Angels Fall Study Guide

Angels Fall by Lanford Wilson

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Introduction

More than twenty years after its debut, Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall* continues to be a little-known and rarely produced play. Commissioned by the New World Festival of Miami, Florida, in 1982, it moved to the Circle Repertory Theater in New York later that year. In 1983, despite a brief run on Broadway, New York drama critic John Simon judged it as the best American play that season. Unlike the familiar urban and Midwestern settings of Wilson's previous plays, *Angels Fall* is set in a church in the desert of the American Southwest. The catalyst for the play's action□a nuclear accident at a uranium mine that forces a group of people to take refuge at a Catholic mission□is more overtly political than many of his other plays and can even be seen, particularly through the figure of Father Doherty, as a morality tale about the nuclear age.

Although the accident at Chin Rock mine alludes to a broader theme of Wilson's that concerns the destruction of the a national heritage as found in the stark natural beauty of the Southwest, another key theme unravels as the characters gathered at the church begin to interact. What is most compelling about the play is its ability to conjure up complex feelings in the characters about the direction their lives have taken, particularly as it concerns their occupations. For some, such as the tennis player Zappy, there is no ambivalence regarding vocation. Contrast that with Don Tabaha, whose choices will have an effect not just on him but the community of Native Americans with whom he has spent his life. Thus, a main question that Wilson pursues throughout the play reveals a concern with being satisfied with the kind of work one has chosen to do. One's work or vocation must have a function that moves beyond economic need. For this cast of professionals, work must be meaningful or else one's life has not been lived as fully as it could have been. The absent presence of an environmental disaster as a backdrop to the play compels the characters to confront, if it is only momentarily, how to live fully in the time given doing work that is satisfying.

Author Biography

Dramatist Lanford Wilson was born in Lebanon, Missouri, on April 13, 1937. An only child of divorced parents, Wilson spent most of his younger years with his mother in Missouri, only reuniting with his father in California after his freshman year of college. After only a year in San Diego where he attended San Diego State College, Wilson moved to Chicago, spending six years there working as a copywriter in advertising while pursuing his writing career. In 1962, Wilson moved to New York and became involved with the experimental drama scene at off-off-Broadway theaters such as Caffe Cino and Cafe La Mama Experimental Theater. In 1963, his first play *So Long at the Fair* was produced at Caffe Cino. While many of his early plays were produced at these experimental theaters, it was not until the late 1960s when Wilson, along with three of his friends involved in theater, founded the Circle Repertory Company that he began to garner a reputation as an important American playwright. It was at this venue that many of his best known plays *Hot l Baltimore* (1973), *Talley's Folly* (1979), and *Burn This* (1987) had their premieres; many of them moving to Broadway theaters after receiving critical reviews.

During the 1970s, Wilson gained recognition as a major American playwright. In 1973, he received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play and an Obie for *Hot l Baltimore*. Two years later, *The Moundbuilders* won an Obie, an award that recognizes outstanding off-Broadway productions. In 1980, Wilson received a Pulitzer Prize for *Talley's Folly*, the first of three plays that followed several generations of an American family. One of his less well-received plays, produced in 1982 for the New World Festival of Miami, Florida, *Angels Fall* later opened at the Circle Repertory Theater and eventually moved to Broadway where it had only a short run before closing. *Lemon Sky*, another play that did not do well on Broadway during its first appearance in 1970, was later revived successfully and adapted to television in a PBS American Playhouse production.

In the past decade, Wilson has continued to write plays and collaborate with long-time friend and fellow Circle Repertory Company founder, Marshall Mason. In 1995, after nearly thirty years of being its playwright-in-residence, Wilson resigned from his position. Since then, he has held a number artist-in-residencies at theaters such as the Signature in New York and at university theater departments such as the University of Houston and Arizona State University. When not in residence, he lives in Sag Harbor on Long Island, New York.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The setting of *Angels Fall* is a small, plain adobe church in northwestern New Mexico. The play takes place during an afternoon and early evening. As the play begins, Don Tabaha is sitting in the church staring at the wall. Momentarily he walks into the residence where he, his mother Maria, and Father Doherty live. As the play begins, two of the main characters, Niles and Vita Harris, are heard offstage. From their conversation, it appears that they have been turned back by the highway patrol and have sought refuge from the heat in the church. After they enter the church, Vita goes off to make a phone call to Dr. Singer who runs the mental health institute where Niles is going for therapy.

As they wait for Dr. Singer to call, Don walks into the church and tells them that the church is closed on Saturdays. Soon after this exchange, voices are heard approaching. Momentarily, Marion and Zappy enter the church and head toward the phone. A few minutes later, Father Doherty enters the church and assumes Vita and Niles are here for a conference or appointment which he cannot remember making. When Vita explains that there was a bridge out at the fork, Doherty claims there is no problem with the bridge at this time of year, but that it must be "some problem with the nuclear thing again." When they inquire about it again, he brushes them off and asks if they have seen Don whom he describes as "short, dark, surly." When Vita tells the priest that Don left on his motorcycle, the priest appears disturbed, then looks out the window and sees Don arguing with Arthur, the highway patrol officer who is also his uncle. Niles pursues Doherty about the nuclear accident and Doherty explains that the whole area is surrounded by uranium mines, nuclear power plants, and toxic dumps that often experience accidents.

Soon Marion and Zap enter the church again and the priest enters his living quarters. Zap tells them that something went wrong when some yellow cake was being loaded at the Chin Rock mine and that traffic is being stopped for a hundred miles. Marion tells Vita and Niles that they are due in San Diego tomorrow for a tennis match and need to catch a plane at the local airport. While talking about what route to take to leave the area, they hear a helicopter approach. A voice from a speaker proclaims, "Stay indoors. The roads are temporarily closed." When it is clear everyone in the church must stay there for a while, the priest has his housekeeper make them lemonade. Meanwhile, Don enters the church, demanding to learn what Marion knows about the Chin Rock mine accident. He is furious that Arthur will not allow him to travel on the road. He is supposed to be leaving for Berkley that evening to take up a position as a researcher. While Vita is once again talking to the clinic in Phoenix, Marion and Niles discover they are both involved with art, he as an art professor and she as a gallery owner. Niles also learns that Marion is the widow of Ernest Branch, a well-known regional artist. Although she lives in the area, she is about to move, having sold most of her late husband's work to various museums around the country.

Father Doherty returns with the lemonade and acknowledges Don, who has been sitting quietly while the others talk. Tension erupts between Don and the priest and Don leaves again. The priest explains to the others that, instead of administering medicine to his people, the Navajo, Don has decided to take a research position at a famous cancer institute. Afterwards, the characters begin to express frustration about not being able to leave. Meanwhile, Niles reveals that he is not returning to the college where he teaches since undergoing a "willful suspension of disbelief." He and Vita then describe the reason why he is on his way to the mental health clinic. Don and Zap enter the church again, Don with a newspaper and Zap with earphones, listening to the radio. He tells everyone that someone has died at the mine already and that a truck overturned, blowing yellowcake dust all over. Everyone becomes nervous and begins discussing the difficulties of living in the southwest. Discussion turns toward Don about his decision. Soon, Don and Father Doherty are bickering about his decision. When Niles gets involved, Don accuses him of not living in the real world and mocks his decision to go to Dr. Singer's where all the wealthy professionals go. Niles leaves in a huff. Don who is tired of hearing the priest press him to stay, also departs. By the end of the first act, Vita is the only one left in the church. She holds Niles's jacket and turns toward the altar.

Act 2

The second act begins at dusk with a discussion between Vita and Father Doherty about the work that he does in the area. Zap, who is listening to the radio, tells them that traffic is beginning to move and that the road should be cleared by 8:00. After Father Doherty leaves the church, Marion and Vita discuss the difficulties of moving and getting rid of personal effects. Marion is putting together a show of her late husband's that will be exhibited in Chicago and other cities around the country. Soon after Don returns to the church, Niles enters and apologizes to him for his behavior. Meanwhile, Marion tells Zap about the schedule he will be playing in the tennis tournament. Each of his contenders appears to be easily defeated. While he and Don are talking, Father Doherty comes in and again begins goading Don about his decision. This time, the priest chides him for moving to Northern California where, unlike his current situation, he will be living among very well-to-do people. Niles seems to be getting upset again and suddenly claims that he and Vita are leaving. However, he takes ill and falls to a bench. Don immediately begins to diagnose him, asking questions and making him drink lemonade. After a while, Niles recovers from what Don has tentatively described as a hypoglycemic, or low blood sugar, attack. This scare allows him to discuss his departure from the college and his feelings about his profession as a teacher and scholar. The priest joins in the discussion, claiming that teaching is a calling much like Don's calling to medicine, and his to the priesthood. Zap also chimes in claiming that tennis was a calling to him at a very young age and recounts the story of how he knew he was a tennis player without ever really playing the game.

Overhead, a voice announces from a helicopter that the road is clear. On hearing this, Father Doherty runs outside, shouting that the road is not clear. Back inside, he resumes hounding Don about his decision to leave the indigenous people who have very little health care available to them in the area. At this point, Niles intervenes again

but more aggressively pointing out the priest's inability to see Don's decision for what it is□his own. Suddenly, after a pause in the argument, the priest understands what he has been doing to Don, denying him the freedom to make his own decision. He wishes Don good luck and begins to get ready for mass that evening. As the characters depart, they treat each other with newfound respect and intimacy. Niles and Vita decide to remain for evening mass but go and take a walk beforehand. In the final moments of the play, Don says his goodbye to Father Doherty. They make gestures of reconciliation toward each other and then Don leaves, crying. The play ends with Father Doherty ringing the church bells for mass to begin.

Characters

Marion Clay

Marion Clay is the widow of a well-known New Mexico artist who is dating a younger man, Salvatore Zappala or Zappy. Her vocation in life has been to run an art gallery in Chicago where she has sold her husband's and other contemporary artists' work successfully. When the play begins, Marion is in the midst of selling her dead husband's effects so that she can leave the southwest and attend to her gallery as well as her lover's career as a professional tennis player. However, even though she is portrayed as an independent woman, she has a very maternal relationship to Zappy, indulging him as one would a child about his health and well-being.

Father William Doherty

Father Doherty is the parish priest of the New Mexico mission where the play takes place. As a mentor to Don Tabaha, the young half-Navajo studying medicine, Father Doherty tries to convince him to stay in New Mexico and administer to the Native Americans who live in the vicinity rather than pursue a career as a researcher at UC Berkeley. Their conflict acts as the nexus for the other "couples" in conflict: Niles and Vita Harris and Marion and Zappy. Despite his officious nature, the priest reveals himself to have only good intentions, even if they are misguided. Throughout the play, he acts as a unifying force among the strangers gathered at the church. His friendly overtures include serving lemonade, giving counsel to Niles Harris, the professor who has recently undergone a nervous breakdown, and his wife, Vita, and providing comic relief during the tense hours when everyone is trying to figure out the effects of the nuclear accident. However, despite his whimsical nature, often twisting popular song lyrics to suit his own situation, he is quite serious about persuading Don to stay and administer medicine to his people. Just as Doherty had a calling to the priesthood, he is intent on convincing Don that being a doctor and not a scientist is his vocation.

Niles Harris

Niles Harris is a middle-aged art history professor who is on his way to a mental health clinic in Arizona with his wife, Vita. After suffering a nervous breakdown in the classroom due to what he refers to as "my willful suspension of disbelief," Niles is asked to take a temporary leave at the university in Providence, Rhode Island where he works. On route to Phoenix, Niles and Vita stop at the mission to use a phone and end up staying for several hours while a nearby nuclear accident is being contained. It is clear that the professor is not mentally alert and often appears to be forgetful and daft despite his erudition. He is querulous and difficult at times, sarcastic and biting, especially toward Don who mocks him for his position in the ivory tower. After experiencing a slight case of hypoglycemia that Don diagnoses and then treats, Niles calms down, confessing the

details of his mid-life crisis candidly with Don and the priest. Of all the characters in the play, Niles appears to be most changed by the hours spent confined with strangers. His momentary health crisis leads him to appreciate Don's generosity of spirit and to connect with Father Doherty about their callings as teachers despite their differences. Finally, in the last scene he comes to the aid of Don by defending his decision to leave New Mexico for California. Speaking from experience, he derides Father Doherty by exclaiming, "You cannot hold power over another man; even for his own good."

Vita Harris

As the young wife of Niles Harris, Vita Harris is exceptionally pretty, thin, and smart. Whereas Niles is cantankerous, Vita is upbeat and charming. Throughout the play, she is the paragon of the protective and supportive wife, providing Niles with as much care as she can while also gently chiding him for his cantankerous ways. As a former student of his, Vita shares his love of art and history. Although she does not have a major role in the play, Vita acts as the backbone to the relationship, making sure they are in touch with the mental health institute where they are going, providing support when Niles's faculties are quite weak and being amenable to his various whims.

Don Tabaha

Intentionally unfriendly and belligerent at times toward the other characters, Don Tabaha, a young half-Navajo, has given up his intention to be a doctor in the Indian community in northern New Mexico to take a high level position as a research scientist near San Francisco. It is his decision to take the position that results in continual conflicts between him and his mentor and substitute father, Father Doherty, who wants him to practice medicine among his people. His torment is exacerbated by the nuclear accident which prevents him from leaving, and thus allows Father Doherty to harp on his decision to leave. Toward the end of the play, Don reiterates the famous line delivered by James Dean in *Rebel without a Cause* as he declares to the priest, "You are tearing me apart." Throughout the play, Don appears on the periphery of the action, trying to keep to himself and dissuade others from engaging with him, yet when Niles experiences a hypoglycemic attack, it is Don who administers aid and provide comfort. At the end of the play, he breaks down crying as he leaves the priest, thus capturing the difficulty of his decision.

Salvatore Zappala

Referred to as Zappy, the young lover of Marion Clay aspires to be a champion tennis player. Although he has a rather minor role in the play compared to the other characters, his youth and vitality are contrasted to the diminishing health and well-being of Niles Harris. Whereas Niles' career is viewed as over because of his failing state of mind, Zappy is on his way to the top if he is given a chance to show his talents as a tennis player. Throughout the play, Zappy plays a marginal role, acting out childish whims

about the upcoming tournament he is about to play, obsessing about his health, and even at times trying to undermine himself by belittling his abilities. However, like Marion, he understands who he is and what he wants. His determination to be a contender on the tennis circuit is witnessed by the way he recounts playing tennis for the first time and knowing that was what he wanted to do. Although he may be younger than the other characters, his understanding of who he is and what he wants to do is quite certain.

Zappy

See Salvatore Zappala

Themes

Following One's Calling

A central theme of following one's calling or vocation emerges most frequently in the bitter exchanges between Don Tabaha and Father Doherty over Tabaha's decision to become a research scientist and the more philosophical discussions between Niles and Father Doherty over Niles's loss of faith in his scholarship and its effect on his teaching art history. The ability to follow one's calling despite occasional lapses is witnessed in Doherty himself. For example, he describes his church service to Vita as one where "Twelve, fifteen stoic Navajos shuffle in, kneel, I mumble sincerely, they mumble sincerely, and they shuffle out." For Father Doherty, administering religion to a congregation that may not be particularly attuned to everything that Christianity has to offer may be daunting but it is what he does. His insistence on the importance of vocation is most dramatically seen in the encounters he has with Don whom he thinks was meant to be a local doctor. Yet Don's decision is based on what he considers "a very special talent for research." On a more positive note, the priest encourages Niles to return to teaching which he sees as being part of his vocation as a priest. In nearly all of the characters, a desire to do something with one's life involves work. For Marion, it is selling the work of contemporary artists; for her lover, Zappy, it is playing tennis, a talent he discovered having while in grade school. What these chance encounters among the characters engender is a reassessment of what is most important, particularly with the threat of nuclear contamination occurring nearby.

Skepticism about Technology

The nuclear accident at the Chin Rock mine acts as a reminder that dangerous technologies threaten mankind. Although the setting of the accident is offstage, reference is made to it throughout the play as a way of drawing danger close enough to the characters to have a feeling of unease. However, more pertinent are Father Doherty's comments that make it clear how technology has contributed to the destruction of the natural environment in the Southwest as well as to its native peoples, many of whom are employed in the nuclear industry. Describing the frequent accidents that occur at the various nuclear mines, reactors, and waste dumps in the vicinity as "the Perils of Pauline," Doherty expresses his disgust at the government's inability to consider the dangers of its policies. Particularly via the character of the priest, Wilson reveals a cautious attitude toward embracing the concept of technology as improving the quality of life. Instead, Doherty fixates on how these technologies have contaminated natural resources and endangered human lives. In addition, Don Tabaha's decision to abandon his adolescent dream of being a local doctor to pursue genetic engineering reveals how the pursuit of scientific knowledge can be highly seductive.

Crisis of Faith

Isolated from the rest of the world due to the nuclear accident, several of the characters, particularly Niles, Don, and Father Doherty, reveal in obvious and oblique ways that they are undergoing a crisis of faith regarding their work. This crisis is most outwardly expressed in Niles Harris, who admits that while reading his life's work, he experienced "a willful suspension of disbelief" that made him realize that his scholarship was a farce. This leads him to comment that for thirty years he had been "brainwashing the little bastards" in the classroom. After breaking down in the classroom, he was told to take a leave from the university where he taught. In contrast to Niles's open confession of his crises, Father Doherty appears to be projecting his own crisis of faith onto Don. The priest does not seem to get much satisfaction out of his work in this remote parish, partly because it seems as if he is not really needed. Still, he is unable to leave because he is so attached to the region and its people. Don, on the other hand, seems overwhelmed by the amount of work that needs to be done in terms of providing good health care to the Navajos. His crisis stems from his fear of failure as is witnessed when he lists major diseases affecting the Navajo and ends by saying to Vita, "there's no time for one person in a hundred years to begin to correct a millennium of genetic neglect." Compared to these men, minor characters such as Marion, Zappy, and Vita appear stable and content with their life's decisions although their social roles do not have as much import as a doctor, priest, and professor does.

Style

Dialogue

The dialogue in the play is marked by fast-paced one-liners interspersed with monologues that slow down the pace of the play. The bitter and detailed exchanges between Don and Father Doherty reveal a complex history of expectations and obligations that leave others who do not know them outside the loop. In contrast, Wilson employs monologues to reveal autobiographical details that bring understanding and empathy to the listeners. Throughout the play, these two kinds of dialogue create a rhythm, at points highlighting the intensity of the accident occurring offstage, while at others marking the passing of time for people who are in transit. At moments throughout the play, Wilson uses overlapping dialogue to convey a rush to gain understanding of someone or something. He also peppers his dialogue with popular sayings, passages from the Bible, and popular song lyrics as found in the sometimes solemn, sometimes humorous speech of Father Doherty.

Genre

The dramatic structure of *Angels Fall* is best described as a 'sealed-room' play in which characters who may not know each other or who are very different from each other are forced together due to an unforeseen or unknown circumstance. The accident at the Chin Rock mine results in the characters not being able to go anywhere until notified by authorities. All of the characters are affected in different ways by this news in terms of where they are supposed to be going, yet having their plans on hold allows each of them to take the time to interact with people whom they may not typically meet. Thus, a priest, a professor, a tennis player, an art gallery owner, and a scientist are brought together, each with his or her particular worldview. Although these world views clash throughout the play, there are occasional moments of understanding. The accident literally seals the characters off from the world, except for the radio and phone, thus allowing time to be placed on hold.

Setting

Wilson uses the setting of a church in the New Mexican desert to highlight his themes of finding one's calling, being skeptical of technology, and undergoing a crisis of faith. In particular, the church symbolizes the need for a sanctuary in a world that is increasingly dehumanized through modernization, commercialization, and militarization. Thus, even though the church provides sanctuary, its modern day counterpart, the Chin Rock mine acts as a more compelling but absent setting. Whereas the nuclear accident symbolizes the destruction of the natural world, the church promotes preservation of traditional values. However, that the church is located in the desert reveals its marginalized position from the mainstream. Although the church may have an impact on the few

humans it serves in the area, it has little effect on the economic and political realities represented by the uranium mine, which though never stated in the play, contributes to the creation and continuation of the military-industrial complex.

Symbolism

It is also significant that the church is located at a crossroads since many of the characters in the play, particularly Niles and Don, find themselves at a moment in their lives where they are experiencing indecision about their life's work. Whereas Niles must determine whether he can return to the classroom, Don must decide whether to stay among his people or leave to pursue an illustrious career as a scientist. Each of these decisions is based on what their vocation is in life. It is the priest, acting as a mediator, who both thwarts (as in the case of Don) and facilitates (as in the case of Niles) these decisions. Another important symbol conveying the inability of these characters to make a decision is the helicopter that appears like a modern deity to warn the neighboring areas around the mine that "The road is closed." That the road is closed metaphorically may mean that there is a temporary inability to move forward in life as represented by Don and Niles's indecisiveness. Later, at the end of the play, the helicopter reappears, signaling that the road has reopened and that both Don and Niles can now make their way.

Allusion

The title of the play is taken from a Gerald Manley Hopkins poem that compares the condition of humans whose lives for the most part are ordinary and often times lackluster to the dramatic story of fallen angels who rise and fall majestically. The contrast between the eternal and temporal which Hopkins explores in the poem poses this question: if humans cannot live on the grand scale that angels do, what can they do to make their lives have significance while here on earth? The need to find a calling seems to be the answer in this play. For the short time that the characters are gathered at the church, they seem to come to some realization that they only have a short time in which to do what they can to improve life on earth, regardless of how small these actions may appear.

A similar allusion to the theme of how to live one's life gracefully and fully within the time that one has is posed by Father Doherty when he quotes from the Bible: "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?" The quote as found in the New Testament alludes to the possibility of an apocalypse and challenges its readers to live life in a manner in which confronting death will not be frightening. As a contemporary example, the play provides a situation in which the characters face an environmental disaster that is highly suggestive of an even bleaker possibility, the end of the world due to nuclear war. For these characters, undergoing even a slightly deeper understanding of themselves may be the only possible course of action, but it will be one that is true to themselves.

Historical Context

As a playwright coming of age in the 1950s, Wilson, like his other dramatic cohorts, drew his inspiration from the social and historical conditions that transformed the United States into a superpower after World War II. Despite the general optimism buoyed by post-war economic growth throughout the 1950s, the rush towards building and maintaining a nuclear arsenal ready to be deployed at any moment resulted in social anxiety and occasional panic about the possibility of nuclear annihilation. In *Drama Since 1960: A Critical History*, Matthew Roudane notes that "Some of our dramatists lived through many of these historical and social experiences, and their plays reflect an uneasiness with an increasingly atomized and mechanized postwar America." The growth of the military state resulted in the production of thousands of warheads capable of reaching the Soviet Union at any time. In addition, the conservative cultural climate of the cold war provoked anti-Communist sentiment in the 1950s, known as the McCarthy Era, which involved an attempt to root out American Communists. Many people lost their jobs and went to jail, often times for little more than being a member of the American Communist Party. Others were falsely accused of spying for America's nemesis, the Soviet Union.

Along with the social panic incited by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the fear of nuclear war came an understanding of the cold war's impact on the environment through the production of uranium and the testing of missiles. Starting in the 1950s and continuing today (despite the dismantling of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s), the United States military has used the West and Southwest as a testing ground for missiles. In addition, the region's rich mineral resources, particularly uranium, are needed to fuel nuclear power plants. Thus, it is not surprising that throughout the play, references are made to the deadly costs of building military strength. Literally, the deaths of workers at the Chin Rock mine reflect the dangers inherent in the industry.

In particular, it is Father Doherty who addresses the potential environmental hazards that surround his parish. "[W]est are about seven mines and mills, and east of here the Rio Puerco goes awash with some kind of waste. . . , and of course there's the reactor at Los Alamos and the missile base at White Sands." His anger and distrust of the nuclear industry acts as the moral barometer for a nation obsessed with its own technological achievements. Because the play takes place in the early 1980s, during an accelerated build up of nuclear missiles under the administration of Ronald Reagan, an underlying theme is that Americans have lost sight of what really matters. Thus, the setting of a church during a time where the end of the world is near signifies that spiritual and traditional values are being replaced by the gods of technology and notions of progress. Father Doherty expresses this when yelling at the helicopter after it has announced that the road is now clear: "The road is not clear! You're sick as cats! You've made the bomb your god and you're praying for the bomb to call in the number." During an age when super powers have jurisdiction over whether or not the world will end, *Angels Fall* provides a bleak yet realistic view of the role of technology in the culture of the United States.

Critical Overview

At the time that *Angels Fall* was written and produced in the early 1980s, Lanford Wilson had already established himself as an exceptional dramatist with compelling Broadway plays such as *The Hot l Baltimore* (1973), *The Fifth of July* (1978), and *Talley's Folley* (1979). As Gerald Berkowitz notes in *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, Wilson's plays, from the mid-seventies onward, had "the ability to depict the complex emotions and relationships of a group of characters through a domestic realism given a lyrical tone by a musical and poetic use of language." More than one critic has noted that Wilson's emphasis on family relations combined with lyricism and compassion evoke Tennessee Williams, a playwright Wilson deeply admired. His emphasis on the dignified struggles of ordinary people in contemporary times has lead drama critic Anne Dean, in her book *Discovery and Invention: The Urban Plays of Lanford Wilson*, to note that Wilson is concerned with capturing "the dramatic and poetic essence of a particular social milieu" similar to the work of Charles Dickens, whom Wilson cites as a major influence. She continues to examine these two writers' similarities, suggesting that in both their works "metaphorically heightened messages about the unhappy state of the world abound."

Probably no other play of Wilson's illustrates the polemicist side of him than *Angels Fall*, which depicts the incidental gathering of a group of people in a New Mexican church during a nuclear accident at a nearby uranium mine. What strikes many critics of this play is its atypical setting which might account for critics' inability to designate this play as one that fits into the schemata of Wilson settings□Midwest, New York, West Coast. However, like his other plays, the setting of the play is extremely important to the play's themes and outcomes. The church setting shelters an ensemble of characters who may not be completely shunned from society as other misfit casts he has created in plays like *Hot l Baltimore* but it represents, according to Thomas Adler in his article "The Artist in the Garden: Theatre Space and Place in Lanford Wilson," "an oasis . . . whose inherent beauty has been threatened by contemporary man's idolization of technological progress at the expense of human values." In this way, as noted by Mark Busby in *Lanford Wilson*, the contrast of the church in the desert surrounded by the waste products of the modern age reveals a juxtaposition of the eternal past (the natural world, the spiritual world) with the temporal present (industry motivated by capitalism). This theme of past and present in conflict with each other is also a key foundation to the crises of faith that the art professor, Niles Harris, and the parish priest, Father Doherty, undergo in their inability to accept the shift in thinking that the modern world demands□that truth has become relative.

Most critics agree that Wilson's solution to this crisis of faith is found in the concept of vocation, which is offered as a solution to threat of nuclear war and ultimately death. This is seen in the passage from the New Testament that incites people to do goodwill and thus death becomes less fraught, which Father Doherty recites to the other characters. As Gene Barnett, writing in *Lanford Wilson*, suggests, the play's major theme is that "in finding our own profession, we are able to face death in the knowledge that life has been lived well." In this way, both the professor and priest must engage in

rediscovering their abilities to teach in order to make their lives fulfilling. The "road" that is referred to in the play as first being closed and then opened act has both a literal and metaphorical meaning. In his article, "'Above Time' in the Present?: Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' and Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall*," Richard Wattenberg describes the road as denoting both the route of the characters' lives as well as the course of the lives they currently lead, particularly as it refers to their work.

However, as Susan Harris Smith, in her article "*Angels Fall*: An American Melodrama of Beset Manhood," points out, having one's work be a solution to the environmental and political crises that nuclear technologies engender displaces one's commitment to community to that of the self. The true problem, contends Smith, is that this group "disbands for individual realization and does not coalesce around the pressing issue that should unite them permanently, namely the threat of nuclear catastrophe." As other critics have noted about *Angels Fall*, the play lacks any resolution and provides little redemption in relation to the epiphanies the characters' experience. What it does offer, notes Berkowitz in *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, is its ability to show ordinary people enduring life, not necessarily in a triumphant way, but in a way that is reassuring.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Piano is a Marion Brittain Fellow in the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. In this essay, Piano explores how strangers who inadvertently gather at a church during an environmental accident struggle to understand the importance of their lives in relation to their work.

Written in 1982 for the New World Festival of Miami, Florida, *Angels Fall* depicts a group of people, some of whom are strangers, who take refuge in a church during an accident at a nearby uranium mine. Set in New Mexico, the action takes place over the course of an afternoon and early evening. Both the desert setting and the use of a "sealed-room play"□a plot device that forces a group of people to interact with each other□increase their feeling of being isolated from the rest of the world. It is only through finding out small bits of information that the characters are able to piece together what has happened nearby. This isolation creates both a sense of fear in terms of the proximity to the disaster as well as a sense of timelessness since the characters cannot go anywhere and thus their plans are in abeyance. By disrupting the timetables of these characters, Wilson creates a space for them to examine their lives. In particular, through dialogue and setting, he addresses the need for people to have a specific calling or vocation that gives their lives meaning beyond material comfort. Despite the characters' differences which are most apparent in the dialogues between them as well as their chosen professions□a priest, a professor, a research scientist, an art gallery owner, a children's book illustrator, and a professional tennis player□they are able to come together if only momentarily to understand each other and in some small way provide comfort during a brief crisis. By drawing together a variety of disparate people during an environmental disaster, Wilson is able to show how people react differently to confronting the possibility of death by stepping away from their day to day lives to find out what is really important to them.

The nuclear accident that propels the characters together forms a perfect backdrop for their internal conflicts. Although the accident occurs at some distance to the church, it is present both as a topic of conversation among those characters who are not familiar with each other and as a source of anxiety and anger. While Father Doherty appears to take the accident all in stride, referring to it as another one of these "little emergencies," Niles and Vita attempt to deduce from his descriptions of these catastrophes how harmful they are. Throughout the play, references to what is occurring at the Chin Rock mine remind the audience of why the characters are gathered and contribute to the internal turmoil that some of the characters are experiencing. For example, two of the characters, Niles Harris, the art professor, and Don Tabaha, the young half-Navajo, are at a crossroads in determining what to do next in their chosen professions. For Niles, it is a crisis of faith that erupted while reviewing his life's work and realizing that "to every didactic, authoritative sentence I had written, I said: 'Yes, of course, and exactly the opposite could be as true.'" This evaluation stirs him to repudiate his life's work. Don, on the other hand, must decide between being a doctor in the poor, rural area in which he grew up, or working as a cancer researcher with a famous scientist at Berkley.

Because of the accident, these two men are forced to interact with each other and to reflect on their life's choices. At first, their relationship is antagonistic, with both men making assumptions about each other, particularly Don, who accuses Niles of "working in your ivy-covered ivory towers back East." However, by the second act, especially after Niles's hypoglycemic attack in which Don helps him recover, the two men have come to an understanding that they have more in common than first imagined□as each is undergoing a professional crisis. Being holed up at the church provides a respite from their daily lives, a temporary sanctuary from the world's demands, that allows them time to evaluate their choices. As Christopher Bigsby notes in *Contemporary American Playwrights*, "The intensity of the situation raises the stakes for those who find themselves suddenly shaken out of their routines, nudged off the paths they believe themselves to have chosen." Although the meeting does not engender any radical action from either of the men, the accident at the mine facilitates an exchange between them that brings richer understanding of why they do what they do.

The theme of making the most of one's life through one's work is most prominently displayed by the parish priest, Father Doherty. Although Doherty's work at the mission is not exactly what he himself had hoped for as a parish priest, he has a keen understanding that his purpose in life transcends the rather uninspiring aspects of his job. When Vita asks him how many parishioners he has in the area, he honestly tells her very few. But despite the few attendees, he is committed to his task. After describing the services to Vita, he tells her later, "It's what we live for." The sense of vocation that Doherty illuminates is also what he advocates most incessantly in his encounters with Don, whom Doherty has known for his whole life. Don's decision to leave medicine for research infuriates Doherty as he views it as a cop-out. Referring to the inadequate health care in the area, he says to Niles late in the play, "The need here is something you can't comprehend." For Father Doherty, Don's departure is viewed as an escape from a world that he longs to forget, one that is full of misery and pain. As Don himself acknowledges, in reference to the health problems among the Navajo, "There's no time for one person in a hundred years to begin to correct a millennium of genetic neglect."

Throughout the play, the priest badgers Don about why he is leaving the area, often getting others to side with him. Yet by imposing his own views of what Tabaha should do, Doherty is not granting him the freedom to make his own decision. In *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, Gerald Berkowitz notes that it is this realization, more than Don's decision to leave medicine and Niles' decision to leave teaching, that produces the most dramatic moment of the play. Having listened to their barbed conversations for most of the afternoon, toward the end of the play Niles comes to Don's defense, exclaiming to the priest, "You cannot hold power over another man; even for his own good. . . . I've seen it with teachers a dozen times. I've done it myself." By intervening into the debate between Don and Father Doherty, Niles extends himself outward, seeking a common ground, first by defending the young man who appears extremely different from him, and second, by acknowledging to the priest that as teachers they are similar in their shortsightedness as well as their good intentions.

Although the uranium accident does not have any immediate dire effects on the characters gathered, it does provide a setting for several of the characters to respond at

least internally to the understanding that their time on earth is limited and thus making the best of it through valuable work is urgent and necessary. This message is conveyed most overtly by the Biblical passage Doherty reads to them, "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be?" When the helicopter arrives toward the end of the play to announce that the road has been cleared, the characters, except for Doherty, leave the church, re-entering the world of temporal time. They may not necessarily have undergone a profound change, but because their paths have crossed, they may have a deeper understanding of the need to continue on with their own specific journeys.

Source: Doreen Piano, Critical Essay on *Angels Fall*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

After reading Wilson's play *Angels Fall*, read other "sealed-room" plays that confine characters to a particular place such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and William Inge's *Bus Stop*. Compare the settings of these plays□a church, a spare room, and a snowbound bus stop□noting the use of a specific setting for its symbolic effects. In what ways do these confined settings illustrate a major theme found in the plays? What symbolism is provoked by the setting? What is the significance of the characters' inability to leave?

The historical period in which *Angels Fall* takes place is the height of the nuclear arms build-up between the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1980s. Research this decade for other plays, works of fiction, and popular films that dramatize the effects of a possible nuclear catastrophe. In what ways are they similar to *Angels Fall* in theme and setting? In what ways are they different?

Tennessee Williams, best known for his plays *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *The Glass Menagerie*, is one of the most highly acclaimed American dramatists. Critics have noted that Wilson's plays bear a strong semblance to Williams's in terms of their poetic lyricism and sentimentality. Compare a Williams play to *Angels Fall*, noting what critics have said about these two playwrights, then write an argumentative paper that agrees or disagrees with these critics' comparisons.

Some critics, such as Susan Harris Smith, have noted that the female characters□Vita, Maria, and Marion□in *Angels Fall* are not very significant characters and do nothing more than provide support and encouragement to the men in the play. Other critics such as Richard Wattenberg suggest the opposite, claiming that the female characters are strong and central to the play's themes. After reading these two critics, choose one couple and analyze their gender roles. In what ways do you agree with either Smith or Wattenberg's assessment and in what ways do you disagree?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Nuclear accidents, such as the meltdowns at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania in 1979 and at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986, awaken Americans to the dangers of radiation from nuclear energy. Because of these accidents and the build-up of nuclear arms, an international grassroots movement forms to protest the use of nuclear energy. Environmental groups, such as Greenpeace and the Sierra Club, pressure governments to rethink their environmental policies.

Today: In the United States, a moratorium is placed on the building of nuclear energy plants. However, because of its lengthy shelf life, hazardous waste from uranium mining in the southwestern United States continues to be a problem in terms of its handling, transportation, and storage.

1980s: The Cold War, which began as a diplomatic standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II, reaches its zenith under Ronald Reagan's U.S. administration from 1980 to 1988. Billions of dollars are spent building nuclear missiles that are hidden in various parts of the country that can be deployed at any moment. In addition, the Reagan administration lobbies heavily for funding of a defense plan popularly known as "Star Wars," which is meant to repel incoming nuclear missiles.

Today: In the early 1990s, the Soviet Union is dismantled and the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union comes to an end. However, because of the enormous trafficking in nuclear weapons, not only do many developing nations such as North Korea, India, and Pakistan acquire missiles, they continue to build them as a defense system against invasion.

What Do I Read Next?

Contemporary Native American writer Sherman Alexie in his novel *Reservation Blues* (1996) explores the complex historical relationship between indigenous cultures and Christianity in the United States which is alluded to in *Angels Fall* through the relationship between Father Doherty and Don Tabaha.

Drama scholar Christopher Bigsby, in his *Contemporary American Playwrights* (1999), analyzes the contemporary American theater scene by focusing on ten playwrights who have secured major reputations in drama but who may not have garnered major academic interest. His study includes chapters on Marsha Norman, Tony Kushner, Wendy Wasserstein, and Lanford Wilson.

In *New American Dramatists 1960—1980*, Ruby Cohn covers a range of contemporary playwrights who have influenced American theater. Whereas the actual coverage of individual works is cursory, the book, published in 1981, provides an important overview of drama during an experimental and fertile period of American drama.

Robert Del Tredici's *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb* (1987) documents the history of nuclear power, the rise of the United States' nuclear arsenal, and the contemporary uses and effects of uranium in communities through photographs of those who work in the nuclear industry as well as those who have been affected by it.

In *Drama since 1960: A Critical History* (1996), Matthew Roudané discusses over two dozen contemporary playwrights, focusing especially on the political and social histories in which they wrote. Particular attention is paid to African American and women playwrights as well as to themes in drama that explore myths of rebellion and resistance, of confrontation and expiation, and of the American dream.

As a contrasting example of a "locked-door" play similar to the format of *Angels Fall*, Jean-Paul Sartre's existential play *No Exit*, originally written in French in 1944, depicts a concept of Hell that involves a group of strangers locked in a room who are forced to interact with each other.

Wilson's award-winning play *Hot l Baltimore* (1975) provides an interesting comparison in setting, theme, and characterization to *Angels Fall* in its sympathetic look at a group of urban misfits mostly prostitutes, occupying a hotel that is about to be demolished.

Further Study

Barnett, Gene, *Lanford Wilson*, Twayne's United States Author Series, No. 490, Twayne Publishers, 1987, pp. 125—33.

Barnett's book is a comprehensive study of the works of Wilson that includes detailed analysis of his early experimental works, his major and minor plays, work for opera and television, commissioned works, and biographical information.

Bryer, Jackson R., *Lanford Wilson: A Casebook*, Garland Publishing, 1994.

This anthology is the first to compile a range of critical articles on the works of Wilson. Besides critical analyses of his plays, the author also covers historical and social aspects of Wilson's work, interviews the playwright, and has compiled an extensive bibliography.

Busby, Mark, *Lanford Wilson*, Western Writers Series, No. 81, Boise State University Press, 1987.

This very brief work offers a succinct overview of Wilson's work that primarily investigates the influence of place on his plays. While providing biographical details that contribute to his analysis, Busby focuses on how aspects of the frontier myth are central to understanding major themes of Wilson's plays.

Herman, William, *Understanding Contemporary American Drama*, University of South Carolina Press, 1987, pp. 196—229.

Covering a number of major contemporary playwrights, Herman dedicates a chapter to Wilson, explaining not only his major themes but analyzing his major works. Whereas little is mentioned specifically about *Angels Fall*, the chapter outlines a general reception of his work by critics.

Ryzuk, Mary, *The Circle Repertory Company: The First Fifteen Years*, Iowa State University Press, 1989.

As a tribute to an important theatrical institution, Ryzuk's book provides an account of the Circle Repertory Company theater which Wilson helped to create and continues to be involved with since 1969. Covering its founders, productions, cast ensembles, and its ability to change with times, Ryzuk's book gives an insider's look at the historical and artistic development of an independent theater.

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Lawson, D. K., "Lanford Wilson," in *Contemporary Gay American Poets and Playwrights: An A—to—Z Guide*, edited by Emmanuel S. Nelson, Greenwood Press, 2003, pp. 451—60.

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Sartre, Jean-Paul, *No Exit and Other Plays*, Vintage Books, 1989.

Smith, Susan Harris, "*Angels Fall*: An American Melodrama of Beset Manhood," in *Lanford Wilson: A Casebook*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, Garland Publishing, 1994, pp. 103—18.

Wattenberg, Richard, "'Above Time' in the Present?: Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' and Lanford Wilson's *Angels Fall*," in *Lanford Wilson: A Casebook*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, Garland Publishing, 1994, pp. 85—101.

Williams, Philip Middleton, *A Comfortable House: Lanford Wilson, Marshall W. Mason, and the Circle Repertory Theatre*, McFarland, 1993.

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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

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- 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.
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- 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.
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- 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.

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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.

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.

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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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