

Arcadia Study Guide

Arcadia by Tom Stoppard

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Plot Summary

Arcadia tells the story of the lives of the Coverly family of Sidley Park, Derbyshire, England, in the years 1809-1812. Simultaneously, it also tells the story of the present day Coverly family of Sidley Park. The narrative also details the lives of the past and present guests and staff who reside at Sidley Park. The narrative of Arcadia involves a multiplicity of personal, philosophical, and scientific themes as the characters of the play attempt to develop and discover a world of order and sense in the chaos of history and the present world. While presenting the romantic sagas of the characters, which resemble a modern day soap opera, the play also examines the principles of mathematics, literary analysis, historical research, and garden landscape.

The Coverlys both past and present are an eccentric group of philosophers, scientists, and mathematicians. One of the main themes of the play is the clash between Enlightenment and Romanticism. The eighteenth century age of Enlightenment stressed order, logic, and rationality. The aesthetics and social structures of Classical Greek and Roman societies were held up as models of perfection for their moderation and emphasis on the mind. Great figures of the Enlightenment were characterized by restrained emotion in all areas of their lives from culture to art. Romanticism, on the other hand, was a movement of the early nineteenth century and was created as a direct reaction to the order and restraint of the Enlightenment. Advocates of Romanticism stressed the importance of nature and emotion. Order and restraint were viewed as tools of oppression. The artistic creations of the individual and the emotions of the individual became the most important cornerstones of society. The transformation of the Sidley Park gardens from the pastoral perfection of Enlightenment culture to the fantastical Gothic wilderness of Romantic culture symbolizes the tension between Classical and Romantic thought that is an underlying theme of the entire play.

Flowing out of this clash between Enlightenment and Romantic thoughts and philosophies is the clash between the characters which embody these two schools of thought. Bernard Nightingale and Hannah Jarvis argue over the techniques of literary analysis and historical research. Bernard advocates intuition and imagination and Hannah advocates concrete proofs grounded in reality. However, both ultimately discover the theory that forms the basis of their research and discoveries is a mistake. Through the character of Thomasina Coverly, mathematical theories and formulas are applied to the natural world and a formula for the future of the universe is discovered but lost due to her untimely death. A Coverly descendent, Valentine, is able to develop Thomasina's formula using modern technology, but even modern technology cannot ultimately discover the answers of the universe. Neither school of thought is ultimately justified. The representatives of the Enlightenment realize their intellectual pursuits can only take them so far and the representatives of Romanticism realize emotion can lead to mistakes. The essence of life lies somewhere between the philosophies of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. The essence of life is the heat of passion whether it is the passion of intellectual pursuit or emotional passion for another human being.



Although the play depicts the clash between these two schools of thought and examines the concepts of nature, math, literature, and art, there is never a final resolution or a final discovery. The characters of the past look to the future for the answers to their questions and the characters of the present look to the ideas of the past. Neither group is able to uncover finally the answers to their questions, suggesting there is no ultimate answer. Life is too short and chaotic for any one person ever to arrive at the ultimate answer. Life is too riddled with the distractions of emotion and human interaction for a complete scientific or philosophical survey to be completed. The most important thing is the process of investigation and thought, not the destination. And the only way people are remembered is by creating questions that will continue to puzzle future generations. Creation of art and literature, scientific queries and formulas, these are the things that last. The elements of culture are forgotten and dropped only to be rediscovered by future generations. The flow of time is cyclical and all events, memories, creations, philosophies and discoveries will be forgotten and remembered over and over again. In the end, the play concludes, the process of thought is far more important than the destination of the thought process. It is the search for meaning and knowledge, the desire to discover, that gives life meaning. The world is a chaotic swirl of cyclical repetitions of people, events, and discoveries and the only thing that pauses time and has meaning is the desire to know.



Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

The play opens at the Coverly family estate of Sidley Park in Derbyshire, England in April, 1809. Thomasina Coverly, at the age of thirteen, is studying with her tutor, Septimus Hodge, in a room facing the garden. Thomasina is attempting to discover a proof of Fermat's last theorem, an algebraic enigma that has puzzled mathematicians for hundreds of years. Septimus is attempting to read "The Couch of Eros," a poem written by Ezra Chater, a guest currently residing in the manor house. Thomasina pauses in her studies to ask Septimus the meaning of the phrase "carnal embrace." Septimus attempts to fool Thomasina into thinking the phrase describes someone hugging some kind of meat, but Thomasina pursues the subject saying she overheard the house staff saying Mrs. Chater was discovered in a "carnal embrace" with someone in the gazebo. Septimus questions Thomasina further and then attempts to make her return to her studies. Jellaby, the butler, arrives and delivers a note to Septimus from Mr. Chater requiring him to meet him for a duel over the honor of his wife. Septimus tells Jellaby he will meet Mr. Chater after his lessons with Thomasina and slips the note into "The Couch of Eros." Thomasina and Septimus engage in a philosophical discussion about fate, free will, and rice pudding. They begin to discuss Fermat's theorem and Thomasina exclaims she has discovered the formula for all of the future using Fermat's note in the margin. Septimus is expressing his doubt when an enraged Mr. Chater bursts into the room. Septimus asks Thomasina to leave and as she does she explains Fermat's note was simply a joke to make everyone mad.

Chater accuses Septimus of insulting his wife and Septimus corrects him by saying he made love to his wife at her request. Chater tries to call Septimus out and Septimus complains about always being called on to satisfy the demands of the Chater family. Septimus is able to avoid conflict by pandering to Chater's vanity and complimenting his poetic skill. Septimus promises Chater he will publish a glowing review of "The Couch of Eros" and suggests Mrs. Chater slept with him in order to ensure a good review for her husband's work. Mr. Chater naively tells a story revealing Captain Brice has also had an affair with Mrs. Chater. Chater is fooled by Septimus's story and inscribes his copy of "The Couch of Eros" with these words: "To my friend Septimus Hodge, who stood up and gave his best on behalf of the author--Ezra Chater, at Sidley Park, Derbyshire, April 10th, 1809."

Lady Croom and her brother, Captain Brice, burst into the room as they protest the methods of landscape architect Richard Noakes and his plans for the Sidley gardens. They argue for the neat and symmetrical, classical arrangement of the gardens over Noakes's ideas to transform the gardens into a Romantic-style Gothic wilderness of shrubs and artificial ruins. Thomasina returns to defend Noakes and tells everyone she knows all about "carnal embrace" thanks to Septimus. Captain Brice demands to know if Thomasina is a ruined child and Thomasina apologizes to Septimus for getting him in



trouble, but in such a way suggesting she still believes a “carnal embrace” involves a slab of meat.

Lady Croom criticizes Noakes’s “Picturesque” drawings of his plans for the ground, including the “rustic hovel” he calls a hermitage. Lady Croom says her classical garden is the natural way God intended a garden to look. Shots are heard outside where Lord Byron, Lord Croom, and Augustus Coverly are shooting pigeons. They all leave Thomasina and Septimus to meet the hunters and Thomasina asks Septimus if he is in love with her mother, and he replies she is far too clever but doesn’t answer her question. Thomasina draws a hermit into Mr. Noakes’s sketchbook in front of the hermitage. Thomasina gives Septimus a note from Mrs. Chater and he places it into Chater’s book for safekeeping.

Analysis

The play opens with a mathematical problem. Septimus Hodge has set Thomasina Coverly the task of finding a proof for Fermat’s Last Theorem. Hodge has given her this task as a way to keep her busy and has no hope or anticipation of her actually solving the problem. However, Hodge doesn’t appreciate Thomasina’s ability to comprehend the questions of the universe in familiar terms and make connections between seemingly unrelated concepts. As she contemplates Fermat’s Last Theorem, Thomasina develops the original idea of a formula that would explain the movements of the universe. Hodge wryly tells her she may indeed be the first to come up with this idea because he recognizes the impossibility of finding or developing such a formula. Thomasina eventually laughingly concludes Fermat didn’t ever actually develop a theorem but simply wrote the note in the margin to drive future mathematicians insane. Thomasina jokes, but this moment foreshadows her quest throughout the plot of the play as well as her eventual discovery.

When Thomasina’s lessons are interrupted by her search for another type of knowledge, another theme of the play is created. The characters of the play are constantly distracted from intellectual and scientific pursuits by emotional, relational, or personal complications. Sex plays a large part in these distractions and this moment of distraction for Thomasina foreshadows Chloe’s conclusion about the progress of the universe at a later time in the play. Hodge further develops this theme when he juxtaposes his description of the sexual act with his description of Fermat’s Last Theorem in answer to Thomasina’s questions. However, though Hodge enlightens Thomasina as to the specific nature of “carnal embrace,” she does remain innocent. The concept of “carnal embrace” is repugnant to her and she displays a kind of juvenile curiosity rather than a serious consideration of the topic she is discussing.

The argument over the architecture of the landscape serves as an illustration of the battle between the philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment and those of Romanticism. The present layout of the garden includes simple lines and natural developments. There are fields and gazebos and forests and bridges, but all are real and natural. Noakes’s goal is to transform the gardens of Sibley Park into a kind of Gothic riot of fantasy and



the oddness of the “Picturesque.” He wants to place brambles and rivers where they would not naturally be. And to create ruins and hermitages where buildings never existed and hermits never lived. Noakes wants to transform the logical structure of the gardens into a chaotic riot of ruin. As Noakes remarks, “Irregularity is one of the chiefest principles of the Picturesque style.” The threat of Romanticism to those characters who rely on logic is it too closely resembles the ultimate disorder of the universe. The comfort of the Enlightenment is contained within the idea the mind can triumph over disorder and stave off the vulnerability of the unknown.

Vocabulary

carnal, absurd, candid, congress, incomprehensible, picturesque, visionary, self-determination, suspend, miscarried, admiration, refuge, cowardice, slander, insight, anticipation, hovel, scant



Act 1, Scene 2

Summary

Scene 2 opens around two centuries later in the present day Sidley Park and in the same room with exchanged occupants. The table in the room has accumulated more paraphernalia in addition to what was on it in the first scene. The Croom family still owns the estate and Hannah Jarvis, a writer, is visiting the estate in order to write a book about the history of the house gardens. Chloe Croom, the daughter of the house, welcomes the flamboyantly attired Bernard Nightingale. When Bernard hears of Hannah's presence, he asks Chloe not to mention his name to her. Chloe decides to give Bernard another name and goes into the garden in search of Hannah. Valentine Coverly, Chloe's oldest brother and a postgraduate student at Oxford, curses his way across the room, completely ignoring Bernard. Valentine complains that everything in the house has been removed for an upcoming party and he can't find the old historical game books. Valentine asks Bernard if anyone is looking after him and Bernard replies he is looking for Miss Jarvis. Bernard explains he is hoping to ask Hannah about his research, and Valentine tells him Hannah's book is actually about hermits not gardens. Bernard reminds Valentine they have met before at a conference when a mathematical analysis was used to evaluate literature.

Hannah arrives calling Bernard "Mr. Peacock" and he almost forgets Chloe has given him a new name. Bernard incompetently attempts to flatter Hannah and she discovers he is a professor. Hannah threatens physical violence if he doesn't get to the point and Bernard tells her he wants to know about Ezra Chater. Bernard explains to Hannah he has come to Sidley Park seeking information on Chater and Lord Byron. He has Septimus's copy of "The Couch of Eros," including the notes and inscription inside of the book. The book was discovered in Byron's personal library and Bernard has concluded Lord Byron killed Chater in a duel when they were both visiting Sidley Park in 1809 and then had to flee the country.

Bernard says it is difficult to find information on Chater and Hannah asks about family. Bernard replies there was only one other Chater in the British Library Database but he was a botanist who died in Martinique after being bitten by a monkey. Bernard asks Hannah to share any information she might have. Hannah says she is surprised Bernard appreciated her book since most academics have looked down on it, especially professors who are known for their work on Byron. Asking at which university Bernard teaches, Hannah is reminded of a Mr. Nightingale who published a scathing review of her book. They talk about the eccentricities of the family members, but Hannah doesn't seem to have any great liking for Bernard.

Hannah eventually tells Bernard Septimus Hodge was Thomasina's tutor, but Chater never appears in any records. She goes on to tell Bernard about her own project. Finding Thomasina's drawing of the hermit in Noakes's landscape drawings, Hannah assumed the figure was a real person who died in 1834 and she is now basing a book



about the decline of Romanticism in England on the “Sidley Hermit.” Hannah tells Bernard the hermit was placed in the gardens like a gnome and lived out his life as a garden decoration. However, he was believed to be a genius who turned out to be insane. She says the hermit is a symbol of the effect of Romanticism on the Enlightenment and the destruction of reason. She follows the images of Sidley from 1730, a paradise in the age of reason, to Noakes’s alterations, the decline from thinking to feeling.

Bernard is impressed by Hannah’s thought processes. Hannah says she dislikes sentimentality. Chloe comes in with tea and calls Bernard by his real name. Hannah realizes Bernard is the critic who wrote the terrible review of her book, *Caro*. Hannah and Bernard decide to put aside their differences and work together to go through all of the documents as they are both studying the same period. Bernard tells Hannah about the reviews of “The Couch of Eros” and she correctly deduces they were written by Hodge. Bernard, however, tells her he believes they were written by Byron because of the satirical and scathing nature. Bernard points to the inscription and notes within the book as proof Byron killed Chater in a duel. When Hannah reveals Byron and Hodge went to school together, Bernard decides to settle down in the local inn for an extended period of research, much to Hannah’s chagrin. Chloe expresses an interest in asking Bernard to the costume ball that night as Hannah’s date and Hannah quickly refuses. Just then Gus, Chloe’s fifteen-year-old brother who is autistic and apparently mute, comes in and presents Hannah with an apple as a sign of his affection.

Analysis

Bernard’s unsuccessful attempts at flattery with Hannah create a kind of opposite mirror view of Hodge’s flattery of Chater in the first scene. Bernard’s lack of success underscores the fact he is far more similar to Chater than he is to Hodge. He himself is pompous and vain and so he believes by appealing to Hannah’s vanity he will get what he wants. However, he overdoes the act and Hannah sees through his attempts at flattery to his need for assistance. Hannah’s consistent reliance on logic and sense make her more of a reflection of Hodge in this scene. But Hannah is not entirely without sentiment and imagination. As she tells Bernard about her ideas regarding her book--the breakdown of the romantic imagination--she employs a great deal of sentiment. He sympathizes with the unrecognized genius of the hermit and she imagines him being regarded as nothing more than a garden decoration. Her story of the unappreciated human being, driven by the impossibility of discovery, is actually quite heavy on sentimentality. However, the thesis of her book, the breakdown of the romantic imagination, presents Romanticism as a destructive force, capable of corrupting the logical mind.

All of the present day characters pursue history in some way. The mother is obsessed with the history of her garden, Hannah is searching for the history of the hermit, Bernard wants to discover the history of Byron’s connection to the house, and Valentine is searching for the historical game books. This blending of the past and the present creates a concept of the progression of knowledge. While the present day characters



are obsessed with the facts and knowledge of the past, the past characters from the previous scene are obsessed with making new discoveries and predicting the future. These obsessions form a kind of cyclical loop between the knowledge of the past and the knowledge of the present as well as the characters of the past and the characters of the present. Knowledge of the present revolves around the knowledge of the past because present knowledge evolves from past knowledge. This cyclical progression of knowledge is not just applied to facts and figures but also encompasses self-knowledge. Many of the characters in the present day Sidley Park closely resemble the residents of the past. In this way, the cyclical view of knowledge indicates the identities of the present revolve and evolve out of the identities of the past. The obsession with history exhibited by the present residents of Sidley Park indicates they build their identities on the past and especially on the history of their family.

Vocabulary

delighted, unattributed, analyze, extraordinary, rehabilitate, substantial, patronize, technically, pupil, prospectus, illustrious, simpleton, sage, epiphany, rigour, collaborate, ridiculed, contemporaries



Act 1, Scene 3

Summary

The third scene picks up on the day after Chater confronts Hodge in 1809. Resting on the table are now the copy of "The Couch of Eros," Hodge's portfolio, a tortoise named Plautus, and an apple identical to the one Gus gave to Hannah. As Thomasina works on her lessons in the same garden room, Jellaby delivers another letter to Hodge, who says there will be no reply. The tortoise sits on Mr. Chater's book and Hodge puts the letter he has just received into the book. As Thomasina works on her Latin, Hodge eats the apple and feeds some to the tortoise. Thomasina realizes the Latin she is translating was written by Lord Byron and says her mother is in love with him. Hodge is shocked and calls this nonsense, but Thomasina says she saw them together in the gazebo. Thomasina notes her mother is annoyed with her father for his plans to alter the park, but this does not explain her "friendliness" to Lord Byron.

She tells Hodge Byron liked his review of Chater's earlier book, *The Maid of Turkey*. Thomasina gets a low grade on her mathematics and angrily accuses Hodge of being churlish with her because her mother is paying attention to Lord Byron. Thomasina expresses frustration over the fact these banal algebraic equations don't apply to the real world of nature but rather the material world of manufacture. She dismisses Hodge's assertion certain things cannot be known or understood by human beings. She believes the values of the formulas and graphs she has been studying can be applied to chart the shapes of natural objects. She insists the entire universe can be reduced to a mathematical formula and decides to perform an equation in reverse. She decides to chart the shape of Hodge's apple leaf and then find a formula that explains the graph.

Hodge tells Thomasina to get back to her translation about Cleopatra, and Thomasina exclaims she hates Cleopatra because everything is always about love. She bemoans the fact "the Egyptian noodle made carnal embrace with the enemy who burned the great library of Alexandria without so much as a fine for all that is overdue." Hodge comforts her with the number of ancient works of literature that still exist. He develops an idea of the world as a cyclical procession of events, discoveries, and characters. He notes the small amount of time each life takes in the large span of history. Hodge picks up Thomasina's Latin assignment and begins a fluent translation, which at first confounds and then angers her as she realizes he has memorized the English translation. Thomasina flees from the room, wishing Hodge dead and almost runs over her uncle, Captain Brice.

Captain Brice is followed by Chater who tells Hodge anything he has to say to him, he can say to Captain Brice. So Hodge mischievously addresses his remarks to Chater as speech to Captain Brice and confusion follows. Chater and Brice attempt to draw Hodge into a duel because Chater has discovered the scathing review of his earlier book in the Piccadilly was done by Hodge, and he returns to the injury done to him through his wife. Hodge apologizes and Captain Brice says there is no excuse for his injury to Chater's



“conjugal property,” otherwise known as his wife. Lady Croom interrupts them to ask for “The Couch of Eros” so Byron can include it in his mocking new work on the prominent poets of the day. Lady Croom tells Hodge he must persuade Byron to remain at Sidley Park and take possession of his pistols because it would prevent him from going into the dangerous regions of Europe and because he is a terrible shot.

Lady Croom leaves the room bearing Hodge’s copy of “The Couch of Eros,” including the notes and the inscription. As she leaves she notes Thomasina’s terrible piano playing in the background. Hodge agrees to a duel with Chater. Hodge also insults Captain Brice and accepts a duel with him following his duel with Chater, at which point he will get on the ship Byron has mentioned sailing on and depart for unknown regions so Byron will remain at Sidley Park and Lady Croom “will be satisfied.” He angrily storms out of the room.

Analysis

While the players in the present are obsessed with the past and the players in the past are obsessed with the future, they both share an obsession with knowledge. Not just knowledge of the intellectual variety, but self-knowledge. However, the play suggests self-knowledge is far more allusive than the knowledge of facts and figures. Without understanding themselves, the heat and passion of humanity, the characters of the play have no hope of discovering the mysteries of the universe. Thomasina and Chloe can be seen as doubles of one another in their roles as the daughter of the house as well as their unique ability to comprehend the mysteries of the universe through the framework of human nature. Thomasina is able to combine Fermat’s Last Theorem with the Second Law of Thermodynamics and imagine a formula that would predict the future of the universe. She understands the basis for comprehending the world around her is the “action of bodies in heat,” the movements of the universe are driven by something as simple as the passion of a human being. Like Thomasina, Chloe is able to connect seemingly random concepts and develop a brilliant conclusion. Also, like Thomasina, Chloe understands the basis for the movements of the universe. She asserts that passion, human emotion, and sex are the final arguments against the determinism of the mathematical functions of nature. She believes the randomness of attraction and emotion is what prevents the path of the universe from strictly following its predetermined way. While Valentine believes at the end of the play he is the only one capable of taking Thomasina’s theories to the next level through the use of his computer, it is actually Chloe who develops Thomasina’s theory by drawing the mathematical theory even closer to the heart of the natural world.

However, the knowledge of Thomasina and Chloe does not mean they can completely prevent the universe from following its predetermined course. Everything will ultimately descend into disorder. The Second Law of Thermodynamics provides an answer to the mystery of the movements of the universe, but it also provides a description of an unavoidable doom. There cannot be any prediction for the random actions of people and there is no avoiding the determined destination of the universe. This fact is illustrated by Thomasina’s death by fire. Heat was her answer and heat was her doom.



The characters and times of the play are duplicated in order to illustrate select constant truths that have existed throughout time and will continue to exist throughout time immemorial.

Vocabulary

amorous, commonplace, procession, ancient, ecstasy, barge, beggared, repent, malice, conjugal, affectation, sportive



Act 1, Scene 4

Summary

Scene 4 returns to the present day with Hannah and Valentine conducting research in the garden room. On the table is Valentine's tortoise that looks the same as the tortoise Hodge fed the apple to, Hodge's portfolio, a math textbook, Thomasina's math notebook, and a paper with a diagram on it. Hannah is reading Thomasina's math notebook and discovers her claim of a proof for "The New Geometry of Irregular Forms" in the margin. Like Fermat's notation, Thomasina says the space of the margin is too small for her proof which can be found elsewhere. The piano in the next room starts playing during this discussion, although the song is being performed with much more talent than Thomasina's performance. Valentine explains to Hannah Thomasina has been graphing the same formula over and over on a progressively larger scale. She has been using the end point for each graph as the starting point for the next. Oddly enough, this is exactly the same method Valentine is using in his mathematical studies and this method is thought to be newly developed. Hannah wonders why Thomasina was doing this calculation and Valentine asks why she isn't focusing on the hermit. Hannah notes that the primer was Septimus's and wonders why all of these old materials were saved. She asks Valentine if he knows what the diagram means and he crossly says no. She asks why he is upset and he denies he is but says math was classical for hundreds of years until it suddenly became modern and nature became classical. But now, he explains, mathematicians are noticing the most interesting stuff are the mathematics of the natural world.

Valentine reveals to Hannah he is studying the population changes of the grouse in Sidley Park and doing the reverse of Thomasina. He has a graph and is attempting to discover the equation that explains the graph. He is attempting to discover the mathematical algorithm that explains the changing numbers of the grouse. But he is employing the same idea as Thomasina and using the end point of each record for the beginning of the next. Valentine explains the population numbers can be difficult to accrue because of the many interferences of daily life and human beings. He likens this interference or "noise" to a piano playing in another room by an untalented pianist with a badly tuned piano. Valentine becomes excited thinking about the mysteries of mathematics. He says he got his information from the game books of Thomasina's time and Hannah becomes excited by the thought that Thomasina was doing the same thing Valentine is doing.

Valentine resents the idea that a young girl from so many years ago could have been doing what he is now doing. Hannah gets him to admit he could use the same concept to discover the graph of the apple leaf sitting on the table. Valentine says a computer could be used to perform the calculations. The grand and humble mysteries of nature could be solved with mathematics because "the unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to make everything the way it is." He says the future is disorder and every discovery will be discovered to be wrong. But he is excited by the idea of mystery.



It is revealed Gus is playing the piano. And they discuss the possibility of Gus's genius. Valentine tells Hannah Gus spoke until the age of five.

Bernard bursts into the room and triumphantly presents his discovery of Byron's satirical mention of Chater's poetry in his book *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Hannah points out the verse is handwritten and not in Byron's handwriting. Hannah tells Bernard she has discovered an 1810 letter from Lady Croom to her husband mentioning her brother's marriage to Mrs. Chater. So Chater would have had to be dead by 1810. Bernard believes this supports his theory that Byron killed Chater and Hannah mocks the passion and excitement exhibited by Bernard for his historical discoveries and Valentine for his mathematical ones. Hannah insists there is no evidence that Byron ever visited Sidley Park. Bernard says her problem is that she has no sense of confidence in her gut instincts. He presents the form of imagination and story building that he has been doing as a reversal of time.

Valentine interrupts at this moment to tell them Byron was at Sidley Park and is mentioned in the game book. He notes his mother is making a fool of herself over Bernard as Bernard flies excitedly from the room and Hannah returns to her thoughts about Thomasina's calculations. Gus comes into the room as Valentine and Hannah are discussing the topic. Valentine explains the reason no one was able really to discover this method before is because the technology wasn't there. He says the calculations performed in a moment with a computer would take decades to do by hand. Hannah excitedly asks him if this was the only problem. Gus runs from the room and Valentine says he hates shouting. Valentine explains to Hannah it is not just a time issue, only a madman would take up such a mammoth project. Valentine leaves and Hannah picks up the essay about the crazy Sidley Park hermit she had discussed with Bernard before. A change in the light suggests dawn is coming. A shot is heard and birds call. And it is time for intermission.

Analysis

Hannah Jarvis has come to Sidley Park with the specific intent of writing a book that presents Romanticism as a destructive force of fantasy and upholds Classicism as the only ideal for the rational mind. She refuses to believe in Bernard's theory because he has no proof and because she is unwilling to believe Lord Byron would kill Ezra Chater out of some kind of instinctive emotion. She refuses to believe Bernard because he has no concrete proof. When Bernard says that time is reversed, he is acknowledging Septimus Hodge's concept of the cyclical nature of life. He understands the knowledge and lives of the past dictate the knowledge and lives of the future. He also understands the fire and passion, "the guts," that Chloe and Thomasina understand. He knows sometimes the only way to discover a fact is to follow your intuition. Hannah however, is completely incapable of following her intuition. She must always have cold, hard facts to lead her. When Bernard says she was in there and she knows, he is referring to the way he was there when Byron killed Chater. Through his imagination he has followed his intuition to create a scenario in which Byron killed Chater in a duel.



In the same way, Hannah began building her story about the hermit before she even arrived at Sidley Park. She has been looking at all of the literature on her topic within this framework and building evidence to support her theory. However, she is unaware her theory is incorrect and the hermit was not exactly as she supposed. This undermines her assertion that concrete evidence and testimony are the only way to develop a theory or a story. She has been gathering her evidence with only one goal in mind and thus she has been blind to certain elements of the story that might have told her of her mistake.

She is also unaware of the fact the entire thesis for her book is undermined by the somewhat romantic reason for Hodge's retreat to the hermitage. It is true he retreats to the hermitage in order to attempt finally to solve Thomasina's formula, but it is also true he is driven to the hermitage because of lost love.

Hannah's belief that mental processes of deduction and rational thought outweigh any kind of emotion, that they control the elements of the universe and create meaning, is undermined by the fact the most powerful woman in the play is also the most seductive. Mrs. Chater certainly has the highest degree of "carnal knowledge" and, whether or not she understands the terms or is conscious of her power, she exhibits the greatest ability to alter the mechanisms of the universe of anyone else in the whole play. She seduces her husband, Captain Brice, Septimus Hodge, and Lord Byron, and in doing so she sets in motion all the events of the play. All of the events and interactions of the play can be traced back to Mrs. Chater. She has no actual part in the play, but this simply highlights her characterization as the faceless unpredictable force of human emotion. Mrs. Chater demonstrates the random and unexpected nature of "carnal embrace" and forges the events of history.

Vocabulary

whereby, mean, iteration, cross, phenomenon, predetermined, relativity, variation, aristocrat, savage, prudent, flutter, boredom



Act 2, Scene 5

Summary

Scene 5 opens with Bernard reading a speech to Chloe, Gus, and Valentine detailing his evidence that Byron killed Chater in a duel. Hannah excitedly enters the room with something she wants to share with Valentine, but Chloe tells her to wait until Bernard is finished. Bernard picks up his speech but is interrupted occasionally by sarcastic comments from Valentine and Hannah. When Bernard finally ends his speech Hannah criticizes his tendency to select only the facts that support his own imagined theory. Valentine tells him in scientific terms, his theory is incomplete and Bernard protests he is not a scientist. Bernard says he is taking his finds beyond the academic world and planning a press conference.

Bernard then personally insults Hannah's book, *Caro*, and her research into the hermit. He tells her she has the wrong man on the cover of her novel. Hannah says maybe he should make his erroneous theory public, but she is bothered by his remark about the wrong man. Valentine takes this opportunity to introduce the topic of his computer model, which analyzed the reviews of *Chater* in the *Piccadilly* and found they were different from Byron's other reviews. Bernard dismisses his findings and calls them trivial. Valentine replies all authorship is trivial, the point is the text was written or the discovery was discovered. He says personalities don't matter, what matters is discovery. Bernard disagrees. Bernard explodes at Valentine and says science is trivial because it has nothing to do with real people and the real world. Beauty and personality are all that matter to Bernard and they are far more important in the creation of meaning. He insults Valentine's grouse project and seems to have hit upon a sensitive area as Valentine leaves the room, almost in tears. Chloe and Gus quickly follow Valentine out of the room.

Hannah demands to know what Bernard was referring to when he said she had the wrong man on the cover of her book. He explains an art scholar has looked at the image and said Lord Byron and Caroline Lamb could not have been the subjects of the image because it was created later than any plausible date. Hannah insists the image is of Caroline Lamb and Byron and says she simply knows it is they. Bernard sneers at her "gut instinct."

Bernard gives Hannah an invitation to return with him to London and sleep with him, but Hannah turns him down. Bernard claims Hannah is more romantic than she thinks she is and she should have just written a book about Byron because it would have taken a romantic to have made a heroine out of Caroline Lamb. Hannah tries to get rid of Bernard, but he tells her he will be returning for the costume ball as Chloe's date. However, before he leaves, Bernard presents Hannah with gift of a book he found in the Sidley Park library that mentions the hermit and his pet tortoise, *Plautus*.



After Bernard leaves, Valentine returns and Hannah tells him about a letter she has discovered written by the source cited in the essay that mentions the hermit. According to the letter, the hermit's mathematical obsession is the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states when left alone, everything will progress into disorder. The letter also contains the information that the hermit was born in the same year as Septimus Hodge. Hannah tells Valentine not to mind Bernard because all of his talk is just "rhetoric" that doesn't rely on right or wrong but mere style. Hannah reveals she is slowly coming to believe Septimus Hodge was the hermit and he was the symbol of the Enlightenment banished to the wilderness of Romanticism.

Analysis

The relative nature of these literary facts Hannah relies on so heavily can be seen when Bernard attempts to return to his speech and asks rhetorically, "Where was I?" Valentine says pigeons, Chloe says sex, Hannah says literature, and Bernard says life and death. They all view his speech from the very specific perspective of their own minds and their own theories. Valentine is conducting his grouse calculations and so his preoccupation is with the element of the natural world. Chloe is preoccupied with sex. Hannah thinks about nothing other than literature. And Bernard is looking for a strong drama that will bring him fame and glory.

The tenuous nature of the facts of history is again revealed when Bernard tries to prove his point that Byron wrote the reviews of Chater's books. It is only by looking into the lineage of Septimus Hodge that he would discover Hodge's brother was the editor of the *Piccadilly* and thus realizes Hodge did indeed have a connection to that paper. But he can't go through the lineage of every person connected to this event or through every paper in which this event was mentioned. Some papers have been lost and some things were never written down. But he does know Byron was connected to the paper by a review of another author and he follows his intuition to the conclusion that Byron wrote the reviews.

In this way, literary study is exactly like scientific study or mathematical deduction. Valentine says Thomasina could not have possibly arrived at a formula for the prediction of the future because the possibilities were too massive. With a computer he is able to do in moments what it would have taken her years or months to accomplish, but even then he still is not able to discover the conclusion. In the same way, finding out the definite details of historical events would require a complete and thorough search of every document even remotely related to each individual and each event.

Bernard says one must look at every piece of paper in order to develop a complete account of a past event or person and he is right, but this is not possible. There are too many elements scattered here and there for anyone to perform truly comprehensive research. In this way Bernard displays more sense than Hannah. Hannah insists on pursuing every line of thought, every avenue of her narrative, and so she will never see her story end, she will never have the time to create a complete story because she will be forever inundated by documents. Bernard gets the information he requires and then



follows his intuition, his “gut instinct,” to a conclusion. Right or wrong, this method is certainly more useful in staving off insanity.

Vocabulary

avenge, urgent, indispensable, eccentric, vulgar, hectoring, contemporary, gauntlet, cuckold, courtesy, ridicule, trivial, distinguished, underrated, chaps, grotto, symbol,



Act 2, Scene 6

Summary

Scene 6 brings the play back to 1809 to a pistol shot at dawn. Jellaby enters the room and lets Hodge in with a rabbit he has shot for one of Thomasina's favorite dishes, rabbit pie. After spending the night in the boathouse, Hodge returns to find the house vacated by many of its occupants. Captain Brice departed with the Chaters during the night and Lord Byron left in the early hours of the morning. Jellaby relates the information that Lady Croom looked for Hodge in his room during the night. Hodge inquires after his copy of "The Couch of Eros," but learns Byron took it with him. Jellaby tells Hodge while Mr. Chater and Captain Brice got drunk together, Lady Croom ran into Mrs. Chater at the door to Lord Byron's room. Extreme unhappiness ensued.

Lady Croom now enters the room and Jellaby ends his narrative. Lady Croom confronts Hodge about two letters she found in his room to be opened only after his death. One is addressed to herself and contains images of a sexual nature, while the other is addressed to Thomasina and is about rice pudding. Lady Croom informs Hodge she has banished her house guests for their terrible behavior and she expects him to follow after them. She tells Hodge about the events of the night before and relates the story that Mr. Chater ran into Mrs. Chater at the door of Byron's room. Jellaby enters the room with Lady Croom's tea and a letter from Byron to Hodge. Hodge burns the letter in deference to Lady Croom's feelings. Lady Croom inquires whether or not Hodge plans to follow the Chaters to the Indies where Chater is acting as botanist for an expedition led by Captain Brice. Hodge explains it was only his longing for Lady Croom that led him to sleep with Mrs. Chater, and Lady Croom accepts the compliment. His smooth tongue is able to convince Lady Croom he was merely sorrowful over her inability to see him as nothing more than her daughter's tutor. Lady Croom leaves, telling Hodge to meet her in her room at 7:00 a.m. and to bring a book.

Analysis

Septimus tells Lady Croom he cannot be held accountable for the two letters to herself and Thomasina as they were only meant to be read after his death. He makes an interesting point as just about every letter and shred of paper, down to the game books, have been examined by Hannah, Bernard, and Valentine. Letters and documents are read and examined by people who are not even remotely related to the intended recipient. This explains why they are given meanings the writer never intended.

Hannah, Bernard, and Valentine draw mistaken conclusions because they have no context for the letters and documents as they were. They continuously explain their ignorance or intuition by saying that they were not there when the events they are researching took place, they were not there in the past. But they never listen to their own words. They were not there, so there is no way for them to have a complete



understanding of events. They merely have secondhand narrative for which they have no context to help interpret correctly. However, because of the cyclical nature of time, these letters and documents of the past will always be read and examined by historians and literary detectives.

As Septimus says earlier to console Thomasina over the burning of the library at Alexandria, nothing is ever truly lost. Although even here, Septimus is not completely correct. There is a way to completely destroy a record and that is to burn it. By burning Byron's letter to him, Septimus destroys the one piece of evidence Bernard might have discovered, which would have revealed this mistake to him earlier and saved him the embarrassment of publication. In fact, if he had found this letter then, Bernard might have been able to tell his story from a different, more factual angle. Byron's burned letter serves as a symbol of the unknown element, of the natural incompleteness of written records. For both Hannah and Bernard, there is something, some small bit of information, they don't know and that totally disproves their theory.

Vocabulary

altercation, reckoning, decorum, oaths, trollop, unworthy, idle, scrupled, deceive, agony



Act 2, Scene 7

Summary

Back in the present day, Valentine, Chloe, and Gus are all wearing clothes from the early nineteenth century and lounging in the garden room. The table now holds a pyramid, a cone, and a pot of dwarf dahlias. Chloe is going through the newspaper, reading accounts of Bernard's Byron discovery. Referring to an earlier conversation, Chloe asks Valentine if she is the first one to have thought of something and he replies in the negative. Chloe goes on to explain her idea that with a big enough computer, someone could predict the future drawing from the physical laws of motion. Valentine interrupts Chloe's ruminations to tell her someone came up with that idea in the 1820s but discovered it wouldn't work. Valentine explains math of this kind doesn't work the way people used to think it did.

Chloe thinks it's impossible to predict the future because the unpredictable forces of romance, love, and sex get in the way. She explains her idea of the future is deterministic. That is, once you set events in motion, they will continue to unfold according to predetermined rules. What prevents the world from following this predetermined path is people falling in love or sleeping with other people they are not supposed to fall in love with or sleep with. Valentine replies dryly Chloe is probably the first person to see the events of the world in this light.

Hannah enters the room with a newspaper containing the headline "Bonking Byron Shot Poet," and Chloe leaves with Gus to find shoes to match his costume. Hannah expresses her continued disbelief in Bernard's theory. When Valentine remarks it could be true, Hannah replies the only thing known so far is that the theory has not yet been proven false. Valentine replies this view of things is also the scientific method. Valentine and Hannah settle down at opposite ends of the table to work on their research.

Valentine asks Hannah if she agrees with Bernard that his work is trivial, and Hannah replies everything is trivial. However, she says the search for knowledge and the desire to understand is what lends meaning to a meaningless existence. Valentine reveals he is not working on his grouse project. That instead he has put Thomasina's equations into his computer and carried her process much farther than she would have ever been able to do. Hannah comes to look and remarks the resulting images are beautiful but asks what it all means. Valentine says if Thomasina had really discovered something, then she would have become famous.

Hannah tells Valentine Thomasina died in a fire the night before her seventeenth birthday, but she suggests that Hodge, as Thomasina's tutor, might have worked with her to develop something and continued the work after her death. Valentine dismisses Hannah's suggestion.



Suddenly, Thomasina and her younger brother, Augustus (who bears a striking resemblance to Gus), come running into the room and begin to fight. Hodge follows them in and demands they stop fighting. He turns to Augustus and asks him if he is joining Thomasina in her drawing lesson of the cone and pyramid on the table, but Augustus replies at Eton they only draw naked women. Thomasina is scandalized. Hodge gives Thomasina her math homework and she is surprised to find she has received a zero for her equation attempting to chart the form of a rabbit. Hodge says her graph doesn't look like a rabbit, and Thomasina replies that is because the rabbit eats its own babies and the output becomes the input. Hodge looks through Thomasina's math notebook as Hannah looks through it centuries later.

Hannah asks Valentine if the new scientific understanding of how the world works doesn't indicate everything is doomed to disorder. Valentine replies in the negative but says it might explain how the next world will develop after theirs falls into chaos. Valentine explains Hannah's tea is getting cold and this is actually a phenomenon because everything goes at room temperature, the whole universe will end up at room temperature. Hannah proposes the idea that either Thomasina or Hodge was smart enough to figure this out in 1812, but Valentine says "you can't open a door till there's a house." Hannah says she thinks that's exactly what the definition of genius is and Valentine replies that is only for poets and madmen. Hannah recites some poetry by Byron about the dying earth, sunless and starless. Hannah and Valentine return to their research.

Thomasina tells Hodge she has a crush on Lord Byron and asks him if he thinks she will marry Lord Byron. Hodge tells her he doubts Byron even knows of her existence. Thomasina and Augustus resume arguing and Hodge tries to get them to quit. Augustus finally leaves the room, saying mysteriously he has something important to tell. Thomasina tells Hodge she told Augustus about a kiss they shared, but she doesn't think Augustus will really tell anyone. The kiss was a joke to seal Hodge's promise to Thomasina to teach her how to waltz.

Hodge and Lady Croom have just returned from London and Lady Croom has brought back a pianist named Count Zelinsky. Thomasina asks Hodge what he is reading and he tells her it is a possible contradiction of Newton's laws of physics. Thomasina borrows the book and pauses to note her mother is in love with the count. Hodge insists he is nothing more than a piano tutor.

Lady Croom enters the room swiftly followed by Chloe who is looking for Gus. Lady Croom comments on the terrible noise coming from Mr. Noakes's engine. Chloe and Valentine leave to look for Gus while Hannah remains in the room with the group from the past. Hannah reads one of Lady Croom's garden books as Lady Croom tells everyone about Mr. Chater's death as a result of a monkey bite and Mrs. Chater's subsequent marriage to Captain Brice. She gleefully tells everyone she is the recipient of the first dahlias in England.

Hannah leaves the room at the end of Lady Croom's story, leaving it to the characters of the past of 1812. Thomasina finishes the book and says she agrees Newton's theory



doesn't adequately describe the motions of bodies in heat. Hodge speaks in praise of geometry, and Thomasina says she is trying to develop a new geometry to describe the forms we see in nature. When Thomasina's talk of "bodies in heat" seems to have a double meaning, Lady Croom asks Thomasina how old she is today and Thomasina replies she is sixteen years, eleven months, and three weeks old. Lady Croom comments she will need to be married soon and Thomasina replies she plans to marry Lord Byron. Lady Croom mockingly says Byron neglected to mention that fact when she ran into him with an underdressed companion at the Royal Academy art gallery in London.

Mr. Noakes enters the room and Lady Croom verbally attacks him for his noisy steam engine, his creation of so much mud, and the ridiculous lack of a real hermit in her hermitage. Thomasina shows Noakes a diagram showing this steam engine can never produce as much energy as it uses up. Mr. Noakes and Lady Croom leave the room.

Hodge asks Thomasina about her diagram and she tells him Newton's equations go both ways, but the heat equation only goes one way. Hodge tells Thomasina to explain her diagram for homework. As they talk, Thomasina makes a drawing of Hodge and his tortoise, Plautus, and gives it to him. Thomasina leaves and Augustus returns to the room to apologize to Hodge. Augustus asks Hodge if he has an older brother and Hodge says yes and that his brother is the editor of the Piccadilly. Augustus asks if he can have Thomasina's drawing of Hodge and his tortoise. Augustus tells Hodge the real reason he wants to talk to him is to find out about sex because he thinks Thomasina's ideas on the subject are mistaken. They two leave as Hodge promises to explain everything to him.

Bernard enters the room followed by Hannah and Valentine, and Hannah says she has discovered an interesting entry in Lady Croom's garden book. She says Lady Croom mentions her dahlias and that Chater died of a monkey bite in Martinique, disproving Bernard's theory. Bernard bemoans his short-lived fame and wonders how long it will be before someone else figures it out. Hannah says she is planning a letter to the Times to inform them. Chloe enters the room and starts dressing Bernard up in old clothes for the costume ball photograph and Bernard chooses a big hat to hide his face. They all leave and the day changes to night.

Hodge enters the room with Thomasina's papers to grade and Thomasina enters in a nightgown and gives Hodge a kiss. He thinks she is trying to seduce him, but she is just reminding him of his promise to teach her to waltz before her seventeenth birthday, which is the next day. The Count plays the piano in the next room, but Hodge says the music is too slow for a waltz. Thomasina says she will wait until the music is right. Hodge has her math notebook with her note resembling Fermat's and tells her it is driving him insane.

Hannah and Valentine enter the room and Valentine is a little drunk as he digs Thomasina's diagram out of the clutter on the table and tells Hannah he has figured out it is a diagram of heat exchange. Hodge and Thomasina and Hannah and Valentine all begin to discuss Thomasina's diagram which proves energy is always being dispersed



but can never be brought back together. Hodge says we will be left “on an empty shore” and Thomasina replies that then they will dance.

Hodge agrees to teach Thomasina the waltz and they slowly begin. Hodge kisses Thomasina twice as she puts her arms around him. Chloe runs furiously into the room, angry because her mother caught her kissing Bernard in the hermitage. Bernard says he is leaving for London alone and Chloe dashes out of the room followed by Valentine. Bernard tells Hannah he is looking forward to her book and Hannah says she thinks she knows the identity of the hermit but she can't prove it. Bernard tells her to publish her work anyway. Thomasina and Hodge finish their waltz and Gus, who looks exactly like Augustus in his period costume, appears in the doorway. Hodge returns Thomasina's essay and gives it an “A” because it is beyond his understanding. Hodge lights Thomasina's candle and tells her to be careful of fire. Thomasina tells Hodge she will wait for him in her room, but he tells her he will not come to her, and Thomasina insists one last waltz as a birthday present. Gus enters the room and startles Hannah as he gives her a folder containing Thomasina's drawing of Hodge and his tortoise, Plautus. Gus silently invites Hannah to dance and she agrees. The two couples waltz across the stage.

Analysis

Earlier in the play, as Valentine talks about the unexplained mysteries of the universe, it becomes obvious while he enjoys the pursuits of science, what he really loves is mystery. Hannah feels the same way and expresses the same thought when she tells him it is the search for knowledge that means something. Ultimately, nothing can be known or decided for certain. In the quest for truth, no matter how much evidence you have to establish the validity of your theory, it only takes one small detail or fact to argue against it. Just as Bernard's theory is totally undone by a single dahlia. Of course the dahlia is just a representation of Chater's death in Martinique, but Bernard had this story right before him from the beginning.

At the beginning of the play he tells Hannah he knows of another Chater who lived at the same time as Ezra Chater and was a botanist who died of a monkey bite. All he needed was the dahlia to draw the connection between the two Chaters, as the dahlia was received by Lady Croom. So Bernard's downfall is brought about by a small dahlia. Knowing this, Hannah and Valentine conclude the only way to find meaning in the universe is to continue to search for knowledge knowing ultimate truth is never attainable because it doesn't exist. In the face of certain failure, the only distraction is the search or the pursuit.

Bernard, Chloe, and Thomasina all seem to view things differently. Chloe occupies herself with thoughts of sex and the pursuit of men. Bernard distracts himself from the knowledge of ultimate failure with the search for knowledge just like Hannah and Valentine, but his search has a different goal. For Bernard the purpose of the search is personalities and people. He has no interest in scientific equations or pursuits. For



Bernard, cold, bare facts do not contain the essence of life. Like Thomasina and Chloe, he seeks the heat and comfort of passion and beauty contained within the individual.

When Thomasina asks Septimus to teach her to waltz, she is choosing the heat and essence of life in the face of certain destruction. The world will end with the absence of heat. The essence of life is this heat. It is the spark contained within the individual that has nothing to do with scientific facts and observations. It is explained by them but it is not contained within them. Just as Valentine's computer displays a beautiful picture when it calculates Thomasina's formula, science can explain and evaluate the beauties of life, but it cannot capture them. The mysteries of science are ultimately unexplainable and the source of life is easy to find because it is held within the heated core of each individual, but not everyone is capable of making this discovery.

Vocabulary

deterministic, bonking, fatal, infinite, celestial, disgusting, lunatics, pendulum, significant, lame, propagation, contradict, approval, dowry, satisfactory, likeness, offense, recreation, propagate



Characters

Lady Croom

The lady of the house in the 1809-1812 Sidley Park, Lady Croom is witty, although somewhat academically challenged. She has affairs with multiple guests in her home and resents her husband's decision to remake their garden in the Gothic style. Septimus Hodge is in love with Lady Croom.

Thomasina Coverly

The pupil of Septimus Hodge, Thomasina Coverly goes from the age of fourteen to the brink of seventeen within the narrative span of the play. Thomasina is a mathematical genius, although she is also an intuitive genius, who possibly discovers a formula that would predict the entire future. Thomasina dies in a fire in her bedroom the night before her seventeenth birthday.

Augustus Coverly

Augustus comes in at the end of the play and is Thomasina's fifteen-year-old brother. Augustus bears a striking resemblance to Gus Coverly, although Augustus is fifteen years old in 1812 and Gus is in the present day.

Septimus Hodge

The tutor of Thomasina, Septimus is in love with Lady Croom. Septimus, like Thomasina, is a mathematical genius but her intelligence is greater even than his. When he realizes the truth of Thomasina's theories and formulas about the end of the universe, he mourns the loss of innocence rather than the loss of life.

Valentine Coverly

The oldest son of the modern day Sidley Park family, Valentine is a postgraduate student at Oxford attempting to use the same mathematical techniques as Thomasina to explain the alterations in grouse populations at Sidley Park. Valentine jokingly refers to Hannah Jarvis as his fiancé and is drawn into the research of the past by her. He scoffs at Thomasina's theories at the beginning of the play, but by the end he recognizes her genius.



Chloe Coverly

The daughter of the modern day family at Sidley Park, Chloe is eighteen. While everyone around her is developing philosophical and scientific explanations for the chaos of the universe, Chloe proposes the unpredictability of human behavior as the source of the chaos.

Gus Coverly

Gus is the youngest child of the modern day Sidley Park family and fifteen years old. Gus is autistic and supposedly mute. He stopped talking at the age of five. However, Gus displays a silent intelligence and brilliant intuition unnoticed by most of the other characters.

Hannah Jarvis

After writing a bestseller about Byron, Hannah has come to Sidley Park to do research on a book about the struggle between Enlightenment and Romanticism. After seeing a landscape sketch done by Noakes in which Thomasina has drawn a hermit for his hermitage, Hannah mistakenly believes the hermit was a real person and adopts him as the central figure of her book. Hannah consistently maintains her alliance to reason and hatred of sentimentality.

Bernard Nightingale

Although he is a professor, Bernard's real passion lies in publication and fame rather than the classroom. He comes to Sidley Park to research its connection to Ezra Chater and Lord Byron. Before he has adequate proof, he publishes his discovery of the fact that Lord Byron killed Ezra Chater in a duel before fleeing to the continent. His assertion is later proven to be false by Hannah.

Captain Edward Brice

A Captain of the British Royal Navy and the brother of Lady Croom, Brice is not as refined or intelligent as his sister, but he makes up for this with his stubborn and aggressive manner. Brice, like Hodge, has an affair with Mrs. Chater and eventually marries her after the death of her husband.

Ezra Chater

A poet and a silly man, Mr. Chater is aware of some of his wife's infidelities but chooses to believe she is unfaithful in order to gain him a more prestigious place in the world. He challenges Septimus Hodge to a duel for sleeping with his wife, but flees from Sidley



Park when his wife is found with Lord Byron. The ridiculous man eventually dies a ridiculous death as a result of a monkey bite.

Jellaby

The butler of the Sidley Park of the past, Jellaby is also a great gossip. It is from Jellaby that Thomasina first hears the phrase “carnal embrace.”

Richard Noakes

Richard Noakes is the landscape architect hired by Lord Croom to redo the gardens of Sidley Park in the Gothic wilderness style. Noakes transforms the gardens from the simple beauty of the natural world promoted by the influence Enlightenment to the Gothic wilderness of well-placed brambles and fake ruins promoted by Romantic ideals.



Objects/Places

Arcadia

In Classical Greek mythology, Arcadia was the home of the god Pan and a place of pastoral ideal and natural harmony. Arcadia was an unspoiled wilderness that created a utopian environment free from vanity and avarice. However, Arcadia is a lost Eden that can no longer be attained.

Sidley Park

Sidley Park is a manor home in the idyllic, picturesque English countryside and the home of the Coverly family. The large room overlooking the gardens of Sidley Park is the location of both of the stories from 1809 and the present day.

Gardens

In the 1809 narrative, the gardens of Sidley Park are receiving a Gothic makeover from landscape architect Richard Noakes. Noakes transforms the garden from a pastoral paradise to a Gothic wilderness. The transformation of the garden symbolizes the struggle between Realism and Romanticism.

Hermitage

Among the false ruins and briars of Noakes's garden, he builds a hermitage without a hermit. However, the play suggests that Septimus Hodge later occupies the hermitage as he struggles to complete Thomasina's mathematical discoveries after her death.

“The Couch of Eros”

“The Couch of Eros” is the book of poetry by Mr. Chater that Septimus Hodge sarcastically and brutally reviews. The notes and inscription left in the book by Hodge and Chater later convince Bernard Nightingale that Lord Byron killed Chater in a duel.

The Piccadilly

The Piccadilly is the newspaper edited by Septimus Hodge's older brother. Hodge publishes his scathing reviews of Chater's poetical works “The Maid of Turkey” and “The Couch of Eros” in the Piccadilly.



English Bards and Scotch Reviewers

English Bards and Scotch Reviewers is Byron's satirical poetic examination of the major poets of the day. The notation on Chater in the book, as well as Byron's possession of Chater's "The Couch of Eros,," are the major discoveries that lead Bernard Nightingale to the mistaken conclusion that Byron killed Chater in a duel.

The Table

The table in the garden room of Sidley Park holds an ever-accumulating assortment of paraphernalia from the past and present. The table illustrates the connection between the past and present and the cyclical nature of life.

Steam Engine

Later in the play, Thomasina creates a diagram which proves that Mr. Noakes's steam engine will always consume more energy than it can create. This discovery symbolizes the end of the entire universe, which will be destroyed by the loss of heat.

Martinique

Martinique is the location of Mr. Chater's death by monkey bite. Bernard discovers at the end of the play that his theory about Byron killing Chater in a duel is mistaken and that Chater actually died in Martinique, attempting to work as a botanist.

Themes

Enlightenment vs. Romanticism

The battle between Enlightenment and Romanticism, or intellect and emotion, can be seen in *Arcadia* through the discussions of the characters as well as the transformation of the Sidley Park gardens. The Age of Enlightenment occurred in the eighteenth century and created a culture of order, rational thought, and rules and processes. Philosophers of the Enlightenment period looked to examples of the Classical Greeks who emphasized simplicity and importance of the mind over the value of emotion. Romanticism occurred in the nineteenth century as a reaction to Enlightenment culture. Romantic philosophers encouraged individuality, freedom, and emotion. Art, especially literature, became more experimental. Emotion and intuition were viewed as more valuable than the mental processes. Noakes's transformation of the Sidley Park gardens from the simple, classical forms of nature into the fanciful, supernatural ideals of the Romantic mindset symbolizes this historical transformation. The struggle between Romanticism and Enlightenment can also be seen in the struggle between the intellect and intuition. Many of Bernard and Hannah's arguments develop because Bernard follows his intuition while Hannah stays strictly to the path of the intellect.

While many of the characters in the play side with the ideals of the Enlightenment and emphasize the mind over emotion, these characters are not superior to those with a greater alliance to emotion or lesser intelligence. The most intelligent characters in the play still make mistakes and the least intelligent characters can still provide enlightening insights.

Genius

The theme of genius, especially unrecognized genius, runs throughout the play. Gus is autistic and mute and everyone treats him like a small child. But it is Gus who seems to have an intuitive understanding of the world and a genius for discovery. It is also Gus who ultimately provides Hannah with the information she needs to solve the riddle of the hermit.

Thomasina's mathematical and intuitive genius leads her to the discovery of a formula which can plot the forms of the natural world and predict the future of the universe. However, Septimus never truly realizes the validity or value of Thomasina's formula until after her death and Valentine is unwilling to admit Thomasina's genius until the end of the play. But their realizations are in vain because before Thomasina can present her formula or explain it to anyone, she dies in a fire.

Genius and heat share a symbolic symbiotic relationship in the play. Just as the end of the universe will arrive because of the absence of heat, so the end of the universe is implied by the death of genius. Thomasina's death by fire is no coincidence. Earlier in



the play she uses the Second Law of Thermodynamics to prove Mr. Noakes's steam engine uses more energy than it produces. Life is a slow descent into disorder and heat is life. Heat, in the form of fire, is what kills Thomasina's genius before she can present her discovery of the future. Thomasina's own genius consumes her.

Literature

Literature and writing plays a massive role in the plot of *Arcadia*. Hannah and Valentine study the past and discover Thomasina's formula by reading her math notebook. Bernard discovers the existence of Ezra Chater and his ties to Sidley Park through Chater's books and the notes and notations within it. All of the knowledge of the past is contained within the literary works of the individuals from the past. However, this makes the study of historical events somewhat problematic.

Hannah, Valentine, and Bernard all continually misunderstand the documents they read. Technology and literary professionals are both seen to analyze works of literature in the play, but both make mistakes and both come up with inconclusive results. Literature is a record of the past but it not a foolproof system. Literature is written by people who can make incorrect observations and arrive at mistaken conclusions. However, literature is also a vehicle for continued discovery and the preservation of knowledge. Valentine is able to take Thomasina's theories farther with his computer than she would have ever been able to do. This concept of literature as a way of renewing discovery and knowledge supports Septimus Hodge's description of life as a cyclical flow of facts and figures that continue well beyond the short lifespan of the individual. This view of literature also supports Hannah's claim that the pursuit of knowledge and the desire to understand the universe are what create meaning.

Style

Point of View

Arcadia is told from a semi-omniscient, third person point of view. The reader or audience of the play knows the answers to the riddles of the mystery the present day inhabitants of Sidley Park are attempting to solve. While Hannah and Bernard struggle to form their theories and conclusions, the audience knows it was Septimus Hodge who was supposed to duel with Ezra Chater and the hermit was a girlish drawing of Thomasina rather than a real character. At the same time, the audience also recognizes the validity of Septimus's words when he tells Thomasina every discovery and creation will be rediscovered and remade as time goes on, because they see Valentine comes to the same mathematical conclusions as Thomasina around a century later. Watching the events of the play unfold from a distant observatory perspective, the audience can see for themselves the cyclical nature of time and human events as well as the disorderly and chaotic end of all things.

Setting

The setting of the entire play is the large room in Sidley Park with a large window that overlooks the gardens. The historical events and characters appear between the years 1809-1812 and the rest of the play is based in the modern day Sidley Park. However, the modern day inhabitants of Sidley Park are having a costume ball and they are dressed up in the clothes of the nineteenth century for part of the play. By setting all of the scenes in the same room, Stoppard is able to draw the audience's attention to the relative nature of time. The past and present events and characters of Sidley Park flow in and out of each other. The juxtaposition of scenes and characters from the past and present makes the distance between them appear minimal. Ultimately the two periods come together in the final scene and the characters of the past and the present occupy the stage at the same time.

Language and Meaning

The characters of Arcadia address highly developed mathematical techniques and concepts as well as highly intellectual philosophical concepts of the universe. While many of the characters are silly and stupid even, they often have something to contribute to these concepts. Chloe Coverly is the only individual in the play who comes up with the possibly original idea the predetermined events of the natural world and fate of the universe can be altered by the unpredictable emotions of human beings. While all of the other characters delve into these deep philosophical theories and come to the conclusion the process of thought and the search for knowledge is the only thing that creates meaning in such a chaotic universe, Chloe Coverly discovers a cause for the chaos of the universe. The intellectual pursuits of the more intelligent characters are



interrupted again and again by human emotion and romance, and yet none of them are able to recognize the validity of Chloe's theory. Sarcasm and irony pervade the speeches of these enlightened intellectual characters, but the most ironic aspect of the play is that none of them are able to recognize the solution to the mystery when it is staring them in the face.

Structure

The structural juxtapositions of the scenes and characters in the play enhance the dramatic irony pervading the entire plot. Stoppard places the characters in the same room with the two different time periods following one after another so that the audience can watch as the characters of the present arrive at mistaken conclusions about the past and the characters of the past ineffectually attempt to predict the future. The characters are also placed in juxtaposition due to the structure of the play. Ezra Chater and Bernard Nightingale bear a resemblance to one another in their desperate search for fame and glory as well as their preference for Romantic ideals. Valentine Coverly and Septimus Hodge resemble one another in their search for truth and their concept of time as well as their early dismissal and ultimate recognition of Thomasina's genius. Hannah Jarvis resembles Thomasina in her alliance to reason and mocking attitude towards sentimentality. However, Chloe Coverly also resembles Thomasina as the daughter of the house and this resemblance reveals the possible validity of Chloe's theory of the universe. Gus Coverly and Augustus Coverly even seem to be the same person. The structure of the play echoes the underlying theme of the play, which is the cyclical nature of time and the brief nature of a lifespan.



Quotes

When you stir your rice pudding, Septimus, the spoonful of jam spreads itself round making red trails like the picture of a meteor on my astronomical atlas. But if you stir backward, the jam will not come together again. (Act 1, Scene 1)

If you could stop every atom in its position and direction, and if your mind could comprehend all the actions thus suspended, then if you were really, really good at algebra, you could write the formula for all the future; and although nobody can be so clever as to do it, the formula must exist just as if one could. (Act 1, Scene 1)

Where there is the familiar pastoral refinement of an Englishman's garden, here is an eruption of gloomy forest and towering crag, of ruins where there was never a house, of water dashing against rocks where there was neither spring nor a stone I could not throw the length of a cricket pitch. (Act 1, Scene 1)

English landscape was invented by gardeners imitating foreign painters who were evoking classical authors. The whole thing was brought home in the luggage from the grand tour ... It's the Gothic novel expressed in landscape. (Act 1, Scene 2)

The grass went from the doorstep to the horizon and the best box hedge in Derbyshire was dug up for the ha-ha so that the fools could pretend they were living in God's countryside. And then Richard Noakes came in to bring God up to date. (Act 1, Scene 2)

We shed as we pick up, like travelers who must carry everything in their arms. And what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. (Act 1, Scene 3)

A theory of everything. But they only explained the very big and the very small... The ordinary-sized stuff which is our lives, the things people write poetry about--clouds--daffodils--waterfalls--and what happens in a cup of coffee when the cream goes in--these things are full of mystery, as mysterious to us as the heavens were to the Greeks. (Act 1, Scene 4)

Don't you see? I thought my hermit was a perfect symbol. An idiot in the landscape. But this is better. The Age of Enlightenment banished into the Romantic wilderness! The genius of Sidley Park living on in a hermit's hut! (Act 2, Scene 5)

When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore. (Act 2, Scene 7)

In an ocean of ashes, islands of order. Patterns making themselves out of nothing. I can't show you how deep it goes. Each picture is a detail of the previous one, blown up. And so on. For-ever. (Act 2, Scene 7)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What do the belongings that accumulate on the table mean? Why is the tortoise in both story lines? Why is there a Gus in the present storyline and an Augustus in the past? How do these things impact the narrative flow of the play?

Topic 2

What is the conflict between Classicism or Enlightenment and Romanticism in the novel? Which characters are classicists and which are romantics? Do they remain that way throughout the narrative of the play? Which side is presented as the most appealing?

Topic 3

Does the play suggest intuition or evidence as the more dependable basis for knowledge and conclusion? Are there examples of the characters claiming to have evidence when they really only have instinct? Are there examples of characters following their intuition to discover evidence?

Topic 4

Does fate or free will win in the end? Do you think that the universe can be predicted with an equation? Does the play suggest that a foretelling equation is a good or a bad thing? What do you think?

Topic 5

What does the play suggest about time? What does it suggest about invention and discovery? Do you think that the progress of scientific discovery would have been altered if Thomasina had lived?

Topic 6

How do the scientific views and approaches of Thomasina, Septimus, and Valentine differ? How are they similar? How do the literary views and approaches of Bernard and Hannah differ? How are they similar?



Topic 7

What is the relationship between literature and science in the play? Between art and science? What is scientific genius and what is artistic genius in the play?

Topic 8

Does the play suggest that literature is a reliable source of historical records? Does the play promote a certain method of seeing into the past? Does Bernard equate imagination with “guts” when he criticizes Hannah in Act 1, Scene 4? What does Bernard’s ability to understand the “guts” of life indicate about a possible similarity to Thomasina or Chloe?