Alison's House Study Guide

Alison's House by Susan Glaspell

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Alison's House, by Susan Glaspell, was first produced off-Broadway at the Civic Repertory Theater in the fall and winter season of 1930. At the heart of this play is a poet, Alison Stanhope, who has been dead eighteen years. Although only a handful of her poems were published during her lifetime, they have captured the attention and affection of people all over the country. Alison's spirit lives on in the hearts of her family and her fans. *Alison's House* is about the poet's family, their relationships, and the discovery of a portfolio containing hundreds of previously unknown poems by Alison.

Glaspell wanted to write her play about enigmatic New England poet Emily Dickinson, but the Dickinson family refused to give her permission to use their name or to quote from Emily's poetry. Undaunted, Glaspell moved the setting to her home state of Iowa and recast the Dickinson family as the Stanhopes. Unable to quote Dickinson's poetry, Glaspell quoted from Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose work was beloved by Dickinson. Emerson's poem, □The House,□ inspired the title of Glaspell's play.

Glaspell was an established and well-regarded novelist and playwright as well as the cofounder, with her husband George Cram Cook, of the Provincetown Players. When Glaspell wrote *Alison's House*, Cook had died, and Glaspell had married writer Norman Matson. *Alison's House* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931, which was a huge surprise to everyone because it had not been a favorite of critics and audiences. Production of *Alison's House* was immediately moved to Broadway where lukewarm reception forced the play to close after two weeks.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1876

Deathdate: 1948

Susan Keating Glaspell was born July 1, 1876, in Davenport, Iowa, to Alice and Elmer Glaspell. Her year of birth is sometimes given as 1882, which Glaspell herself perpetuated to make herself six years younger. She received her bachelor's degree from Drake University in 1899 and worked briefly as a reported in Des Moines, unconsciously gathering material for her later fiction and dramatic works. After successful sales of some of her short stories, Glaspell left journalism in 1901. She pursued full-time writing, publishing her first novel, *The Glory of the Conquered*, in 1909.

Glaspell was introduced to her husband, George Cram Cook, through a bohemian society, and they married in 1913. Glaspell and Cook soon moved to Greenwich Village in New York City. They spent their summers in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where, in 1915, they founded the experimental theater, Provincetown Players. Their work with the Provincetown Players was at the vanguard of the new theater movement in North America, which had slowly been picked up from its popular incarnations in Europe. Glaspell and Cook helped launch the careers of several aspiring playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill, whom they met in 1916. Glaspell's popular play *Trifles* (1916) was written to be performed along with O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916). *Trifles* was reworked a year later as the much-anthologized short story, □A Jury of Her Peers.□

In 1922, Glaspell and Cook separated from the Provincetown Players after Cook experienced some failure and O'Neill left to do commercial theater. The couple went to Delphi, Greece, where Cook worked on his writing. He died two years later, in Greece, and Glaspell returned to Provincetown. She married writer Norman Matson in 1925, and they divorced in 1931. *Alison's House* was first produced in 1930 and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931. People were surprised and disappointed by this honor because *Alison's House* was not widely regarded as a successful play. After its failure on Broadway, Glaspell left New York City. She worked briefly as director of the Federal Theater Project and then retired to Provincetown to write novels. Glaspell's work is notable for its pioneer spirit, regional Iowan flavor, and sexual tension between male and female characters. Her works often deal with questions about the meaning of life. In her lifetime, she published forty short stories, twenty plays, and ten novels. Glaspell died of pneumonia on July 27, 1948, in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Alison's House begins in the library of the Stanhope house, with Ann, the family secretary, sorting through old papers in a trunk. The housekeeper, Jennie, shows Knowles, a young reporter, into the library. He is looking for information about the late Alison Stanhope before the family finishes clearing out the house and sells it. He also desperately wants to see Alison's room. Knowles shares his passion for Alison's poetry with Ann, even showing her a poem he wrote. Ted, the youngest Stanhope, comes into the library. Ann introduces Knowles to Ted, and Ted is persuaded to take Knowles up to Alison's room, against the rest of the family's wishes.

Shortly after they leave, Louise comes in and questions Ann sharply about the reporter. Ann pretends not to know where Knowles has gone. Irritated, Louise calls for her father-in-law, Mr. Stanhope, to question Ann. She admits to him that Knowles is here because of Alison. Mr. Stanhope is not perturbed, but Louise is distraught at the talk that will be stirred up. She brings up Mr. Stanhope's daughter, Elsa, comparing her to Alison, which angers him. Louise and Mr. Stanhope find out from Ann that Knowles is with Ted and has gone to see Alison's room. Louise continues to complain about the gossip she is sure will come, and Mr. Stanhope tells her to go into the dining room and pack china. Louise pleads with him to take these matters seriously then leaves. Mr. Stanhope tells Ann he wishes he did not have family to worry about.

Ted and Knowles return to the library, and Knowles is formally introduced to Mr. Stanhope. Mr. Stanhope tries to be stern with Knowles, but Knowles's sincerity touches him. Agatha, Mr. Stanhope's sister, enters, suspicious of Knowles. Mr. Stanhope diverts her and tells Knowles to leave. Knowles asks one last question: □Have all the poems of Alison Stanhope been published?□ Mr. Stanhope says yes, but Agatha is distressed that Knowles may have found or taken something. Knowles gives his copy of his published poem to Ann and leaves, followed by Ted.

Agatha is upset that people will not leave Alison alone. Their packing is not going quickly, and Mr. Stanhope is stressed. Ann helps Agatha pack her mother's tea set. Agatha feels she and Alison are being turned out of their home. Mr. Stanhope replies, □Alison was at home in the universe.□ When Ted returns, his father rebukes him, but Ted thinks they are all foolish for keeping Alison to themselves. □She belongs to the world,□ he says. Agatha declares that she will continue to protect Alison, even if it kills her. Ted sits down to write a letter about Alison to his Harvard English professor. Mr. Stanhope yells at him, but Ted continues his task. Mr. Stanhope and Ann work on cataloging books, while Agatha quietly unpacks the tea set and leaves the room with just a basket full of straw.

Louise enters to collect a table that is to be sent to Cousin Marion. Ted tells his father that he needs information about Alison so that he can get a good grade with his

professor, who is very interested in Alison Stanhope. The abandoned tea set is discovered under the table, and the family thinks Agatha is going crazy. Ted persists in asking questions about Alison, which irritates Mr. Stanhope and Louise.

Eben arrives and greets his family. They talk about selling the house to Cousin Marion, but Mr. Stanhope says she does not have the money so the sale is going to Mr. Hodges. Mr. Stanhope tells Eben that Agatha is overly excited and not dealing well with the move. None of them really wants to give the house up, although they all live in town, and only Agatha and Jennie live in the house now. Eben fondly remembers his childhood with Elsa at this house, when Alison was alive. Ted asks if Alison was a virgin, which scandalizes Louise. Mr. Stanhope tells Ted to leave the room, and Eben grabs Ted and shakes him, cursing him. Eben is deeply stirred by his memories of Alison, □how can we help but think of her□and feel her□and wonder what's the matter with us□that something from her didn't□oh Lord, *make* us something!□

Elsa arrives in time to hear her brother's passionate outburst, and she agrees with him. The family is astonished to see her. She asks her father's permission to enter. Louise is hostile toward Elsa, and Mr. Stanhope is speechless. Elsa wants to stay the night in the house, for old time's sake. Jennie cries out from upstairs that a fire has been set. Eben, Ted, Louise, Ann, and Mr. Stanhope go to see what is happening. Elsa is shaken that the house is on fire just after she arrives. Agatha returns to the room, in a daze. The fire is put out, and Mr. Stanhope comes in looking for Agatha to reassure her that the fire was stopped. Agatha is distressed. Eben enters and tells his father that the fire was set□straw and kerosene. Stunned, Mr. Stanhope calls Jennie into the room and interrogates her. Louise blames the reporter, so Mr. Stanhope calls Ann and Ted in and asks them about Knowles. Eventually, Mr. Stanhope notices the tea set and realizes it was Agatha who set the fire. Distraught that her fire was put out, Agatha starts talking nonsense and nearly swoons.

Act 2

In the library again, in the afternoon of the same day, Mr. Stanhope is sorting papers and dictating notes to Ann. They talk about Ann's mother, whom Mr. Stanhope was fond of. She has been dead for nine years. Eben brings in a box of old newspapers, and they reminisce. Eben and Mr. Stanhope talk about Agatha, and Eben says he thinks Agatha has something she wants to burn but could not do it so she tried to burn the whole house instead. They think it has something to do with Alison. Mr. Stanhope decides to save the old newspapers for their nostalgic value. They talk about the New Year's Eve dance this night, but Eben and Ann do not want to go because they would rather spend their time packing up the house. Ted returns to the library and his letter to his professor. Mr. Stanhope is irritated with Ted and tells him to stop telling other people the family business.

Jennie tells Mr. Stanhope that Mr. and Mrs. Hodges have arrived. Mr. Stanhope is aggravated because they were to wait until the move was finished. He is worried about Agatha. The Hodges enter cheerfully, declaring that they are trying to decide between

this house and another. Mrs. Hodges wants to turn it into a boarding house with significant upgrades, all of which breaks Mr. Stanhope's heart. Eben implies that they do not want to sell after all, but Mr. Stanhope assures them that he will stand by his original price. The Hodges want a price break, but Mr. Stanhope is firm. Mr. Hodges will not commit to buying but wants to look at the upstairs rooms. Mr. Stanhope says no because Agatha is abed, but they convince him, and Ann takes the Hodges to look upstairs. Eben despairs of what they are going to do to his family's old house. Mr. Stanhope says he is glad it will be radically changed, so that it will not be the same house with other people living in it.

Eben and Mr. Stanhope talk about Elsa. Mr. Stanhope is angry with her for what she did because he and Alison were able to stop themselves from running off with the people they fell in love with. Mr. Stanhope says Louise is the only one with sense even though she goes about things wrong. Ted tells his father he wants to go into the rubber wheel business. Mr. Stanhope tells him he is going to practice law like he and Eben do. Eben wants to take time off□he is a bit dreamy, especially in regards to old times with Alison. Mr. Stanhope reminds him of Louise and his children. Eben knows he is being foolish but feels a pull to do something else. Ted offers to run away with Louise if Eben will write a new essay about Alison for him. Eben used to write when he was young but gave it up when he and Louise married.

Louise returns to the library and tells Mr. Stanhope she refuses to stay the night in the same house as Elsa. She is outraged when Mr. Stanhope tells her to stay with friends for the evening, and Eben, her husband, sides with his sister instead of her, his wife. Ted propositions Louise to take a trip with him back to Cambridge. Mr. Stanhope cuts them off, and they talk about the Hodges and Ann. The Hodges return to the library and Louise chats with them about their boarding house plans, going along with Mrs. Hodges's ideas. Mr. Hodges finally says that they will buy the house and immediately writes out a check. Mr. Stanhope is stunned.

Knowles returns to talk to Ann. Mr. Stanhope interrogates Knowles as to his purpose, but the reporter is embarrassed to say. Ted understands that he likes her, but Mr. Stanhope is suspicious of the young man. Mr. Stanhope finally sends for Ann, and meanwhile Knowles wonders aloud that something of Alison remains in all her family members. When Ann arrives in the library, Knowles implores her to walk with him, so that they might get to know each other better. Mr. Stanhope finally encourages her, and she agrees to go. While Ann is off getting ready, Mr. Stanhope gives Knowles a book of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poetry□Alison's favorite book, marked with her notes. Knowles and Mr. Stanhope take turns reading each other poems from the book.

After Ann and Knowles leave, Mr. Stanhope remarks that Ann is in love. Elsa comes into the room and tells Mr. Stanhope that Aunt Agatha is up and about. He leaves to see to her health. Elsa and Eben talk about how she ran away with a married man, and Eben points out that Alison, when she was in love with a married man, did not run off with him. Elsa admits that her boyfriend misses his family and that they are not happy all the time. Agatha enters the library carrying a bag and arguing that she has a right to be in her library. She is fixated on the fire Eben is tossing old papers into. Agatha believes she is

being made to live with her brother because Elsa left him when she ran off with her married boyfriend. Agatha and Elsa sit close together, and Eben leaves them alone together. Agatha takes a leather portfolio out of her bag. Elsa senses her aunt's distress and offers to help her in any way she can. Agatha is conflicted but she cries out: □For□Elsa!□ just before she collapses. Elsa cries out and her brother and father return to the library. Agatha is dead.

Act 3

Elsa is in Alison's room, preparing to look through the portfolio that Aunt Agatha gave her. Ann comes in to see Alison's room one last time. Elsa reminisces about Alison and Ann talks about falling in love. They look at the picture of the man, whom Alison loved. Elsa recounts how she fell in love with her boyfriend Bill all at once even though they knew each other since they were children. Ann asks Elsa for a picture of Aunt Agatha, for Knowles's story. They talk about Agatha, who was possessive of her sister Alison. Elsa is reluctant to give Ann her picture of Agatha or speak about her to Knowles because her father or Eben should approve first.

Eben joins Elsa and Ann in Alison's room. Ann admits she is going to marry Knowles. Eben is hesitant at first but gives Ann the picture of Agatha in her youth for Knowles to put in his story. Ann thanks them both profusely and leaves. Eben feels terrible for his father, who will be losing Ann, and so soon after losing his sister Agatha. Eben recalls beloved Aunt Alison aloud, what she looked like, and how she would sit and compose her now famous poetry. Elsa shows Eben the mysterious portfolio just as Mr. Stanhope joins his two grown children. Mr. Stanhope recognizes the portfolio as belonging to Alison, and Elsa recounts how Agatha bequeathed it to her with her dying breath.

Jennie enters, determined to carry out a wish of Agatha's. Mr. Stanhope figures out that Agatha made Jennie promise to burn the portfolio. Jennie does not know what it is, but she wants to do right by her employer and is distressed. Mr. Stanhope, Elsa, and Eben convince Jennie that she absolved of her promise because Agatha gave the case to Elsa at the last minute. Jennie is distraught that since Alison and Agatha are dead she has no one to look after. Mr. Stanhope says he needs her to look after him, and he sends her off to bed.

Elsa finally opens the contents of the portfolio and discovers packets of Alison's poetry□poems that no one has ever seen before. The three of them are absorbed with reading these poems, poems that are so revealing of the person they knew and loved, which is why she never published them. Ted arrives, apologizing for his tardiness. He was summonsed home after Aunt Agatha's death. Ted is astonished to see these new poems, but Eben sends him away so that Mr. Stanhope can have peace while he reads.

After they read for a while, Mr. Stanhope tells Elsa and Eben that he was instrumental in keeping Alison from running away with her beloved. She was in love with a professor at Harvard who was married with children. Ted returns, demanding to read the poems also. Mr. Stanhope becomes protective of Alison and says he will do what Agatha could

not and burn Alison's poems. His children disagree, decrying that the poems belong to them as well. Ted is very passionate and even stuffs some of the poems in his pocket. Mr. Stanhope threatens to kill him and then is shocked by his own outcry. Elsa convinces Ted to leave, and Eben also goes out to get sherry. Elsa speaks a little with her father about the world of shame and happiness she lives in and how Alison would not disapprove of her. Eben returns, and they drink to Alison's memory. The poems are gathered, and Eben says of them, "They were too big for just us. They are for the world." Ann, Ted, and Knowles come to the bedroom to add their voices to Eben and Elsa. Ann implores Mr. Stanhope to let Alison's poems go out in the world, invoking his forbidden love of her mother. Mr. Stanhope is stricken. Ann, Ted, Knowles, and Eben leave once Mr. Stanhope has been convinced to leave the poems to Elsa, as Agatha bequeathed. Alone, Elsa and her father talk about his unhappy marriage to her mother. He is angry with her for running off with a married man after he lived the lie all of his life, denying himself his true love, Ann's mother. They feel Alison's poems were written for each of them and take this as a sign of their universal appeal. Mr. Stanhope builds up the fire, takes the portfolio, and appeals to Elsa one last time to join him in protecting Alison's good name. As the hour strikes the new year and new century, Mr. Stanhope finally turns over the poems to Elsa and father and daughter embrace and are reunited.

Characters

Aunt Agatha

Aunt Agatha is the sister of Alison and of Mr. Stanhope. She lives alone in the historic family home in the Iowa countryside, near the Mississippi River, cared for by her maid, Jennie. Agatha is upset about being moved out of her home and repeatedly blames her brother for turning her out. She does not seem to regard his strained finances as any kind of justification for selling the house. All the talk about Alison that comes up from the move and from Knowles's arrival drives Agatha to worry about the unpublished poetry of Alison's, which she is hiding. Because of its scandalous content, Agatha knows she must destroy the poems, but she cannot bring herself to do it. Although Agatha never specifies, one might conclude from the other characters that Agatha is unable to destroy these poems because of their beauty. Agatha tries to burn the house down and later dies just after failing a second time to burn the portfolio. She leaves the poems to Elsa.

Father

See Mr. Stanhope

Mr. Hodges

Mr. Hodges buys the Stanhope family manor. He and his wife plan to drastically alter the building, making it into a summer boarding house. Mr. Stanhope and Eben are unhappy when they learn of these plans, but Hodges is either oblivious to their emotions or does not care. Hodges tries to negotiate a lower price because he says the house is in poor repair, but Mr. Stanhope stands firm, half-hoping Hodges will back out of the deal.

Mrs. Hodges

Mrs. Hodges, wife to Mr. Hodges, looks forward to modernizing the Stanhope house. She wants to rent its rooms to summer boarders. Like her husband, Mrs. Hodges seems completely insensitive to the Stanhopes' grief about losing their family house and about the prospect that it will be completely changed in renovation.

Jennie

Jennie, Aunt Agatha's servant, has been with the family for a long time; she once worked for Alison Stanhope as well. After Agatha dies, Jennie tries to carry out Agatha's wish to burn Alison's portfolio of poetry, but she is prevented by Mr. Stanhope, Eben, and Elsa. She is distressed at not being able to fulfill her promise to Agatha, but Mr. Stanhope reassures her that her earnest intent is fulfillment enough.

Richard Knowles

Richard Knowles, a young reporter from Chicago, comes to the Stanhope family house hoping to learn more about Alison before the house she lived in is sold and her century is past. A poet himself, Knowles loves Alison's poetry. He convinces Ted to show him Alison's room, something no outsider has ever seen. Later, he walks the banks of the Mississippi River, thinking about how Alison once did the same thing. When Mr. Stanhope realizes how much feeling Knowles has for Alison as a poet, he gives the young man Alison's marked copy of Emerson's *Poems*. Knowles and Ann fall in love soon after they meet, and they are engaged by the end of the play.

Ann Leslie

Ann Leslie, Mr. Stanhope's secretary, is no mere employee. She is very close to the family, having grown up with them. She is treated more like an extended family member. Ann falls in love with Knowles and his poetic soul, but she restrains herself from acting on her feelings until Mr. Stanhope, her surrogate father, gives his consent. In the third act, Ann speaks passionately to Mr. Stanhope in favor of publishing Alison's poetry because her words were meant to live on beyond them all and their mortal concerns. Knowing the power of what she asks, she pleads with Mr. Stanhope to do it for her mother.

Miss Agatha Stanhope

See Aunt Agatha

Alison Stanhope

Alison Stanhope is the central character of *Alison's House*, although she is never seen on stage or heard from directly. She has been dead eighteen years at the time the play's action takes place. Through the dialogue of the other characters, it is revealed that Alison loved a married man and may have had an affair with him, but her brother, Mr. Stanhope, stopped her from leaving with him, behavior that would have been scandalous to the family in the mid-nineteenth century. Alison wrote beautiful, unique poetry. A few of her poems were published in her lifetime and just after, but those few earned her a fierce following. People such as Knowles are eager to discover and publish more of her writing. When Alison's secret stash of poems, which tell the story of her forbidden love, are discovered, Mr. Stanhope wants them destroyed so that Alison's honor and memory will not be tarnished.

Alison is modeled after American poet Emily Dickinson. Dickinson was a reclusive but witty woman, and the genius of her unique poetry was not discovered until after her death. Like the Stanhope family, the Dickinsons favored their privacy in the face of

Emily Dickinson's fame and refused to let Glaspell use Dickinson's name or poetry in this play.

Eben Stanhope

Eben Stanhope, Mr. Stanhope's son and husband to Louise, works as a lawyer in the family business. He and Louise are cold toward each other and clearly do not have a happy marriage, although it is mentioned that they have children. Eben is overall unhappy with his life, but he does not have a forbidden, secret love like several of the other characters do. He feels an urge to do *something* different with his life, and that something may be writing, the love of which he seems to have inherited from his aunt Alison. Eben confesses to Ted that he gave up writing when he got married. Eben, like Elsa and the others, argues with Mr. Stanhope for the preservation of Alison's private poems.

Edward Stanhope

See Ted Stanhope

Elsa Stanhope

Elsa Stanhope, Mr. Stanhope's daughter, ran away with Bill who was married to Louise's best friend Margaret. Elsa and Bill live in exile from their families because of the scandal their relationship created. Elsa shyly returns home for a visit when she hears that her father is selling the family house. Louise is irate at Elsa's presence and will not stay in the house with her, but Mr. Stanhope permits Elsa to stay, despite the dishonor she has brought to the family. Elsa is given Alison's portfolio of unpublished poems by Aunt Agatha and fights with her father for their preservation. Elsa convinces him that they cannot destroy Alison's story and that it should be shared with the world. In his agreement, Mr. Stanhope also accepts Elsa. Elsa anticipates a new age when love is a more honorable foundation for a relationship than status or expectation. She completes the story of love and loneliness told through Alison's poetry. Elsa has her own, different loneliness, but now, with the acceptance of her family, it need not be as severe as it was for Alison.

Louise Stanhope

Louise Stanhope, Eben's wife, is an example of a typical, upstanding late-nineteenth-century woman, but her rigid character clashes with the Stanhope family. Louise worries more than anyone else about what other people are saying about their family. She and Eben have children, but they are not happily married. Although Eben has not fallen in love with another woman, Eben may eventually find a reason to leave her. Louise seems unconcerned that this could actually happen, probably because breaking up a marriage is still a very serious social transgression.

Mr. Stanhope

Mr. Stanhope, the patriarch of the family and Alison Stanhope's brother, lives in the city and is being forced to sell the historic family home where his sister, Agatha, and her maid, Jennie, now live. Mr. Stanhope is saddened to see the home in which he was born and grew up go to the soulless Hodges but strained finances and concern for Agatha are forcing him to sell. Like Alison, Mr. Stanhope has suffered his own share of heartache, pining after Ann's mother even as he remained in an unhappy marriage to the mother of his children. Nonetheless, he is a good father and close to his children. Rigid Louise is a foil for Mr. Stanhope, showing him to be reserved and private but not uptight or overly concerned with gossip. When Elsa arrives at the house unexpectedly, Mr. Stanhope will not turn her away even though he is upset with her for bringing shame to the family name. He is reluctant to give up Ann, who is like a daughter to him and his only remaining connection to the woman he once loved, but he see that Knowles is a kind man. Mr. Stanhope does not want to reveal what may be seen as a scandal regarding Alison, but for the first time in his life, he chooses love. Thus, he is able to reconcile with Elsa and release Alison's poems.

Ted Stanhope

Ted Stanhope, Mr. Stanhope's youngest son, is a student at Harvard University. Ted is too young to remember Alison and seems to lack the sensitivity toward life that Eben and Elsa exhibit, although he does not lack for passion and argues vehemently with his father for the preservation of Alison's lost poems. Throughout the play, Ted seeks new information about mysterious Aunt Alison in order to get better grades with his English professor, but his family refuses to cooperate with him. He does not understand what the big deal is□Ted is the only family member not touched by forbidden love. Ted also does not want to go into the family business and is more attracted to speculating in rubber.

Themes

Forbidden Love

Forbidden love is a theme that runs throughout the lives of the characters in *Alison's House*. The title character, Alison Stanhope, is known to have loved a married man. She would have run away with him except that her brother stopped her. Her loneliness and love inform much of her unpublished poetry, which her sister and brother try to suppress. Alison's brother, Mr. Stanhope, has also experienced forbidden love. He was in love with Ann's mother even though he was married with three children. He denied himself this love although Mr. Stanhope kept Ann and her mother in his household so that he could enjoy Ann's mother's company.

Elsa is the only character who has acted on her forbidden love. Although it was scandalous to her family, Elsa ran away with the man she fell in love with, and he left his wife and children to be with her. It is perceived as improper for her to come back home, but she is moved to see her childhood home before it is sold, and her father and brothers do not really want to disown her even if society expects it of them. Elsa's brother Eben suffers from a nebulous need to do something other than be married with children and work in the family business. He is not sure what he wants to do instead, but it might be writing, the only conversation topic in the play that excites Eben.

Alison's House takes place at the end of the nineteenth century. Mores concerning marriage and family were strict and clearly defined. Although men and women could legally get divorced, doing so carried a much greater stigma then than it does in the early 2000s. People who left their families to run off with a lover were even more disgraceful than those who got divorced. Their behavior was considered to be immoral and selfish and reflected badly upon family members, who often disowned the person in an effort to distance themselves from the shame. What readers see in the context of Glaspell's play is that people who deny their love (Mr. Stanhope and Alison) are no worse or better off than the people who indulge their feelings at the expense of their family (Elsa). The playwright offers no simple answer.

Ownership

Ownership of the Stanhope family house, of its furnishings, and, ultimately, Alison's unpublished poetry is the problem that the characters of this play struggle to solve. Mr. Stanhope must sell the house he and his children were born in because they have all moved away to the city except for his elderly sister, Agatha, and Mr. Stanhope cannot afford both homes any longer. Interestingly, none of the Stanhopes ever considers moving back to the country, although they are all deeply saddened to see the house sold. While they can have no control over what becomes of the house, Mr. Stanhope and Eben are upset to learn that the Hodges plan to dramatically overhaul the house:

modernize it, partition the rooms, cut down very old trees, and, in general, transform the place into something that little resembles the old Stanhope home.

As part of the moving process, the family belongings are being divided up. Agatha is to take her mother's china tea set. Mr. Stanhope is sharing the library of books with Eben and Elsa. He even gives a volume of poetry to Knowles after the young reporter impresses Mr. Stanhope with the sincerity of his feelings for Alison's poetic works. Very few of her poems have been published. Her published work is small but dearly loved by her family and immensely popular with readers. Although she has been dead eighteen years, reporters and scholars still periodically probe the family for more information about the reclusive Alison and to learn if any more unpublished poems have been found. But the Stanhope family has been close-mouthed about their beloved Alison. When Alison's secret stash of poems is found in the third act, held by Agatha all these years, the question of ownership arises again. Mr. Stanhope, like Agatha, wants to destroy the poems because they reveal Alison's love for a married man, which threatens to bring scandal to her name and to the Stanhope family all over again. Elsa, to whom Agatha gave the poems before she died, sees her own experiences in forbidden love reflected in Alison's writing and determines that the poems must not be destroyed. Elsa, Eben, Ted, Ann, and Knowles argue for the universal truth and beauty in Alison's writing, which belongs to the whole world and not just one small family. Mr. Stanhope, seeing something of his own life's suffering in Alison's words, finally consents that the poems can be published and returns them to Elsa's care.

The play explores, then, the rights of ownership and privacy in a case in which relatives of a famous artist face the dilemma of either saving their privacy at the expense of the artwork or running the risk of having assumptions made about their relative and themselves if the artwork is published. The family members know readers ought to distinguish the writing from the life experience that generated it, but this distinction is often overlooked by those who seek sensational inferences regarding an artist's life in the work that artist produces. In the end, however, the Stanhopes affirm that the poetry is more important than any potential comfort they would gain by suppressing it.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a significant theme in Emily Dickinson's poetry, and Glaspell evokes this theme in her play. Although the major characters are related in some fashion, each is isolated from the others because of private miseries. Elsa has run off with a married man, effectively cutting herself off from her family and friends. Although she and Bill are happy with each other, they are also unhappy because they are estranged from others. Eben is in a loveless marriage and working in a job he dislikes, which happens to be the family business. He is cold toward his wife and only comes to life when he thinks about the past, especially the good times he had as a child around his aunt Alison. Although surrounded by family, he is close to no one and unable to express true emotion. Ann, although embraced by the Stanhopes as one of their own, seems to have no immediate family of her own now that her mother is dead. Agatha lives alone in the Stanhope ancestral home. Her isolation is physical as well as emotional. With her sister Alison

dead, Agatha has little companionship, refusing to move into the city with her brother until he forces her to by selling the house. Mr. Stanhope, as family patriarch, brings his loneliness upon himself by taking on the mantel of family leader. He denied himself true love with Ann's mother because he was already married and had children. He has carried the pain of this unfulfilled love with him much of his life, keeping Ann near as a reminder of her mother. Alison wrote her loneliness into her poetry, which becomes a balm to her family and seems to show them each a way to cope.

Style

Foreshadowing

In *Alison's House*, Knowles arrives in act 1, asking about Alison and gently inquiring if there might be some of her poetry yet unpublished. His questions, on top of the move itself, stir up memories of Alison for all of the family, and the subject of a possible body of unpublished work lingers and repeats. This foreshadows the eventual discovery of the poems in act 3. Aunt Agatha appears in act 2 with a leather portfolio of unnamed contents, drawing heightened interest to this possibility. The Stanhopes' certainty that all of Alison's poetry has been found and published lends dramatic tension to the final discovery.

Setting

This play is set in Iowa, where Glaspell herself grew up. She chose Iowa as her setting in part because she knew and loved the area and in part because Emily Dickinson's family refused to allow her to directly use their name or likenesses in her dramatization of the discovery of Dickinson's body of work. The action of the play takes place in the library and in Alison's room of the Stanhope family house, a large country manor near the Mississippi River. The house is old-fashioned and a little run down and in this way reflects the family who loves it. *Alison's House* takes place at the turn of the century, on December 31, 1899. Even as the family members are ensconced in their familiar territory, they are preparing to enter the unknown: a new century and a life without their ancestral home.

Historical Parallels

Glaspell's play is a creative work that parallels in characters and events actual historical people and their experiences. While purporting to be about the Iowan family called Stanhope, *Alison's House* is actually about Emily Dickinson's family, who discovered her writings after she died. In Dickinson's lifetime, only a few of her poems were published. Her family found more than eight hundred poems in hand-bound volumes after she died. Dickinson's style is unique and compelling, but she and her family were very private people. Over forty years after Dickinson's death, her family would not permit Glaspell to use the Dickinson name or any of Emily Dickinson's poetry in her play. By fictionalizing the characters and the setting, Glaspell was able to explore the dilemma that faced Dickinson's family. The play shows characters grappling with whether creative work is a private thing, for one's family, or part of the culture in which it occurs and thus something that really belongs to everyone.

Climax and Denouement

The climax is the turning point of a story and is often the most exciting part. The denouement, which is a French word that means untying, follows the climax and resolves the plot. In *Alison's House*, the climax occurs at the end of act 2, when Agatha fails to destroy Alison's poetry and bequeaths it all to Elsa. This event is considered the turning point in the story partly because of its placement two-thirds of the way into the play and partly because Agatha's gift and subsequent death irrefutably change the outcome that was expected up to that point, which was the destruction of Alison's portfolio.

The denouement occurs in act 3 when Elsa and her family discover Alison's lost poetry. The question posed throughout the play of whether Alison wrote more poetry is finally answered. The family struggles over whether to share these revealing poems with the rest of the world, but sympathies expressed throughout the play suggest the eventual outcome that Mr. Stanhope relinquishes his grip on Alison's privacy and permits the poems to be known to the world.

Historical Context

Roaring Twenties

The Roaring Twenties is a name for the decade of the 1920s. In the United States, it was a time of prosperity and social advances, especially for women who were granted the right to vote in 1920 with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. World War I was over, and growing communication and transportation technologies made the world a smaller place. Mass production made automobiles less expensive and more readily available. Radio broadcasting production also became less costly, and thus radio was the main form of mass communication in this decade. Coal was being replaced by electricity and telephones were in more and more households. Jazz was the popular music, as was the flapper fashions, which emphasized an androgynous figure for women at a time when they sought equality of treatment with men. The Harlem Renaissance artistic movement was at its height in the 1920s and produced a wealth of literary, artistic, musical, and critical works. The Roaring Twenties were also marked by Prohibition: the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, passed in 1920, forbade the sale or manufacture of alcohol. Instead of alleviating social ills, Prohibition increased criminal activity as people sought illegal ways to make or buy alcohol. A repeal of Prohibition was not passed until 1933. Despite Prohibition, the Roaring Twenties was an exciting time when people looked forward optimistically. This joyful prosperity came to a halt in 1929 with the Black Tuesday crash of the New York Stock Exchange. The stock market crash was devastating to the U.S. economy and signaled the Great Depression of the 1930s. In all, the 1920s was a permissive decade, one particularly recognized for a more liberal view of women's roles and social options. Audiences for Glaspell's play would have tended to view the Stanhopes' concern for propriety as outdated and approve of those emotional choices the Stanhopes view as posing a threat social conventions and family reputation.

Theater in the Early Twentieth Century

The realism movement of the nineteenth century continued without pause in the early twentieth century although experimental forms of theater became more and more prevalent. These experimental forms include absurdism and epic or Brechtian theater. Eugene O'Neill was a popular playwright associated with twentieth century realism although he also experimented with his style during the 1920s. O'Neill was introduced professionally by the Provincetown Players, a small theater group dedicated to preserving the creative process, which its members saw disappearing from the very conventional shows that appeared on Broadway. Experimental forms continued to gain critical attention until the breakthrough text, *Theater of the Absurd*, was published in 1962 by British scholar and critic Martin Esslin. Esslin named Samuel Beckett as one of the first playwrights to address absurdism in his work. Bertolt Brecht was a creative German playwright whose fame was unfortunately overshadowed in his lifetime by World War II and the Nazis. His style is sometimes called epic theater and is shaped

around argument and ideas. Brecht preferred to call it dialectic theater, but many have opted simply for the term Brechtian. Postmodern approaches from the end of the twentieth century drew significantly from experimental roots in the early part of the century. Postmodernism is anti-ideological, which means that it eschews exclusive bodies of belief in favor of a broader view.

Critical Overview

Glaspell was an esteemed author and playwright in her own time and also well-known for cofounding the Provincetown Players and launching the career of Eugene O'Neill. In 1918, the *New York Times* hailed her as □one of the two or three foremost and most promising contemporaneous writers of the one-act play.□ Despite her popularity, however, *Alison's House* was never a resounding success. J. Brooks Atkinson, reporting for the *New York Times* on the off-Broadway production of *Alison's House* in December 1930, writes that it is □haunted by genius□ but that it is □a disappointingly elusive play.□ John Chamberlain, as an aside while reviewing Glaspell's novel *Ambrose Holt*, comments that *Alison's House* □does its best before a badly sentimental close.□

When it was announced in May 1931 that Glaspell had won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama with *Alison's House*, critics became more heated in their remarks. Atkinson devoted an entire column to belittling the judges' choice for the drama award. He acknowledges that Glaspell is □one of our most gifted writers,□ but her efforts in *Alison's House* are not her best. He argues that it is □a play of flat statement□of assertions, of sentimentally literary flourishes and of perfunctory characterizations.□ The anonymous review, □Prize Play on Broadway,□ of the revived Broadway performance states that the audience □clapped its hands in a gentle approval which, however, never threatened to become an ovation.□ Interestingly, in response to Atkinson's commentary that *Alison's House* was a poor choice for the Pulitzer, two people wrote letters proclaiming their admiration and enjoyment of the play and their disagreement with Atkinson. Despite these proclamations, Glaspell's play closed on Broadway after two weeks and was not revived for more than sixty years. When it was restaged in 1999 at the Mint Theater in New York City, reviews were nostalgic but still lukewarm. Elyse Sommer for the online magazine *CurtainUp* writes that *Alison's House* is □old-fashioned and slow-paced□ but still enjoyable. Victor Gluck, reviewing for *Back Stage*, summarizes the conflicting opinions with his simple description of Glaspell's play as □talky, old-fashioned, and dated□ but also □dramatic, engrossing, and moving.□ *Alison's House* was and continued to be in the early 2000s viewed as a lesser, more conventional work in the oeuvre of a woman who did not shy away from radical social statement elsewhere in her work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Ullmann is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she explores the function and characterization of the unseen, unheard Alison Stanhope, who is the focus of Glaspell's Alison's House*.*

Alison's House, by Susan Glaspell, is a play in which the central character never appears on stage. Alison Stanhope has been dead for eighteen years when the play begins. Her sister, her brother, and his children are breaking up the house they all grew up in, and in this process, they stir up memories that have laid in waiting, unfaded and powerful. The house itself belongs to Alison's brother, Mr. Stanhope, who is the patriarch of the family, but many of the house's contents give references to Alison, famous for her poetry and particularly dear to each of her family members who remember her with fierce affection. Alison lived as a near-recluse, but despite her hermitic life, she was larger-than-life to the people close to her and full of whimsy and wisdom. Eben and Elsa's memories of Alison from their childhood are charged with wonder. They all feel that she was the greatest of them and in some way more alive, stronger, more authentic.

The play's title refers to Alison's metaphorical house: the world she built with words. Alison's poetry, although never recited during the course of the play, is understood to be a thing of great beauty, wisdom, and love. It is fitting, therefore, that the first two acts of the play take place in the library, a common area where everyone can come together and be surrounded by words□both hers and others□which may express secondhand thoughts and feelings readers do not know to say themselves.

The first person to bring up Alison in Glaspell's play is the young reporter from Chicago, Richard Knowles. Unlike other reporters the Stanhope family has encountered, Knowles is sensitive, a poet himself, and passionate about Alison's writings. Knowles is representative of Alison's earnest fans. The family is suspicious of him as they are of any outsider, but as romance blossoms between Knowles and Ann, they slowly accept him. Mr. Stanhope, warming to Knowles as he feels he must, seems to finally accept that Alison's spirit also lives on in those who truly love her poetry. He gives Knowles one of Alison's favorite books, marked by her own hand, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Poems*. From this volume, Mr. Stanhope reads the poem, □The House,□ for Knowles, which evokes Alison's presence: □She lays her beams in music / In music every one.□ The end of the poem seems to describe Alison's family: □That so they shall not be displaced / By lapses or by wars / But for the love of happy souls / Outlive the newest stars.□ Knowles immediately understands what Mr. Stanhope is describing: □Alison's house,□ he says.

The poem Knowles reads to Mr. Stanhope from the Emerson volume is titled □Forbearance,□ which is a commentary by the playwright on how the Stanhope family has practiced self-control, even to its detriment: □And loved so well a high behavior / In man or maid, that thou from speech refrained.□ Alison, in her lifetime, was unable to cleave to the man she loved, and her brother stayed in an unhappy marriage while

loving another woman. But Alison's niece, Elsa, born into a different time, had the bravery to do what they could not. She followed her love.

Act 3 takes the audience into the innermost chamber of the house, Alison's bedroom. It has been left untouched□partly because the room was not needed in the mostly empty house and partly in tribute to the beloved poet, aunt, and sister. Alison's room is the last one to be packed. The family seems reluctant to disturb this shrine. When Alison's secret stash of poems is discovered in act 3, the question quickly rises about whether it should be published because doing so would generate a scandal. Alison, although a recluse, was a passionate woman. She once fell in love with a married man and may have carried on an affair with him. Mr. Stanhope reveals near the end of the play to Eben and Elsa that he was instrumental in keeping Alison from running off with her lover. She stayed only because he requested it. Elsa, reading the new poems, says, □It's here□the story she never told. She has written it, as it was never written before. The love that never died□loneliness that never died□anguish and beauty of her love!□ Alison embraced her loneliness as none of the other characters are able to, which imbues her with strength. Agatha fails repeatedly to burn Alison's poetry, crying out that it was too lonely to do such a thing. Mr. Stanhope also cannot do away with Alison's private poems because to do so would be too lonely. With Alison's poetry, they need never feel alone because she is watching over them, guiding them with her words.

The character of Alison is modeled after Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) who has long been a figure of mystery because of her reclusive nature and her family's earnest wish for privacy. Glaspell's play is based on incomplete information about Dickinson's life but also draws from the stories her poems seem to tell. The playwright holds forth that the Dickinson family reticence may have had more to do with their tangled hearts than a quirk of personality. It was a time in history very different than one hundred years later. Cheating on a spouse was a kind of social death; people like the Dickinsons and the Stanhopes would sooner give up their own happiness than bring that kind of shame onto themselves and their families. Forty years after Dickinson's death, her poetry and something of the story of her life was well-known to Glaspell's theater-going audience. Although Glaspell was unable to use the Dickinson name or Emily's poetry, her audience knew who this play was about. This knowledge brings full circle the characterization of a woman who is central to the story but is never seen or heard.

Alison materializes in the play in other ways. She is the focus of conversation throughout the drama, from Ted's inquiries for his letter to his Harvard professor to Elsa and Eben's reminisces of their childhood. Knowles himself, a great fan of her work and hoping to write an article about her, seeks out her spirit and keeps her poetry alive and in the minds of people by writing about her. The book of Emerson's poetry speaks for Alison indirectly. The love that quickly springs up between Knowles and Ann is also a product of Alison's passion as is Elsa's less sanctioned romance with Bill. Agatha and Mr. Stanhope's pain over Alison's scandalous relationship being publicly revealed is a facet of their love for her. They want to protect her, but Alison, in writing and keeping these poems, does not seek protection. She did the right thing when she was alive, but the time has come when her love, her story, and her strength should be shared.

Alison's ephemeral presence is strongest in act 3, when her family gathers in her bedroom and reads her story through for the first time. Despite her isolation, Alison was a woman of high emotion and creative expression. Her story of love and loneliness has universal appeal□both Mr. Stanhope and Elsa say they feel as if her poems were written just for them. Elsa then points out that other people are sure to feel the same way, and thus Mr. Stanhope should release his hold on his dead sister and share her, her wisdom, and the beauty of her poetry with the world. It is a difficult decision for Mr. Stanhope, who has protected Alison's story for so many decades and even lived through the anguish of frustrated longing himself. But he made it clear earlier in the play that he did not care as much as he should about what outsiders will say or think. Ultimately, Mr. Stanhopes chooses life for Alison: □She loved to make her little gifts. If she can make one more, from her century to yours, then she isn't gone.□

Glaspell's decision to focus on an historical figure that does not actually appear in the action of the play is unusual. Alison's unseen person acts as a lens to focus the emotions of the other characters as they circle around her and her story. She has been dead eighteen years, but her influence is strong. In modeling Alison after Dickinson, Glaspell lends plausibility to her tale as well as the drama of exploring the life of a mysterious woman. *Alison's House* has been criticized for being overly conventional compared to Glaspell's other works, but in fact the playwright is making a bold statement to the effect that no one needs to go through the anguish and loneliness that shaped Alison's or Dickinson's life because the new century heralds different times. Elsa has demonstrated this herself and tells her father that while some things are difficult, she does not regret choosing love above all else.

Source: Carol Ullmann, Critical Essay on *Alison's House*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Select your favorite Dickinson poem. Read it aloud to your class and explain what you think it is about and why you like it best.

Individually or in small groups, select an author whose work you admire. Script a fifteen-minute dramatization of an important event in that person's life and perform your short play for the class. For added effect, work some of the author's writing into the script.

Glaspell liked to write about her home state of Iowa where *Alison's House* is set. Research the history of Iowa and write a brief report about a significant event that took place in Iowa or an important person who lived there.

In the early 2000s, divorce is much more commonplace and socially accepted in the United States than it was a century earlier. What are the divorce rates then as compared to now? Do you agree with Elsa's position to live only for love no matter what other people say or with Mr. Stanhope's position to deny love and stay in an unhappy marriage because that is what is proper, especially when one has children? Write a short essay defending your point of view, using evidence from Glaspell's play.

Write a poem that reflects on one of the themes in *Alison's House*. Have a poetry slam party where participants read their poems using visuals, sound, lighting, performance, or audience interaction, as desired.

Alison's House takes place on December 31, 1899, at the turn of the nineteenth century. How are people recognizing the turn of the century in this play? How does it compare to the recent millennial celebration at the turn of the twentieth century? How do you like to celebrate New Year's Eve? Write a short story about a fictional New Year's Eve celebration□set on December 31, 2099.

Alison Stanhope is modeled after New England poet Emily Dickinson. Read a biography of this poet. Write an essay describing the similarities and differences between the poet's life and Glaspell's portrayal. What do we know about Dickinson and her family that Glaspell and Dickinson's biographers did not know in the 1930s? Do you feel *Alison's House* is an accurate portrayal of the Dickinson family?

Emily Dickinson admired the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American poet and philosopher who first expressed the philosophical ideas of American transcendentalism in his long essay *Nature* (1836). Research American transcendentalism, including reading *Nature*, and prepare a poster or other visual aid that summarizes this philosophy, gives examples of works that are considered transcendental, and describes some well-known adherents from the nineteenth century to today. Display your poster in the classroom or school public space.

Dickinson and Walt Whitman were two influential American poets from the nineteenth century. They were very different in their personalities and writing styles. Read a

selection of poems from each poet. Which do you prefer and why? Be specific in your answers: point to specific lines, images, or emotions, and use literary device terminology. Share your responses with your classmates in a roundtable discussion of the lives and works of these two prominent American poets.

Theater-going has declined since the 1930s, when *Alison's House* was produced. Select a show to attend at a nearby theater, whether civic or professional. You can go individually to different shows or as a class to the same show. Write a review of the play you see, focusing on the performances, sound, lights, setting, directing, writing, and anything else that catches your attention. Include compliments as well as criticisms to make your review balanced. For extra credit, submit your review to a local newspaper for publication consideration.

Compare and Contrast

1890s: Popular poets of this decade include Emily Dickinson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, A. E. Housman, Rudyard Kipling, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

1920s: Robert Frost is a popular poet in this decade, as well as Edna St. Vincent Millay, William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings, and T. S. Eliot.

Today: Popular poets include Mary Oliver, Maya Angelou, Donald Hall, Billy Collins, and Louise Glück.

1890s: Realism dominates the theater of the nineteenth century. Realist playwrights of this decade include Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, and Anton Chekhov.

1920s: Harlem Renaissance literary movement flourishes during this decade and includes the playwrights Langston Hughes, Angelina Weld Grimke, and Thelma Myrtle Duncan.

Today: Absurdism, which takes hold in U.S. theater in the 1960s, continues to be a fashionable movement in playwriting. Popular absurdist playwrights are Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and Maria Irene Fornes.

1890s: In the United States, a new dye makes mauve a more accessible color in fashion, and it is extremely popular for about a decade.

1920s: The flapper style is popular during this decade. It is characterized by short dresses with a straight, androgynous silhouette.

Today: Fashion is widely varied in the United States but tends heavily toward retro styles, sometimes combining a mix of styles from former decades. Looser fits, which have not been seen since the grunge period of the early 1990s, are more prevalent.

What Do I Read Next?

The Visioning (1911), Glaspell's second novel, tells the story of young Katie Jones who questions the conventions of her day. *The Visioning* addresses social issues such as gender roles, divorce, and labor unions. This novel is in the public domain in the United States, and Project Gutenberg has made it available free for download at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/11217.

Eugene O'Neill's first play, *Bound East for Cardiff* (1916), was among the first plays produced by Glaspell's theater company, Provincetown Players. It was also O'Neill's first produced play and launched his professional playwriting career. *Bound East for Cardiff* is a one-act play that takes place at sea on a steamship where a sick sailor who is dying talks about his life and the life he wished he had lived.

□A Jury of Her Peers□ (1917), from the short story collection by the same name, is a widely anthologized story by Glaspell, based on her popular play *Trifles* (1916). The short story and play are about an investigation into the death of an abused woman's husband. Glaspell was inspired to write *Trifles* after covering a similar court case as a reporter. □A Jury of Her Peers□ is available in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (1999), edited by John Updike. *Trifles* is in the public domain and is available as a free download from Project Gutenberg at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/10623.

Inheritors (1921) is a popular play by Glaspell about a young college woman who stands up against her college and her government when two Hindu students are discriminated against for protesting. The themes and questions raised by this play remain relevant. *Inheritors* is in the public domain and is available as a free download from Project Gutenberg at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/10623.

A Room of One's Own (1929), an extended essay by Virginia Woolf, argues that women writers are capable of producing work as great as that produced by men. Woolf, a contemporary of Glaspell, did not shy away from writing about controversial social issues.

Renascence and Other Poems (1917) is the first published volume of poetry by Edna St. Vincent Millay, an American poet known for her bohemian lifestyle. Millay's poetry is lyrical and technically precise. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923. This collection is in the public domain and available as a free download from Project Gutenberg at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/109.

Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights (1999), edited by Brenda Murphy, is a collection of fifteen essays, which examine the role of female playwrights in the history of U.S. theater. Glaspell, Lillian Hellman, and Wendy Wasserstein are among the more than dozen playwrights discussed.

The Awakening (1899), by Kate Chopin, is a slim novel about a woman who is married to a wealthy man but is in turmoil about the conflicts she feels between the role of wife

and the role of artist. Chopin's novel was so controversial at the time that it was published that the author was blacklisted.

Nature (1836), by Ralph Waldo Emerson, is an important essay, which explains the philosophy of transcendentalism; it explores the metaphysical aspects of the natural world.

Leaves of Grass (1891) is a collection of poetry by Walt Whitman, who was a contemporary of Dickinson. Whitman's style contrasts sharply to that of Emily Dickinson.

Further Study

Ben-Zvi, Linda, *Susan Glaspell: A Life*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Ben-Zvi presents a scholarly analysis of the life and work of Glaspell in this biography. She also gives a critical analysis of each of Glaspell's major works.

Dickinson, Emily, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Little, Brown, 1960.

This collection of Dickinson's poetry contains all 1,775 poems in chronological order, a layout that is unusual for Dickinson collections but presents a refreshing view of her development as a writer.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Poems*, J. Munroe, 1847.

Emerson's poetry was beloved by Dickinson even though he was more popular as an essayist and philosopher. His poetry is in the public domain and easy to find in various editions, including online.

Sewall, Richard Benson, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols., Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1974.

Sewall's extensive biography of Dickinson brings new information to light about the life and work of this reclusive poet. This book won the National Book Award in 1975.

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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.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

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.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

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

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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