The Alchemist Study Guide

The Alchemist by Ben Jonson

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

The Alchemist is one of Ben Jonson' s more popular comedies. Cony-catching or swindling (a cony was another word for dupe, gull, or victim) was as popular in the seventeenth century as it is in the twentieth. The con or swindle was a familiar theme and one which Jonson found to be a natural topic for comedy. There is little known about audience reaction to any of Jonson's plays. There were no theatre reviews and no newspapers or magazines to report on the opening of a play. The little that is known is drawn from surviving letters and diaries. But Jonson was not as popular with theatre-goers as William Shakespeare. In general, Jonson's plays were not well received by audiences, but *The Alchemist* appears to have been more popular than most, probably because of its topic.

Jonson differed from other playwrights of his period iq, that he did not use old stories, fables, or histories as the sources for his plays. Instead, Jonson used a plot "type" as the basis for most of his drama. In *The Alchemist* the plot is the familiar one of a farce. The characters are common, a man or men and a woman who set up the swindle. The victims offer a selection of London society. Like the characters from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* there are religious men, a clerk and a shopkeeper, a widow, a knight, and a foolish young man. Jonson's characters are not well-defined, nor do they have any depth. Instead, they are "types" familiar to the audience. The initial popularity of *The Alchemist* diminished in subsequent years; by BEN(JAMIN) JONSON 1610 the eighteenth century the play was rarely being produced. As is the case with most of Jonson's plays, *The Alchemist* has been rarely produced outside of England during the twentieth century.

Author Biography

Jonson was born in about 1572. The date is uncertain, since Elizabethans were very casual about the recording of exact dates. He was a scholar, a poet, and a dramatist. Jonson was born near London shortly after the death of his father. He was educated at Westminster School and for a brief period worked as a bricklayer for his stepfather. Jonson was briefly in the military where he killed an enemy in combat.

In his next career as an actor, Jonson also wrote additional dialogue for some of the works in which he performed. After killing another actor in a duel, Jonson was arrested but released after claiming benefit of clergy, which meant that he was an educated man. Jonson converted to Roman Catholicism during this period, and although he escaped hanging, he was still labeled a felon after his release.

Jonson's first play, *Every Man in His Humour,* was written in 1598, with William Shakespeare playing one of the roles on stage. Jonson continued with a new play every year for the next few years: *Every Man out of His Humour* (1599), *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), and *Poetaster* in 1601. Perhaps best known for his court masques, Jonson wrote the first of many, *The Masque of Blackness,* in 1605.

Although Jonson became well established as a playwright with works such as *Volpone* (1606), *Epicene, or the Silent Woman* (1610), *The Alchemist* (1610), *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and *The Devil was an Ass* (1616), he is also well known as a poet. Jonson was not formally appointed England's poet laureate, but he was awarded a pension in 1616 by King James I, thus acknowledging that the author was essentially performing that function.

Also in 1616, Jonson became the first poet or dramatist to publish a folio edition of his *Works.* Since not even Shakespeare had published a compilation of his work, Jonson received some criticism for this action. He was also awarded with an honorary degree from Cambridge University in 1616. Among Jonson's patrons was the Sidney family for whom he wrote one of his most famous poems,' *'To Penshurst,"* one of the best known poems to celebrate an estate and family. The beauty of this poem and the skill with which Jonson composed it is evident to visitors who abandon the road to approach Penshurst from the back of the estate.

Jonson was not always popular with audiences, who while attending his plays, were often verbally critical of the writer. During the height of his creativity, Jonson was as popular a writer as Shakespeare, who was also Jonson's friend. But he saw much of his popularity diminish later in his life while Shakespeare's continued to grow. Although Jonson was largely responsible for the publication of the first folio of Shakespeare's work in 1623, for which he wrote a poem, Jonson was less generous with his praise in private. Still, there is no doubt that Jonson both liked and admired Shakespeare. While Jonson was a talented writer, his misfortune was to be writing plays during the same period as a talent as enormous as Shakespeare. Jonson spent the last nine years of his

life bedridden after suffering a stroke. He died in 1637 and was buried in Westminster Abbey

Plot Summary

Act I

The scene is London in 1610. This is a plague year and wealthy people have fled London for the safer countryside. Lovewit has departed until the plague is over and has left his butler, Jeremy, to care for the house. As the play begins, Jeremy and Subtle are arguing over their relative importance to the swindle they are organizing, and each is claiming a larger share of the profit. Dol, who realizes that the two could ruin everything with their loud quarreling, tries to quiet the two men.

At that moment, the first victim, Dapper, arrives at the house. Dapper has come to the astrologer, Subtle, to find a way to win at gambling. After paying the two men all his money, Dapper is assured that he was born under a lucky star and that he will win. He is also told that the Queen of Fairy will help him win. The next victim, Drugger, arrives and is told that he, too, will be very wealthy and a great success.

Act II

Sir Epicure Mammon, accompanied by Pertinax Surly arrive at the house. Mammon is promised the philosopher's stone which will turn all base metals into gold. His companion, Surly is not as innocent and suspects Subtle of being a thief. Mammon has great plans for the stone that include having great wealth and power. Surly is not convinced and sneers as Mammon tries to convince him of the power of the stone. Mammon accidentally sees Dol and is told that she is a Lord's sister who is suffering from madness. Subtle and Jeremy get rid of Surly by sending him on an errand. Mammon leaves with the promise that he will send many of his household goods to Subtle to be turned into gold.

The next visitor is Ananias, who, when he reports that he cannot get more money to invest, is turned away by Subtle. Drugger calls again to bring tobacco and to tell Subtle that the Widow Pliant wishes to have her fortune told. He also agrees to bring Pliant's brother to the house so that his wishes can also be fulfilled.

Act III

Ananias returns with Wholesome, who when told of a way to turn pewter into coins, is concerned with the morality of counterfeiting, even to benefit the church. They both agree to purchase Mammon's household goods, and both leave to consider the legality of the counterfeiting problem. Surly returns to the house disguised as a Spaniard, Kastril arrives with Drugger and is so impressed with Subtle that the two young men leave to bring Dame Pliant back.

Dapper returns to meet the Queen of Fairy. Dapper is undressed and his money taken in an elaborate ritual during which he meets Dol disguised as the Queen of Fairy. When Mammon knocks on the door, Dapper, who is tied up and blindfolded, has a piece of gingerbread stuffed in his mouth. He is locked in the privy.

Act IV

Mammon is ushered in to meet Dol, who is disguised as an aristocratic lady suffering from madness. Mammon is warned that he should not speak of religion, as it will bring on the woman's madness. As others arrive, Dol and Mammon are moved into another room of the house. Dame Pliant arrives and is placed in the garden to walk with the Spaniard. Soon, Dol assumes a guise of madness, and Mammon is told that he has caused this because of his moral laxity, and thus, the completion of the stone is certainly delayed.

While this is occurring. Surly, disguised as the Spaniard, has revealed to the widow that Subtle and Face/Lungs/Jeremy are swindlers. Surly also proposes marriage to the widow. Her brother, who has been learning the art of quarreling in another part of the house, is told that since the Spaniard is an impostor, Kastril should challenge Surly to a duel. The two Puritans reappear and announce that they have decided that the church's need for money meant that counterfeiting, although against the king's law, was certainly not against God's law. Surly is so disgusted that he leaves the house. The scene ends with Lovewit's reappearance.

Act V

Jeremy goes to the door and tries to detain Lovewit long enough for Subtle and Do! to escape. Jeremy's attempts to convince his master that the neighbors are wrong about the activities that have occurred in the house fails when Mammon and Surly return to expose Subtle and Dol. Jeremy decides to confess his role in the game to his master, who decides to forgive the butler when he promises to deliver Dame Pliant to Lovewit as wife.

In the back of the house Dapper has been freed and has received what he thinks is a guarantee that he will be a winner at gambling. Subtle and Dol are forced to flee without their reward and Drugger is tricked out of his fiance. After Lovewit weds Dame Pliant, he convinces the remaining characters that they have been victims of their own greed. Kastril is pleased that his sister has made a good match and is no longer interested in a duel. The plays ends with Jeremy in control and safe from retribution.

Characters

The Alchemist

See Subtle

Ananias

Ananias is one of the holy Brethren of Amsterdam. He is a Puritan who seeks out the swindlers so that he might secure possession of the philosopher's stone. He hopes to increase his influence through possessing the stone. But when Ananias tells the alchemist that the Brethren will not invest any more money in the stone, Subtle drives the Puritan from the house. Later he returns with another elder, Tribulation Wholesome, and the promise to pay more money. He is zealous and quarrelsome, an idealist who rejects Christmas as too Catholic but who decides that counterfeiting is not really a crime if it benefits his congregation. In the Bible, Ananias is a man who was struck dead for lying.

Jeremy Butler

Jeremy is Master Lovewit's butler. He is known to his friends as Face, while Lungs is the persona Jeremy assumes as the alchemist's assistant. Knowing that while the plague continues to claim victims Lovewit will remain absent, Jeremy decides to offer the home and his services to an acquaintance, Subtle and his partner Dol, so that they can prepare an elaborate swindle. He is smart and inventive. In his disguise as Face, he is able to recruit new victims to the house and the swindle.

When Lovewit returns unexpectedly, Jeremy offers marriage to the rich Widow Pliant as a means of escaping punishment. Lungs is an appropriate name for one who assists an alchemist with the dark and shadowy process of turning base metals into gold. His name conjures up the smoky furnace of the alchemist's laboratory. Since alchemy is also associated with Satan, Lungs also suggest the fires and smoke of hell. Face is symbolic of the many faces, names, and characters that Jeremy can assume depending on his need and audience.

Dol Common

Dol Common is a prostitute, a friend of Jeremy and Subtle, and a partner in their con game. She disguises herself as the Queen of Fairy as part of the swindle of Dapper. She also assumes the persona of a great scholar who is seeking a rest cure as part of the swindle of Mammon.

Dol is the cool, level-headed partner, the one who keeps the other two under control when their arguing gets too loud. Her name offers two clues to her identity. Dol suggests doll, an artificial plaything that can become whatever its owner or holder wishes. Common represents the nature of the prostitute, lower class and too readily or easily available.

Dapper

Dapper is a law clerk who gambles and who hopes to learn how to win at games of chance. Jeremy met Dapper at the Dagger and the young law clerk comes to the house seeking assistance and a means to win at racing and gambling. Dapper pays Subtle and is told that a rare star was aligned at his birth, a good fairy, who will help him win. When Dapper returns prepared to meet his fairy, he is stripped, his mouth is stuffed with gingerbread, and he is locked in an outhouse as a more important customer arrives at the house.

The word dapper was identified with young men who present themselves as neat, trim, and smart in appearance, but was also often associated with littleness or pettiness.

Deacon

See Ananias

Abel Drugger

Drugger is a tobacconist who is also a victim of the swindlers. Drugger is seeking a magic that will tell him where to place the doors of his new shop and where to store certain goods so that he can make more money and be successful in his enterprise. The swindlers tell Drugger that it will be bis fortune to enjoy great success and that he will achieve a position beyond his youthful years. Drugger returns to the swindlers a second time with a story about a rich young widow who would like her fortune told. He hopes that Subtle will assist with a match between the tobacconist and the widow.

The smoking of tobacco in London began with the importation of the product from the New World. Since Drugger was used to refer to someone who dealt in drugs or who functioned as a druggist, Jonson's use of the name may suggest that he viewed tobacco as a drug.

Elder

See Ananias

Face

See Jeremy Butler

Kastril

Kastril, brother to Dame Pliant, has recently inherited money, and he wants to learn to be quarrelsome so that he might be a gentleman and a gallant. He is referred to as the angry boy. He is given a lesson in quarreling by Subtle. At the play's conclusion, Kastril is very impressed with Lovewit's ability to quarrel and so consents to his sister's marriage to Lovewit. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary,* the word, Kastril, is thought to be an derivative of Kestrel, a type of small hawk that is most noted for its ability to hold itself in the same place in the air with its head turned into the wind.

Lovewit

Lovewit is master of the house. Because of the plague that has hit London in 1610, he has left town and taken refuge in the country. He returns home earlier than expected and interrupts the swindle that his butler, Jeremy, has undertaken. He decides to forgive his butler in exchange for his assistance in marrying a rich widow who will make him feel seven years younger. Lovewit's departure from London permits the knavery to begin; his return brings the trickery to a close. He forgives his butler for allowing his master's house to be used in the deceptions, hence the love origin of Lovewit's name.

Lungs

- *See* Jeremy Butler

Epicure Mammon

Mammon is a disreputable knight who is guilty of avarice and lechery? He is a great believer in alchemy. He anticipates being able to transform all the base metals in his house into gold and precious metals. He has grandiose plans to be wealthy and to acquire all the lead, tin, and copper available, which he will then turn into gold. He also thinks he can turn old men young, cure all disease, and eliminate the plague. Mammon even pays more money for the extra promises the stone offers. He expects to have many wives and mistresses, silk clothing, and wonderful perfumes.

After Mammon catches a glimpse of Dol, he is enamored and wants to marry her. As is true for so many of the swindler's victims, Mammon is foolish an,d greedy and an unsympathetic victim of his own avarice. The explosion of the alchemist's furnace wipes out Mammon's investment in the scheme. Mammon's origination is as a Greek word for

riches. In Medieval English, Mammon is thought to be the name of the devil who covets riches. Its use in Jonson's play describes the nature of the character.

Widow Pliant

See Dame Pliant

Dame Pliant

Dame Pliant is a soft and buxom widow, who just happens to be rich and whom Drugger seeks to marry. Surly also wishes to marry her, but in the end, Dame Pliant weds Lovewit. Although she is engaged to Drugger she is willing to marry another man, hence the meaning of her name ("pliant" meaning flexible).

The Spaniard

See Pertinax Surly

Subtle

Subtle is a swindler who poses as an alchemist. He is disreputable and uses his persuasive abilities to cheat his gullible victims. Subtle has a talent for language and so presents a sort of pseudo-science that convinces his willing victims to part with their money. When Lovewit returns, Subtle is forced to flee without his gains. Subtle fits the definition of his name: he is cunning and crafty, difficult to discern or perceive, and a skillful, clever liar.

Pertinax Surly

Surly is experienced with swindlers and he immediately suspects that Face, Dol, and Subtle are conducting a swindle. He is unconvinced at the evidence, and so Sir Mammon attempts to persuade Surly with documents. Surly, however, is unconvinced. He is finally sent off on an errand. When Surly returns in Act IV, he is dressed as a Spaniard who cannot speak English. The swindlers heap insults upon Surly when they think he cannot understand English. When left alone in the garden with Dame Plaint, Surly reveals the swindlers' purpose and purposes marriage to the widow.

As his name suggests, Surly is a menacing threat to Subtle and his partners. He is unfriendly and rude, and as his first name (probably derived from pertinacious) alludes, he is tenacious in his quest to expose the swindlers.

Tribulation Wholesome

Wholesome is a church elder who accompanies Ananias on his second trip to the see the swindlers. He promises more money and when he is told that he and Ananias might transform pewter into money, he finds he must debate the ethics of coining foreign money. Like Ananias, Wholesome represents Jonson's use of satire to poke fun at Puritanism. Wholesome is the opposite of his name. He is much more willing that Ananias to forget ethical concerns when the question becomes one of compromise and profit or conscience.

Themes

Appearances and Reality

What the victims of the three swindlers perceive as reality is not the truth of the play. Each one thinks that he will receive wealth or power as a reward gained through little effort. The reality is that each will be left with less wealth and no more power than they had initially.

Change and Transformation

The theme of transformation is crucial to this play. The plot revolves around the chance and expectation that Subtle can change base metals into gold. A belief m alchemy was still firmly held at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Queen Elizabeth investigated the possibility of using alchemy to increase her worth and even Sir Isaac Newton believed in the principle. In *The Alchemist,* alchemy is the basis for a con game, a means to swindle unsuspecting victims. The only transformation that occurs is a lightening of their purses.

Deception

The plot of Jonson' s play is based on deception. Each of the three swindlers uses deception for financial gam. But the victims are also self-deceiving. Their willingness to believe allows the game to succeed. Surly assumes a disguise to reveal the deception, but his disguise is in itself a deception. Jeremy disguises himself as Face to lure victims to the house and later he becomes Lungs, the alchemist's assistant. Dol pretends to be the Queen of Fairy and a mad aristocrat as part of the game, and

Subtle is an astrologer and an alchemist. Each deception is dependent on none of the victims meeting one another. Thus, beginning with the middle of Act IV when the victims comings and goings reach a level of unanticipated activity, the deception becomes more difficult to control.

Greed

It is the victim's greed that allows the swindles to occur. Each man seeks more power or wealth than he has earned or deserves. And each returns to be further swindled as their greed escalates. The loss of goods and money increases as each victim fails to be satisfied with his lot and each desires even more wealth.

Morality

The play's resolution creates some questions about morality. The sting of loss is eased in the victims as they learn their lessons; their lives are better knowing the ill-effects caused by excessive greed. When Subtle and Dol are forced to flee the house without the money and goods gained from their efforts, it is also clear that there is no reward for dishonesty. But Jeremy escapes any punishment for his role in the swindles, and so, the concept of justice is questioned. Traditionally, the audience wants to see the bad guys punished and the good characters rewarded. That resolution is denied when Jeremy is forgiven by his master, and the end of the play leaves Jeremy victorious.

Order and Disorder

These two ideas are tied to the exit and entrance of Lovewit. When Lovewit leaves London and his house in Jeremy's care, disorder is the result. This is especially evident in Act IV when the victims begin amassing at the house, each seeking more help and more wealth. Order is finally restored when Lovewit returns to the house. The swindlers flee the house and the victims are forced to restore order to then-lives when they accept their losses.

Religion

The two Puritans are important symbols of Jonson's intent to satirize extreme religious practice. When Subtle tells the two that they need more money, he also suggests that they can "make" more money by transforming pewter to coin. The initial concern is the legality of transforming foreign coin. But this is all a deceptive debate about counterfeiting. The two Deacons decide that their need for money is necessary to fulfill God's work.

Accordingly, the needs to God outweigh the laws of man or, in this case, the laws of the king.

In effect, the Puritans compromise their religion and their ethics in the name of God's work. Jonson uses the two Puritans to illustrate what he sees as one of the problems of organized religion, the inability of some zealots to recognize that civil laws are important in the function of a society and cannot be discarded to satisfy religious need.

Victim and Victimization

The Alchemist put the definition of victim and victimization to the test. The victims of the swindlers are victims because they have been willing to cheat, to gain from magic or dishonesty what they have not earned. The issue, then, becomes whether they are victimized by Subtle, Jeremy, and Dol or if they are victims of their own greed. Since in the end, all, except Jeremy, become victims, the audience concludes that each

character has arrived at their destination due to their own actions; they have only victimized themselves and have reaped what they deserve.

Style

Act

A major division in a drama. In Greek plays the sections of the drama signified by the appearance of the chorus were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama from the Greeks to the Romans and to Elizabethan playwrights like William Shakespeare. The five acts denote the structure of dramatic action. They are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five act structure was followed until the nineteenth century when Henrik Ibsen combined some of the acts.

The Alchemist is a five act play. The exposition occurs in the first act when the audience learns of Subtle and Face's plan and meets the first of the victims. By the end of Act II, the complication, the audience has met the rest of the victims. The climax occurs in the third act when the victims all begin to arrive and Dapper must be gagged and locked in the privy. The near misses as each of the victims is targeted by the swindlers in a separate part of the house provides the falling action, and the catastrophe occurs in the last act when Lovewit arrives to restore order and each victim discovers the extent of the trickery.

Character

A person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual' s morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. "Characterization" is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation.

The Alchemist differs slightly from this definition, since each character is little more than a "type." The audience does not really know or understand the character as an individual. For instance, Drugger is recognizable as a representative the new merchant class. He is a shopkeeper who hopes to use magic to be more successful than other shopkeepers.

Genre

Genres are a way of categorizing literature. Genre is a French term that means "kind" or "type." Genre can refer to both the category of literature such as tragedy, comedy, epic, poetry, or pastoral. It can also include modern forms of literature such as drama novels,

or short stones. This term can also refer to types of literature such as mystery, science fiction, comedy, or romance. *The Alchemist* is a comedy.

Plot

This term refers to the pattern of events. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also sometimes be a series of episodes connected together. Basically, the plot provides.the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus the plot of *The Alchemist* is the story of three swindlers to try to cheat some gullible victims of their money. But the theme is that of greed.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for Jonson' s play is London and the house of Master Lovewit. The action is further reduced to three weeks during 1610.

Satire

Satire attempts to blend social commentary with comedy and humor. Satire does not usually attack any individual but rather the institution he or she represents. The intent is to expose problems and create debate that will lead to a correction of the problem. In *The Alchemist,* the two Puritan Deacons are the object of satire because they represent an over-zealous approach to religion.

Historical Context

Religion and Society

In 1610, James I had been king for seven years. And the Anglican church, firmly re-established with the reign of Elizabeth I, was only one of several religious influences at work in Renaissance England. Among these different religions, the Puritans were of major importance to theatre-goers. Puritans opposed the theatre, since they viewed it as deceitful. Actors were, after all, assuming a role other than their own. For Puritans, acting was analogous to lying.

Accordingly, it is easy to understand why Jonson might target Puritans for satire in *The Alchemist.* It is also important to understand that plays were subject to censure and were reviewed by the Master of Revels, who could force revisions and censure content. Unlike twentieth-century works, seventeenth-century plays were not reviewed for sexual content or obscene language. Instead, the issue of review was religion and politics, theology governed politics in many cases. In addition, the depiction of the king, who was a representative of God, and as such, was head of the Anglican Church, was especially important.

The hierarchy that began with God and moved to the King, was also analogous to the structure of the family, with the order descending from man to woman to child. England was still a largely agrarian society at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Most men labored outside the house and most women functioned primarily as wife, mother, cook, housekeeper, and sometimes nurse. Few men and even fewer women could read. Society was very class-defined.

For most purposes, there were two classes: the aristocratic land-owners and those who worked for them. In a society where few people could read, men and women were largely dependent on the church for their information. The clergy used church services as an opportunity to teach lessons and morals, and so the English had a knowledge of the Bible that few twentieth-century church-goers can appreciate.

The Theatre

The first permanent theatre was built c. 1576 and this led to a greater social status for theatre people. By 1600, some actors and playwrights like William Shakespeare also owned an interest in a theatre and earned a comfortable income. Most theatres were located just outside town due to religious problems, especially with Puritans. Plays were performed outside, during the day, and many patrons stood during the entire performance.

The theatres were open at the top, shaped in a circle or octagon, with rows of seating along the perimeter. The seats were protected by a covered gallery, but there was a large area in front of the stage where spectators stood that was open to the elements. If

the weather was cooperative and a play was to be performed, a flag was displayed to notify the audiences of a performance. Since working people were not usually free to attend plays during the day, the audience consisted largely of gentlemen who paid about 1 pence for the more expensive seats, while those who could afford the less costly center area crowded before the stage. Respectable women could attend if accompanied by a male escort. Prostitutes also attended to increase trade. All roles were played by male actors, with younger boys assuming the roles of female characters

Although many in the audience were uneducated, stage presentation and performance usually overcame those shortcomings, and the ideas of the plays were often familiar enough to be easily grasped by the audience. There were no curtains or dimming of lights to signal the end of an act; the act was finished when all actors in the scene had left the stage. There was no intermission and no scenery and none of the time or location indicators that are so familiar to today's audiences. There was only the text, which was often in verse.

Jonson's plays were frequently performed in the Globe, the theatre in which Shakespeare was part owner. Plays were very popular, but thirty years after Jonson's play, Puritans finally succeeded in closing down the theatres. They would remain closed until the Restoration in 1660.

Critical Overview

There is little information about how Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* was received by critics and the public. Most scholars acknowledge that Jonson's plays were not generally well received. The audience was often loudly critical, and Jonas Barish noted that several of Jonson's plays were hissed from the stage. This is not necessarily because die plays were not entertaining or topical, but rather, the play's reception reflected the audience's acceptance of the author. Jonson is usually described as arrogant and difficult; that may be a generous report. Jonson inspired little neutral comment. Critics and contemporaries either loved and worshiped Jonson or they hated and scorned him.

Since plays were not reviewed during the period in which this play was composed, response to a play may be determined by examining how often it has been produced in the years since its creation. Another way to gauge a play's popularity is through anecdotal evidence, letters, diary, and journal entries from the period. Unfortunately, in the case of *The Alchemist,* there is little evidence of this kind available. There is also little information about how long any play remained in production and on the stage during the early part of the seventeenth century. Although all plays were licensed by a government official, the Master of Revels, these records have not survived. The details of performance that are so readily available in the twentieth century, length and dates of performance and the theatre in which a production played, are not available for the period during which Ben Jonson wrote.

The topic of *The Alchemist* was a familiar one to Elizabethan audiences. The idea of a con man or swindler who, with or without a partner, seeks to part a gullible fool from his or her property derives from an old tradition in literature. It is a well-known story in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* The most familiar of Chaucer's stories of a fool conned by a woman and man is "The Miller's Tale," the narrative of a young wife and her lover who swindle a greedy older husband of his wife's fidelity. Thus, the plot of *The Alchemist* would have been anticipated and enjoyed by Jonson's audience. Indeed *The Alchemist* proved to be popular during the seventeenth century.

Alvin Kernan observed in *Jonson & Shakespeare,* that this Jonson play reappeared on stage throughout the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth. But by the middle of the eighteenth century, the play's language and its allusions had become too alien for audiences. During the nineteenth century the play was rarely performed, but many of Jonson's plays have been reappearing on stage during the twentieth century.

Most often, the reasons cited for not performing Jonson's work center on the difficulty of the language and the obscure nature of the references. It is interesting to note that while William Shakespeare's plays are enjoying a resurgence of interest on film (they have never been gone long from the stage), none of Jonson's plays has ever been filmed and few are produced on stage outside England. Shakespeare was Jonson's friend, but he was also his greatest rival. That appears to be just as true four hundred years later.

The Alchemist was not Jonson's only use of the con game as a play's primary topic. In *Volpone* (written five years before *The Alchemist),* Jonson creates an elaborate swindle devised by a man and his servant. The premise is the duping of several individuals who, thinking they will be left a substantial estate, shower the charlatan with expensive gifts. Of course the protagonist is not dying, the victims will not inherit anything, and the entire plot is revealed and order is restored in the conclusion.

The central idea, the farce, needs only a full compliment of cheaters and victims to be successful.

Like *The Alchemist, Volpone* is set in contemporary London. This is one way in which Jonson differed from his contemporaries, especially Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plots were drawn from stories and from history. They were set in another time or in another land, but they did not relate the events of the London outside the theatre's walls. It is difficult to assert exactly why Jonson's popularity with theatre audiences lagged so far behind Shakespeare's. But Jonson was enormously popular with James] and Charles I, Jonson's masques (masques differed from plays because they were characterized by elaborate costumes, scenery, and stage machinery; they were very expensive to produce) were very successful, and Jonson is best known for revitalizing a genre that dated from the Medieval period and reintroducing it in the seventeenth century. It is ironic that the excessive and progressively expensive cost of the masques were one element of what ultimately led to the closing of the theatres (in 1642) and the deposition of Charles I during the English Revolution.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Metzger discusses Jonson's symbolic use of the plague to satirize social dysfunction.

In 1610, London suffered another bad plague year. Those who could, left their city homes and fled to the clean air and relative safety of country life. It is this partial desertion of London that provides the time and setting for *The Alchemist.* Unlike his friend and contemporary, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson incorporated topical locations and issues into his plays. When Lovewit leaves his home in the care of his butler, Jeremy, and flees to the country, thus setting up the action of the play, the master's actions are similar to those that were occurring in London at the time.

The importance of setting is the focus of Cheryl Lynn Ross's examination of *The Alchemist* in *Renaissance Quarterly.* Ross explained that "the world of Ben Jonson's *Alchemist* - its setting, its rogues and their victims, the structure of the play, and the moral judgments both inherent in the text and on its margins - is the world of London during a plague." The plague grants Jeremy a freedom he would not otherwise enjoy. Ross argued that it is this freedom, common enough during a plague year, that provides Jeremy with the unstructured time to assume other identities. He is free to roam the city as Face, to go into taverns and seek out victims, and to transform himself into Lungs, the alchemist's assistant.

The plague also provides an empty house in which the three knaves can centralize their plot and the action. Victims can be invited back to the house to be conned at the thieves' leisure. This is another glimpse of the plague than that traditionally offered in historical accounts. The increase in crime due to increased opportunity is clearly established in Jonson's comedy and is just one element of the connection between Jonson's location and his theme. The observation that crime in *The Alchemist* is an opportunistic disease is only one small part of the satire that Jonson employs to provide laughs at the expense of his victims: the clergy, scientists, philosophers, and merchants of London.

One important element of satire is its ability to poke fun at institutions and ideas rather than individuals. This occurs in *The Alchemist* when the plague that visits the city becomes a part of Lovewit's house. As sickness envelops the real London, Jonson uses the symbols of sickness to illustrate the infection (in the form of con games and dishonesty) that threatens London. During the height of the plague, men abandoned their wives, mothers, and children, and neighbors became enemies. Fear became a motivating force in the destruction of social relationships.

Ross concluded that this betrayal of humanity is another part of the sickness that accompanies the plague. Jonson illuminates the problem by transforming it into a plot about three scheming knaves who try to bilk other Londoners out of their money. Of these characters, Ross stated that "from Drugger to Mammon, the characters represent a society suffering a thoroughgoing contagion of immorality." It is not the plague that

makes them sick; it is their lack of morality. Ross continued with "[these characters] absolute selfishness is a symptom of moral sickness that the plague characteristically and unerringly uncovered, tearing away at relationships of love and trust, pitting neighbor against neighbor, parent against child, subject against ruler."

Indeed, *The Alchemist* exemplifies the moral rottenness of London. It is little wonder that Jonson was unpopular with his audience. His picture of London society was not a flattering one. Ross insisted that to cure the city of its moral plague, Jonson subverts the usual ending of the plague - the return to the city of those who had fled to the safety of the country. Rather than have Lovewit return to the house and restore order to the play, and by representation, to London, Jonson uses Lovewit to illustrate a different ending. Ross noted that "with Lovewit's entrance, the play changes its appearance.... For Lovewit does not return London to its original, pre-plague state; he does not restore Subtle's booty to its rightful owners. Instead, he appropriates it himself, turning Subtle's productive efforts to his own advantage."

Jonson's ending denies his audience the tidy resolution they expect. The moral ambiguity of a roaster who seizes the victims' property and who forgives his butler for such acts of deception raises some questions. Ross would argue that Jonson is only illuminating the moral decay of London society. But that interpretation is dependent on a close reading of the final act.

It is this interpretation of the final act that interested G. D. Monsarrat, who argued in *Cahiers Elisabethans* that an understanding of Lovewit is completely dependent on how the last three scenes are read. Monsarrat provided a close reading of the final scenes and concluded that Lovewit is not a dishonest rogue as is his butler; instead, Lovewit is provided only the briefest information that Jeremy has confessed to his master. Traditional readings of the last act assume that Jeremy confesses everything to Lovewit offstage. On-stage, the audience learns only that Jeremy asks that Lovewit "pardon me th' abuse of your house."

To help make this forgiveness easier, Jeremy offers his master the Widow Pliant as an incentive. When Jeremy tells Dol and Subtle that Lovewit knows all, the audience assumes that the butler has confessed everything offstage. But it is also possible that Jeremy offers Lovewit's knowledge and forgiveness as a means of convincing Subtle and Dol that the master of the house is in control, and with him lies the authority of the law. Monsarrat pointed out that "even if Lovewit does not know everything Jeremy must make them believe that he does, otherwise they themselves might reveal *all* to Lovewit. Thus, Jeremy has a lot at stake if he cannot convince Dol and Subtle to leave quickly and quietly.

Although the audience knows that Jeremy is a liar, Monsarrat noted that Jeremy does not have an opportunity to meet Lovewit offstage, and accordingly, the audience should not believe Jeremy's warning to Subtle and Dol.

Lovewit is further absolved of complicity, according to Monsarrat, when he fails to ask Jeremy whether he has gotten rid of Subtle and Dol. The critic argued that "if Jeremy

and Lovewit were partners the natural thing for Lovewit to do would be to inquire whether Jeremy has got rid of Subtle and Doll. But Lovewit does not ask any questions, and Jeremy volunteers no information, precisely because they are not partners." Lovewit's failure to question Jeremy about his partners indicates that the master has no knowledge of them. When Lovewit invites the officers to search the house, it is because he has no reason not to.

As Monsarrat pointed out, Lovewit says that butler has "let out my house /... To a Doctor and a Captain: who, what they are, / Or where they be, he knows not." On stage, Jeremy has only confessed to the abuse of the house, and yet Lovewit states that the house was let to a doctor and captain. This information is not provided on stage and appears to contradict Monsarrat's argument, since Lovewit is either embellishing Jeremy's story to protect his butler or Jeremy has talked to Lovewit offstage. Monsarrat assumed that Jeremy has told his master this information, but it creates a loose end that weakens the argument.

In his discussion of the disposition of the goods, though, Monsarrat does offer some interesting observations that help diminish Lovewit's appearance of guilt. Mammon claims the goods as his. But Subtle has sold them to Ananias and Tribulation, who also claim the goods as theirs. Lovewit does what any good magistrate might: he asks Mammon to prove his ownership. Monsarrat argued that "whatever Lovewit's personal motives, it seems evident that he also fulfills a judicial function ... the officers never intervene, and therefore do not object to Lovewit's behaviour."

Mammon appears to accept Lovewit's judgment, since he acknowledges that the loss of his dreams is a greater disaster than the loss of his household goods. The goods do not represent great wealth. They are the pewter and tin that Mammon has sent to be changed into gold. The wealth lies with the widow. In marrying her, Lovewit acquires more wealth, but he also acquires a younger wife who will help keep him young. She is the real prize. Monsarrat made one last point that is an important observation about Jonson' s use of language in naming his characters. Lovewit's name does not suggest deception, as does Subtle or Face. In a play, such as *The Alchemist,* where the character's name reveals his or her personality and temperament, Lovewit's name reveals only innocent traits, not deceptive ones.

Monsarrat's argument provided a very different glimpse of Lovewit than the one offered by Ross. Ultimately, only the reader's close examination of the text will reveal the Lovewit each reader believes Jonson intended.

Source: Sheri Metzger, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, Cervo discusses the allusions to odors - particularly offensive ones - that characterize the emotional content of a scene in The Alchemist.

In the spat between Face and Subtle, the alchemist, that opens Jonson's play, Subtle is described as having been very much down on his luck before Face met him:

Fiteously costive, with your pinch'd-horn-nose, And your complexion of the Roman wash, Stuck full of black and melancholic worms, Like powder-corns shot at th' artillery-yard (11.28-31)

Glossing "Roman wash," Brooke and Paradise suggest "a wash of alum water," that is, an emetic. Face apparently returns to this odious metaphor when he calls Subtle "The vomit of all prisons-." However, the phrase "Piteously costive" introduces the motif of constipation to the passage that seems to point to a conflation of sewer and stomach contents, such as occurs in the *Curculio* of Jonson's chief comedic model, Plautus.

In *Curculio* (corn-worm, weevil), Platus uses the word *cloaca* (a sewer, drain) to describe the stomach of a drunken woman.

Vomit and excrement may be equally offensive to one's "nose," and Face knows, in retrospect, that Subtle was a charlatan waiting to explode. In the spat, Subtle resorts to a kind of halo-effect defense/ attack, berating Face as a "scarab," that is, a dung beetle, and "[the] heat of horse's dung." Jonson's irony here centers on the fact that the scarab held a privileged place in esoteric alchemy, signifying the survival of the stag (Christ) in a world the morality and thought processes of which amounted to little more than vomit and excrement.

In addition to being known as the dung beetle, the scarab is also known as the stag beetle because of the peculiarity of the structure of its antennae. *Cervo volante,* "the flying stag," is Italian for scarab. Whereas Christ's flying may be linked to resurrection and ascension, comparable to the ascension of the illuminated man in esoteric alchemy, Subtle's "flying" is a swindle, consisting in the "Selling of flies," that is, familiar spirits, to gullible clients. Consequently, Jonson's parodic irony is positively vitriolic when he has Face exclaim to Dapper, a mark, in reference to Subtle, "Hang him, proud stag, with bis broad velvet head" - velvety like the dung beetle's antennae and broad with relatively enormous pincers.

The element of the cloaca is essential to Jonson's larger satirical meaning. In the passage cited above, it seems clear that Jonson is using a pun to acknowlede the *Curculio* (the corn-worm) as his contextual source: "worms" and "corns" point to Plautus. Clyster and emetic combine to produce Subtle's moral character.

Source: Nathan Cervo, "Jonson's *The Alchemist"* in the *Explicator,* Volume 55, no. 3, Spring, 1997, pp. 128-29

Critical Essay #3

In this excerpt from his book The Third Theatre, *Brustein reviews a performance* o/The Alchemist. *While he complains of the lackluster production, Brustein does note that Jonson's play is "one of the three most perfect plays in literature" - a fact that is not diminished by mundane performances and staging.*

Jules Irving had two possible alternatives when he decided to stage Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* - either to find some modern equivalent for the action which might point its relevance to contemporary America or to choose a more traditional mode of presentation and offer the work frankly as a revival. Irving made the latter option, setting the play near its own time (the seventeenth century) and adopting a style common on the English stage about fifteen years ago: measured pace, lots of props, elocutionary delivery. The initial decision was honorable enough - it is a pleasure to see a work as brilliantly conceived as *The Alchemist* either in a new framework or an old - but within that option, the production is not successful. For all the farcical frenzy and frenetic activity on the stage of the Vivian Beaumont, there is no real speed in the performance, with the result that some inner vitality has been lost and one of the fastest works in the English language now seems like one of the slowest.

It is difficult to account for the longueurs of the evening: certainly the playwright is not at fault. The con games Jonson provided for his three central characters are still as fresh and inventive as the day they were conceived, and if alchemy is no longer exactly a popular hipster racket, why then politics and advertising can easily be substituted. Tribulation Wholesome and Ananias, those fanatical Puritan elders, have been replaced by more glib but no less dubious personalities like Oral Roberts and Billy Graham; the gigantic hedonism of Sir Epicure Mammon is now being realized by the kick-seeking Hollywood and Bohemian aristocracy; and open-mouthed suckers - like Jonson's gullible Dapper - are still looking for shortcuts to fortune with the horses or the numbers. Kastril, the angry boy who lives to quarrel, is personified today by those who try to prove their manhood through persistent violent encounters, and Abel Drugger, who wants his tobacco shop blessed with magical charms, is no more absurd than those who put religious icons in their automobiles. As for Jonson's amiable con artists, Subtle and Face, they have become as indigenous to American life as Mom and apple pie - indeed, Melville took the confidence man to be an archetypal national figure. Perhaps the ideal actors in these roles would have been W. C. Fields and Groucho Marx, perhaps the ideal epigraph of the play a common Americanism: never give a sucker an even break.

Then, Jonson's manipulation of his complex action is absolutely masterly: Coleridge was correct to call this one of the three most perfect plays m literature. The author keeps at least six distinct plots bustling simultaneously, not to mention countless secondary plots, and enormous energy is unleashed through this method - none of the strands allowed to touch until the conclusion, when they are rolled into a tight ball with the appearance of Face's master, Lovewit, returning to London.

Why then does the Repertory Theatre production seem so dull? The company is considerably more accomplished than previous casts at Lincoln Center, James Hart Steam's setting captures the atmosphere of the Jacobean theatre without sacrificing the spaciousness or ingenuity of the modern one, and George Rochberg's brassy score has a fine dissonant, and occasionally electronic, raucousness. But the evening suffers from much too much production, as if the budget for the show were a large one and every penny had to be spent. Points which should be made through character are made through the use of expensive props; a huge steam-producing machine, with a female figurehead, is pumped for laughs whenever the action flags; the costumes, though handsome, do not look as if they had ever been worn by human beings; and none of the actors manages to make a vivid imprint on his part.

The failure of the actors to rise above the production is the most disappointing aspect of the evening, for most of these performers have been extremely impressive in previous roles. Perhaps they are hamstrung by the casting - I certainly found it strange. Epicure Mammon, for example, possibly the most extravagant and voluptuous figure in dramatic literature, is reduced, by George Voskovec, to a mincing courtier with nervous mannerisms and minor appetites. Mammon's desires are so immense that even his speech is a form of gorging: note how, in his description of the banquets and orgies he intends to give after achieving the philosopher's stone, the sibilant consonants make him sound as if he were slobbering over his words:

I myself will have The beards of barbels served, instead of salads: Oird mushrooms, and the swelling unctuous paps Of a fat pregnant sow, newly cut off, Drest with an exquisite, and poignant sauce ...

Mammon is a Marlovian figure who wishes not to conquer the world but to swallow it; Voskovec turns him into a hungry Middle European who would be perfectly satisfied with a few scraps in a restaurant not even endorsed by Michelin

The actors playing Subtle and Face also seem to be miscast, since each would have been more effective in the other's role. Michael O'Sullivan - a galvanic actor with Beatle bangs and a marvelous dental smirk - is too light for the weighty Subtle, while Robert Symonds - a heavy presence with the sonorous chuckle of Frank Morgan - is too earthbound for the quicksilver Captain Face. Both Symonds and O'Sullivan are extremely inventive performers who are perfectly capable of managing the numerous impersonations called for by the text *{The Alchemist* is based on the varying of shapes), but since it is makeup and costume that is forced to do the job, one goes away remembering not so much alterations in character as changes in wigs, cloaks, and beards. Philip Bosco, an actor who looks like Redgrave and sounds like Gielgud, is solid and authoritative as Lovewit, and Nancy Marchand, as Dol Common, maintains a solid, vulgar, brawling quality which suggests more than anything the low-life character of the play. But the actors as a whole simply cannot hold one's attention for more than moments at a time, or wake one from a state of semi-somnambulism.

The production, finally, is without risk, and without the fine ensemble work that might divert attention from the lack of risk. Oh, there is one playful textual innovation -

Tribulation Wholesome is played by a woman. Aline MacMahon, who plays the part, is a charming, warmhearted actress, but charm and warmth are hardly appropriate qualities for this smooth, unctuous hypocrite, and considering what the Puritans thought about the "monstrous regiment of woman," it is not very likely that a female preacher would have been accepted into the ranks of the Anabaptists. Ultimately, then, the production is the result neither of good antiquarian research nor of a new vision, and that may be why, for all its intermittent moments of vitality, it gives the impression of having entombed the play.

Source: Robert Brustein, "Sepulchral Odors at Lincoln Center" in his *The ThirdTheatre,* Knopf, 1969, pp. 173-77.

Topics for Further Study

Research the use of character names to represent traits or ideology When did playwrights first begin this practice? Research contemporary characters in theater, film, and literature. How do their names reflect their character?

Religion was very important to English social structure during the seventeenth century. Roman Catholics were forbidden from receiving degrees from the universities and also banned from holding many political offices. Puritans were often the object of derision and many fled to the New World seeking religious freedom. Examine the role of religion during this period and try to resolve some of the references to religion that you find in Jonson's play.

At the end of the play, Subtle and Dol have fled without any reward for their knavery and only Jeremy seems to have profited from the three weeks his master has been gone. Jeremy is forgiven when he offers the widow in marriage. Nearly four hundred years after the play was written, changing social values would condemn such an arrangement and insist that Jeremy be punished rather than having the widow "sold" in exchange for bis master's forgiveness. Considering those issues, do you think the play is still effective? Do you rind that it condemns "get rich quick schemes" or that it offers an effective satire of the artificial nature of men's morals. Consider who you think really benefits from the play's resolution.

Critics sometimes argue that Jonson's play lacks a comedic plot and that it is really just a series of short episodes strung together, thus it is not really a comedy. Traditionally, comedies of this period were defined as such if they ended with a happy marriage. If you compare *The Alchemist* to other comedies of the period, what is it lacking? Because of the public's exposure to television sitcoms, do you think a modern audience might be more receptive to the structure of this play?

Compare and Contrast

1610: The plague, which is a reoccurring problem for congested London, hits especially hard.

Today: The plague, while not completely eradicated, is no longer a major threat to London or other major cities of the world. Today's modern plague continues to be HIV and AIDS.

1610: The New World is being settled with Jamestown colonists preparing to abandon their colony after a particularly difficult period. They are convinced to stay and try again when more colonists arrive.

Today: Those British colonies, whose tenuous survival were once in doubt, have become a major military and economic force, the United States.

1610: Henry Hudson makes another attempt to find a Northwest Passage. Backed by English investors, Hudson succeeds only in entering the strait that will bear his name.

Today: The twentieth-fifth anniversary of the last manned lunar landing is celebrated, and NASA announces that another exploration of the moon is planned.

1610: Shakespeare has enjoyed nearly twenty-five years of success as a play wright. After 1610, he will write *The Tempest* and collaborate on two more plays, *All Is True (Henry VIII)* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen.*

Today: Shakespeare is enjoying a Renaissance in film and theatre. Nearly a dozen of his plays have been filmed in the last ten years or are in the planning stages. In addition, scenes or plots have been adapted to other popular film use.

What Do I Read Next?

Ben Jonson's *Volpone,* written in 1605, is another play that uses the farce or the con game as a plot device. In this case a wealthy man pretends to be dying so that he can con expensive gifts from everyone who thinks he or she might benefit from his will.

Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale" is another parable about greed. As he did elsewhere in his *Canterbury Tales,* written c. 1387, Chaucer uses an old man's greed and lust to reveal the vulnerability of men.

Twelfth Night, by William Shakespeare, was first presented in 1600. Although the plot is not about a swindle, it does involve the use of disguise and trickery to bring about order and resolution. Since Shakespeare was a contemporary of Jonson's, his comedies provide a useful contrast to Jonson's.

The Merchant of Venice, also by Shakespeare, was first presented in 1596. This play also involves disguise and deceit, but it is interesting because the ending creates many questions about the definition of comedy. Like *The Alchemist,* a complete moral resolution is missing, but in the case of this Shakespearean play, the plot raises more complicated questions about racism and honesty. The character of Portia also provides a contrast to Dol and Dame Pliant for those who are interested in the depiction of female characters in comedies of this era.

Volume 11 of *Ben Jonson,* written by C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (published 1925-52), provides the most complete information about Jonson and his plays. Vol. 10 also provides some of the history of *The Alchemist's* production.

Further Study

Ford, Boris, Editor *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain* Vol. 4: *Seventeenth-Century Britain,* Cambridge, 1989 This book provides an easy to understand history of England in the seventeenth century. The book is divided into separate sections on literature, art, and music. An introductory section provides a historical context.

Fothenngham, Richard. "The Doubling of Roles on the Jacobean Stage" in *Theatre Research International,* Vol 10, no 1, September, 1985, pp. 18-32

This short essay provides an interesting examination of the doubling of roles on stage. Most playwrights wrote with an eye to how few actors would have to be paid to play the roles. Thus scenes and lines were constructed with the anticipation that one actor might be playing several roles, thus entrances and exits were planned accordingly Herford, C H., Percy and Evelyn Simpson, Editors *Ben Jonson,* Vols. I-XI, Oxford, 1925-52.

This eleven volume work includes a biography of Jonson and introductions to each of the plays. This text of the plays is a reprint of the 1616 folio that Jonson printed There is also some information about the public's reception of the plays and a great deal of information dealing with almost every aspect of Jonson's life and work Hill, Christopher *The Century of Revolution 1603-1714,* Norton, 1961.

Hill is a well-known author of Renaissance books that examine the cultural and historical background of English literature. Hill has provided an well-organized examination of the economic, religious, and political issues of the seventeenth century. The events that led up to the English Revolution, the Revolution, and the Restoration that followed were crucial incidents that shaped the literature of this period and that which followed Maclean, Hugh, Editor *Ben Jonson and the Cavalier Poets,* Norton, 1974.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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