Zoot Suit

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LUIS VALDEZ

Luis Valdez was born in Delano, California to migrant farmers. The second of 10 children, he rarely stayed in one place long enough to become acquainted with a specific school system, since his family constantly moved to follow the best seasonal crops. All the same, Valdez was a good student and even appeared rather frequently on a local television show when he was a teenager in high school. He then attended San Jose State College and focused more seriously on theater, producing his first play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho*, when he was a senior. After graduating, Valdez spent some time in the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and then he founded his own theater company, El Teatro Campesino. The company was made up of farmers, and Valdez served as its artistic director, primarily putting on short political plays about the importance of farmers' unions. El Teatro Campesino quickly became popular, but Valdez decided to leave the company in 1967, at which point he founded a Chicano cultural center in Del Rey, California. He then moved to Fresno, where he reestablished the cultural center while teaching at Fresno State College. Valdez also founded another theater organization called TENAZ, which he moved once again when he resettled just south of San Francisco in 1971. All the while, he wrote political plays that were comedic yet emotionally striking, including *The Dark Root of a Scream* in 1967, *Bernabé* in 1970, and *Zoot Suit* in 1979, to name just a few. He has since directed many films—including the well-known *La Bamba* in 1987—and won a number of awards. Valdez lives in San Juan Bautista, California and received the National Medal of Arts in 2015.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Valdez's *Zoot Suit* is based on the real-life Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, which took place in early 1943. In August of 1942, a man named José Gallardo Díaz was found nearly dead on a road near a swimming hole outside of Los Angeles known as the Sleepy Lagoon. He died shortly after being taken to the hospital, and his death led the Los Angeles Police Department to arrest 17 young Mexican American men. However, this was a highly reactionary decision, since the police didn't actually have sufficient evidence to link anyone to Díaz's murder. All the same, 12 of the 17 defendants received prison sentences, though they were later acquitted of all charges in 1944. Still, the trial did lasting damage, especially since the media's coverage of the entire ordeal villainized the Mexican American community as violent and dangerous. These tensions ultimately fed into the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, in which white servicemen and civilians violently targeted Mexican American people and other minority groups who wore zoot suits. Many of the rioters claimed that they were targeted because it was unpatriotic to wear such large suits during World War II, since the government had recently called for a cut-back in fabric, but this was primarily an excuse for racists to persecute people of color. Although the riots began in Los Angeles, they also took place in most American cities, including San Diego, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because *Zoot Suit* examines the Chicano community and the ways in which the American government vilifies young immigrants, it's helpful to consider the play alongside Valeria Luiselli's contemporary essay, *Tell Me How It Ends*. In this short book, Luiselli unveils how the American government has historically encouraged (albeit inadvertently) Latinx immigrants to establish gangs, ultimately creating hostile environments in which young people of color need to band together for support and safety, creating groups that the government then unfairly targets. This is exactly what happens in *Zoot Suit* when Lieutenant Edwards wrongfully arrests Henry and then helps him start a "youth group," which becomes the 38th Street Gang that the police force later targets and treats like a criminal organization. On another note, *Zoot Suit*'s consideration of racial profiling is something that a number of more contemporary works take as their central topic, including Nic Stone's young adult novel *Dear Martin*, in which a young black man must navigate the dangerous racist prejudices of law enforcement officials. Furthermore, journalist John Howard Griffin's book *Black Like Me*, about disguising himself as a black man and traveling through the American South during the 1950s, engages similar ideas as *Zoot Suit* when it comes to the nuances and complexities of what it means to for white people to be allies to people of color.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Zoot Suit
- **When Published:** Premiered in 1979
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Documentary Play; Political Theater; Historical Drama; Musical
- **Setting:** Los Angeles during World War II
- **Climax:** While Henry Reyna endures solitary confinement in prison, Los Angeles is overrun by the Zoot Suit Riots, in which angry white servicemen and civilians target minority groups wearing zoot suits.

- **Antagonist:** Racism; cultural insensitivity; biased news outlets
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. In 1981, Luis Valdez adapted *Zoot Suit* as a film. The production starred Daniel Valdez (Luis's brother) and Edward James Olmos (of *Blade Runner* fame).

Reality Check. Luis Valdez based Henry Reyna on a real man named Henry Leyvas, whose life perfectly matches the fictionalized version that Valdez includes in *Zoot Suit*. Although Valdez leaves his character's future ambiguous at the end of the play, the real Henry was arrested on drug charges not long after winning his appeal in the Sleepy Lagoon trial. After serving time for over a decade, he ran a restaurant called Hank's before dying of a heart attack in 1971.

PLOT SUMMARY

A man dressed in a zoot suit uses a switchblade to cut through a backdrop of a newspaper's frontpage, which reads, "*ZOOT-SUITER HORDES INVADE LOS ANGELES*." Emerging from the hole he cut, El Pachuco adjusts his outfit and combs his hair, eventually addressing the audience by asking them in Spanish slang if they're looking at his clothes. Switching to English, he explains that the audience is about to see a play about the Pachuco way of life, saying that the archetypical Pachuco is first and foremost a performer, somebody who takes part in constructing what it means to be Chicano. The 38th Street Gang then enters and erupts into an animated party.

Wearing a zoot suit, Henry Reyna, leader of the 38th Street Gang, greets his friends. The gang has a good time they spot members of the Downey Gang—their rivals. A fight almost erupts, but El Pachuco stops it. Still, the party is interrupted by a siren, and Sargent Smith and Lieutenant Edwards burst onto the scene, telling the dancers to put their hands up. Smith calmly tells a white sailor at the party to leave, but then he and Edwards arrest the 38th Street Gang before bring them to jail. Members of the press arrive and shout out headlines: the 38th Street Gang has been arrested on suspicion of the recent murder of José Williams at Sleepy Lagoon.

In jail, Henry speaks to El Pachuco, the narrator who also functions as a part of Henry's conscience. El Pachuco says the city is "cracking down on pachucos." This disheartens Henry, who complains that the police have repeatedly pinned crimes on him even though he's innocent—and this time it's worse because he's supposed to report to the Navy the following day to fight in World War II. El Pachuco doesn't understand why Henry wants to do this, pointing out that the United States doesn't care about him. He tells Henry to forget about foreign wars because he has his own war to fight at home.

A member of the press enters with Edwards and Smith, reading a headline aloud that reveals the police have arrested 22 members of the 38th Street Gang. Approaching Henry, Edwards and Smith talk to him about their suspicions, saying they've been told to round up "malcontents," especially since the country is at war. Edwards uses this as an excuse when Henry reminds him that Edwards has arrested him on false charges before, and goes on to say that he will let Henry out of jail and allow him to join the Navy if he provides a statement about what happened to José Williams. With El Pachuco giving Henry advice that only he can hear, though, Henry refuses to talk.

When Edwards and Smith leave, Henry thinks back to the night of the Sleep Lagoon murder. He's back at this house, getting ready to go out dancing with his new girlfriend, Della, his sister Lupe, and his younger brother, Rudy. As they prepare to leave, Henry's parents, Dolores and Enrique, take issue with the way Lupe's short skirt and Rudy's zoot suit. On their way out, Enrique tells Henry not to let Rudy drink beer.

Back in the present, press members question Edwards about the murder trial and the "Mexican Crime wave." In response, Edwards gives scant details about the crime scene, explaining that the Sleepy Lagoon is a reservoir where young Chicanos often swim. Hearing this, a reporter named Alice asks if this is because Chicanos aren't allowed at the public pools, but the other journalist react negatively to this question.

In jail, Henry talks to his friends Joey, Smiley, and Tommy about the way the press has portrayed them. A white lawyer named George then enters and introduces himself, explaining that Henry's parents hired him to represent the gang in court. Despite the men's initial skepticism, George makes it clear that he isn't expecting to make money from representing them. He also emphasizes just how badly the members of the 38th Street Gang need a lawyer, since biased news coverage has already swayed popular opinion against them. In response to this, George explains, a committee has formed in the gang's support, demonstrating that there are people who care about giving them the justice they deserve. Reluctantly, Henry and his friends accept George's offer.

The narrative jumps back to the night of the murder. At a party with Henry and the rest of the 38th Street Gang, Rudy gets drunk. This becomes a problem when members of the Downey Gang, led by a man named Rafas, pick a fight with Rudy. Henry steps in just before things escalate. He and Rafas have a knife fight, which Henry wins by knocking Rafas down and stabbing him in the neck. Just then, El Pachuco interrupts by snapping his fingers—everybody freezes in place. He tells Henry that the play doesn't need any more bloodshed, especially between two Mexicans. When Henry points out that he must kill Rafas to avoid getting killed himself, El Pachuco says that this kind of violence is exactly what the audience paid to see—a point that

convinces Henry to let Rafas go.

The narrative returns to the jail, where George visits Henry and introduces him to Alice, a reporter working to clear his name. Wanting to write an unbiased story, she asks Henry questions about the night of the murder, but he doesn't see the point in talking. Alice points out that other newspapers are actively spreading rumors about the gang to ruin their public image. She also says that the entire concept of Los Angeles's so-called "Mexican Crime Wave" was invented by a newspaper owner who just wants to make money. For this reason, she says, it's important that the people hear Henry's side of the story. When Henry remains skeptical, she tells him that she grew up in Los Angeles but never heard about the Chicano population. Now, though, she's eager to learn about the community, a fact that makes Henry a bit more receptive to what she says.

During the 38th Street Gang's trial, George tells the judge that the jail hasn't given Henry and his friends clean clothes or fresh haircuts like they normally do before sending prisoners to court. However, the public prosecutor claims that this is because the gang members are identifiable to witnesses by their appearances, and rules that they won't be allowed to change how they look. He also says that each member of the gang must stand whenever the prosecutor mentions him, claiming that the witnesses need them to do this in order tell them apart. George objects, saying that this might affect the way the jury rules, since Henry and his friends will risk incriminating themselves if they stand during allegations of criminality. Again, though, the judge overrules this objection.

As the trial proceeds, Della takes the stand and describes what happened on the night of José Williams's murder: she and Henry were at the Lagoon having a romantic evening—Henry even suggested they get married when he returns from the Navy. As they looked out over the lagoon, they were curious about a nearby party but then noticed the Downey Gang vandalizing Henry's car. Henry tried to fight them, but they beat him unconscious. When he came to, Henry went to get the rest of the 38th Street Gang, returning to the lagoon to find that the Downey Gang was no longer there. Just before they were about to leave, though, they heard noise from the nearby party and went to see what was going on—apparently, the Downey Gang had just stirred up trouble at this party, so the partiers attacked the 38th Street Gang when they saw them approaching, thinking they were the Downey Gang returning for more trouble. In the chaotic fight that ensued, José was beaten to death, but the 38th Street Gang was unaware of this at the time.

After Della finishes her account, the prosecutor and judge attempt to frame Henry and his friends as criminals and murderers. Finally, in his closing statement, the prosecutor suggests to the jury that letting these young men free would be dangerous to American society. George counters this argument in his own closing statement, insisting that Henry and his friends are innocent Americans and that to convict them of murder without sufficient evidence would be to undermine the country's core values of justice. Despite this, the jury sentences the members of the 38th Street Gang to life in prison.

In the coming weeks, Alice writes letters to Henry and his friends while working hard to publish an article about their case, since George has appealed the court's decision. During this time, Henry becomes fond of Alice, and they develop a vaguely romantic relationship. However, they find themselves at odds when Henry says he wants to drop out of the appeal. Incredulous, Alice tells him he can't do this, pointing out how hard she's worked to help him. Henry tells her to keep her self-righteous altruism to herself, reminding her that he never asked for help. As this argument continues, Alice becomes upset and finally breaks down, lamenting the fact that—no matter how hard she works—nobody takes her seriously, discounting her as too "sentimental" and too untrustworthy because she's a Jewish communist. Hearing this, Henry remarks that she finally sounds like she really means what she's saying, and he recommits himself to the appeal.

Shortly after this interaction, Henry is thrown into solitary confinement for fighting with a guard. While he's in isolation, the Zoot Suit Riots break out over Los Angeles, and Rudy gets swept up in the violence when white servicemen target him and other young Chicano men for wearing zoot suits. Though this devastates the Chicano community, some good news follows on the heels of the riots: Henry and the rest of the gang win their appeal and are released. When they come home, they have a large party at Dolores and Enrique's house, but this is not the happy, simple ending it might seem. Rather, Henry has to decide whom he loves more: Della or Alice (he never makes a definitive choice). Meanwhile, Rudy warns Henry against wearing his zoot suit. Rudy himself joined the Navy while Henry was in prison and will be returning to the war the following day. As Della and Alice wait for Henry to decide between them, a police officer arrives outside and tries to arrest Joey, but Enrique doesn't let Henry outside to help, not wanting his son to get wrongfully arrested once again. Instead, George, Alice, and Tommy handle the matter, and then the entire cast of characters takes turns narrating the rest of Henry's life. A member of the press enters and says that Henry goes back to prison in 1947 for robbery and assault and then kills an inmate before eventually dying in 1955. El Pachuco, however, says that this is just the story the press sets forth, at which point Rudy claims that Henry goes to Korea and dies in action in 1952, receiving a Congressional Medal of Honor after his death. Alice, for her part, says that Henry marries Della, with whom he has five children. As everyone calls Henry different names ("the born leader", "the social victim," etc.), El Pachuco sums up Henry's life by saying, "Henry Reyna…El Pachuco…The Man…the myth…still lives."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Henry Reyna – Henry is a 21-year-old member of Los Angeles's Chicano community, and the protagonist of *Zoot Suit*. The leader of the 38th Street Gang, Henry is a well-liked young man who enjoys wearing zoot suits and going to dances with his girlfriend, Della. Even though he's still relatively young, he's had quite a few run-ins with the police, since they frequently arrest him simply because he's a young Chicano man wearing a **zoot suit**. The audience learns this when Lieutenant Edwards arrests Henry and his friends, all of whom Edwards suspects are guilty of murdering a man named José Williams, who died at place called the Sleepy Lagoon. Because Henry was supposed to report to the Navy the following day, he's especially frustrated that he's been arrested, but Edwards doesn't care, since the only thing he *does* care about is the "Mexican Crime Wave" that the local **newspapers** have been writing about recently. Thankfully, a man named George Shearer decides to represent Henry and his friends in court, even though Henry is skeptical of him at first because he's not used to white people helping him—in fact, he's accustomed to white men like George using their power *against* him, not in his favor. Luckily, though, George genuinely wants to help Henry, and he also introduces Henry to Alice Bloomfield, a reporter who wants to counter the negative narrative that has emerged about the Chicano community in the press. Again, Henry is hesitant to accept support, but he comes to trust Alice and even develops romantic feelings for her—feelings he doesn't know what to do with when he and his friends are eventually let out of prison and he must decide between Alice and Della. In the end, Henry doesn't choose Alice, though it's not particularly clear what his future holds, since the play draws to a close as his loved ones narrate different futures for his life. They suggest—variously—that Henry goes back to jail, that he goes to war, that he dies a drug addict, and that he dies a war hero, to name just a few of the narratives.

El Pachuco – El Pachuco is a multifunctional character in *Zoot Suit*, since he serves as both a narrator and a part of Henry's consciousness, often talking to him and giving him advice in times of hardship. Valdez describes El Pachuco as the very embodiment of the "pachuco myth." He is always dressed in a **zoot suit** and is adamantly against anything or anyone that challenges the Chicano community. A proud man, he often urges Henry to forget about people like Alice who try to convince him that they'll be able to help him win his court case. To that end, El Pachuco is something of a pessimistic pragmatist, which is why he tries to tell Henry not to expect justice from the American government. In keeping with this, El Pachuco also doesn't think it's a good idea for Henry to join the military, since El Pachuco believes that he should spend his time fighting for the Chicano community, not for the nation at large. During the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 (while Henry is in prison), El Pachuco gets into an argument with several white men, who ultimately beat him and strip off his zoot suit. In the aftermath of this altercation, El Pachuco rises wearing a loincloth and looking—according to Valdez's stage note—like one of his Aztec forebears. In this way, El Pachuco represents not only the quintessential image of a *pachuco*, but also the ways in which this identity is tied to Mexican history and the Chicano community's cultural heritage. It's also worth mentioning that El Pachuco is a metanarrative character, often addressing the audience to call attention to something that's happening in the play. In turn, he demonstrates his self-awareness and the close attention he pays to the ways in which he and his fellow Chicanos present themselves.

Alice Bloomfield – Alice Bloomfield is a reporter and activist who is eager to counter the predominant narrative about the Chicano community in the press. To do this, she introduces herself to Henry while he's in prison, telling him that she wants to write a piece about him. However, Henry is hesitant to talk to Alice because he doesn't see how she could possibly help him. Consequently, Alice explains that she has always wanted to learn about the Chicano community because she grew up in Los Angeles but never encountered many Chicanos. By saying this, she shows Henry that she is genuinely invested in learning about his culture and supporting him in an organic way that is actually based on what he and his friends need or want. At the same time, though, Alice isn't always so good at offering her support in ways that don't overshadow the people for whom she hopes to advocate. This becomes evident by her harsh reaction to the idea of Henry dropping out of the appeal. Losing sight of the fact that Henry can make his own decisions, Alice tells him he can't drop out of the case because she has put so much work into the entire cause, thereby giving him the impression that he owes her something when, in reality, he never asked for her support. Thankfully, though, Alice and Henry patch things up when Henry sees just how much she cares about him and his wellbeing. In turn, Alice's commitment to helping Henry becomes an example of the ways in which advocacy can get interpersonally complicated and messy.

George Shearer – George is an attorney who wants to defend Henry and the other members of the 38th Street Gang in court. A kind man who believes in the importance of upholding justice and fighting racism, he has trouble at first understanding why Henry finds it hard to accept his support. However, George eventually proves to Henry that he only wants what's best for him, and George becomes a successful white ally, despite his slight inability to fully step out of his own perspective to consider why Henry is initially hesitant to embrace him. He also introduces Henry to Alice Bloomfield, who plays an important role in changing how the public views the Chicano community. In court, George stands up to the judge and the public prosecutor whenever they reveal their biases, and though this

doesn't convince the jury to acquit Henry and the others, his citations of misconduct (aimed at the judge) make it possible for him to mount a strong appeal, which is what leads to the 38th Street Gang's eventual release from prison.

Rudy – Rudy is Henry's younger brother. Eager to be like Henry, Rudy is sometimes overzealous and hotheaded. For example, after drinking too much at a party, he picks a fight with Rafas, the leader of the Downey Gang (the 38th Street Gang's rivals). Thankfully, Henry is always willing to stick up for his younger brother. Even though Rudy was at the Sleepy Lagoon with everyone else on the night that José Williams was murdered there, he somehow evaded the police's scrutiny, and Henry makes his fellow gang members vow not to say anything about this discrepancy. While Henry and the others are wrongly imprisoned for the murder, Rudy wears Henry's **zoot suit** to a dance hall and gets swept up in the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. Like El Pachuco, he finds himself facing a group of angry white servicemen who ultimately beat him and strip him naked. Shortly after this altercation, Rudy joins the Navy and goes to fight in World War II, returning only for Henry's release from prison.

The Judge – The judge who presides over Henry and his friends' trial is played by the same actor who portrays Lieutenant Edwards. This is an early indication in the play that he will be biased against the members of the 38th Street Gang, since Edwards is quite prejudiced against the Chicano community. In keeping with this, the judge makes it easy for the public prosecutor to take liberties while questioning witnesses. He also makes a number of racist and unfair rulings, to which the gang's lawyer, George, objects, though the judge never pays much attention to George's complaints. In fact, he doesn't even care when George cites him for misconduct. Interestingly enough, these instances of misconduct are what enable George to build a strong case when he appeals the jury's initial guilty verdict.

The Public Prosecutor ("Press") – The lawyer who serves as the public prosecutor in Henry's court case is a manipulative and crafty man who stakes his entire strategy on trying to convince the jurors that the Chicano community poses a threat to American society. Portrayed by one of the actors who also plays various members of the press, the prosecutor convinces the biased judge that Henry and his friends shouldn't be allowed to change out of their dirty clothes because the witnesses and jurors will have a hard time recognizing them if they're not dressed in the stereotypical pachuco style. He also twists Della's words around when she testifies, forcing her to say a number of things she doesn't mean. When Della finally stops answering the prosecutor's questions because she knows he's going to use her words against her, the judge holds her in contempt of the court and sentences her to a year in a correctional facility for young women.

Rafas – Rafas is the leader of the Downey Gang, the rivals of the 38th Street Gang. Rafas and his crew often show up at 38th Street Gang parties, much to Henry's dismay. He and his friends also vandalize Henry's car at the Sleepy Lagoon and then beat him unconscious. When Henry awakes, he gets the rest of the 38th Street Gang and then returns to the Lagoon, but Rafas and the Downey Gang have already left for the Williams' Ranch, which they terrorize before taking off into the night. Although it's never clarified, the implication is that Rafas and his gang are responsible for the death of José Williams, which gets pinned on Henry and his friends.

Lieutenant Edwards – Lieutenant Edwards is a member of the Los Angeles Police Department. Edwards is a racist man who has a long personal history with Henry, since he was the first person to arrest Henry, though he did so wrongfully, since he unfairly assumed that Henry had stolen a car (the car belonged to Henry's father). When Edwards and his colleague Sergeant Smith arrest Henry and the rest of the 38th Street Gang on suspicion of murder, Edwards shows no sympathy toward them, though he does *pretend* to care about Henry by saying that he won't interfere with his plans to join the Navy the following day if he tells him who killed José Williams. Henry doesn't tell Lieutenant Edwards anything, though, so Edwards continues to treat him in a condescending, authoritarian manner.

Sergeant Smith – Sergeant Smith is a member of the Los Angeles Police Department who unfairly and mercilessly persecutes Henry and the rest of the 38th Street Gang. Like Lieutenant Edwards, Smith discriminates against the city's Chicano community, though he is even more intolerant than Edwards, as evidenced by the fact that he frequently uses physical violence against Henry.

Della – Della is Henry's girlfriend. While testifying at Henry's trial, Della refuses to answer a question because she knows that the public prosecutor will twist her words around to make it seem like she's making incriminating statements about Henry and the other members of the 38th Street Gang. In response to this, the judge sentences her to one year in a correctional facility for young women. When she eventually gets out, she moves in with Henry's parents because her own parents disapprove of her relationship with Henry and kick her out. When Henry finally comes home from prison, then, he discovers that Della will be living with him and his family. What's more, she wants to know if he still wants to marry her, since he mentioned this possibility before getting arrested. Now, though, Henry has romantic feelings for Alice, too, so he doesn't know what to do. Nonetheless, he chooses Della, and in one of the many alternative endings (the play has multiple because the characters each narrate different versions of Henry's future), he and Della get married and have three children.

Joey Castro – Joey Castro is a member of the 38th Street Gang. While in prison, Joey decides to give up leading the life of

a pachuco. However, when he's eventually acquitted and let out of prison, it isn't long before he starts wearing his **zoot suit** again—something that immediately attracts attention, as police officers try to arrest Joey on the very same night that he's set free, claiming that he's trying to steal George's car.

Tommy Roberts – Tommy Roberts is a member of the 38th Street Gang. Unlike the other members, though, Tommy is white. However, he closely identifies with the pachuco lifestyle, seeing the Chicano community as his own because he has grown up speaking Spanish and spending all of his time with Henry and the others.

Dolores – Dolores is Henry's mother. A loving woman, she worries about the fact that police officers target Henry and his friends for wearing **zoot suits**, though she doesn't stop Henry from dressing how he wants because she knows how much his clothing means to him. While Henry is in prison, Dolores and her husband, Enrique, take in Henry's girlfriend, Della, because her parents kicked her out.

Enrique – Enrique is Henry's father. When Henry is in prison, Enrique and his wife, Dolores, take in Henry's girlfriend, Della, because her parents kicked her out. During this time, Enrique tells Della that Henry will marry her when he gets out of prison—a statement that causes some awkward tension when Henry comes home and has to choose between Della and Alice. At the very end of the play, Enrique stops Henry from leaving the house when he hears that several police officers are trying to arrest Joey. Not wanting his son to be wrongfully arrested once again, he stands in Henry's way and even pushes him to the ground. For a moment, Henry considers hitting Enrique, but then he backs down, knowing he could never do such a thing to his own father.

The Press – Throughout the play, multiple members of the press involve themselves in whatever's going on. By announcing headlines, they call attention to new developments and advance the play's plot, all while reminding viewers of the ever-presence of the news media, which is always waiting to run a story about Henry and his friends.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Smiley Torres – Smiley Torres is a member of the 38th Street Gang. In fact, he is the gang's cofounder, along with Henry. However, Smiley's time in prison inspires him to leave California altogether, deciding to move with his wife and child to Arizona after he's released.

José Williams – José Williams is the man who's murdered at the Williams' Ranch near the Sleepy Lagoon. Although there's no evidence to suggest that Henry and the rest of the 38th Street are responsible for José's death, they are arrested for killing him.

Lupe – Lupe is Henry's younger sister, and one of the people who hangs out with the 38th Street Gang. Like Henry and their brother, Rudy, she is quite concerned with the way she looks, wanting to dress in the style popular among young Chicanas in the 1940s.

Bertha – Bertha is Henry's ex-girlfriend who bothers him at a dance party because he's dancing with his new girlfriend, Della.

Cholo – Cholo is a member of the 38th Street Gang. He is with Rudy during the Zoot Suit Riots.

TERMS

Chicano/Chicana – A term that refers to Americans of Mexican descent. The word has roots in Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s, and today is often used by Mexican American people as a chosen identity.

Pachuco – *Pachucos* are generally understood to be Mexican Americans who are often associated with specific styles (like the zoot suit) and involvement in neighborhood gangs. According to **El Pachuco**, the "Pachuco Style" is—above all—a performance of identity, or a way of dressing and acting that distinguishes people as young members of the Chicano community who are trying to build a collective cultural identity.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM, NATIONALISM, AND SCAPEGOATING

In Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit*, a play about discrimination against Los Angeles's Chicano population in the 1940s, Henry Reyna and his fellow members of the 38th Street Gang face institutionalized racism and prejudice. Valdez makes it clear that Henry and his friends are at the mercy of a biased court system, as the men are held accountable for a murder they didn't commit. As the gang go through the legal process, the judge presiding over the case does everything he can to help the prosecutor frame the men as malicious and dangerous. Although it's clear from a legal perspective that the 38th Street Gang wasn't responsible for the death of José Williams (the dead man in question), the public prosecutor insists to the jury that to let Henry and the others free would mean unleashing "the forces of anarchy and destruction" into American society. Because this trial unfolds during World War II, this rhetoric is especially effective, since the prosecutor takes the worst fears of the American citizenry at that time—"anarchy" and "destruction"—and pins it on people

of color, conflating the fight against extremism in Europe with completely unrelated domestic matters. By spotlighting the government's unjust targeting of the Chicano community in the early 1940s, Valdez invites audience members to consider an unfortunate part of the country's history, ultimately calling attention to the ways in which prejudiced authorities sometimes manipulate patriotism and fear to villainize minority groups.

Zoot Suit shows audiences the consequences of racial profiling, a term that refers to biased policing based on race and ethnicity. This is made quite clear by the play's title, since it's named after a style of suit that was wildly popular in the Chicano community during the 1940s—a style that police officers eventually treated as a sign of criminality. Baggy suits with long jackets and high-waisted trousers, **zoot suits** weren't exclusive to the Chicano population, but the police largely associated the style with young minority groups. For this reason, racists took a dim view of the trend, ultimately coming to see the zoot suit as a uniform that represented everything they hated, including anti-American sentiments. Henry's brother, Rudy, encounters this unfair attitude when he gets swept up in the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. For three nights, Navy officers, sailors, civilians, and other white servicemen run through Los Angeles attacking anyone wearing a zoot suit. While out dancing on one of these evenings, Rudy suddenly finds himself embroiled in a violent altercation simply because of his clothing. One white man even insists that "zoot suiters" like Rudy are trying to "outdo the white man in exaggerated white man's clothes." This accusation underscores not only a racist and intolerant attitude toward the Chicano population, but also the man's anxiety that white people might lose their power in American society—a bigoted fear that leads to violence. What Rudy and his community face, then, is a brand of hatred motivated by insecurity.

What's worse, prejudiced white authorities try to validate their insecurity and aggression by framing the Chicano community as threats to the American war effort in Europe. During the Zoot Suit Riots, one member of the press tells El Pachuco (a character who serves as the play's narrator) that the "Zoot Suit Crime Wave is even beginning to push the war news off the front page." It's worth noting that the member of the press who says this goes out of his way to conflate the zoot suit itself with a "crime wave," as if anyone who dresses like a member of the Chicano community (or for that matter, like somebody from any minority group) is not only involved in crime, but also responsible for diminishing wartime patriotism. In this regard, racists take issue with the zoot suit in order to vilify and further disenfranchise minorities like Rudy and Henry, who aren't actually doing anything to detract from the American war effort.

In fact, it's quite unfair to suggest that people like Henry and Rudy are undermining American wartime values. After all, Henry originally signed up for the Navy before getting arrested, and Rudy joins shortly after his brother goes to prison. This is why George, the lawyer defending the accused members of the 38th Street Gang, tries to emphasize in his closing statement that they are committed members of American society. To find Henry and his friends guilty of a murder they didn't commit (without even furnishing any evidence) would be deeply unfair, George upholds, adding that this decision would "murder the spirit of racial justice in America." Put another way, George tries to show the jury that the accused members of the Chicano community aren't *others*—they're Americans. This, in turn, means that to treat them unfairly would be to go against core American values, which is exactly what racists claim the "zoot suiters" are doing in the first place. And yet, people like the public prosecutor work tirelessly to suggest that Henry and his friends symbolize "anarchy" and "destruction," thereby using them as scapegoats to advance racial prejudices simply by upholding that they are, as a member of the press puts it during the Zoot Suit Riots, "enemies of the American way of life."

Thankfully, Henry and the rest of the 38th Street Gang are eventually let out of prison, but this doesn't mean that this kind of fearmongering rhetoric doesn't do lasting damage to the Chicano community, unnecessarily and unjustly interrupting the lives of these young men by forcing them to undeservedly spend time in prison. By putting this fact on display, then, Valdez warns audience members against giving into false nationalist claims about the supposed threat that minority groups pose to the country, since this is nothing more than a way to oppress people who are already vulnerable to racism and discrimination.

SELF-PRESENTATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* pays close attention to how people present themselves and the ways in which this presentation influences cultural identification. The play itself is named after a 1940s style of clothing known as the **zoot suit**, which many Chicanos saw as representative of their place in American society. From the very beginning of the play, El Pachuco—the production's active, meta-narrative narrator—calls attention to the importance of self-presentation, urging audience members to look at his clothing, since he dons a zoot suit, which according to Valdez's stage note makes El Pachuco look like "*the very image of the* pachuco *myth*" (a *pachuco* is somebody of Chicano descent generally associated with Mexican American street gangs). It's especially interesting that Valdez uses the word "myth," since this frames the zoot suit as an important symbol of Chicano history while also suggesting that the style comes along with certain exaggerations, misrepresentations, and implications—a notion that aligns with the fact that the "zoot suiters" in the play are

unfairly targeted by white authorities simply because the way they look triggers the authorities' racist ideas about the Chicano community. In this way, white racists attack the very thing that helps the characters in *Zoot Suit* carve out a space for themselves in American society. It is perhaps because El Pachuco is aware of this troubling dynamic that he is so conscious of how he and the other Chicano characters present themselves, ultimately refusing to let go of his cultural identity. In turn, Valdez intimates that people ought to embrace what makes their communities unique even if those things also attract bigotry and intolerance.

Valdez's interest in self-presentation is apparent even before the play's action begins. When El Pachuco emerges onstage, he spends a moment tending to his appearance, adjusting his collar, his suspenders, and his shirt cuffs. He then brushes his hair into a popular style among Chicanos in the 1940s. Valdez's stage note says that El Pachuco does this with "infinite loving pains," a phrase that emphasizes just how much El Pachuco cares about the way he looks. But his attention to his own appearance has nothing to do with vanity. Instead, El Pachuco dresses himself in a zoot suit so that he looks like the very model of the "*pachuco myth*," thereby suggesting that his attention to the way he looks has more to do with his cultural identity than with the shallow desire to simply look good. Indeed, the care he gives to his own appearance ultimately encourages audience members to consider the zoot suit with the same reverence that he, Henry, and the rest of the 38th Street Gang exhibit throughout the play. And, as if it's not already clear that Valdez wants the audience to meditate on the significance of physical appearance, El Pachuco's first words are, "¿Que le watcha a mis trapos, ese?" which roughly translates to, "What, you're looking at my clothes, bro?" By saying this, he signals to audience members that *Zoot Suit* will be a play that takes self-presentation seriously and champions a style that El Pachuco—and, in turn, Valdez—sees as integral to the identity of young Chicanos.

Interestingly enough, El Pachuco pays attention to the act of self-presentation by doing more than simply scrutinizing his own physical appearance. He sometimes directly addresses the audience, acknowledging that he knows he's part of a play. By doing this, he accentuates the notion that the "Pachuco Style" is more than just a way of dressing—it's a performance of identity. In the same way that he himself is participating in a representational artform by taking part in a play, Chicanos who embrace the zoot suit and the overall "Pachuco Style" are taking part in a collective cultural identity. When a young man dresses in a zoot suit, El Pachuco says, he becomes "an Actor in the streets," one who engages with a socially-constructed way of being—one that El Pachuco characterizes as a "myth," a word that evokes the idea of tradition, as if the "Pachuco Style" has grown out Chicano history. Consequently, the audience sees that such matters of self-presentation aren't superficial or trivial, but intertwined with a serious sense of cultural heritage.

Of course, there can be unfortunate downsides to using physical appearances to represent cultural heritage and identity. Valdez hints at this when he suggests that the zoot suit symbolizes the "*pachuco myth*," because although this phrase gestures toward tradition and history, it also subtly addresses the fact that many racists are eager to associate the zoot suit with negative and unfounded stereotypes about the Chicano community (with, in other words, unfair "myth[s]" about what it means to be a young Mexican American). For example, when the 38th Street Gang is on trial for a murder they didn't commit, the judge and prosecutor try to turn the jury against them by, as Henry's lawyer puts it, "exploit[ing] the fact that [they] look foreign in appearance." In keeping with this, the judge rules that the young men on trial must keep their "zoot haircuts" so they can be identified by the witnesses, who would supposedly have trouble doing so otherwise. In this regard, the judge uses elements of Chicano self-presentation against them, going out of his way to distinguish them from white Americans in a manner that threatens to turn the white jury members against them. In turn, Valdez's consideration of self-presentation and cultural identity takes on an interesting nuance, as he examines the ways in which young Chicanos use the "Pachuco style" to connect with their community and heritage while also suffering the consequences of this identification, since many people in the country are eager to associate the zoot suit—and, in turn, Chicano culture—with negative stereotypes. And yet, despite this tension, El Pachuco himself never stops championing the zoot suit, thereby indicating that people ought to proudly stand by their cultural identities even when facing discrimination.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND THE PRESS

Although Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* is largely about how people present themselves, it's also about what happens when they're unable to control their own public image. Valdez spotlights the press's unfair treatment of Henry Reyna, outlining what it looks like when the news media manipulates a narrative at the expense of people who can't defend themselves because they don't have a substantial public platform. To further accentuate this power imbalance, Valdez goes out of his way to situate the press as an ever-present and seemingly unavoidable presence throughout the play. Indeed, when Valdez refers to the state prosecutor who mercilessly casts the Chicano community as a threat to American society, he doesn't call him by a name, but by "PRESS"—a choice that hints that the press as a whole has a biased attitude toward the Chicano community. In the same way that this prosecutor actively tries to condemn Henry and his friends, the actual journalistic press runs exaggerated stories about the "Mexican crime wave" in Los Angeles, attempting to sway public perception against young Chicanos.

Accordingly, it becomes clear that Henry and his friends are at the mercy of a malicious press. Thankfully, though, certain reporters like Alice Bloomfield take it upon themselves to challenge the distorted narratives emerging about the Chicano community. The fact that these efforts ultimately win out suggests that Valdez deeply values the power of impartial journalism, clearly believing that a community's wellbeing partly depends upon whether or not it has access to a fair, unbiased press.

During the play's prologue, Valdez hints that *Zoot Suit* will focus on how the press portrays the Chicano community. He does this by displaying a large frontpage of the *Los Angeles Herald Express Press*, which serves as a literal backdrop for everything about to take place onstage. In this **newspaper**, an enormous headline reads, "*ZOOT-SUITER HORDES INVADE LOS ANGELES*." It's worth paying attention to the language that this headline uses, especially since the Zoot Suit Riots actually happened in real life. If audience members are familiar with this particular event in history, they know that the "zoot-suiters" in question were simply residents of Los Angeles who were violently targeted by white servicemen and civilians because they were wearing **zoot suits**, a style popular among young Chicanos and other minority groups. Given that this is what really happened, the *Los Angeles Herald*'s headline is a clear distortion of reality, since it suggests that "hordes" of young Chicanos have "invade[d]" the city—a phrase that makes it seem like Los Angeles has suddenly been overtaken and thrown into chaos when, in reality, the white service men picking fights with people of color wearing zoot suits are the ones who plunged the city into violent disorder. It's worth keeping in mind that this headline serves as the backdrop of the entire play, a constant reminder that some of the most powerful cultural institutions in Los Angeles are actively working against the Chicano community by perpetuating false narratives.

Large publications like the *Los Angeles Herald* also slander the Chicano community in more specific ways. In addition to writing headlines that subtly present Chicanos as antagonistic, these media outlets make wild, irresponsible speculations about people like Henry and the members of the 38th Street Gang, even saying that they're fascists. They do this, of course, because they are racist, but they also do it because they know that writing scandalous pieces will help them sell more papers. A progressive reporter and activist named Alice Bloomfield outlines this problem when she first visits in Henry, pointing out that one of the main reasons he and his friends were arrested is because "some bigshot" wants to get rich. She explains that a newspaper owner came up with the idea to start writing about a "Mexican Crime Wave." This, Alice claims, is what encouraged the police and other servicemen to tear through the city and attack young Chicanos in zoot suits. By saying this, she calls attention to the power of the news media to impact real life, showing the audience why it's so important to hold journalistic outlets accountable for what they print. After all, these false narratives have now put Henry and his friends in danger of receiving the death penalty even though they're innocent of the crime for which they're being held accountable.

Although Henry and the 38th Street Gang suffer as a result of the press's biased and inaccurate coverage of the Chicano community, they are fortunate that there exists a group of people who want to help set the record straight. Alice is one of these people, and she assembles a group that publishes a paper dedicated to countering the unearned claims of other outlets like the *Los Angeles Herald*. And yet, this doesn't necessarily relieve the pressure that has been placed on Henry—something Alice herself emphasizes when she reminds him that the press is constantly watching him, even when he's in prison. When she says this, audience members see just how ready the press is to further damage Henry's—and, in turn, the Chicano community's—public image. This is especially unjust, considering that although Alice helps form a response to this biased coverage, Henry and his friends don't have the same ability as large news outlets to reach people—meaning that it's almost impossible for them to properly advocate for themselves in any substantial way. Despite this, the members of the 38th Street Gang eventually win their appeal, and this is perhaps because Alice's grassroots publication ensured that the jury members deciding on the case no longer existed in a society in which there was only one (flawed) narrative about the Chicano community. In this capacity, then, Alice's efforts demonstrate just how crucial it is to fight back against biased narratives, especially those that attack disenfranchised communities by manipulating the way society at large views them.

ADVOCATES VS. SAVIORS

In *Zoot Suit*, Luis Valdez studies the nuances of civil rights advocacy. Considering what it means for a white person to act as an ally to people of color, Valdez shows audience members that there are certain complexities inherent to relationships in which white people use their privilege to support minorities. This dynamic arises when George—a white man—offers to represent Henry and the rest of the 38th Street Gang in court, since they have a hard time taking his initial suggestion seriously, having never received support from people outside their community. Similarly, Alice Bloomfield also decides to help Henry and his friends by working to change the public opinion about Los Angeles's Chicano population. As a white woman, she surprises Henry by how passionate she is about addressing society's racism. Initially hesitant to embrace the idea of a white person supporting him in this way, Henry eventually decides that Alice wants to do what's best for him, so he accepts her as an advocate and ally. However, this doesn't mean that their

relationship isn't complicated, since Alice sometimes ignores what Henry wants because she thinks she knows what's best for him. This puts a strain on their connection, as Alice's behavior highlights the difference between acting as a genuine advocate and acting like a white savior (someone whose support of minorities has a self-serving component). As Alice tries to navigate this distinction, Valdez shows the audience that it's important for white allies to remain cognizant of how, exactly, they're supporting people of color, ultimately making sure that they're not condescendingly discounting the very people they want to uplift.

When George first approaches Henry and the 38th Street Gang, it's clear that they're unaccustomed to receiving support from white people. This serves as a good reminder to audience members that Henry exists in a society in which white people rarely identify themselves as allies to people of color. To that end, there is a concrete reason that Henry distrusts white men like George—after all, he has been arrested multiple times by white police officers simply because of his race. However, George goes out of his way to show Henry that he means no harm. "The problem seems to be that I look like an Anglo to you," he says, acknowledging that Henry and his friends don't trust him because he's white. Slowly but surely, Henry and the others come around to accepting his support, but what's most important to keep in mind is their initial hesitancy, since it underscores not only how rare it is for them to find white allies, but also that it's not particularly easy for them to simply accept help from someone who otherwise represents the very same social class that has long persecuted them.

When Alice introduces herself to Henry while he's in jail, he shows her the same kind of skepticism he initially showed George. In response, Alice tells him why she cares about changing the public narrative about the Chicano community. She says that she grew up in Los Angeles but heard practically nothing about the city's Chicano population and now wants to learn about the community. This comment surprises Henry and encourages him to let down his guard, since it shows him that Alice is invested in these matters on a genuine emotional level. Perhaps even more importantly, Alice's desire to learn about Henry's culture indicates that she might become a positive kind of white ally, one who understands that listening to the people she hopes to support is the best way to use her privilege.

However, Alice proves herself to be a *flawed* white ally. This becomes apparent shortly after Alice shows her willingness to listen to Henry, since she goes on to call him a "classic social victim"—a phrase that hints at the fact that she has romanticized the idea of helping a disenfranchised person of color. Henry, for his part, calls her assertion "bullshit," cutting through her patronizing rhetoric and encouraging her to remember that, though perhaps helpful in certain contexts, this social theorizing will do little to actually help him. Worse, Alice later loses sight of what originally drew her to Henry and his friends, which was the prospect of learning about their community and, in doing so, learning to support them in a manner that aligns with what they want. When Henry tells her he wants to drop his appeal, Alice becomes incredulous, saying he can't and that his withdrawal will ruin the entire movement she has helped build. "That's your problem," Henry replies, reminding Alice that he never asked for her support. Beside herself, Alice reminds Henry that she has dedicated large amounts of time to this cause, failing to see that this is irrelevant—she wanted to support Henry and his friends, but it's not her place to steamroll them into doing things they don't want to do. In this moment, then, she oversteps a boundary in their relationship by acting like she's better qualified than Henry is to run his life.

What's tricky about Henry and Alice's argument, though, is that it *is* unwise for him to drop out of his appeal, at least if he wants to avoid a life in prison. However, it's his right to decide what to do, and though it makes sense that Alice might want—as somebody who set out to support him—to convince him to reconsider, she makes a mistake by condescending to him. Fortunately, she and Henry make up when Alice emotionally breaks down and he sees just how much she cares about his case, realizing that she's not simply "using Mexicans to play politics." In this way, Henry recognizes that Alice is legitimately invested in him as a person, essentially reinforcing the idea that she's there to uplift him. And though Alice stumbles at times in her efforts to be a supportive white ally, Valdez intimates that her relationship with Henry is a good example of effective social justice advocacy, which is often interpersonally complex.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ZOOT SUITS

In the play, zoot suits serve as an embodiment of the "Pachuco Style," ultimately enabling Henry and his friends to strengthen their collective cultural identity as young Mexican Americans. At the very beginning of the play, El Pachuco calls attention to his suit before saying that the "Pachuco Style" is a performance of identity. Because pachucos wear zoot suits (which are made up of large pleated pants, long coats, and thick watch chains), the style itself becomes an integral part of this performance, not only helping people like Henry distinguish themselves as individuals, but also helping them connect and relate to one another. Unfortunately, though, the racist news media is—along with the American government—all too eager to turn the zoot suit into a symbol of criminality and danger, thereby using it against the Chicano community as a whole. This leads to all kinds of racial profiling,

as police officers target minority groups wearing zoot suits. In turn, the suit itself becomes a representation of the unjust ways in which racists sometimes hijack important cultural identifiers and weaponize them against already disenfranchised and vulnerable communities.

NEWSPAPERS

Newspapers appear throughout *Zoot Suit*, serving as constant reminders of the inescapable influence of the press on everyday life. When the play begins, audience members set eyes on an enormous frontpage, which serves as a backdrop for the play's action. This particular paper announces news of the **Zoot Suit** Riots and immediately calls attention to the ways in which the press vilifies the Chicano community. As the play progresses, viewers will notice that the characters use newspapers as props, like when Dolores hangs sheets of paper on a clothesline instead of actual laundry, or when the judge sits upon a throne of newspapers while presiding over the 38th Street Gang's trial. In these ways, Valdez presents the press as ever-present, showing audience members that Henry and his friends are perpetually inundated by whatever the media has to say about them. This, in turn, influences not only how they conduct themselves, but also how the public views the Chicano community—something that becomes especially apparent during the Zoot Suit Riots, when angry white servicemen and civilians raid Los Angeles simply because the local newspapers have spread false narratives about a "Mexican crime wave." In turn, it becomes clear that the press has an inordinate amount of power over the general public. In keeping with this, the staggering abundance of newspapers in the play comes to stand for how important it is for societies to have unbiased, egalitarian news outlets.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Arte Publico edition of *Zoot Suit and Other Plays* published in 1992.

Act 1, Prologue Quotes

HE *adjusts his clothing, meticulously fussing with his collar, suspenders, cuffs.* HE *tends to his hair, combing back every strand into a long luxurious ducktail, with infinite loving pains. Then* HE *reaches into the slit [of the newspaper backdrop] and pulls out his coat and hat.* HE *dons them. His fantastic costume is complete. It is a zoot suit.* HE *is transformed into the very image of the pachuco myth, from his pork-pie hat to the tip of his four-foot watch chain.*

Related Characters: El Pachuco

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of El Pachuco, who has just emerged from behind a large newspaper, which he cut open with a switchblade. As audience members set their eyes on El Pachuco for the first time, he largely ignores them, attending to how he looks. By "meticulously fussing" with his clothes, he makes it clear that his appearance means a great deal to him. This is because he is "*the very image of the pachuco myth*," meaning that he is an embodiment of the cultural identity that *Zoot Suit* takes as its central topic. When El Pachuco tends to his looks with "infinite loving pains," viewers are encouraged to approach the zoot suit—a cornerstone of the *pachuco* style and Chicano culture—with respect, seeing it as a coveted and revered representation of El Pachuco's community and his cultural heritage. This is especially important because the press and racist white authorities will try throughout the course of the play to frame the zoot suit (and the pachuco style in general) as a sign of criminality and disreputability. In reality, though, the suit is a way for members of the Chicano community to identify with one another, and the fact that Valdez refers to El Pachuco as the embodiment of a "myth" suggests that he sees the pachuco style as something that engages with Chicano history.

PACHUCO: [...] Ladies and gentlemen
the play you are about to see
is a construct of fact and fantasy.
The Pachuco Style was an act in Life
and his language a new creation.
[...]
I speak as an actor on the stage.
The Pachuco was existential
for he was an Actor in the streets
both profane and reverential.

Related Characters: El Pachuco (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

El Pachuco says this in his opening monologue, directly addressing the audience and signaling to them that he's aware not only that he's being watched, but also that he's an actor in a play. By saying this, El Pachuco highlights his own self-consciousness, demonstrating that he's attuned to the ways in which others perceive him. This is in keeping with the attention he pays to his looks and clothing, as he strives to control how he presents himself, grasping the fact that people perform and construct their own identities. In alignment with this idea, El Pachuco says that "the Pachuco Style was an act in Life," suggesting that anyone who wears zoot suits and engages with the *pachuco* lifestyle effectively becomes a performer. What's more, the language that comes along with this identity is a "new creation," meaning that he and his fellow *pachucos* are able to tailor their own way of speaking, wielding whatever language best reflects (and helps them construct) their identity. In this way, El Pachuco presents the *pachuco* style as something that is malleable and dynamic, and it is this kind of performative flexibility that enables him and his fellow Chicano community members to form a cohesive and empowering cultural identity.

Act 1, Scene 3: Pachuco Yo Quotes

PACHUCO: The city's cracking down on pachucos, carnal. Don't

you read the newspapers? They're screaming for blood.

HENRY: All I know is they got nothing on me. I didn't do anything.

PACHUCO: You're Henry Reyna, ese—Hank Reyna! The snarling juvenile delinquent. The zootsuiter. The bitter young pachuco gang leader of 38th Street. That's what they got on you.

Related Characters: Henry Reyna, El Pachuco (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, El Pachuco talks to Henry, who has just been thrown in jail for murder even though he's innocent. El Pachuco explains to him that law enforcement officials have decided to strictly persecute the Chicano community by targeting *pachucos* like Henry and his friends in the 38th Street Gang. Upon hearing this, Henry insists that this won't work because he hasn't done anything to deserve punishment, but El Pachuco suggests that this is a naïve way to approach the situation. After all, he implies, it doesn't *matter* whether or not Henry really broke any laws—what matters is that racist white authorities are prejudiced against the Chicano community. And because Henry is a prominent member of that community, he is at the mercy of a corrupt system. In this moment, then, both Henry and the audience see that the justice system is rigged against minority groups and that, because of this, it will be especially difficult for Henry and his friends to avoid mistreatment.

PACHUCO: Off to fight for your country.

HENRY: Why not?

PACHUCO: Because this ain't your country. Look what's happening all around you. The Japs have sewed up the Pacific. Rommel is kicking ass in Egypt but the Mayor of L.A. has declared all-out war on Chicanos. On you!

Related Characters: Henry Reyna, El Pachuco (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, El Pachuco voices his disapproval of Henry's decision to join the Navy. Henry, for his part, likes the idea of fighting for his country in World War II, but El Pachuco feels otherwise, saying that, though Henry lives in the United States, he can hardly call it *his* country. This isn't because Henry doesn't deserve to feel at home in his own nation, but rather because El Pachuco is painfully aware of the fact that the American government continues to mistreat the Chicano community. Although racist white authorities subject Henry and his friends to injustice and discrimination, Henry wants to serve his country—something that the government is willing to accept even if it's unwilling to give Henry the rights he deserves as an American citizen (and, for that matter, as a human being). This is why El Pachuco suggests that the struggle Henry faces in his own country deserves just as much of his attention as foreign struggles in places like Egypt (which Nazis like General Erwin Rommel invaded on behalf of Germany) and the Pacific. After all, if Henry can't

live freely in the United States, then why should he defend it in the first place? This, at least, is the logic El Pachuco proposes.

Act 1, Scene 6: The People's Lawyer Quotes

GEORGE: [...] The problem seems to be that I look like an Anglo to you. What if I were to tell you that I had Spanish blood in my veins? That my roots go back to Spain, just like yours? What if I'm an Arab? What if I'm a Jew? What difference does it make? The question is, will you let me help you?

Related Characters: George Shearer (speaker), Joey Castro, Tommy Roberts, Smiley Torres, Henry Reyna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

George says this to Henry, Smiley, Tommy, and Joey when he first visits them in prison. After introducing himself and explaining that he wants to represent them in court, he's surprised to find that Henry is hesitant to accept his support. For this reason, George tries to convince Henry that he only wants the best for him, so George acknowledges the fact that he's white, since this is obviously what's keeping Henry from trusting him. By highlighting this tension, George correctly identifies the fact that Henry is unused to encountering white people who want to use their resources to uplift him and his friends. However, George naïvely says that it shouldn't matter what color he is, inadvertently revealing that he isn't quite as good at stepping out of his own privileged worldview as he'd like to think. Indeed, only a person who has never experienced discrimination or prejudice would say that his race shouldn't matter. Consequently, George demonstrates a slight lack of understanding when it comes to the nuances of being a productive white ally to minority groups—though it's clear that his intentions are good, since what he mainly wants is to offer support to Henry and his friends.

Act 1, Scene 8: El Día de la Raza Quotes

ALICE: I'm talking about you, Henry Reyna. And what the regular press has been saying. Are you aware you're in here just because some bigshot up in San Simeon wants to sell more papers? It's true.

HENRY: So?

ALICE: So, he's the man who started this Mexican Crime Wave stuff. Then the police got into the act. Get the picture?

Related Characters: Henry Reyna, Alice Bloomfield (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place when Alice Bloomfield meets Henry for the first time. Henry is in jail, and Alice wants to write a newspaper article about him because she hopes to counter the negative narrative that has emerged in the news media about the Chicano community. However, Henry is hesitant to talk to her, failing to see how, exactly, she can do anything for him. Consequently, Alice emphasizes an important point about the way the public views Henry and his friends, calling attention to the fact that a newspaper proprietor who doesn't even live in Los Angeles coined the term "Mexican Crime Wave" in order to capture attention. By printing alarmist headlines that frame the Chicano community as dangerous, the "regular press" exploits preexisting racial tensions, knowing all too well that scandalous stories attract more readers and therefore generate more revenue. Given that this is the same attitude that eventually leads to the violent Zoot Suit Riots, it's important to bear in mind what Alice is saying, since she spotlights the ways in which the media's racism has a direct impact on people's lives.

ALICE: Believe it or not, I was born in Los Angeles just like you. But for some strange reason I grew up here, not knowing very much about Mexicans at all. I'm just trying to learn.

Related Characters: Alice Bloomfield (speaker), Henry Reyna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Alice says this to Henry in an attempt to convince him to trust her, ultimately trying to explain why, exactly, she wants to support him and the other members of the 38th Street Gang. To do this, she tells Henry that she wants to educate herself about the Chicano community—a fact that illustrates her willingness to actually listen to Henry instead of simply deciding what's best for him. This is an important moment in the play because it indicates that Alice is capable of being a positive white ally who tries to support people of color by making a legitimate effort to understand cultures to which she does not belong. Instead of telling Henry that she's going to help him and then assuming that she knows exactly what's best for him and his fellow members of the 38th Street Gang, she expresses a willingness and desire to "learn" from them. In turn, audiences see that she's at least somewhat aware of the fact that being a successful white ally requires nuance and understanding, though she later loses sight of this.

Act 1, Scene 9: Opening of the Trial Quotes

PRESS: (*Jumping in.*) Your Honor, there is testimony we expect to develop that the 38th Street Gang are characterized by their style of haircuts…

GEORGE: Three months, Your Honor.

PRESS: …the thick heavy heads of hair, the ducktail comb, the pachuco pants...

GEORGE: Your Honor, I can only infer that the Prosecution…is trying to make these boys look disreputable, like mobsters.

PRESS: Their appearance is distinctive. Your Honor. Essential to the case.

GEORGE: You are trying to exploit the fact that these boys look foreign in appearance! Yet clothes like these are being worn by kids all over America.

PRESS: Your Honor…

JUDGE: (*Bangs the gavel.*) I don't believe we will have any difficulty if their clothing becomes dirty.

GEORGE: What about the haircuts. Your Honor?

JUDGE: (*Ruling.*) The zoot haircuts will be retained throughout the trial for purposes of identification of defendants by witnesses.

Related Characters: The Judge, George Shearer, The Public Prosecutor ("Press") (speaker), Henry Reyna

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the public prosecutor (referred to in the script as "PRESS") argues against George's complaint that the jail hasn't allowed Henry and the other members of the 38th Street Gang to change into fresh clothes or receive new haircuts. Although the jail usually allows defendants to tend to their appearances before their trial, the public prosecutor has made sure that Henry and his friends are deprived of this right, claiming that he "expect[s]" the 38th Street Gang's stereotypical appearance to factor into the trial itself. Accordingly, the prosecutor believes that the defendants should be forced to dress in their standard *pachuco* style. The judge agrees with this, even saying that it shouldn't be a problem if their clothes become dirty throughout the course of the long trial. In and of itself, this comment reveals the judge's bias, since he makes it clear that he doesn't care whether or not Henry and his friends look presentable—after all, he has no desire to make them look good and, in fact, seems to actively want to decrease the likelihood that they'll make a good impression on the jury. George, on the other hand, identifies that the prosecutor is trying to make Henry and the others look "disreputable." The fact that his objections in this scene do little to influence the judge's rulings is especially important, since this is one of the first indications that the prosecutor will have free reign throughout the trial to manipulate the proceedings in a racist, unjust manner.

Act 1, Scene 11: The Conclusion of Trial Quotes

PRESS: (*Springing to the attack.*) You say Henry Reyna hit the man with his fist. (*Indicates* HENRY *standing.*) Is this the Henry Reyna?

DELLA: Yes. I mean, no. He's Henry, but he didn't ...

PRESS: Please be seated. (HENRY *sits.*) Now, after Henry Reyna hit the old man with his closed fist, is that when he pulled the knife?

DELLA: The old man had the knife.

PRESS: So Henry pulled one out, too?

GEORGE: (*Rises.*) Your Honor, I object to counsel leading the witness.

PRESS: I am not leading the witness.

GEORGE: You are.

PRESS: I certainly am not.

GEORGE: Yes, you are.

JUDGE: I would suggest, Mr. Shearer, that you look up during the noon hour just what a leading question is?

Related Characters: The Judge, George Shearer, Della, The Public Prosecutor ("Press") (speaker), Henry Reyna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during Henry and the 38th Street Gang's court trial, when the prosecutor cross-examines Della about the night of the Sleepy Lagoon murder. Because the judge has ruled that each member of the 38th Street Gang must stand when his name is mentioned, the prosecutor is able to confuse Della, effectively making it seem as if she's saying that Henry hit an old man who was at the Williams' Ranch on the night of the murder. When Della tries to clarify that she's only confirming that Henry has just stood up (not that he struck the old man), the prosecutor cuts her off, quickly moving on as if Della has unequivocally testified against Henry. George, for his part, recognizes that the prosecutor is actively trying to twist around Della's words, but the judge doesn't care—yet another indication that he's biased against Henry and the others. The prosecutor even condescends to George by suggesting that he look up the definition of a leading question, demonstrating just how little the prosecutor respects the judicial process. Once again, then, it becomes clear that Henry and his friends are facing an uphill battle when it comes to getting the justice they deserve.

PRESS: [...] We are dealing with a threat and danger to our children, our families, our homes. Set these pachucos free, and you shall unleash the forces of anarchy and destruction in our society. Set these pachucos free and you will turn them into heroes. Others just like them must be watching us at this very moment. What nefarious schemes can they be hatching in their twisted minds? Rape, drugs, assault, more violence? Who shall be their next innocent victim in some dark alley way, on some lonely street? You? You? Your loved ones? No! Henry Reyna and his Latin juvenile cohorts are not heroes. They are criminals, and they must be stopped. The specific details of this murder are irrelevant before the overwhelming danger of the pachuco in our midst. I ask you to find these zoot-suited gangsters guilty of murder and to put them in the gas chamber where they belong.

Related Characters: The Public Prosecutor ("Press") (speaker), Henry Reyna

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

The public prosecutor speaks these words during his closing statement. Trying to convince the jury to find Henry and his friends guilty and sentence them to death, he suggests that it would be dangerous to let them go free. This, he says, is because they represent a threat to society. Leaning on racism and bigotry, the prosecutor frames all Chicanos as violent, trying to scare the jurors into thinking that they need to send a message to the Mexican-American community before it's too late. This, of course, isn't true, but the prosecutor knows that one of the most effective ways to convince people of something is to exploit their prejudiced fears. This is why he says, "Who shall be their next innocent victim in some dark alley way, on some lonely street? You? You? Your loved ones?" This heightens any preexisting (racist) fears that the jurors might have about whether or not they're safe, and the prosecutor even takes his argument one step further by saying that "the specific details of this murder are irrelevant before the overwhelming danger of the pachuco," ultimately suggesting that whether or not the 38th Street Gang is guilty doesn't matter—what matters, he implies, is that society oppress the Chicano community. In turn, audience members see that the prosecutor wants to use Henry and his friends as scapegoats for his racist idea that minority groups and people of color pose a threat to American society.

GEORGE: [...] All the prosecution has been able to prove is that these boys wear long hair and zoot suits. And all the rest has been circumstantial evidence, hearsay and war hysteria. The prosecution has tried to lead you to believe that they are some kind of inhuman gangsters. Yet they are Americans. Find them guilty of anything more serious than a juvenile bout of fisticuffs, and you will condemn all American youth. Find them guilty of murder, and you will murder the spirit of racial justice in America.

Related Characters: George Shearer (speaker), Henry Reyna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

George says this during his closing statement, attempting not only to emphasize the 38th Street Gang's innocence, but also to counter the public prosecutor's racist notion that Henry and his friends pose a threat to American society. First, he reminds the jurors that there is no hard evidence that Henry or anyone else in the 38th Street Gang killed José Williams. Considering that the public prosecutor wants the jury to sentence these young men to death, this is an important point, since it's quite severe to execute people without concrete proof that they committed murder. What's more, though, George also emphasizes the fact that Henry and the others are Americans themselves, a point that weakens the prosecutor's suggestion that they are imminent threats to the country. In fact, George says that to find these young men guilty of murder without sufficient evidence would be to undermine the very values that the prosecutor claims to be trying to protect in the first place.

Act 2, Scene 2: The Letters Quotes

TOMMY: [...] I don't want to be treated any different than the rest of the batos, see? And don't expect me to talk to you like some square Anglo [...]. You just better find out what it means to be Chicano, and it better be pretty damn quick.

[...]

I also know that I'm in here just be cause I hung around with Mexicans ... or pachucos. Well, just remember this, Alicia ... I grew up right alongside most of these batos, and I'm pachuco too.

Related Characters: Tommy Roberts (speaker), Henry Reyna, Alice Bloomfield

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Tommy says this to Alice Bloomfield after she says that his vocabulary is "better than most"—a statement that gives him pause, causing him to wonder if she means that his English is better than most of his friends'. This bothers him because he is white, unlike Henry and the other members of the 38th Street Gang. Despite the fact that Tommy isn't Chicano, though, he doesn't see himself as different than the rest of the gang, apparently interpreting "what it means to be Chicano" in a way that frames it as a cultural identity and way of life, not necessarily a racial designation. For Tommy, circumstance and upbringing is what makes a person Chicano, which is why he tells Alice that he has spent his entire life with Mexicans, saying that he "grew up right alongside most of these batos [guys]." When he says that this makes him "pachuco too," then, the audience sees that the notion of cultural identity in *Zoot Suit* is largely tied to experience and the way people present themselves—after all, El Pachuco has already asserted that the *pachuco* lifestyle is a performance, so it makes sense that Tommy finds himself capable of participating in this cultural identity.

Act 2, Scene 3: The Incorrigible Pachuco Quotes

HENRY: [...] You think you can just move in and defend anybody you feel like? When did I ever ask you to start a defense committee for me? Or a newspaper? Or a fundraising drive and all that other shit? I don't need defending, esa. I can take care of myself.

ALICE: But what about the trial, the sentence. They gave you life imprisonment?

HENRY: It's my life!

ALICE: Henry, honestly—are you kidding me?

HENRY: You think so?

ALICE: But you've seen me coming and going. Writing to you, speaking for you, traveling up and down the state. You must have known I was doing it for you. Nothing has come before my involvement, my attachment, my passion for this case. My boys have been everything to me.

HENRY: My boys? My boys! What the hell are we—your personal property? Well, let me set you straight, lady, I ain't your boy.

Related Characters: Alice Bloomfield, Henry Reyna

(speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In this exchange, Henry has just told Alice that he wants to drop out of the appeal, effectively ensuring that he will spend the rest of his life in prison. Hearing this, Alice becomes quite upset and can't keep herself from reminding Henry how much work she has poured into his case. By bringing this up, though, she makes it seem as if Henry owes her something, so he reminds her that he never asked for her help. When Henry accuses Alice of feeling like she can "just move in and defend anybody" she wants, he points out that she has forgotten that her role as a white ally is to use her privilege to uplift people who don't have the same resources as her, *not* to simply do whatever she wants on their behalf. Still, she remains unable to recognize that she has lost sight of the fact that Henry is capable of making his own decisions. Instead, she says, "My boys have been everything to me," trying to emphasize just how invested she is in helping Henry and his friends. Unfortunately for her, though, this backfires because her possessive tone makes it seem as if she controls or owns the members of the 38th Street Gang, casting her as even more patronizing than she already seemed. Once again, then, audience members note that there are a number of tricky interpersonal dynamics that arise when a white person attempts to support people of color in positions of vulnerability. At the same time, though, this is not to say that Valdez thinks white people shouldn't even try to support disenfranchised people of color, but just to say that he's aware of the many complexities that come along with such an endeavor.

Act 2, Scene 6: Zoot Suit Riots Quotes

PRESS: [...] The Zoot Suit Crime Wave is even beginning to push the war news off the front page.

PACHUCO: The Press distorted the very meaning of the word "zoot suit."
All it is for you guys is another way to say Mexican.
But the ideal of the original chuco
was to look like a diamond
to look sharp
hip
bonaroo
finding a style of urban survival
in the rural skirts and outskirts
of the brown metropolis of Los, cabron.

Related Characters: The Press, El Pachuco (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between El Pachuco and a member of the press during the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943. As white servicemen and civilians alike attack young Chicano men for wearing zoot suits, El Pachuco criticizes this member of the press for using terms like "pachuco" and "zoot suiter" as substitutes for more blatantly racist words. The journalist, for his part, claims that there's nothing wrong with this, saying that American citizens have good reason to be contemptuous toward the Chicano community—after all, he points out, "The Zoot Suit Crime Wave is even beginning to push the war news off the front page." By saying this, the journalist casts Chicanos who wear zoot suits as unpatriotic and as threats to the nation's overall war effort. El Pachuco, for his part, takes issue with the very term "Zoot Suit Crime Wave," calling attention to the fact that the press has "distorted the very meaning of the word 'zoot suit.'" This idea aligns with Alice Bloomfield's earlier assertion that the news media made up the mere existence of a crime wave in order to sell papers, targeting the Chicano community to drum up fear throughout Los Angeles. Even though the zoot suit originally symbolized Chicano pride and celebrated the pachuco lifestyle, El Pachuco notes, it is now associated with criminality and destruction. As a result, the audience sees that the press has stolen an important part of Chicano culture and weaponized it.

PRESS: Henry Reyna went back to prison in 1947 for robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. While incarcerated, he killed another inmate and he wasn't released until 1955, when he got into hard drugs. He died of the trauma of his life in 1972.

PACHUCO: That's the way you see it, ese. But there's other way[s] to end this story.

RUDY: Henry Reyna went to Korea in 1950. He was shipped across in a destroyer and defended the 38th Parallel until he was killed at Inchon in 1952, being posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

ALICE: Henry Reyna married Della in 1948 and they have five kids, three of them now going to the University, speaking calo and calling themselves Chicanos.

Related Characters: Alice Bloomfield, Rudy, El Pachuco, The Press (speaker), Henry Reyna

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, several characters narrate Henry's future while hugging him. This scene takes place at the very end of the play, just after Henry breaks down and his family and friends embrace him in a collective hug, showing them their unyielding support. As this happens, a member of the press enters and says that Henry will soon return to prison and eventually become addicted to drugs. However, El Pachuco refutes this, saying that this is only the version of Henry's life that the press has chosen to latch onto. This comment then encourages Rudy and Alice to furnish their own accounts of what happens to Henry in the aftermath of the play, and their versions are much preferable. The fact that there are multiple different interpretations of Henry's life is in keeping with Valdez's overarching belief that identity is something that people construct together as a community. In the same way that the *pachuco* style is a performance of identity that everyone in the Chicano community helps build, Henry's future is a collaborative effort, something that is subject to change based on how other people interpret his life. Furthermore, that Henry's loved ones suggest happy endings to his life while the press advances a bleak image of his future accords with the media's eagerness to smear Henry and the Chicano community, reminding audiences once more that—although Henry and his friends were acquitted and set free—the biases surrounding them are still going strong.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, PROLOGUE

The stage is set with a backdrop of an enlarged **newspaper**, which reads, "*ZOOT-SUITER HORDES INVADE LOS ANGELES*." A switchblade thrusts through the middle of this page and cuts a slit big enough for El Pachuco to climb through it, making a grand entrance. When he fully emerges, he adjusts his shirt collar and cuffs, combs his hair, and puts on a suit jacket, completing his outfit—he is wearing a **zoot suit**, and he looks fantastic. Looking at the audience, he speaks in Spanish slang, saying something that translates to, "What, you're looking at my clothes, bro?" When he eventually switches to English, he says that the audience is about to witness a play about the "Pachuco Style," which requires just as much of a performance as acting onstage. To put on the zoot suit, he says, is to participate in the Pachuco "myth."

Luis Valdez foregrounds Zoot Suit *by presenting the audience with a large newspaper headline about "zoot-suiter hordes," preparing viewers for the hostility that the Chicano characters will face throughout the play for wearing zoot suits—a style of exaggeratedly baggy clothes popular in the 1940s, especially among young Chicanos (Mexican American men). Furthermore, El Pachuco himself serves as a representation of the "Pachuco style," acting as both a literal character and a symbolic figure, one who actively interrogates what it means to participate in the "myth" of the* Pachuco, *a term that* Merriam-Webster's Dictionary *defines as "a young Mexican-American having a taste for flashy clothes and a special jargon and usually belonging to a neighborhood gang." In keeping with this definition, El Pachuco pays close attention to his clothes, indicating that matters of self-presentation influence his sense of self. Lastly, it's worth noting that he directly addresses the audience, thereby managing his own public image while inviting viewers to consider the fact that the "Pachuco style" is, above all, a performance of identity.*

ACT 1, SCENE 1: ZOOT SUIT

El Pachuco struts about to music as the stage transforms into a dance in the 1940s. Henry Reyna, the leader of the 38th Street Gang, dances with his friends and fellow gang members, all of whom—including Henry himself—are in **zoot suits**. As El Pachuco sings, Henry and his friends have a fantastic time until their rivals, the Downey Gang, enter. This causes commotion and disrupts the festivities, as El Pachuco rushes over to break up a fight developing between Henry and Rafas, the Downey Gang's leader who has just pushed Henry's little brother, Rudy.

In this section, Valdez sets the scene for the play. As Henry and the members of the 38th Street Gang dance, audience members will note that they're all wearing zoot suits. This, in turn, suggests that this outfit is something that helps them identify as a cohesive group. In this way, the zoot suit becomes a tool to help the young men resonate with one another and, in doing so, strengthen their collective identity.

ACT 1, SCENE 2: THE MASS ARRESTS

Suddenly, police officers emerge with their guns out, yelling as a reporter takes pictures of the chaos. Lieutenant Edwards yells that everyone must put their hands up while his associate, Sergeant Smith, sees a white sailor and his girlfriend with the young Chicanos. Upon seeing them, Smith tells them to run off, but when Henry asks if he can do the same, Lieutenant Edwards tells him to get in line with the rest of his friends. Edwards and Smith then march them away. As they go, the members of the 38th Street Gang shout out headlines drawn from various Los Angeles **newspapers**. In doing so, it becomes clear that there has been a murder at a place called the Sleepy Lagoon. The headlines suggest that "Mexican youths" are responsible for the crime. As the lineup recedes, Edwards grabs Henry and throws him to the ground.

First of all, it's worth noting that Edwards and Smith treat the white sailor much better than they treat Henry and his friends. This, of course, is because they are racist toward the Chicano population and are therefore uninterested in harassing a white man and his girlfriend. Furthermore, when the members of the 38th Street Gang call out various newspaper headlines, the audience not only sees that the presence of the press will loom large throughout the play, but also learns that newspapers are blaming "Mexican youths" for a murder. And though it's obviously not clear at this point whether or not Henry and his friends are guilty of this crime, it's already apparent that they most likely won't receive fair treatment from white authorities, as evidenced by the fact that Edwards pushes Henry to the ground for no reason.

ACT 1, SCENE 3: PACHUCO YO

Sergeant Smith places Henry in jail and tells him to wait for him to return. While waiting, Henry paces and calls out for El Pachuco, who appears and asks what he wants. When Henry wonders where he's been, El Pachuco says he's been surveying the *barrio* (neighborhood) explaining that the police are arresting as many pachucos as possible. Henry, for his part, insists that he's innocent and therefore untouchable by the law, but El Pachuco disagrees, pointing out that he's the leader of the 38th Street Gang. Plus, the police see him as a "**zootsuiter**," which they think is reason enough to persecute him. Hearing this, Henry loses his sense of calm, complaining that the police are going to charge him with false crimes—just like they've done many times before.

When Henry gets frustrated, he reveals that he has experienced discrimination and racial profiling in the past. The fact that the police have charged him with crimes he never committed shows viewers that he—as a young Chicano man—is all too familiar with being targeted by white authorities because of his race and cultural identity. What's more, El Pachuco's assertion that the police are rounding up pachucos *suggests that this is a large-scale instance of racial profiling, as authorities vilify the Chicano community without just cause. On another note, audience members will notice that El Pachuco is capable of coming and going, addressing the audience, and even interacting with Henry as if he's part of Henry's conscience. There is, it seems, nothing El Pachuco can't do, a fact that contrasts greatly with Henry's current situation as he sits trapped in a cell.*

What makes this specific run-in with the police worse than usual, Henry explains, is that he's supposed to report to the Navy the following day. After saying this, he looks up and guesses that El Pachuco doesn't want him to do this. El Pachuco confirms that this is true, but Henry insists that he wants to do something for his country—an idea El Pachuco finds absurd, pointing out that the United States has done nothing for Henry. In fact, he urges Henry not to focus on World War II, but on the struggle that is more relevant to his own life, which is the fight between the racist government and the Chicano community. Henry's fellow pachucos need him, El Pachuco says, encouraging him to help them stand up to injustice.

This conversation highlights one of the central tensions driving Zoot Suit*—namely, the tension between the government's racism toward Henry and the fact that Henry is an American who wants to serve his country. Throughout the play, the press and various white authorities try to portray Henry and his friends as threats to the American way of life, but it's overwhelmingly clear—even at this early stage—that this is unfounded, since Henry and the others are Americans themselves and even want to honor the country by fighting in World War II. Unable to see this, though, Henry's racist society persecutes him because of his skin color and his cultural identity.*

ACT 1, SCENE 4: THE INTERROGATION

A member of the press enters with Lieutenant Edwards and Sergeant Smith, reading aloud a headline, which clarifies that the police arrested 22 members of the 38th Street Gang. Addressing Henry, Edwards says that he had hoped not see him back in jail for a long time. He then asks how long he's known Henry, and Henry reminds him that he arrested him in 1939 for stealing a car. This, Edwards admits, was a mistake, but he insists that he didn't know the car Henry was driving was his father's. Edwards also claims that he tried to make up for this by helping Henry start a "youth club," though Smith chimes in to say that Henry and his friends turned this club into a gang.

Again, it's undeniably clear that Henry has been the victim of racial profiling in the past. After all, if he was arrested and put in jail simply for driving his father's car, then it's obvious that the police are quick to think the worst of him simply because of assumptions they've already formed about people from his community. When the member of the press reads yet another headline aloud, Valdez reminds viewers of the large role that the news media plays in Zoot Suit, *implying that this kind of coverage is perhaps part of what skews the way people like Edwards and Smith view the city's Chicano population.*

Moving on, Edwards reminds Henry that the country is at war in Europe. This, he claims, is why he and his colleagues have been ordered to heavily police pachucos. Edwards also says he heard Henry was admitted to the Navy, adding that he could still report for duty the following day if only he tells them what happened the night of the Sleepy Lagoon murder. Hearing this, El Pachuco urges Henry not to tell them anything—a statement that only Henry (and the audience) can hear. Henry refuses to tell Edwards and Smith anything about what happened that night, simply insisting that he's innocent, though Smith claims they have enough dirt on Henry to indict him for murder whenever they want.

Edwards's assertion that he and the other police officers have been told to crack down on pachucos *is important to note, since he effectively admits that the government is using World War II as an excuse to implement racist domestic policies. In other words, they villainize the Chicano population under the false pretense that young men like Henry are disrupting the war effort on the home front—an illogical conclusion, considering that Henry has committed himself to joining the Navy and fighting on behalf of the country.*

As Lieutenant Edwards tries to reason with Henry, Smith tells Edwards to stop, saying that it's futile to be reasonable with "animals" like Henry. Trying one last time to get Henry to talk, Edwards says that Henry's father would surely be proud to see him in the Navy. When this attempt fails, though, Edwards exits with the member of the press who came in with him. As he does so, El Pachuco says that, although Henry doesn't deserve mistreatment, it's clear he'll be forced to endure it. As if to illustrate this point, Sergeant Smith turns to Henry and starts to beat him, demanding that he tell him what happened that night at the Sleepy Lagoon.

The choices that are available to Henry are quite unappealing. By this point, it's clear that he didn't commit the Sleepy Lagoon murder, since he has already talked to El Pachuco in private about how he's innocent—something he wouldn't need to do if he'd actually committed the crime. However, Edwards and Smith are hell-bent on pinning this murder on Henry and his friends, and they won't be satisfied until Henry says something to confirm this. This is why El Pachuco points out that, though Henry doesn't disserve this misfortune, there's seemingly nothing he can do to avoid it.

As Henry faints from Sergeant Smith's blows, he sees a vision of his mother. In fact, an entire scene from his memory emerges as the stage lights shift to depict a domestic scene. In this scene, Henry's mother, Dolores, hangs laundry (though instead of clothes, she drapes **newspapers** over a clothesline). As she calls her son's name, El Pachuco narrates, clarifying that this scene takes place in the past, before the Sleepy Lagoon murder. Rising from the ground, Henry tells Dolores that he and his new girlfriend, Della, are about to go to a dance. When she asks why he has to go, he says it's his last chance to wear his **zoot suit** before entering the Navy. Upset, she reminds him that his father doesn't like the idea of him wearing a zoot suit, but he ignores her.

Jumping back in time, Valdez gives audience members a glimpse of Henry's home life. In doing so, he further distances Henry from the standard image of a murderer, demonstrating that he doesn't necessarily lead the life of a hardened killer. Like many people, he has arguments with his parents about his clothes, and Dolores hints that Henry's father doesn't like the zoot suit—perhaps because it attracts negative attention from racist police officers like Edwards and Smith.

Dolores points out to Henry that, though he and his friends like **zoot suits**, the police target them because of what they wear. Again, Henry ignores her, assuring her that he'll soon be wearing a Naval uniform. As he says this, Lupe (Henry's younger sister) and Della enter. They too are dressed to go to the dance, but Dolores takes issue with Lupe's outfit, saying that her skirt is too short. When Henry's father, Enrique, enters, he agrees with Dolores's assessment, incensed that Lupe would even try to wear such an outfit. Lupe tries to defend herself, but Enrique doesn't let up, so she rolls down her skirt. Just then, Rudy emerges wearing one of Enrique's old suits, which he has doctored to look like a zoot suit. Enrique complains, but Henry defends his little brother, promising to give him his zoot suit when he joins the Navy.

Again, Valdez calls viewers' attention to the ways in which the characters onstage present themselves. In this moment, the members of the Reyna family debate the messages that their outfits convey to others, suggesting that clothing plays an integral role in how people identify themselves. In keeping with this, Henry promises to give Rudy his zoot suit when he joins the Navy, ultimately planning to hand it down to his brother so that Rudy can participate more thoroughly in pachuco *culture.*

As Henry, Della, Lupe, and Rudy leave, Enrique tells Henry not to let his brother drink beer, but Rudy insists that he can look after himself. At the dance, Henry meets up with his friends Joey Castro, Smiley Torres, and Tommy Roberts, all of whom are in the 38th Street Gang. As they dance, El Pachuco sings in Spanish about getting together with friends each Saturday night, getting drunk, and dancing.

There is a certain celebratory spirit to this evening, as Henry dances while El Pachuco appreciatively sings about having fun on Saturday nights with friends. It's worth remembering Henry's previous assertion that this party is the last real chance for him to wear his zoot suit before joining the Navy, thereby intimating that he will be giving up part of himself in order to conform to the military. In this way, Henry plans to develop a new aspect to his identity, though this isn't necessarily to say that he's planning on letting go of his connection to his cultural heritage.

ACT 1, SCENE 5: THE PRESS

The dance scene gradually dissipates as a newsboy enters and begins selling papers to random passersby, announcing that a grand jury will hear the case of the Sleepy Lagoon murder. Meanwhile, a group of reporters flock to Lieutenant Edwards, asking him about the case and wanting to know more about the "Mexican crime wave" the **newspapers** have been referencing. In response, he explains that the Sleepy Lagoon is a reservoir where many young Chicanos go to swim. Hearing this, a reporter named Alice Bloomfield asks if this is because the Chicano community isn't allowed to frequent the public pools—a question that draws attention to her, as one reporter suspiciously asks if she works for *The Daily Worker*.

Once again, the news media makes its way to the forefront of the play. In doing so, it comes to seem inescapable, as if Henry and his friends exist in a world in which it's impossible to avoid the public gaze. In this case, the inescapability is rather unfortunate, since the newspapers use terms like "Mexican crime wave," ultimately setting forth a negative image of the Chicano community. And when Alice Bloomfield questions this one-sided narrative, she receives judgement and scorn, as one reporter asks her if she works for The Daily Worker, *a communist newspaper (something that would be frowned upon in the United States at the time).*

Moving on, a reporter asks Edwards if he was really the first person to arrest Henry, and Edwards says that he was, adding that he saw "leadership potential" in Henry but that it's impossible to "change the spots on a leopard."

When Edwards says that he was the first person to arrest Henry, it almost seems as if he and the press think this is something be proud of. In reality, though, Edwards wrongfully arrested Henry for driving his own father's car, thereby giving the young man a criminal record for no reason. Nonetheless, Edwards maintains his racist belief that it's impossible to "change" people like Henry, despite the fact that Henry didn't even deserve to go to jail in the first place.

ACT 1, SCENE 6: THE PEOPLE'S LAWYER

In jail, Joey, Smiley, Tommy, and Henry complain that the police always pin crimes on them. They also note that all of the members of the 38th Street Gang have been detained—everyone, that is, except Rudy, even though he was at the Sleepy Lagoon like everyone else. As Tommy, Joey, and Smiley talk about this, Henry reminds them to keep quiet about this fact, warning them against ratting out his little brother. Just then, a white man named George Shearer comes to visit Henry and his friends, introducing himself as a lawyer hired by Henry's parents to represent the members of the 38th Street Gang in court. Right away, El Pachuco tells Henry to be careful because George might be a police officer. When George asks Henry's name, then, Henry asks who's paying him, since he knows his family can't afford a lawyer.

To some audience members, Henry and El Pachuco's hesitance to trust George might seem like the same kind of unfounded judgment that racists like Edwards and Smith exhibit when they make assumptions about young Chicano men like Henry. However, , Henry has good reason to be weary of white men in positions of authority, since he has suffered so much as a result of their actions. Indeed, the important difference between the judgment Henry makes of George and the racism Edwards and Smith show Henry has to do with the effect that each behavior has. Whereas Henry's hesitance to trust George does nothing to negatively impact George's life, Edwards and Smith's bigoted behavior has significantly impacted the course of Henry's life, making it hard for him to simply live without fearing wrongful arrest, manipulation, and police brutality.

George makes it clear to Henry that he doesn't intend to make much money from representing him and his friends in court. He simply wants to help them, he insists, saying that Henry's parents aren't the only ones who have asked him to help. In fact, a "citizens committee" interested in aiding the accused members of the 38th Street Gang asked George to act as their lawyer. This doesn't do much to impress Henry, who tells George not to strain himself by doing them any special favors. Still, George insists that Henry and his friends need him, since they face the possibility of receiving the death penalty if they're found guilty of murder. This resonates with Smiley, Joey, and Tommy, but Henry remains skeptical, pointing out that there's little George can do to change the fact that the press has already turned the public against them.

Still hesitant to accept George's help, Henry focuses on what he sees as one of his and his friends' biggest problems: that the press has turned most people against the Chicano community. No matter what George does in court, then, it's unlikely that he'll be able to convince society at large to reconsider their prejudices against Henry and his friends. And given that a jury made up of random citizens will be deciding the fate of the 38th Street Gang, public perception is an incredibly important matter.

George agrees that the news media has presented a biased image of Henry and his friends, but he says that what really matters is whether or not they have a lawyer who can successfully prove their innocence. He then acknowledges that Henry is hesitant to accept his support because he's a white man, insisting that this shouldn't matter. What matters, George says, is whether or not Henry lets him help the members of the 38th Street Gang. After thinking for a moment, Henry says that he will accept George's help, and Joey, Smiley, and Tommy echo this sentiment. Accordingly, George says he needs to know what happened on the night of the Sleepy Lagoon murder, so Henry says that it all started at the dance on Saturday night.

Although George convinces Henry to accept his help, it's not necessarily the case that—as George suggests—race doesn't matter in situations like this. After all, only somebody who has never been discriminated against has the privilege to say that such things don't matter. In Henry's position, accepting help from a white man who comes from the same socioeconomic class as the very people who are making his life miserable is a difficult thing, since it requires him to put aside his misgivings and trust an outsider to handle his and his friends' collective fate. Needless to say, this is a hard thing to do, but George fails to see why his whiteness matters in this moment (precisely because he is white and doesn't know what it's like to be in Henry's position).

ACT 1, SCENE 7: THE SATURDAY NIGHT DANCE

At the dance on the night of the Sleepy Lagoon murder, the members of the 38th Street Gang enjoy themselves while drinking beer and listening to loud music. As Henry and Della dance, Henry's ex-girlfriend, Bertha, approaches and confrontationally asks if she can step in for a number. Henry tells her to go away, but his attention is soon redirected when Smiley comes over and tells him that the Downey Gang has just arrived. Henry decides to keep an eye on them, but it isn't long before Rafas picks a fight with Rudy, who's drunk. Henry stands up for his brother, and the 38th Street Gang surrounds the Downey Gang, outnumbering them considerably. As the two gangs begin to fight, Henry tells them to stop, wanting to take Rafas on by himself.

This is the first time audience members witness Henry's confrontational side. Given that he and his friends stand accused of murder, this developing fight might seem like an indication that they are, perhaps, guilty. However, it's worth keeping in mind that this altercation is little more than a petty fight, one in which Henry simply wants to stand up for his little brother. And yet, even this relatively tame behavior puts Henry and his friends at risk, since white authorities like Edwards and Smith are so eager to assume the worst of young Chicanos, viewing them all as criminals and murderers.

Henry and Rafas pull out switchblades and start knife-fighting. Henry soon emerges victorious, poised with his blade against Rafas's neck. Just then, El Pachuco snaps his fingers and everybody freezes in place. El Pachuco tells Henry that "two more Mexicans killing each other" is "exactly what the play needs right now." Henry tries to ignore him, saying that Rafas will kill him if he doesn't act first, but El Pachuco says this kind of bloodshed is exactly what the audience has paid to witness. He then snaps his fingers again, and everyone reanimates. Kicking Rafas away, Henry tells him to get lost. With this, the Downey Gang retreats as both sides fling insults and threats at one another. When Rafas and his crew are gone, the 38th Street Gang resumes the party, celebrating this small victory.

When El Pachuco tells Henry to reconsider killing Rafas, the audience sees that he's sensitive to how Henry and the rest of the Chicano community present themselves. Saying that the audience has paid to see bloodshed, he implies that unnecessary violence will only confirm negative stereotypes about pachucos. *Accordingly, he urges Henry to think about what kind of message he will send if he slits Rafas's throat, ultimately encouraging him to manage his public image by refusing to perpetuate behaviors that racists would eagerly hold against him.*

ACT 1, SCENE 8: EL DÍA DE LA RAZA

As the party continues, a member of the press enters with a cart full of **newspaper** stacks. The partiers freeze as the journalist announces the date (October 12, 1942) and says, "Headlines!" Hearing this, the members of the 38th Street Gang take turns reciting headlines before walking offstage. At first, the news stories are about international politics and World War II, but soon they begin to fixate on the country's Chicano population with headlines like "Web of Zoot Crime Spreads" and "Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial Opens Tomorrow."

Once again, Valdez emphasizes the ever-presence of the news media, making it clear that Henry and his friends live in a society inundated by publications that seek out scandal and gossip. By calling attention to "Zoot Crime," the newspapers associate the Chicano community with unlawfulness and illicit behavior.

The scene returns to the present. As Henry sits in his jail cell, George enters with Alice Bloomfield, who introduces herself to Henry as a reporter. Jumping in, George tells Henry that Alice is one of the people working hard to help clear his name. Uninterested, Henry tells George that he hasn't received clean clothes yet, even though George sent clothes to the jail. Frustrated, George goes to see about this discrepancy, leaving Alice and Henry alone. Taking this opportunity, Alice says she'd like to ask Henry some questions, explaining—when Henry shows some hesitance—that she wants to correct the narrative that the rest of the press has advanced about him and his friends (and about the Chicano community in general).

Like George, Alice is a white person who—unlike people like Edwards, Smith, and the majority of the news media—wants to support the Chicano community. Once again, though, Henry is skeptical, since very few white people have ever showed any interest in uplifting him and his friends. In fact, the only person who has claimed to help him is Lieutenant Edwards, who worked with him to establish a "youth group" but then villainized him and his friends for being in a gang. In turn, it's quite understandable that Henry would be weary of accepting support from supposedly well-meaning white people.

Alice tells Henry that other **newspapers** are linking "the Pachuco Crime Wave" to fascism and spreading other absurd rumors. She also points out that these stories—and the entire idea of a "Mexican Crime Wave"—were cooked up by a newspaper owner who simply wants to sell papers. This, she claims, is the reason Henry and his friends are in jail. Nonetheless, Henry tells Alice to leave him alone, so she tries once again to endear herself to him, this time deciding to begin again by saying that she and many other people are on Henry's side. She also says that she grew up in Los Angeles but never heard about or encountered the Chicano community, which is why she's eager to learn about Henry and his friends. This piques Henry's interest, and though he remains on his guard, he asks what, exactly, she wants to know.

What Alice says about the press associating Henry and his friends with fascism is important, since it reveals that the media is exploiting the country's wartime fears to turn the public against the Chicano community. By sowing this kind of fear, the newspapers hope to turn bigger profits, knowing that alarming headlines will attract more readers. On another note, Alice manages to put Henry at ease by demonstrating her desire to actually listen to what he has to say. This, the audience sees, is what effective white allies do: they pay attention to people of color in respectful, receptive ways.

Henry talks to Alice about his life, discussing the fact that he's been arrested multiple times on suspicion and that these unfair arrests have remained on his record. Alice then calls Henry a "classic social victim"—a term that Henry dismisses, calling it "bullshit." In response, Alice asks if he's saying he's guilty of the Sleepy Lagoon murder, and he tells her that, though he's done bad things in his life, he didn't do this. Just then, George storms in and says that the jail is purposefully withholding the clothes he sent for Henry and his friends. He will, he says, have to mention this in court. Turning back to Henry, Alice tells him that she believes he's innocent and urges him to bear in mind when he's on trial that there are people who support him.

Henry opens up to Alice because he sees that she genuinely wants to support him on his own terms. However, this doesn't mean she's a perfect white ally, as evidenced by the fact that she gets carried away with abstract social theories that ultimately do little to help Henry. This happens when Alice suggests that Henry is a "classic social victim," an idea Henry dismisses not only because it's irrelevant to his current predicament, but also because it patronizingly casts him as a perfect person with no agency. Rather than acknowledging that Henry is a person who is—like everyone—fallible, Alice tries to present him as a flawless person who simply has no control over what happens to him. Henry's response that Alice's assessment of him is "bullshit" suggests that life is more complicated than this, and that people shouldn't need to think of others as completely unimpeachable in order to believe that they deserve justice.

ACT 1, SCENE 9: OPENING OF THE TRIAL

In court, the judge's bench is constructed of large **newspaper** piles. The public prosecutor is portrayed by a member of the press, who is about to begin his opening argument when George interrupts, bringing up the fact that the clothes he sent to Henry and his friends were wrongfully withheld. Normally, he says, the jail gives inmates new clothes and haircuts before their court dates, but the members of the 38th Street Gang have been deprived of both. Immediately, the prosecutor tells the judge that "there is testimony [he] expect[s] to develop" that Henry and his friends are most easily identifiable by their outward appearances—namely, their hairstyles and clothing. Jumping in, George says that the prosecutor is attempting to cast these young men as "disreputable" by taking advantage of the fact that they look "foreign in appearance."

The fact that the public prosecutor is portrayed by a member of the press is worth acknowledging, since it hints at the fact that he is quite biased against the Chicano community. After all, Valdez has presented the news media as unjustly against Henry and his friends from the very beginning of the play. In keeping with this, the prosecutor knows that the jury will be more likely to find the members of the 38th Street Gang guilty if they look like pachuco *stereotypes—stereotypes that the press itself has worked hard to associate with criminality and violence.*

Despite George's objections, the judge rules that the defendants will be forced to keep their current appearances to help witnesses and jury members identify them. Claiming to be concerned that the jury will be unable to tell Henry and his friends apart from one another, the judge also declares that each defendant must stand every time his name is mentioned. Again, George objects, this time saying that this might force the young men to incriminate themselves, since they'll have to stand even when the prosecutor makes accusations against them. The judge, however, pays this no thought. When George pushes back and says he ought to be allowed to sit next to his clients, the judge refuses once more. In response, George says that the judge is depriving the defendants of their constitutional rights, but the judge dismissively says that this is just George's opinion.

Even at this early stage in the trial, it's overwhelmingly clear that the judge is just as prejudiced against Henry and his friends as the public prosecutor is. In fact, he seemingly goes out of his way to make it easy for the prosecutor to sway the jury, not caring that he's letting his racial biases influence his decisions. In turn, the audience sees just how hard it will be for the members of the 38th Street Gang to get the justice they deserve as American citizens.

As the trial commences, El Pachuco snaps his fingers and decides to speed things up, skipping ahead to Della's testimony. While Della takes the stand, El Pachuco points out to Henry that the members of the 38th Street Gang are slumping in their seats and making a generally bad impression on the jury, so Henry whispers at them, urging them to sit up and look engaged. Della then begins her testimony, in which she explains that she and Henry went to the Sleepy Lagoon after the Saturday night dance.

Again, El Pachuco is attuned to the ways in which his fellow Chicanos present themselves. This time, he recognizes that it's especially important for the members of the 38th Street Gang to seem engaged and considerate, since the judge and prosecutor are doing everything they can to cast them as disreputable.

ACT 1, SCENE 10: SLEEPY LAGOON

The scene changes as Della describes the night of the Sleepy Lagoon murder. She and Henry are seen walking under the moonlight, holding hands and looking out at a set of distant lights. Henry guesses that somebody's having a party at the Williams' Ranch, where several Mexican families live. Perhaps, he says, they're having a wedding—a statement that gives him pause. Turning to Della, Henry asks what Della will do if he never comes back from World War II. He then asks if she'll marry him if he does survive the war, and she says yes. As they kiss, they notice that Rafas and the Downey Gang have approached Henry's parked car and have started vandalizing it. Henry rushes over to them and tries to fight them off, but they beat him unconscious.

When Henry mentions the possibility that he could die in World War II, viewers are reminded of the fact that he has willingly signed up to put himself in danger for his country. This is an aspects of Henry's story that the press, the public prosecutor, the judge, and the general public are all too eager to ignore in their attempts to create a false narrative and frame Henry and his friends as threats to the so-called American way of life.

When Henry wakes up, he and Della go back into town to get the rest of the 38th Street Gang, wanting to take revenge on the Downey Gang. By the time they return to the Lagoon, though, the Downey Gang is no longer there, so they drift toward the party at the Williams' Ranch. What they don't know, though, is that the Downey Gang has just terrorized and left the ranch, which is why the Williams family attacks them as they approach, thinking they're the Downey Gang again. A large-scale brawl ensues, and Henry urges everyone to retreat. As they try to leave, Henry notices a man hitting somebody with a stick, so he tells him to stop. However, the man keeps beating the other person, and the rest of the gang leaves, driving away without knowing that José Williams—the man getting beaten—has died.

In this section, Valdez reveals what happened at the Sleepy Lagoon on the night of José Williams's murder. However, it remains unclear who, exactly, killed José, about whom the audience knows essentially nothing. This lack of concrete information suggests that Valdez is uninterested in actually focusing on the murder in question. Instead, he wants the audience to concentrate on the ways in which Henry—as the leader of the 38th Street Gang—is wrongfully blamed for the murder, since it is now clear that, at the very least, he was not the one to kill José Williams, even if he was there when it happened.

ACT 1, SCENE 11: THE CONCLUSION OF TRIAL

Back in the courtroom, the prosecutor cross-examines Della. Addressing her, he says, "You say Henry Reyna hit the man with his fist." Turning to Henry, who is standing, he asks Della if this is, indeed, Henry. At first, Della says yes, but then corrects herself, getting confused and trying to clarify that she's only confirming that Henry is standing before them, not that he hit José Williams. However, the prosecutor cuts her off and continues to ask leading, confusing questions, manipulating Della in order to suggest that Henry pulled out a knife. George objects to this line of questioning, but the judge condescendingly tells him that he clearly doesn't know the definition of a leading question. In response, George declares that the judge's comment is a form of misconduct.

Like George anticipated, the prosecutor abuses his power by asking leading questions that make it difficult for Della to avoid saying things she doesn't mean about Henry. The fact that the judge doesn't see this as problematic is further evidence that he's set against Henry and his friends, as he goes out of his way to give them an unfair trial. Once again, then, viewers can observe the extent to which white authorities are biased against the Chicano community.

The prosecutor continues his questioning, underhandedly suggesting that Smiley beat an innocent woman at the ranch. As he says this, he asks Della to confirm whether or not Smiley is standing up (which he is), once more confusing her and making it impossible for her to distinguish whether or not she's saying that Smiley is standing or that Smiley beat a woman at the ranch. Moving on, the prosecutor upholds that one of the members of the 38th Street Gang was holding a club, but George objects, saying that nobody found a club at crime scene. However, the judge ignores this, and the prosecutor once again asks Della a confusing question that makes it seem as if she's confirming that somebody violently used a club during the altercation on the Williams' ranch. In this same manner, the prosecutor suggests that Henry purposefully killed José Williams.

By this point, it's obvious that it will be virtually impossible for George to stop the prosecutor from manipulating Henry and his friends into incriminating themselves. After all, the judge is clearly just as eager to condemn them as the crafty prosecutor, meaning that they have almost no chance of presenting their own innocence in a convincing, levelheaded way that would resonate with the jury.

Throughout the prosecutor's cross-examination, he mentions multiple weapons that were never found at the scene of the crime or entered into the case as evidence. George tries to point this out, but the judge doesn't care, so George once more cites him for misconduct. At one point, Della refuses to answer the prosecutor's question because she fears he'll manipulate her words, and this lack of cooperation leads the judge to send her to the Ventura State School for Girls (a correctional facility) for one year. During a short recess, George tells Henry that it's clear they're going to lose but that they'll have to set their sights on winning an appeal—something he says will be easier because his citations of misconduct have been noted in the official transcript, which will help them in the long run.

The judge's decision to send Della to a correctional facility for a full year simply for refusing to answer an unfair question is further evidence of the fact that he is eager to persecute the Chicano community. Maintaining his optimism, George claims that this will make it easy for them to appeal the eventual guilty verdict, though this attitude is something that will obviously be difficult for Henry and his friends to embrace, since they will have to wait in jail in the meantime.

When the trial resumes, the prosecutor delivers his closing statement, telling the jury members that they simply must convict the members of the 38th Street Gang. If they don't, he claims, they will be contributing to the worst influx of crime in the city's history. The prosecutor also upholds that Henry and his friends pose an imminent threat to American families, saying that they represent "the forces of anarchy and destruction" in American society. Furthermore, he asserts that to set Henry and his friends free would send a message to the Chicano community that they can break the law and get away with it. For these reasons, the prosecutor says, the jury must condemn these "**zoot-suited** gangsters" to death.

The prosecutor's closing statement is made up of biased rhetoric that plays upon the public's worst fears—namely, that the nation's safety depends upon whether or not people like Henry and his friends are put in jail. Needless to say, this is blatantly untrue, since it's not actually the case that Chicanos are "forces of anarchy and destruction." Rather, this is just the prosecutor's way of manipulating the public's preexisting insecurities, since most Americans are worried about the spread of chaos and "destruction" in Europe as a result of World War II. And though the Chicano community has nothing to do with what's happening abroad, the prosecutor shrewdly makes it seem as if Henry and his friends are directly related to the country's wartime problems.

When George delivers his closing statement, he reminds the jury that the United States is at war in Europe because of the same kind of racism and authoritarianism that people like the prosecutor are perpetuating on American soil by discriminating against the Chicano community. He points out that there are no witnesses who actually saw who killed José Williams—the only thing the prosecution can prove is that the 38th Street Gang members wear **zoot suits** and certain hairstyles. To convict them as guilty of murder without sufficient evidence, George tells the jury, would be to negate the very same kind of justice and equality that the country claims to champion.

Because the public prosecutor went out of his way to frame the 38th Street Gang as a threat to America's core values, George makes a point of emphasizing the fact that Henry and his friends are American citizens who deserve the same justice as anyone else. If the jury is going to concern itself with protecting the nation's values, then, it would be hypocritical to deprive the Chicano community of their rights. Rather than representing a threat to the country, George argues, Henry and his friends represent the country itself.

After a short break, the jury returns and delivers its verdict: the members of the 38th Street Gang have been found guilty of murdering José Williams. Because they're all so young, though, they will not be sentenced to death. Instead, they will spend the rest of their lives in prison. As Henry and his friends are led out of the courtroom, El Pachuco turns to the audience and says that there will now be a short break so that the viewers can smoke or visit the restroom.

When El Pachuco tells the audience to take a short break, he creates a stark contrast between the viewers and the 38th Street Gang. After all, the audience members are free to leave the theater and do whatever they want, whereas Henry and his friends have just been sentenced to life in prison. In turn, viewers are invited to consider just how demoralizing it would feel to be denied freedom without just cause.

ACT 2, PROLOGUE

When the play resumes, El Pachuco waxes poetic about how pachucos are forced to fight a domestic war while the country fights abroad. He briefly notes that marines and sailors will soon invade Los Angeles like Nazis, declaring "**Zoot Suit** wars" against the Chicano community. However, he adds that this will all happen later in the play. For now, Henry and his friends are locked up in San Quentin prison.

Again, El Pachuco calls attention to the fact that the audience members are watching a play. By commenting on how everything unfolds, he once more takes on a certain kind of self-conscious awareness that illustrates just how cognizant he is of the ways in which he and the other Chicano characters present themselves and are perceived by others—an awareness that permeates everything he does, reminding viewers that he sees the pachuco *lifestyle as a grand performance of identity.*

ACT 2, SCENE 1: SAN QUENTIN

In prison, Henry reads aloud a letter to his family. As he does so, El Pachuco points out that it sounds quite dismal and sad, but Henry ignores him, going on to explain to his family members how much he and his friends look forward to receiving letters from the outside. They eagerly await the delivery of their mail each day, even though their letters have been pre-opened and screened by the guards.

By this point in the play, Henry has virtually no freedom, since even his letters are censored by white authorities. Indeed, there is nothing he can do without encountering disapproving white people who are devoted to making his life harder. Under these circumstances, it's easy to see that it would be quite difficult to feel in control of one's own life—after all, Henry can't even choose the way he presents himself to others anymore, since the censors are liable to change what he tells his family members about his life in prison.

ACT 2, SCENE 2: THE LETTERS

Henry reads aloud the letters he and the others receive in prison from Alice Bloomfield, who writes to tell them that she will send them a weekly newsletter, which will outline everything that's happening on their case. She and a number of other activists have formed the Sleeping Lagoon Defense Committee, which is dedicated to helping with the appeal. In her next letter, Alice urges the members of the 38th Street Gang to remember that how they behave in prison will affect the way the public views them.

Alice's attempt to change the public narrative about Henry and his friends is important, since the members of the jury who will eventually rule on their appeal currently exist in a society that vilifies the Chicano community. This is why it's important that Alice has established the Sleeping Lagoon Defense Committee, thereby demonstrating that there are people who disagree with the general consensus regarding the 38th Street Gang.

As the weeks go by, the members of the 38th Street Gang become fond of Alice, though Smiley asks her to stop encouraging his wife to go around asking for money for their cause. Still, Henry takes a liking to her, as does Tommy, though Henry gets frustrated when he apologizes for his poor vocabulary and Alice says that his vocabulary is "better than most"—a statement that he interprets as a comment on the fact that he's not Chicano. Accordingly, Henry tells Alice not to treat him any different than the other members of the 38th Street Gang, saying that she should really think about "what it means to be Chicano." Going on, he acknowledges that the only reason he's in trouble is because he has always hung out with Mexicans, which is why he identifies with the pachuco image.

Tommy is an interesting character in Zoot Suit, *since he is the only non-Chicano member of the 38th Street Gang. The fact that he hasn't received any special legal treatment is worth noting, since it suggests that white authorities have no sympathy for people who associate themselves with the* pachuco *image, regardless of race. This is yet another illustration of how much the local authorities dislike the Chicano community. To Tommy, being Chicano is a way of life, one that doesn't necessarily have to do with ethnicity. To law enforcement officials, though, being Chicano is a sign of criminality—a viewpoint informed by the white community's intolerance of anything that doesn't align with its narrow conception of what it means to be American.*

ACT 2, SCENE 3: THE INCORRIGIBLE PACHUCO

In a letter to Alice, Henry asks her to arrange for a private visit with him the next time she comes to the prison. When Alice comes, she draws close to him and asks what she can do for him, but El Pachuco encroaches upon them, so Henry claims that he doesn't need anything. Going on, he says that he's going to withdraw from the appeal process. Astounded, Alice asks Henry why he would do this, pointing out that this will ruin his friends' chances, too. She also reminds Henry that she has been working tirelessly for him, but he responds by saying that he never asked for her—or anybody else's—support. Alice asks why Henry never expressed this sentiment before, and Henry says that she never asked in the first place.

During this exchange, Alice fails to keep in mind that the decision to go through with the appeal ultimately falls to Henry. Although she wants to support him and help him do whatever will benefit him the most, she can't actually make decisions for him. After all, her main role as an ally is to make it easier for Henry to do what he wants, and though it's true that dropping out of the appeal will result in a lifetime in prison, it is ultimately up to him whether or not he wants to do this. Alice, however, refuses to accept this.

Henry tells Alice that he doesn't need her to take care of him, asserting that it's his choice whether or not he wants to fight his prison sentence. Distraught, Alice says that she has poured herself into this cause, adding, "My boys have been everything to me." This comment irks Henry, who dislikes Alice's possessive tone, pointing out that she's making it sound like she owns him and his friends. Going on, Henry accuses Alice of using the Chicano community to "play politics." Alice takes offense to this, but Henry forges on, sardonically asking her if she's going to help "the Colored People" next. In response, Alice says that she has already done this.

In this moment, Alice acts as something of a white savior, making it seem as if Henry should be unquestioningly grateful to her because she has made sacrifices to help him. However, he never even asked for her help, and Alice's patronizing tendency to take control of Henry's life suggests that she doesn't think he's capable of taking care of himself. Furthermore, when Alice claims to have already helped "the Colored People," she fails to see that Henry is making fun of her for being self-important in her attempts to support minority groups.

Incensed that Henry plans to accept injustice, Alice talks about how difficult it has been to work on helping the 38th Street Gang. She says that nobody takes her seriously, saying that she's too "sentimental and emotional." She also says that everyone distrusts her because she's a Jewish communist. After this outburst, Alice and Henry stare at one another for a moment before smiling, and Henry comments that this is the first time Alice has ever sounded like she's truly invested in what she's saying. Because of this, he agrees to continue with the appeal, saying that he knows she and George are just trying to help him and that he's appreciative of this. Henry then asks if he and Alice can write private letters to each other. Agreeing to do this, Alice puts her hands on Henry's shoulders and says she thinks they're going to become good friends.

Although Alice sometimes loses sight of the fact that she's only supposed to support Henry (not actually make decisions for him), she ultimately shows him that she's genuinely invested in his wellbeing. This becomes evident when she loses her sense of calm, effectively demonstrating the extent to which she has committed herself to the cause. What's more, it becomes clear that Alice is somewhat familiar with what it feels like to experience prejudice, since people criticize her for being "sentimental and emotional," two words people sometimes misogynistically wield against women to discount their passion and commitment. In addition, Alice is Jewish and has faced antisemitism, a fact that leads Henry to believe that she is perhaps more familiar with his predicament than he might have expected.

ACT 2, SCENE 4: MAJOR GEORGE

George visits the gang in prison. When he arrives, they update him on their lives, and Joey says that he's determined to lead a new life, adding, "No more pachuquismo for me." As the conversation switches tracks, though, George tells them two pieces of unfortunate news. First, he says that it will be at least a couple of months before they'll be able to officially file the appeal. Second, he tells them that he has been drafted and is going to fight in World War II. When he hears this, Henry immediately wonders if the government purposefully did this to deprive the members of the 38th Street Gang of their lawyer, but George doesn't think this is the case. He also insists that they'll be fine without him, saying that Alice and many other people are working hard for them on the outside.

Joey's decision to give up the pachuco *lifestyle is worth noting, since it suggests that the discrimination he's been forced to endure has convinced him to refigure his entire identity. In this way, Valdez suggests that this kind of prejudice can have a profound impact on the way people live their lives. Furthermore, when Henry suspects that the military purposefully drafted George to deprive the 38th Street Gang of one of their most important allies, audience members see the extent to which the mistreatment he's experienced has influenced his faith in the government at large.*

After George bids Henry and his friends a sentimental farewell, the guard tells them they've been given new work assignments. This upsets Henry, who picks a fight with the guard. After restraining Henry, the guard puts him into solitary confinement.

Henry lashes out at the guard only after receiving bad news, a sign that the pressure of facing life in prison (and constant discrimination from American society) is starting to get to him. After all, this is the first time throughout the entire play that Henry has been the one to initiate a fight, suggesting that all of this mistreatment has had a negative influence on him.

ACT 2, SCENE 5: SOLITARY

In solitary confinement, Henry talks to El Pachuco, who urges him to accept his current circumstances, saying that this is the only way he'll get through isolation. Henry, for his part, says he can't accustom himself to solitary confinement, but El Pachuco tells Henry that this is the only reality that exists for him. Trying to embrace this mindset, Henry considers the possibility that the appeal might actually work, but El Pachuco tells him to be realistic, saying that he should know better than to think he'll actually see justice. What Henry should do, El Pachuco claims, is protect his loved ones by giving up his hope and letting hate fuel him.

What El Pachuco tells Henry in this moment is somewhat difficult to parse. He urges him to accept his current circumstances, but this advice is only geared at helping Henry stay sane while in solitary confinement. Indeed, El Pachuco doesn't urge him to accept everything *about his situation, but just that there's nothing to do but wait to be let out of solitary confinement. On the whole, though, El Pachuco urges Henry to abandon any other forms of optimism, encouraging him to see everyone but himself and his fellow gang members as enemies. This, of course, means giving up hope that Alice and other white allies will be able to help him.*

Henry gets mad at El Pachuco for advancing such a bleak vision of the world. Insisting that he doesn't need El Pachuco anymore, Henry tells him to go away, but El Pachuco simply laughs and tells Henry not to take the play so seriously. Snapping his fingers, El Pachuco says that Henry ought to see what's happening at that moment in the streets of Los Angeles, where violence has broken out.

Again, El Pachuco calls attention to the fact that he and Henry exist in a play. This time, though, he says this as a way of transitioning away from prison to focus on a more widespread kind of unrest. As he does so, he implies that Henry's specific predicament isn't quite as serious as the larger, systemic problems that are taking hold of American society.

ACT 2, SCENE 6: ZOOT SUIT RIOTS

At a dance hall in Los Angeles, El Pachuco and Henry stand off to one side, watching sailors and pachucos jitterbug to the music. Rudy enters wearing Henry's **zoot suit**, striding in with Bertha, Lupe, and their friend Cholo. When several sailors hit on Lupe and Bertha, Cholo pushes them away. The sailors then fetch another Naval serviceman, who shoves Cholo out the door. When Cholo reenters, he and Rudy start fighting the servicemen, who quickly grow in number. As this tension develops, members of the press arrive and announce that riots have broken out all over the city, as Marines and other soldiers help the Navy "in a new assault on zooter-infested districts."

In this scene, Valdez depicts the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, in which Navy officers and other white servicemen entered Los Angeles and violently targeted minorities wearing zoot suits. When a member of the press announces that these white men have devoted themselves to helping the Navy "in a new assault on zooter-infested districts," audience members will perhaps note a veiled admission that the servicemen are "assault[ing]" people in zoot suits, implying that they're the ones who started the conflict. However, the language that this headline uses obscures this admission with the words "zooter-infested districts," a phrase that refers to people who wear zoot suits as if they are pests who must be stomped out. Once again, then, the press presents a biased narrative, one that purposefully tries to turn society against Chicanos and other minority groups.

As the servicemen berate El Pachuco (who is also present at the Zoot Suit Riots), a member of the press joins them, cursing people who wear **zoot suits**. Hearing this, El Pachuco criticizes the journalist's roundabout way of expressing his disdain for Chicanos. In response, the journalist says that the press is "complying" with the country's war effort by refraining from using decidedly racist words. Hearing this, El Pachuco points out that the press has been using "pachuco" and "zoot suiter" in the same way that they would use more blatantly offensive words, but the journalist says there's nothing wrong with using these terms. To justify himself, the journalist claims that "The Zoot Suit Crime Wave" has started to bump the news of the war off the frontpage—something he finds unacceptable and holds against the Chicano community.

In this exchange, El Pachuco spotlights the fact that the press has managed to use terms like "pachuco" and "zoot suiter" against the Chicano community, weaponizing them by using them to signal their contempt for Mexican Americans. The journalist, however, is unbothered by this accusation, claiming that there is good reason to have contempt for the Chicano community. In order to make this argument, he uses wartime rhetoric to make it seem as if Chicanos are a threat to the country's war effort. In reality, though, "The Zoot Suit Crime Wave" is something the media invented in the first place, so it is actually the press that has distracted the public from the U.S.'s involvement in World War II.

El Pachuco tells the journalist that the pachuco style was originally related to the Chicano community's effort to feel confident as brown people living in Los Angeles, but the journalist only blames him for trying to "outdo the white man in exaggerated white man's clothes." Chiming in, a marine says that his parents have been forced to give up shirt collars and cuffs because of the **zoot suit** craze. Enraged, he asks El Pachuco if he's aware that there's a war going on. He also says he and other servicemen are fighting to eliminate all enemies of "the American way of life." At this point, a large group of servicemen jump on El Pachuco and strip off his zoot suit. When they leave, El Pachuco is in nothing but a loincloth. When he stands, an "Aztec conch blows" as he walks off into darkness.

In this moment, El Pachuco tries to explain that the zoot suit is—above all—something that the Chicano community has developed in order to bolster their collective cultural identity as Mexican Americans. Indeed, it is a style that developed out of a desire to celebrate their heritage, which is why El Pachuco later walks offstage to the sound of an Aztec conch, which symbolizes his engagement with his own cultural heritage. Unable to see this (or perhaps unwilling to acknowledge it), the white servicemen and journalists focus only on their own ideas about what it means to wear a zoot suit—ideas that fail to recognize the cultural significance of the style, instead demonizing it simply because of American society's racist intolerance toward minority groups.

ACT 2, SCENE 7: ALICE

When Henry gets out of solitary confinement, he asks Alice why she's working so hard to help him, and she says it's because she can't stand to see other people face mistreatment. As a Jewish woman, she has experienced what it's like to face discrimination. "If you lose, I lose," Alice says. She also says that she spends all of her time looking forward to seeing Henry. In response, Henry says that he thought about Alice constantly when he was in solitary confinement. He then tries to get her to admit that she has feelings for him, but she holds back because she doesn't want to complicate their relationship. In order to help him, she says, she has to be his friend and nothing else—not, as she says, his "white woman."

It's clear that Henry and Alice have feelings for each other, but they aren't in a situation where it makes sense for them to be together. First of all, Henry is in jail and is also still dating Della. More importantly, though, Alice doesn't want to become Henry's lover because she fears this might get in the way of her ability to support him. This might seem rather ironic, since becoming even closer to Henry would ostensibly make him feel more supported, but Alice is probably right to keep her distance, since other people might think the only reason she's helping him is because she loves him, not because she believes in his innocence. To remain a truly effective advocate, then, Alice must refrain from entering into a romantic relationship with him.

Alice begins to cry, but her tears turn to laughter. She and Henry then start kissing, but the guard interrupts and tells Alice she has to leave. Before she departs, she tells Henry that Rudy is now in the Marines. When Alice leaves, Henry looks for El Pachuco, trying to tell him that he was wrong to be so pessimistic about the case, which Henry now thinks they can win. However, El Pachuco is nowhere to be found. As Henry calls out to him, the guard appears and tells him that the state is transferring him and the others to Folsom Prison. As the guard takes Henry away, El Pachuco appears. He's elevated off the ground in a **zoot suit**, and Henry catches a glimpse of him as he raises his arms. Just then, the lights cut out and bombs begin to fall.

El Pachuco's disappearance is worth noting, since it comes shortly after he was beaten and stripped by white servicemen in the Zoot Suit Riots. However, here he reappears more triumphant than ever, apparently hovering over the stage and once more wearing a zoot suit, thereby suggesting that racism and hatred can't keep him down. In keeping with this, Henry feels optimistic about his appeal, filled with hope and love because of Alice's advocacy efforts and, of course, the fact that they kissed.

ACT 2, SCENE 8: THE WINNING OF THE WAR

Along with the sound of explosions, triumphant music plays as servicemen march across the stage. One of them is Rudy, who quickly sees and embraces his parents, who are happy to see him return from the war. The characters then read headlines aloud, making it clear that the U.S. and its allies have had success in World War II. Among these headlines is another important piece of news: Los Angeles's District Court of Appeals has ruled once again on the Sleepy Lagoon murder case, finding the members of the 38th Street Gang not guilty.

In a somewhat unexpected turn of events, the 38th Street Gang is let off the hook for the murder of José Williams. That this good fortune comes at the same time as news of the U.S.'s success in World War II is important to consider, since it once more aligns Henry and his friends with the country at large, ultimately tying their wellbeing to the nation's. In turn, Valdez intimates that Henry's detractors were wrong to suggest that their freedom would pose a threat to the country.

ACT 2, SCENE 9: RETURN TO THE BARRIO

Back at home, Henry greets Rudy and his parents, along with George, Alice, and the other members of the 38th Street Gang, all of whom have come to Dolores and Enrique's house for a celebration. Rudy tells Henry that he came home from Hawaii just to see him, so they all go inside to have drinks. Before Henry can follow everyone in though, he sees El Pachuco. When he asks where he's been, El Pachuco says he has been in the *barrio*. He and Henry decide to forget about their argument, and Henry says that he and his friends won this particular battle because they learned to fight back in a new manner. El Pachuco says that this is the perfect happy ending for this play, but just as the lights begin to dim, he stops them, saying that there are seldom happy endings in real life.

When Henry says that he and his friends won their appeal because they learned how to fight in a new way, he is referring to the fact that they challenged the status quo with activism and social consciousness. Rather than literally fighting *back, they were able to draw upon a social justice movement, which made it possible for them to stand up to an unfair justice system. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that anything has changed in the way their society views the Chicano population, which is most likely why El Pachuco stops the play from ending on this happy note, clearly wanting to acknowledge the fact that the fight for equality must go on.*

El Pachuco tells Henry that the police are still out to get pachucos and that warring gangs are still killing one another. As he says this, Della comes outside. Henry asks her why she didn't come to pick him up when he first got out of jail, and she says that she was afraid things might have changed between them. Hearing this, El Pachuco informs Henry that Della is now living in Henry's parents' house. Because Della's parents disapprove of Henry, they told her to either forget about him or move out, so she came to live with Enrique and Dolores. Della then tells Henry that she thinks his parents expect them to get married, and El Pachuco asks Henry if he's still planning on proposing to her. Before Henry can decide, though, Alice comes outside.

In keeping with his assertion that there are rarely happy endings in real life, El Pachuco emphasizes the fact that racial profiling and systemic discrimination still pose dire problems for the Chicano community. However, Henry can hardly focus on this because he must first deal with complications in his personal life, trying to figure out what to do in the aftermath of his prison sentence. When the audience sees that Henry is no longer sure what he wants, it becomes clear that his arrest thoroughly derailed his life, making it difficult for him to know how to pick up where he left off. This, the audience sees, is the real-life impact of racism and injustice.

Alice tells Henry that she's going to leave, but Henry insists that she stay. Alice then says she loves Henry, but El Pachuco snaps his fingers and she freezes. Just then, Rudy enters and congratulates Henry, saying that their mother just told him that he and Della are getting married—which, he says, they should do in the next three days if Henry wants Rudy to be his best man. As he says this, Della unfreezes and tells Henry that she will move out if he doesn't want to be with her. Meanwhile, Alice says that Henry can't possibly be expecting her to spend the night with him. Henry says that he needs more time to think, clearly wanting everyone to stop bombarding him with questions. At this point, Enrique enters and admits that he told Della that Henry would marry her.

The overwhelming nature of Henry's return underscores just how thoroughly his time in prison scattered his life. As everyone asks him different questions about what he wants, he finds himself unable to answer them. It will, it seems, take him quite some time to figure out how to move on from here—yet another illustration of how unfair it was that he was kept in prison for so long without just cause.

In a wash of voices, everyone talks at Henry. George approaches and tells him to forget about what has happened and to focus on moving on. Smiley tells Henry that he (Smiley) and his wife are moving away from Los Angeles and away from the 38th Street Gang. Enrique tells Henry to focus on his family. Dolores tells Henry to forget about **zoot suits**. And Della asks Henry what he wants. Shouting above the chatter, Henry says that he doesn't even know whether or not he might wind back up in prison. He then turns to both Alice and Della and says, "But I love you…" After a pause, he goes to Della and hugs her.

Henry's comment about not knowing whether or not he might end up back in prison someday is interesting, since it indicates that he's all too cognizant of the fact that no matter what he chooses to do with the rest of his life, he will still be in danger of getting targeted by racist authorities. By saying this, Henry underscores the unfortunate reality that nothing has actually changed even though he won his freedom. And yet, his prison sentence made it extremely difficult to simply move on with his life, changing his entire existence without actually doing anything to alter the broader systemic problems that led to his arrest in the first place.

As Henry embraces Della, the other members of the 38th Street Gang come over to celebrate. Joey is wearing his **zoot suit**, so Rudy tells him that the style "died under fire" during the riots, insisting that it's no longer safe to walk around in a zoot suit. They then get into a fight, so the others break them up. After several people drag Joey away, Rudy breaks into tears and tells Henry how awful it was to be in the Zoot Suit Riots, where a group of sailors beat him and took his clothes off in front of a large group of bystanders. Speaking this way, he implies that he would have rather gone to jail with Henry than stay in Los Angeles during these tumultuous times. Going on, he explains that he joined the Navy because of his terrible experience during the riots.

What's most tragic about Rudy's experience in the riots is that it made him feel as if he'll never be able to safely wear a zoot suit again—something that is especially sad when viewers recall how excited he was at the beginning of the play to wear Henry's zoot suit someday. Now, though, it seems he will never again feel this way, since racist and violent white servicemen have permanently made him afraid of the style. What began as a symbol of a collective cultural identity, then, has now become a liability because of American society's racism toward the Chicano community.

Tommy interrupts this scene to tell Henry that police officers have arrived and are trying to arrest Joey. Apparently, the officers claim that Joey was stealing George's car, so George goes to settle the matter, taking Alice with him. When Henry goes to help, though, his father stands in his way, ordering him to stay put. When Henry doesn't stand down, Enrique pushes him to the floor. Upon rising, Henry prepares to hit his father but quickly stops himself, realizing that this would ruin their entire family dynamic. Seeing his tension, Della approaches him and takes him in her arms, and then Dolores, Lupe, and Rudy encircle them in a large group hug.

When police officers try to arrest Joey for stealing George's car (something he obviously wouldn't do), the audience sees that truly nothing has changed about society's unjust treatment of the Chicano community. It is perhaps for this reason that Dell and Henry's family members envelop him in a hug, recognizing that they must support one another because nobody else (except for rare individuals like Alice and George) will help them persevere through racism and discrimination.

A member of the press enters and narrates Henry's future, saying that he goes back to prison in 1947 for armed robbery. As a prisoner, he kills another inmate, though he's released in 1955, at which point he becomes addicted to drugs and dies in 1972. Hearing this, El Pachuco says that this is only the press's version of the story, adding that there are other endings, too. Speaking up, Rudy then narrates an alternative future, in which Henry fights in the Korean War and is killed in action in 1952, receiving a posthumous Medal of Honor. Reentering, Alice says that Henry marries Della in 1948 and that they have five children together, three of whom are now college students. The entire cast then calls Henry different names, including "the born leader," "the social victim," and "**zoot suiter**." Finally, El Pachuco concludes that Henry "still lives."

*At the very beginning of the play, Valdez describes El Pachuco in his stage note as "*the very image of the pachuco myth.*" By presenting these alternate endings to Henry's life, the characters in* Zoot Suit *ultimately present Henry himself as a mythical figure, somebody whose life becomes allegorical and legendary. While the press continues to smear Henry's name by outlining a bleak future, the others frame him as a heroic, triumphant man who goes on to accomplish great things and lead a happy life. And yet, it's unclear what Henry's actual future holds, meaning that the audience is left to cobble together their own interpretations. This ambiguity is a representation of the fact that society has continually superimposed its own ideas onto Henry's identity, turning him into a representation of whatever other people think about him and, more generally, what it means to be Chicano.*

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