

A Summary- "Master Harold and the Boys"

The play is set in the St. George Tea Room in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Sam and Willie, two middle-aged black servants, are cleaning up the room on a rainy day. They banter while they do their work, and Sam helps Willie learn ballroom dancing. Willie is going to participate in an upcoming competition but is struggling with the steps. He is also irritated with his girlfriend and partner, Hilda, for supposedly being unfaithful. Sam gently rebukes Willie for slapping her around.

Sam and Willie are interrupted when Hally enters. Hally is the young teenage son of the Tea Room's proprietors. He has just finished his school day and sits down to have lunch. He is clearly very familiar and friendly with Sam and Willie. Today, however, Hally is distressed to learn that his father might be coming home from the hospital. It soon becomes apparent that his father an alcoholic and disabled. The news about his father makes Hally weary, prickly, and apathetic about his schoolwork. Sam encourages him to do his homework, though. Hally and Sam discuss who might be considered a "man of magnitude." Sam first names Napoleon, but Hally disagrees. They discuss Tolstoy, Shakespeare, Darwin, Jesus, and others. Hally, an atheist, evinces disgust when Sam mentions religious figures.

Following this discussion, Hally starts to reminisce about his childhood - which contained both his happiest and unhappiest days. He used to wander down to the servants' quarters and hang out with Sam and Willie. He arranges Sam and Willie in a fictional scene and imagines himself coming down to play games with them. Hally's fondest memory was when Sam made him a kite. At first, Hally was embarrassed about the rudimentary toy, thinking it might not fly. However, once they got to the park and the kite flew, Hally felt exhilarated. Recalling that day, Hally wonders why Sam could not sit down on the bench with him to watch Willie run around with the kite.

Hally muses how strange it was that he, a white boy, could be so close to Sam and Willie, two black men. However, Hally's good mood vanishes when his mom calls. He argues with her on the phone and insists that his father should not be coming home because he is not ready. When Hally gets off the phone, he vents his frustration about his mom's weakness to Sam and Willie. He concludes that life is worthless and messy. Morose, he returns to his studies.

Sam and Willie talk about the upcoming ballroom dance competition and continue to joke around. Willie throws a rag that hits Hally, who explodes with anger. Hally insists that there can be no more of the ballroom dancing nonsense. Sam counters by saying that Hally ought to try dancing, but Hally scoffs that it is not intellectual enough. They discuss the merits of ballroom dance for a bit, and Sam conjures up the scene at the dance competition, describing the judge, the dancers, and the trophy. Sam's passion starts

to pique Hally's interest. He is inspired to write about the dance competition for his school essay about an important cultural event.

Sam waxes poetic about how ballroom dancing is a world of beauty and grace because professional dancers do not collide with each other like people do in the real world. Hally is touched and affected by Sam's words. Unfortunately, Hally's mom calls again. The second conversation between them is more strained than the last. Hally is frustrated that he will have to take care of his dad. However, when his dad comes on the phone, Hally changes his tone and pretends to be upbeat.

After he gets off the phone, Hally is bitter and angry and starts to lash out against his dad. Sam warns him not speak ill of his own father, so Hally starts to shout at Sam and Willie instead. He becomes increasingly belligerent, and starts commanding the men to get back to work. He reminds Sam and Willie that they have to listen to him, his dad, and any other white man in South Africa. Hally then informs Sam he must call him "Master Harold." Sam remains quiet for a beat and tells Hally that if he really wants that, Sam will never call him anything else. Hally is offended by the threat. He sneers at Sam and repeats a cruel, racist joke that he and his father both find funny. Sam pulls down his trousers and shows the boy his rear end to demonstrate the absurdity of Hally's behavior.

Hally is shocked and spits in Sam's face. Willie groans in despair. Sam wipes the spit off and wonders aloud if he should hit the boy but accedes to Willie's request that he should not. Then he tells Hally that he is sorry to see that Hally is this ashamed of his father and himself. He is sad to see that after all this time, his efforts to teach Hally how to be a better man than his father have failed. He then tells Hally that the reason he could not sit beside him while Willie flew the kite all those years ago was because the bench was for "Whites Only."

Hally is clearly morose after the conflict and starts to silently gather up his things. Sam softly asks Hally if they should make a new kite, but Hally responds hopelessly that it is raining, and leaves. Left alone, Willie and Sam continue to close up the Tea Room. Willie sacrifices the money for his ride home to play a song on the jukebox. The two men practice dancing and Willie tells his friend that he won't beat Hilda anymore.

Hally

A seventeen-year old white boy living in South Africa during apartheid. Hally is the son of the proprietors of St. George's Park Tea Room. Hally is smart but apathetic, prone to laziness and bouts of anger. He is also stubborn and cynical. He struggles with the shame of his father's alcoholism, racism, and physical disability, and finds his mother's weakness to be annoying. He has always found comfort with Sam and Willie but the pervasive racism of apartheid-era society creates a barrier between them by the end of the play.

Sam

Sam is a middle-aged black man who works at St. George's Park. He has worked for Hally's family for years, and is educated, smart, and patient. He has a deep friendship with Willie and is like a father figure to Hally. He is understanding but he also has a breaking point. Race complicates Sam's relationship with Hally, and by the end of the play, he experiences profound disillusionment with the petulant teenager.

Willie

Willie is a middle-aged black man who works at St. George's with Sam. Willie is friendly and not as well-read as Sam. He is sweet most of the time but has a quick temper. He has a tempestuous relationship with Hilda, his lover and the mother of his children. Hilda and Willie are practicing to dance in the ballroom competition together, which Willie is very dedicated to although he has difficulty with the steps.

Hilda

Never seen onstage. Willie's lover and the mother of his children; they have a tempestuous relationship. She is supposed to be doing the ballroom competition with him, but is mad at him for beating her.

Hally's mom

Hally's mother is the proprietor of St. George's Park Tea Room but never appears onstage. She is weak-willed and does not stand up to her alcoholic, violent husband. She is also racist, instructing Hally not to spend too much time with the servants.

Hally's dad

Hally's father is disabled and in the hospital throughout the duration of the play. He is an alcoholic, a bully, and is deeply racist. Hally does not respect his father and they do not have a good relationship. Hally's father comes is an example of white patriarchy at its worst. Fugard has openly said that Hally's father in "*Master Harold*"... *and the boys* is based on his own father.