced Pattern:** Details that show the ***connection of the past to the present***.
3. **A Pattern of YOUR OWN:** (Write it in) \_\_\_\_\_

Annotate by **underlining directly in the text** where you see the pattern, or putting a sticky note right at that spot, and writing in the name of the pattern, and any other information or explanations you want to put down.

Target 1	1	2	3	4
I can annotate patterns	I have not demonstrated this skill yet.	Annotate basic patterns of authorial elements in a text given by teacher	Independently annotate patterns OR annotate sophisticated patterns of authorial elements in a text given by teacher	Independently annotate sophisticated patterns of authorial elements in a text.

**Assignment 2: Guided Reading Questions**

As you read *Topdog/Underdog* stories, please answer the following questions briefly (they are chronological).

Pre-Play Notes
1. What special stage directions does Parks tell the reader she will use? What do they mean? (5)
2. (optional research assignment) The play was written by Suzan Lori-Parks, but playwrights don’t make plays by themselves. The original production was developed and produced in 2001 by Joe Papp and the Public Theatre. Do a little research into what the Public Theatre is and why it’s something special. (6)
3. What are the time and place of this play? Why is that important? (7)
<p><b>4. Important Context:</b></p> <p><b>3-card monte:</b> a card game where someone sets up two black cards and a red and people on the street bet on whether they can pick out the red card. It’s a hustle, and a good way to take people’s money if your hands and mouth are fast enough.</p> <p><b>Lincoln and Booth:</b> John Wilkes Booth was an actor who snuck into the Presidential box at Ford Theatre and shot and killed President Abraham Lincoln shortly after the end of the Civil War.</p> <p><b>Parks’s spelling:</b> she spells her words the way other great black writers have (see Amiri Baraka) in an attempt to get the words to sound like African American vernacular. Yr = your, thuh = the, Ima = I am going to, etc.</p> <p><b>Lincoln’s makeup:</b> Lincoln wears whiteface makeup at his job. This is an inversion of the famously racist tradition of white performers wearing black face to play stereotypical black characters in minstrel shows throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and</p>

early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### Scene One

5. What is Booth doing at the start of the play? How well is he doing it? Why does he have to dodge the cops? (11)

6. What does Booth pull out when Lincoln sneaks up on him? What kind of a tone does Parks set for the play with this detail so early in the first scene? (13)

7. Who is Grace? Describe her relationship with Booth. (14-15)

8. What happened to Lincoln on the bus just before? How did he respond? (15-16)

9. Why do you think Booth lies about the 3-card monte table? What does it tell you about him? (16-17)

10. What does Lincoln's advice to Booth about changing his name tell you about Lincoln? (18)

11. Why is Lincoln living at Booth's apartment? Why is Booth welcoming on Friday but not Thursday? (19)

12. What do the way they eat tell you about Booth and Lincoln? (21)

13. What is the situation with the two brothers' "inheritance?" (22)

14. Why does Booth want Lincoln to help him learn 3-card monte? (23-25)

15. How does Booth describe the day their mother left them? (25-26)

16. Booth calls Lincoln a "sh\*teating motherf\*cking pathetic limpd\*ck uncle tom." In what ways is Booth insulting Lincoln? How does Lincoln respond to this insult? Do you think Booth is right? (26)

17. Why does Booth say Lincoln is "STANDING IN [HIS] WAY!" (26)

18. Booth says that Lincoln's job, working at an arcade, "Dressing up like some cracker\*ss white man, some dead president and letting people shoot at you" is a hustle, just like 3-card monte. (27) Do you agree?

19. Booth says Lincoln is "going all the way... back then when folks was slaves." (27) In what ways do the problems of this play go exactly back that far? Think about how Booth and Lincoln respond to the white world.

20. What is the significance of the blues song Lincoln sings, in terms of the play's context? (28)

## Scene Two

21. What has Booth been doing just before scene two starts? (29)

22. Lincoln said in the previous scene that he would be gone the next day, but clearly he is not. Why are the brothers getting along again in this scene? (hint: it's Friday) (30)

23. How does Booth justify stealing the suits? Does Lincoln scold him for doing something illegal? (32)

24. What do you learn about their father through their conversation? (33)

25. Why did Lincoln have to accept less money than the last guy who took his job? What does the *way* he says it tell you about him? (34)

26. Of course Lincoln prefers the subdued tie and Booth prefers the brightly colored one. Lol. (35)

27. What does Lincoln say he likes about his job? What is the significance of the way the brothers describe who is being shot? (BOOTH: He shoot you? LINCOLN: He shot Honest Abe, yeah.") (37-38)

28. What is the significance of the phrases that Lincoln's "best customer" whispers into his ear as he shoots him? (39)

29. Lincoln reveals why he quit 3-card monte. What was the reason? Who do you think Lonny is? (40)

### Scene Three

30. What does the way Lincoln wakes up tell you about how he spent the rest of that Friday night? (42)

31. What metaphor does Booth use to describe the change in his relationship with Grace? Why is the such a beautiful and compelling image for men such as these? (42-43)

32. Lincoln eventually thinks Booth is lying about what happened between he and Grace. The aggressive reply Booth makes suggests he is. What does Booth say to get back at Lincoln for ruining his lie? (49-50)

33. What does Lincoln offer Booth? (50-51)

34. What do you think is the significance of Booth playing Booth and Lincoln playing Lincoln as they practice the assassination? (55-56)

### Scene Four

35. What does Lincoln imagine doing to his boss after he rips his beard? How is this out of character for him? (59)

36. Describe the ambiguity of Lincoln's feelings about his days of hustling 3-card monte. (59-62)

Scene Five

37. What is Booth making preparations for? (62-63)

38. What has happened to Lincoln? (64-65)

39. How long ago was Grace supposed to come over? What does that tell you about Booth? (66)

40. What do you learn about their past in this scene? What is the symbolic significance of the house? (68-72)

41. How does Lincoln's description of their parents' efforts regarding clothes and shoes connect to the brothers' lives now? (71)

42. According to him, why doesn't Booth "hold down a steady job?" (72)

43. We learn about how the brothers got the "inheritance" they were talking about in the first scene. Describe it. (72)

44. What is heartbreaking about the word "Better" that Lincoln uses on the bottom of page 73?

45. How does the card each of the brothers use as the winning card in the monte symbolically connect to their characterization? (75-76)

46. What does Lincoln say about the Dealer not wanting to throw the cards? How does that connect to Booth and Grace? (78)

47. When Booth finally looks at his brother's eyes (to learn how to throw cards), what does he see? What is the significance of this? (80)

48. What does Lincoln say is Booth's problem that's preventing him from learning? (83)

49. What does Booth say is the difference between he and Lincoln? (86)

#### Scene Six

50. How has Lincoln's characterization shifted at the beginning of scene six? (86-87) Do we, the audience, feel good about this change?

51. How do the brothers lie to each other at the beginning of this scene? Why do you think they do it? (89-91)

52. What is ironic about what Booth says on the bottom of page 95?

53. What does Booth say about “that bad part” of himself and of Lincoln? (97)

54. How much does Lincoln put on the table? What does Booth take out to match it? Why is this significant? (102-105)

55. What does Booth reveal about the way their mother left them? (you have to read between the lines) (104-105)

56. What question does Lincoln ask Booth on page 107? How was it brought on by Booth’s story?

57. What two things does Lincoln do after the game is over that annoy Booth? (109-111)

58. What does Booth reveal on page 112? How does this change the tone of the scene?

59. Why does Lincoln say he’s going to give the stocking back? (112)

60. Why? How is the audience left feeling? (114-115)