

Zoot suit and the sleepy lagoon trial

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



Being Pachuco

During the 1940s in the United States, discrimination against Chicanos rose highly after the Sleepy Lagoon incident in 1942. At the time, the sleepy lagoon was a pool where Mexican Americans/Chicanos could hang out at due to the racial segregation going on in the United States at the time. However, during this time Chicanos did not understand where they stood in society. They just understood segregation was happening and it hugely affected them. As the pachuco narrator flips a coin, he is resembling the fact that there are two sides, (heads= Mexican or tails= American). Even today some Chicanos are “too Mexican” for America and “too American” for Mexico. One of the main characters, Henry Reyna, falls into this category. Henry is stuck in between living the pachuco life and trying to be a good citizen to stay out of trouble. He has now realized right from wrong but still has a shadow there misleading him to do the bad stereotypical actions of a pachuco.

The sleepy lagoon incident included “pachucos” which were hated by others during this time. Being a pachuco in the United States was seen as atrocious because they were thought to be affiliated with gangs and violence by the way they dressed and acted, which is still seen as is today. Regardless of having knowledge about what a pachuco is, the message being portrayed can be understood by any individual. Being a pachuco meant to be unified and be proud of one’s culture and where one came from, to resemble the identity of a young chicano. The outfits worn by the pachucos were labeled as zoot suits. The connotation of the colors red and black were a significance

of Testatipoka, the “ Aztec God of Education”. The meaning of the zoot suit was a way of social and political rebellion.

Pausing the Story

Zoot Suit written by Luis Valdez found its way to become the first Chicano play to be on Broadway. Truthfully, in this play, we see the true inconvenient discrimination against Chicanos. Traditionally, in order to get the point (political + social issues) across to the audience, Epic theatre is used so the individual does not reach catharsis (releasing strong emotions) therefore is not consumed with emotions and is aware. The way this is used in this play is by the zoot suiter narrator pausing the story every now and then to remind us that we are watching a play, and to stay aware. With only a snap of his finger, the play is back in action. During this, the audience gets a feel of what the play is trying to portray and its symbolism.

Segregation

During the time of the play when the dance floor comes on, a variety of individuals is represented. Included are Mexicans, blacks, and a marine. The representation of the marine comes later on when the media creates hatred towards pachucos. In conjunction, with there only being one white individual there, it is the same when they are all incarcerated. This is to show that the majority of the felons incarcerated before and even now are people of color. Also according to society, the reason why this white American is incarcerated is due to hanging out with the “ problematic” Mexican Americans. The white man can always walk away and leave the pachuco life, but for the Chicano it

is much more difficult to do so. Therefore, society has inclusively segregated people of color in all kinds of ways.

Gender Roles

Gender roles were also seen in the play, specifically towards women. In one of the scenes where they are having a family dinner, the Mexican parents are very traditional and do not approve of their kids being the bad pachucos as portrayed. However, their daughter is seen as a “puta” even to her own mother. During these times, women were suppose to act like a lady. Alice, Henry’s lawyer, also states “we are all in jail, some of us just don’t know it”, meaning that as a woman it is much more difficult living up to society’s expectations and that they are a segregated society. Furthermore, another woman at club, Henry’s ex girlfriend is annoying Henry when she sees that he has moved on to somebody else, somebody more ladylike and reserved. She then continues to mock Henry for not dancing with her then mocks him once more when the fight outbreaks and Henry does nothing to the other man. Therefore, he is seen as weak and not down for the pachuco actions anymore.

Going to Prison

As a result of threatening the other man but not showing action, the esés come after him for revenge at sleepy lagoon where somebody was killed. In conclusion, Henry is blamed for the death of the individual even though he was not the one who committed the crime. During the trial period, the judge who is in control of the situation is racist and prejudice and clearly does not want Henry and his pachuco friends to be free. The judge bring up the fact

that the Aztec culture is to blame for the bloody incident. In the end, they are all found guilty and end up going to prison for life. Henry receives solitary confinement and eventually attacks his shadow who was misleading him throughout the play in symbolism of his inner struggles.