

Art Study Guide

Art by Yasmina Reza

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Plot Summary

Art is a critically acclaimed play written by the French playwright Yasmina Reza. The play was written in French and translated to English shortly after its creation. Art earned the Tony award for Best Play in 1998, shortly after beginning a Broadway run. Yasmina Reza began her career as an actress in Paris, often playing the role of a seductress, but decided that her true talent lay in writing instead. She has said in interviews that she got the idea for Art after a good friend bought an expensive painting and the two had a good laugh. She has said that Art is representative of what could have happened in their friendship if either person had hard feelings toward the other in their real-life friendship.

The play is written in one act with several changing scenes. The set is very minimal, with the only thing changing between each characters' apartment being a painting on the wall. All of the dialogue between characters occurs within the confines of one of the three apartments. On several occasions, the characters step out of the scene to address the audience directly with their own personal thoughts. The minimal set forces the audience to focus on the text and interaction of the three characters – both places where the play draws its strength.

The play begins with Marc telling the audience that his old friend Serge has bought a white painting. Inside Serge's apartment, Marc sees the white painting for the first time. Serge is clearly proud of his purchase and is looking for some reassurance from his buddy that spending 200,000 francs was worth it. Marc disagrees and criticizes Serge for making such an extravagant purchase for something that is so plain and lacking of artistic value. Serge is offended and an intellectual battle begins that lasts the duration of the play. Each man tries to get their mutual friend Yvan to side with him, but Yvan's desire to remain neutral ends up angering both of his friends instead.

Throughout the course of the play, the men wonder how they all became friends and if their friendship is truly worth all of the tension. Though each can come up with reasons that it may be better to separate from each other, they all talk themselves into keeping the friendship. Serge's purchase of the painting triggers several heated discussions that range from the loss of Marc's sense of humor to Yvan's annoying habit of trying to make everyone happy. The men argue, debate and offend each other but manage to reach a common ground by the end of the play. Marc addresses the audience in vague terms in the final lines, saying that the painting represents a man who "moves across a space and disappears."



Scene 1

Summary

Marc addresses the audience in the opening lines of the play. He explains that one of his oldest friends, Serge, has just purchased a white painting. Marc says that if you “screw up” your eyes, you can see other shades of white in the painting. The scene transforms to the interior of Serge’s apartment. Both men are staring at the painting without speaking. Serge tells Marc that he paid 200,000 francs for it – a price that he feels was a bargain based on the famous artist and what people have paid for his other paintings. Marc is not impressed, and tells his friend that he has just spent a fortune on “shit.” The two argue about Marc’s merit to judge any piece of art.

Serge addresses the audience and describes how hurt he is by Marc’s “vile” reaction to the painting. Marc then addresses the audience, saying that the fact that Serge spent so much on the painting has made him need herbal remedies to calm his anxiety. Marc cannot understand how his friend could spend so much money on such a trivial thing. He decides to go and visit their mutual friend Yvan and see what he thinks about the purchase.

Analysis

The relationship between Marc and Serge is established in the first scene, both through their interaction and what they confide in the audience members. It is clear that Marc feels some sort of jealousy towards Serge in the way that he reacts to the painting and what Serge paid for it. What is not clear is whether Marc is superficially jealous that Serge has the type of money to shell out for such an item or if Marc is jealous of Serge’s relationship with art. When Serge tells Marc that art is “a field about which you know absolutely nothing,” Marc responds defensively. It is almost as if Marc wishes that he did know more about art so that he could share in the appreciation of the painting with his friend.

Serge is annoyed by Marc’s antics and it causes him to come off as an elitist. He quotes names in the art industry that Marc does not recognize and assures his friend that he made a great purchase based on what other experts would say. What Serge misses is that Marc is not impressed with what other people think of the painting; in fact, Marc is even less enthused that Serge has to call on the opinions of strangers to make his case for the painting. Both men are frustrated with the other, wondering where the sense and support has gone from their “old friend.”

Vocabulary

modernism, nostalgia, breathtakingly, incomprehensible, vile, pretentious, indefinable, Gelsemium, Ignatia



Scene 2

Summary

The scene opens in Yvan's apartment, which is the same set as Serge's. The only difference is the painting on the wall. In Yvan's apartment, there is a subtle, inexpensive painting on the wall. Yvan addresses the audience and says that he recently changed careers from the textile industry to the stationary business. He also says that he is getting married in a couple of weeks. He begins searching the apartment for something and his back is to the audience when Marc arrives. He tells Marc that he has lost the top for his felt-tip pen and is searching for it. The two friends begin searching together and Marc is quickly annoyed. He tells Yvan that if he is just going to look for the pen top, he is going to leave. Yvan halts the search and asks Marc if he wants a drink.

Marc tells Yvan about the painting that Serge has purchased. Yvan is shocked at the amount of money Serge spent, but quickly defends Serge, saying "if it makes him happy..." Marc is immediately frustrated with Yvan who he believes is missing the point. Marc explains that it is not the cost of the painting that should upset Yvan – it is the fact that Serge's mentality has changed. Marc believes that Serge's sensibility is fading and feels that Yvan should be more concerned. Yvan remains neutral, saying that it does not bother him that Serge bought the painting. Marc says that it's concerning that Serge never laughs anymore, and Yvan promises to go see his friend and make him laugh.

Analysis

The personality of Yvan is explained in this part of the play. In contrast to Serge and Marc, Yvan seems less intellectual and more immature. While it has been established that Serge is a trusted dermatologist, Yvan is in a layman's profession. His preoccupation with finding a pen cap is unlikely something that would ever be found with Serge or Marc, who are "above" such acts. There is not a shred of snobbery in Yvan's character, leading the audience to wonder about his place in the trio of friends.

The first scene establishes the opinionated personalities of Serge and Marc. The second scene shows the sharp contrast in Yvan's neutrality. Though Yvan is clearly shocked at the price Serge paid for a painting, he determines that it should not bother him as long as his friend is happy and not harming anyone else. This frustrates Marc who is clearly looking for someone to side with him. Yvan remains unmoved in his judgment of Serge and decides that he must go see his friend and the painting before forming an opinion. Yvan is stubborn in a different way than Serge and Marc; he will not be swayed to either side of the argument.

Vocabulary

daub, textiles, infuriating, Perrier, quibbling, grotesque, connoisseurs, discernment, absurd



Scene 3

Summary

Yvan arrives at Serge's apartment, but the painting is nowhere to be found. The two make small talk and Yvan hints at the painting by commenting on Serge's boring décor. Serge asks Yvan if he has spoken with Marc lately and Yvan lies and says that he has not. When Serge believes that Yvan has not had any outside influence from Marc, he brings out the painting. While Yvan is not overly impressed with the painting, he has a much better reaction than Marc did. Serge tells Yvan how much it cost, and then studies Yvan's face closely. The two men burst into laughter with no real explanation to each other as to why they are laughing. Serge says that Marc also laughed at the painting, but in a "sardonic" way. Serge confides in Yvan that Marc's attitude is worrisome and that Marc appears to have lost his sense of humor. Yvan does not agree wholeheartedly with Serge. All that he will say is that Marc has seemed "gloomy" lately.

Analysis

Yvan's accommodating personality becomes even more apparent in this portion of the play. It is clear that he does not want to be in the middle of the fight between Serge and Marc and so he tries to play to both sides of the painting argument. Yvan already knows about the tension between the two friends based on Marc's reaction to the painting so he is careful to not make the same mistake and anger Serge. He will not go so far as to tell Serge that Marc is "wrong" but he is willing to agree that Marc's personality has seemed a little bit off lately. What should be a discussion about the merits of the painting turns into a discussion about Marc and his attitude and Yvan is clearly uncomfortable being in the middle.

Vocabulary

dodgy, vellum, monastic, resonance, sardonic, atrophying, complacency



Scene 4

Summary

In Marc's apartment, Yvan tells his friend about the visit to Serge and what he thinks of the painting. Marc's apartment has a landscape painting that hangs on the wall. Yvan tells Marc that he and Serge had a good laugh about the painting. Marc inquires about the way that the laughter ensues and he decides that Serge was only laughing to keep Yvan from criticizing the painting. Yvan then tells Marc that he liked the painting and that it really does have some artistic merit. Marc scoffs at Yvan's statement and then asks him if he would be happy receiving the painting as a wedding present.

Addressing the audience, Yvan says that he would not be happy with it as a wedding present. Yvan admits that he cannot think of a time when he has been happy though. Marc also addresses the audience and shows some remorse for the way that he acted toward Serge and the painting. He promises to be on better behavior in the future.

Analysis

Though Yvan does not want to be involved in the argument between Serge and Marc, he becomes involved anyway by making Marc feel bad about his actions. By saying that he sees something of value in the painting, Yvan makes Marc feel like an outsider. Marc tries to change Yvan's mind and when he sees that Yvan is not buying into it, he changes his whole outlook. He decides that he must "make nice" with his friend Serge if he does not want to be completely ostracized from the group.

Vocabulary

defuse, aesthete, trajectory, evocative, indulgence, parroting, objectivity, categorical

Scene 5

Summary

Marc returns to Serge's apartment and asks to see the painting again. Serge is cautious, but brings the painting out to admire again. Marc tells Serge that he has been thinking about the painting and that he may have been wrong the first time he saw it. Serge, who thinks that Marc is setting him up, asks what is wrong with him. Marc explains that he is trying to apologize. The two move on and start discussing Yvan and how annoying it is that he is always late. Marc tells Serge that he is obviously annoyed with him but is taking out his aggression on Yvan instead. In an aside to the audience, Serge says that Marc is getting on his nerves because it seems like he is forcing himself to be pleasant.

Yvan finally arrives, nearly forty-five minutes late, and explains that he has been dealing with stress from the wedding. He says that there is an argument between all of the stepmothers associated with the wedding party as to what names should be on the invitations. His friends ask him why he puts up with so much from his fiancé and Yvan says that he does not know. The three men start debating if Serge's painting is "white." Marc says that it is and Serge contends that it is not simply white. Yvan is on the fence, not wanting to be in the middle of the argument between the others. Yvan threatens to leave at one point but decides to stay. Serge and Marc continue to bicker and both start criticizing the painting that they consider to be a "daub" hanging at Yvan's place. Unable to take any more of the fighting, especially now that he is being attacked, Yvan exits the apartment abruptly.

Once Yvan is gone, both men show remorse for treating him so poorly. Serge says that he believes the painting that they criticized was painted by Yvan's father. The doorbell rings and Yvan returns and explains that he had a change of heart when he was walking down the stairs to the street. Yvan lays into a big speech about how he considered returning to the apartment with a gun and shooting Marc, but then remembered what his therapist Dr. Finkelzohn had told him regarding his two friends. Serge and Marc are annoyed that Yvan has been discussing them with his therapist but they ask to hear what the doctor has to say. Yvan reads a cryptic analysis from a piece of paper in his pocket that causes Serge and Marc to gang up on him and make fun of the money he spends on therapy.

Serge starts insulting Marc by speaking ill of his wife, Paula. Serge says that Paula is ugly and repellant and that he is offended by the way that she waves cigarette smoke away. Marc insists that Serge take back his insults, but Serge will not. Even Yvan breaks his neutrality and demands that Serge stop talking so poorly about Paula. Marc lunges at Serge and Yvan is hit in the face when he tries to break it up. The bickering continues and Yvan is so overwhelmed with it all, that he starts to cry. He asks if his friends can even consider themselves friends anymore. Serge decides to make a move in the right direction and hands Marc one of Yvan's markers. He tells Marc to draw on



the beloved painting. Marc draws a figure skiing down a snowy slope. The men go to dinner and when they return, Marc and Serge are seen with an array of cleaning products, removing the marker from the canvas. Each man addresses the audience once more. Yvan says that he needs to get his crying problem under control. Serge admits that he knew he could get the marker off the painting but would not admit it to his friends. Marc speaks in more shrouded terms, saying that the painting represents a man moving through space and time and then disappearing.

Analysis

The final scene of the play covers a lot of time in the evening and is the longest in the text. All three men interact and when Yvan is not in the apartment, the other two are still discussing him. This is the first scene where all the men are together in the same space. In prior scenes, the audience has only seen the way that two of the trio communicates at a time. The collision of all three men causes friction and leads to an angry climax from each character. The conversations from the prior scenes all build up to the time spent in the final scene in Serge's apartment.

The role of Yvan as scapegoat is prominently displayed in this final scene. Though Marc and Serge are clearly at issue with each other, at several points they stop arguing and turn the argument to Yvan. They criticize him for being late, for letting his fiancé "get to him" and for being a coward. When Serge and Marc get into a physical altercation, it is Yvan who ends up getting hurt. Despite the difficulties that the men are having with each other, Serge and Marc still take the time to team up against Yvan. The two also feel some remorse when Yvan storms out, especially when Serge remembers that the painting they insulted was painted by Yvan's father. Yvan is the victim of the fighting, though he is the one who does the least to anger either of the others.

As the arguments continue, the audience sees the men reduced from intellectual beings to immature schoolboys. This becomes very obvious when Serge starts insulting Marc's wife Paula. Serge uses big words, but basically tells his friend that his choice in a woman is ugly and annoying. Marc and Yvan are surprised that Serge has been reduced to this type of argument, and Marc lets his boy-like testosterone get the best of him and attacks Serge. At one point, Yvan starts crying. This self-proclaimed intelligent group of men reverts to very childish tactics as the arguments begin to frustrate them and wear them down.

Vocabulary

Seneca, ingeniously, Carcassonne, conciliatory, homeopathy, ostentatious, Elastoplast, Pompidou, ingratiating, deconstruction, imbued, solemnity, detest, limpet, personified, insinuating, amoeba, obsequious, malaise, Freud, Paul Valery, pompous, aberration, novelty, preposterous, idolatry,



Characters

Marc

Marc is an aeronautical engineer in his forties. He is not particularly fond of what many consider modern culture and voices his opinion with confidence throughout the play. Marc does not like his friend Serge's expensive painting and does not hide this dislike. Later in the play, Marc admits that it is not the painting that bothers him but rather Serge's changing attitude that would lead him to buy such a thing. At one time, Marc considered himself a mentor to Serge but now feels that his friend has abandoned him for more snobbish friends and pursuits.

Marc has a vindictive streak and this is most evident in his interactions with Yvan. Marc is usually the first to criticize Yvan, even when he is not actually angry at something that Yvan has done. Since Serge fights back against Marc, Yvan is a much easier target and Marc takes advantage of this fact. Marc opens and closes the play with an address to the audience. In the final monologue, he gives no definitive answers about the future of the friendships and speaks in poetically vague terms instead.

Serge

Serge is a dermatologist and the person who purchases the "art" that sets off the action in the play. He contends that he is very pleased with the expensive painting but seems to need his friends to approve before he can be fully satisfied. Though he likely does not do it purposely, Serge has an air of elitism that rubs his friends the wrong way. When Serge and Marc first became friends, Marc served as a mentor to Serge. Now that over a decade has passed, Serge has formed other friendships and does not view Marc in the same respect, which is a matter of contention in the context of the play.

Serge has a very self-centered attitude that is demonstrated when he tells his friends to read Seneca but claims that he has no time to do such a thing. He is also overly annoyed when Yvan is late for their dinner date. Though Serge acts confidently, he is clearly self-conscious. The fact that he needs to spend such a large amount of money on a big-name artist's work proves this. He also becomes incredibly defensive when either Marc or Yvan criticize him and lashes out at Marc in the worst way by insulting his wife.

Yvan

Yvan is a soon-to-be married friend of Marc and Serge and he is less opinionated than his peers. He prefers to just go with the flow and not take anything in life too seriously. His attempts to appease both of his friends at the same time cause the friends to get irritated with Yvan's wishy-washy attitude. Yvan's personality causes him problems outside of his friendships and this is revealed when he explains the issues arising with



the wedding invitations. In an attempt to please everyone, Yvan has succeeded in upsetting every set of parents associated with the wedding party.

Yvan is in therapy and has been for six years. His friends comment that his money appears to have been wasted in therapy and Yvan admits to the audience that everything makes him cry lately. He is the most emotional of the three friends, storming out of Serge's apartment at one point and bursting into tears at another point. Due to his people-pleasing attitude and his emotional tendencies, Yvan becomes the target for much of the anger intended for Serge or Marc.

Catherine

Catherine is Yvan's fiancée. Yvan describes her as a nice girl who comes from a "good family." The audience never sees Catherine, only hears about her through the dialogue among the three friends.

Paula

Paula is Marc's significant other who never makes an appearance during the play. She is called a "life-denying woman" by Serge. Serge also says that the first time he met Paula, he found her ugly, repellent and charmless. Marc and Serge come to blows when Serge refuses to stop insulting her or take back the things he has said. Paula is the one who tells Marc and Serge how to remove the marker from the painting.

Finkelzohn

Dr. Finkelzohn is Yvan's therapist that he has been visiting for six years. Yvan mentions that Finkelzohn has never once voiced his own opinion until Yvan began telling him about Marc and Serge. The therapist gave his patient some cryptic advice that Yvan writes down word-for-word and carries around in his pocket.



Objects/Places

The White Painting

Serge buys a white painting by an artist named Antrios for 200,000 francs, or roughly \$40,000 U.S. dollars. Serge believes his purchase was a great deal but his friends disagree and question the motives behind the need for such an extravagant expense.

Serge's Apartment

The majority of the action in the play takes place at Serge's apartment. It is the place where all three friends meet to go out for the night and end up arguing and debating their relationships instead.

Marc's Apartment

Marc's apartment is the setting for one scene in the play. Yvan arrives there to tell Marc that he has been to Serge's place and that he does not "hate" the painting. The only set decoration for Marc's apartment is a non-descript landscape painting.

Yvan's Apartment

Marc visits Yvan's apartment to tell him about the expensive painting that Serge purchased. The only set decoration in Yvan's apartment is a boring painting, described as being a "daub" by Marc and Serge. It is later discovered that the painting was done by Yvan's father.

Wedding Invitations

Yvan arrives late to his meeting with Serge and Marc after a huge argument erupts over the invitations for his upcoming wedding. All of the mothers and stepmothers are upset about the inclusion or exclusion of names on the invitations and in an attempt to please everyone, Yvan has upset everyone further, including his fiancé.

Felt-Tip Marker

Yvan has just begun a career in the stationary industry and carries around felt-tip markers. He is looking for the cap for one of the markers when Marc visits him and it is one of Yvan's markers that Marc uses to draw on the Antrios painting in the final scene.



Seneca's Book

Serge has a book by the philosopher Seneca that he insists Marc read. Serge also suggests the book to Yvan later in the play. Serge says that he is much too busy to read it but highly recommends it for his friends.

Olives

The men are hungry and cranky towards the end of the final scene and they begin to eat olives. Despite the fact that they have all been arguing and at odds with each other, they civilly share the bowl of olives. Extending an "olive branch" is a way to say that someone is trying to make peace with someone else, which adds another layer of meaning to the men eating olives together.



Themes

The Subjective Nature of Art

All of the conversations in the play are sparked by a piece of modern art purchased by Serge for 200,000 francs, which is roughly \$40,000 U.S. dollars. Serge believes that he has purchased the white painting at a value due to its uniqueness and famous creator. Marc scoffs at this idea and worries about the fact that his friend has done such a foolish thing, especially over a painting that is “white, on a white background.” Yvan does believe that Serge got a great deal, considering how much the painting is worth in the art world, but Yvan seems skeptical of the value placed on works of art as a whole. Each man views the value of the painting in a different way and attempts to get the others to agree with his point.

The monetary value associated with the painting is not the only thing that is examined in the play. The way that each person perceives the art is also described. Serge sees more than just a white canvas, claiming that he can make out subtle hints of greys and even some red in the seemingly non-descript canvas. Marc refuses to see any other color than white, though when he speaks privately to Yvan, Marc admits that there may be different shades of white within the artwork. Yvan stands in front of the painting for a few seconds before declaring that he “gets it” and that it is lovely. Still, he is not overwhelmed by the painting in the way that Serge feels a person should be for something that he considers so spectacular.

In his attempt to make peace with his friend, Serge hands Marc a marker and tells him to draw what he sees in the painting. Marc goes with a literal explanation of the painting, drawing a person skiing down the subtle lines in the artwork. It is clear that Serge finds Marc’s interpretation too simple and even distasteful, while Marc seems pleased with his addition to the canvas. The three men bring three very diverse sets of life experiences to what they see, or do not see, in the painting. The value that each person places on the painting is a reflection of their own personal values and how it affects their perception of art.

The Need for Acceptance/Friendship

The men experience several tense moments throughout the course of the play. At some points, an audience member may even wonder how these three even became friends in the first place and why they continue to put up with each other. Perhaps the best explanation comes in the first few lines of the play, when Marc tells the audience that Serge is an “old friend.” Even in cases where personalities clash, the comfort that an established friendship provides is something that people of all cultures value. Even as the men insult each other they demonstrate a knowledge of each other that comes only with friends who know each other well.



Serge says that he believes his painting is fantastic and that he does not need anyone else's opinion. Yet it seems very important that Serge get the acceptance of his friends to back up his expensive purchase. When Marc is underwhelmed by the artwork, Serge tries to get Yvan on his side. Though Yvan is more accepting than Marc, Serge still seems unsatisfied with his response. Some of Serge's joy about his purchase is stolen when his friends do not praise it in the big way that he had hoped they would. The painting loses some of its value to Serge when his friends do not greet it with high enough praise.

In the end, Marc admits his true problem with Serge and it has nothing to do with the actual painting. Marc is hurt that Serge appears to have moved past the predefined perimeters of their relationship and that Serge seems to be "above" a friendship with Marc. The piece of art is just one example of Serge's new outlook on life, one that seems to have no place in it for Marc. Marc is jealous of the painting, or more accurately, what the painting represents in Serge's life. When Serge allows Marc to draw on the expensive painting, it shows Marc how much the friendship truly means. Serge "chooses" Marc over the painting and it ends up saving the relationship.

Jealousy

Throughout the play the men show signs of jealousy at the life choices and successes of the others. The most obvious example is the dejected feeling that Marc has when it comes to Serge's new group of friends and his sudden interest in modern art. Marc admits openly that he feels slighted by the change, especially since he once considered himself a mentor to Serge. It is only after Marc lets down his guard and makes this bold admission that Serge softens, allowing Marc to draw on his expensive painting in a symbolic gesture. Marc feels compelled to remove his drawing from the expensive painting after Serge has given him the "okay" to ruin it. Once Marc no longer feels like the painting is a threat, he is no longer jealous of it and what it represents.

In several scenes, Serge and Marc appear to be jealous of Yvan. They criticize him and make fun of him, but the level of the criticism is so childish that it seems the two are actually jealous of their younger, less intellectual friend. Serge has an especially good reason to be jealous of Yvan; Serge is divorced with two kids who he rarely sees. The talk of Yvan's wedding plans seems to annoy Serge. Yvan inadvertently makes Serge more envious when he tells Serge that he is probably not the best person to be handing out marriage advice. Instead of confront his feelings of jealousy towards Yvan, Serge takes out his rage on Marc and Marc's marriage. Both Marc and Yvan seem confused as to the origin of Serge's sudden attack on Paula, but through analysis of earlier conversations, it is clear to the audience that Serge is simply redirecting his feelings of jealousy towards Yvan onto Marc.

Jealousy in all forms often comes about as a result of insecurity, and this is the case in the play. The men feel insecure in certain areas of their own lives and especially in their relationships with each other. Instead of discussing the true source of their unhappiness, they resort to petty arguments and insults for most of the play. When the

men finally come to honest terms with each other, their confidence grows and the jealousy seems to fade away.

Style

Point of View

The play is written from several points of view. Since it is a script, the playwright has a voice in what is happening. The stage notes describe the setting of each apartment and interject the way in which particular lines are delivered. While some plays are heavy with notes from the playwright, Yasmina Reza keeps her own commentary to a minimum. She gives readers just enough information to be able to envision the scene but does not overly explain any of the settings, characters or actions.

Sections of the play are also written from the point of view of each of the main three characters. At least twice, Serge, Marc and Yvan address the audience directly and provide insight on how they are really feeling, despite what the dialogue may say. These asides help the audience understand the true motives of the characters and what feelings they are hiding during the dialogue. In a way, the audience serves as a neutral sounding board for the characters who confide in it.

Setting

The play is set in three different apartments. Serge's apartment could be considered the major setting, as the majority of the action takes place there. The only difference between each apartment is the art that is hanging on the wall. Since the painting that Serge purchased is the catalyst for many of the conversations that take place, much of the play takes place in his home. When all three characters are together, their arguments take place in Serge's living room.

The apartments of Marc and Yvan also serve as settings. Marc visits Yvan to discuss his concerns about the painting that Serge purchased. Each character shows a little bit more freedom when he is in his own environment, such as when Yvan continues looking for a pen cap at his place even after Marc arrives. The fact that Yvan and Marc are on Serge's "turf" causes them to be defensive and plays into the dynamic among the friends.

Language and Meaning

The play was originally written in French and then translated to English. There are a few French references but for the most part, the translation plays well for English-speaking audiences. The men speak in everyday language, with the exception of a few times when Serge or Marc heightens his vocabulary to prove a point. Yvan is perhaps the character that the audience can most relate, based on his language and the way that he expresses himself.



The quick dialogue and natural digressions makes the text of the play realistic. The men are constantly distracted by something else in the midst of their arguments and it seems that one thought leads naturally into the next. This is the way that normal people interact and Yasmina Reza really captures the way that people, particularly old friends, communicate. There are moments when the language is poetic, like during Marc's final address to the audience. These moments are scarce, making the wording within them even more powerful.

Structure

The play is written in just one act with five different unlabeled scenes. The only way that the audience knows that a scene has changed is by the painting on the wall, as all of the apartments are set up the same way. There is seamless transition from one location to the next, often with the characters addressing the audience between scenes. There are no pauses in the action and the text flows from one character and thought process to the next.

The main plot of the play is the examination of the friendships between Serge, Marc and Yvan. The fact that Serge bought an expensive painting is just the catalyst that causes the men to face the issues in their relationships. Subplots include Yvan's anxiety about his upcoming wedding and the men having plans to go out to dinner. In every plot setup, the interaction of the men is the forefront of the meaning.



Quotes

Yvan is very tolerant because he couldn't care less, (Scene 1)

Yvan: Expensive? Serge: In absolute terms, yes. In fact, no. (Scene 3)

It doesn't count if he laughed first. If he laughed first, it was to defuse your laughter. It means it wasn't a genuine laugh. (Scene 4)

The older I get, the more offensive I hope to become. (Scene 4)

Marc thinks it's white... that's his limit... Marc thinks it's white because he's got hung up on the idea that it's white. (Scene 4)

Serge: Didn't you think Yvan had lost a lot of weight? Marc: So's she. Serge: It's the wedding, eating away at them. (Scene 5)

How can a man live in any other time but his own? Answer me that. (Scene 5)

Marc: It's true I can't imagine you genuinely loving that painting. Yvan: But why? Marc: Because I love Serge and I can't love the Serge who is capable of buying that painting. (Scene 5)

You should never leave your friends unchaperoned. Your friends need to be chaperoned, otherwise they will get away. (Scene 5)

It's brutal what you are doing! You could have had your fight after the 12th, but no, you're determined to ruin my wedding, a wedding which is already a catastrophe, which has made me lose half a stone and now you're completely bugging it up! (Scene 5)

To think we've reached these extremes... Apocalypse because of a white square. (Scene 5)

My friend Serge, who's one of my oldest friends, has bought a painting. It's a canvas about five foot by four. It represents a man who moves across a space and disappears. (Scene 5)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Marc? Would you consider him the protagonist of the play? Why or why not? What does Marc's apartment look like? Who is he married to? What is his career? How does Marc describe Serge to the audience? Describe Marc's initial reaction to Serge's painting. Explain how Marc's attitude changes the next time he goes to see the painting. What is the real issue that Marc has with Serge buying the expensive painting?

Topic 2

Who is Serge? Explain Serge's career and family life. Why does Serge believe that the painting he bought was such a bargain? Where is the painting when Yvan comes to visit? How does the introduction of the painting differ when Marc visits and when Yvan visits? What philosopher does Serge tell his friends to read? What act of true friendship does Serge take when Marc admits that he does miss their old friendship? Why does Serge tell the audience that he lies to Marc about the fact that the marker is washable?

Topic 3

Who is Yvan? Who is Yvan planning to marry? What is the name of Yvan's therapist? Explain what you think the therapist was trying to say, based on the note Yvan reads from his pocket. Why does Yvan storm out of Serge's apartment? Why does he say that he decides to return? What new career path has Yvan just started? Why has he switched careers? Describe the dilemma that Yvan is facing with the wedding invitations. Why do you believe Yvan stays friends with Serge and Marc?

Topic 4

Describe the set for the play. Why did the playwright choose to change only the painting on the wall in each of the three apartments? Describe the painting that hangs in each man's apartment and how it fits his personality. Do you believe that Serge got a good deal on the white painting? Why or why not? Explain how each man's view of the expensive painting reflects his personality. What is the name of the artist who painted Serge's new painting? Where else does this artist have works on display?

Topic 5

Why do you believe the three friends have so much tension? Why are Marc and Serge so critical of Yvan? About how many years have Marc and Serge been friends? Why does Marc say he is most worried about Serge? Marc says that he considered himself



to be a mentor to Serge at one time – do you think that Serge agrees with this statement? Why or why not? Despite all of the tension between the men, they maintain their friendship – explain why you think that it.