Bent Study Guide

Bent by Martin Sherman

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Introduction

Martin Sherman's best-known work, *Bent*, fits in both the categories of gay literature and Holocaust literature. Prior to *Bent*, there had been virtually no inclusion of gays in discussions about the Holocaust. Therefore, it had a groundbreaking impact when it was first staged off-Broadway in 1978; an impact that continued when the play was performed in London the next year and then finally brought to Broadway. Although the play has flaws, the uniqueness of the story line and the strength of its message about tolerance, love, and human dignity made the play successful. In fact, it was nominated for both a Pulitzer and a Tony in 1980.

The time period of the play is also different from most other Holocaust literature. Rather than being set during World War II, the story begins in 1934 when Hitler's purge of his Storm Troopers (SA) coincidentally led to the persecution of gays since the head of the SA was gay and his fall provided an excuse for going after other homosexuals. The play continues into 1936, when most of the world still had no idea that any concentration camps existed.

The subject matter, nudity, and verbal sex in the play were controversial enough, but *Bent* ignited further controversy with its suggestion that the gays suffered more than the Jews during the Holocaust. Debate continues among historians about the situation of each group under the Nazis. In the meantime, the play was staged in more than thirty countries during the 1980s and continues to be produced by community theaters across the United States. As a book, the play is available as a 1979 publication of Samuel French, Inc.

Author Biography

Martin Sherman's parents, Joseph T., an attorney, and Julia Shapiro Sherman, were Jewish immigrants from Russia. Sherman, their only child, was born on December 22, 1938, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but raised in Camden, New Jersey. His upbringing was such that he saw his first theater production at age six. When he was twelve, he was privileged to see the great Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, who dominated the theatrical world for many years. At that point, he joined a children's theatrical group and toured around Pennsylvania in a version of *Snow White*. His interest in the theater was augmented by regular trips into Philadelphia to see stage plays and a once-a-year trip to New York City. Although he hated school, Sherman went to college and received a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from Boston University in 1960. While in college, Sherman realized that his calling was not in acting but in playwriting. After college, he joined the Actors Studio for further study.

Sherman's first play was produced in 1963. A stream of other plays followed; most notably: *Things Went Badly in Westphalia* (1970), included in *The Best Short Plays 1970*; *Passing By* (1974), later included in *Gay Plays 1* in 1984; and *Cracks* (1974), included in *Gay Plays 2* in 1986. The play that merited both Pulitzer Prize and Tony nominations, *Bent*, was written in 1978. From 1976 to 1977, Sherman was the Playwright-in-Residence at Mills College in Oakland, California. He has received various awards including a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1980 and a Rockefeller fellowship in 1985.

After *Bent*, Sherman has written only five more plays that were presented in a stage production, but he has written various television plays and motion picture screenplays, including work for the BBC and CBS. The best known of his screenplays are *Alive and Kicking* (1997), the story of a dancer with AIDS and his AIDS counselor, and the film version of his play *Bent*. In fact, Sherman considers himself to be a screenwriter as well as a playwright. Since 1980, Sherman has lived in London, England.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

In 1934, Nazi Germany, decadent Max Berger is living with a dancer, Rudy, while he frequents nightclubs and drags home one-night stands. The play opens on the first morning after the start of the Night of the Long Knives in which Hitler purged his SA staff, including Ernst Röhm, who was gay and protected other homosexuals. Unfortunately, Max's latest conquest is SA. The Gestapo arrives and murders the soldier in Rudy and Max's apartment. They escape when the Nazis have their backs turned.

Act 1, Scene 2

Max and Rudy run to their friend Greta, a drag queen who owns the nightclub where Rudy works. Greta gives them the news about the purge and the crackdown on homosexuals, advises them to run, and gives them money.

Act 1, Scene 3

Two years later, in a park in Cologne, Max meets with his gay Uncle Freddie, the only family member from whom he is not totally estranged. Max and Rudy have moved from city to city staying one step ahead of the Gestapo. Finally, Max's prominent family has decided to help, so Freddie gives Max papers and tickets that will get him to safety in Amsterdam, but Max insists on two sets so that Rudy can escape, too. Freddie says it is impossible until Max promises to fake being straight and come back to the family business in exchange for papers and tickets for Rudy. Freddie says that he will talk to Max's father about the offer, and Max leaves.

Act 1, Scene 4

When Max returns to the forest camp where he and Rudy have been living, Rudy tells him that he took a job digging ditches, and that he has arranged a meeting with someone who might help them. Instead, the person tells the Gestapo where to find Rudy and Max, and they are captured.

Act 1, Scene 5

Max and Rudy are put on a prisoner train headed to Dachau. Rudy is singled out and tortured in another compartment. Max meets Horst and learns about the pink triangle that gays must wear and what he must do to survive. After Max is forced to help beat Rudy to death, he is also taken away.

Act 1, Scene 6

At Dachau, Max once again finds Horst. Max is wearing a yellow star as if he were a Jew because he thinks that will get him a higher status than being a homosexual. He confesses to Horst how he convinced the guards that he was straight so they would give him the yellow star: he had intercourse with a dead girl in front of the guards.

Act 2, Scene 1

A month later, Horst joins Max in a bizarre work detail of carrying rocks back and forth. It is designed to drive prisoners mad with its futility and monotony. Although they are not supposed to talk or touch, they do manage to talk without the guard noticing. Max reveals that, as a supposedly Jewish prisoner, he is able to get mail on occasion, and Uncle Freddie sent him money that he used to arrange Horst's transfer so that he'd have someone with whom he could talk. Horst is angry that Max has selfishly interfered.

Act 2, Scene 2

After three days of silence, Horst begins to talk to Max. They talk about the heat, rumors, someone who died, their mutual sexiness, and then about sex in such vivid terms that they manage, through the power of imagination, to bring each other to climax.

Act 2, Scene 3

Two months later, Horst tells Max that he loves him. Max tells Horst not to love him because queers are not meant to love. Horst has developed a cough, but he makes Max promise that they will not help each other, but will save themselves.

Act 2, Scene 4

Another two months pass and Horst still has a cough. Max tries to convince him to ask for medicine and to work harder at staying alive. When imagining being in each other's arms, Horst teaches Max to be more gentle, and Max tells Horst "as long as I'm holding you, you're safe."

Act 2, Scene 5

Three days later, Horst is still coughing but getting better because Max got some medicine for him. Horst pesters Max to tell him how he got the medicine. Finally, Max admits that he performed oral sex on an SS captain to get it. Then the SS captain shows up to check on Max and realizes that Horst is the one with the cough. He then orders Horst to throw his hat into the electric fence. Horst is aware of this trick that

electrocutes a prisoner when he retrieves his hat. Rather than go meekly, Horst charges the guard and is shot to death. Max is told to carry Horst's body to a pit. As he does, he talks to the corpse and tells Horst that he loves him. Max returns momentarily to his work, then goes to the pit, takes off his coat with the yellow star and puts on Horst's coat with the pink triangle. He then throws himself onto the electric fence.

Characters

Uncle Freddie Berber

Max's homosexual uncle, who pretends to be straight to stay in favor with their wealthy family, tries to arrange Max's escape. He advises Max to marry for appearances, like he did, and just have boys on the side so that Max can rejoin the family and be safe. When Max offers to do the family's bidding in exchange for help for Rudy, too, Freddie agrees to talk to Max's father about the deal.

Maximilian Berber

Max is the main character of the play that the audience follows from his decadent, directionless, homosexual lifestyle in Berlin to his metamorphic struggle for survival amidst the stark terrors of Dachau. At the opening of the story, Max is living in a perpetual state of escapism through sex, alcohol, and cocaine. Having been disowned by his wealthy family, he is behind in his rent and dependent on his childlike, but devoted lover, Rudy. Max is always trying to make a deal for money, but has sunk to dealing drugs. A handsome, charming weasel, Max fails to appreciate Rudy's patience, tolerance, and loving care. Max uses people, including a steady stream of one-night stands. It is this promiscuity that brings about his identification as a homosexual. When he unwittingly brings home a man wanted by Hitler's SS, he winds up a hunted man himself.

Surprisingly, despite his poor treatment of Rudy, he feels enough responsibility for his companion to insist that he will not make an escape attempt without Rudy. Consequently, Max misses his own chance for a passage to safety when they are captured. Ironically, his one refusal to act selfishly by abandoning Rudy to save himself ends up with Max being forced to kill Rudy to save himself.

When Max meets Horst, he learns that gays are treated the worst of anyone in the concentration camps. So he fakes being straight and Jewish as a survival ploy. Max believes that he is a rotten person and that gay men do not love. With the guidance of Horst, he learns about real love and dignity. Although he continues to work deals, first to get Horst's companionship and then to try to keep him well, Max finally makes a valid connection with another human. In tribute to Horst's bravery and commitment, at the end of the play, Max accepts his sexual identity and refuses to live further with a lie, even if it means not living at all.

Captain

It is with an SS Captain that Max barters sex for medicine. When the Captain realizes that the medicine was for Horst, he apparently feels betrayed and kills Horst, perhaps to teach Max a lesson or perhaps to eliminate a rival for Max's affection.

Wolfgang Granz

Wolf is the storm trooper Max picks up at Greta's club on the night that turns out to be the start of Hitler's purge of the storm troopers and gays. Wolf is tracked down at Max's apartment and killed, but Max and Rudy escape.

Greta

Greta is the drag queen owner of the nightclub where Rudy dances and Max hangs out. It is Greta who tells the SS where to find Wolf, but Greta also helps Max and Rudy with advice and money when they go to him for help. Because of the crackdown on gays, Greta closes his club and returns to his straight life as a husband and father.

Guard

The Guard who watches Max and Horst's work detail eventually shoots Horst.

Guards

Two SS Guards come to Max's apartment to arrest Wolf, then murder him.

Rudolph Hennings

Rudy is Max's lover and a dancer at Greta's nightclub. He is so devoted to Max that he puts up with all the other boys that Max drags home. More concerned about his plants and his dancing lessons than the Gestapo, Rudy is dreadfully naïve and never quite understands the danger that threatens them. Eventually, this innocence causes him to put his trust in the wrong person, and they are turned over to the Gestapo. Oddly enough, though, Rudy is more practical than Max when it comes to working and providing food. Rudy takes care of Max as much, if not more so, than Max takes care of Rudy.

Horst

Horst is the prison-savvy homosexual Max meets on the train to Dachau. It is Horst who advises Max about how to behave to survive and explains the pink triangle patch. Throughout the rest of the play, Horst tries to convince Max to be honest and wear a pink triangle, too. At first, Horst resists Max's pursuit of his friendship, but is sympathetic when Max explains how he got his yellow star. Later, Horst resents Max's interference when Max arranges for Horst to join his lonely, maddening, work detail. For three days, Horst refuses to talk with Max, but finally their sanity-saving dialogue begins, and they discover that they can bring each other sexual pleasure just through words and imagination. Horst's sarcastic humor shows a resilience that starts to fade when he

becomes sick with a debilitating cough. He insists that they not try to save each other, but he has become Max's soul mate, and Max needs him for mental and emotional survival. Horst has not only told Max that he loves him, but has taught Max to love. Ironically, it is Max's deal-making to get medicine for Horst that causes Horst's death. Just as Horst has always advocated preserving honor through the honesty of wearing the pink triangle and enduring whatever that symbol brings, Horst goes to his death with honor. He dies in an act of defiance rather than submit to the degradation of playing the Captain's execution game.

Officer

The SS Officer on the prisoner train is the one who tortures Rudy, forces Max to beat Rudy, and forces Max to prove that he is not gay.

Themes

The Human Spirit and Adversity

What one learns from the Holocaust stories is that there is a tremendous strength within the human spirit that will rise up to meet even the most daunting of circumstances. In that sense, *Bent* is a typical Holocaust story demonstrating how good can come from evil, and how one can find humor and beauty anywhere. Even though Dachau was the most evil of places, Max and Horst maintained a sense of humor and gave each other hope through love. Despite the terror of their daily struggle for life, Horst clings his sexual identity, while Max strengthens his. For Max, this tragedy may have been the only force potent enough to get him to face the truth about himself and truly care about another person. In the end, both choose dignity in death over humiliation and falsehood.

Inherent in the concept of the human spirit is a sense of kindness and concern. Greta is an example of a human spirit determined to survive, but still capable of compassion for others. Greta sold the information about Wolf's whereabouts to the Gestapo because, as Greta said, "You don't play games with the SS." Although Greta sacrificed someone else for his self-preservation, he turned around and gave his blood money to Max and Rudy to help them escape, and there is some redemption in that gesture. In addition, Greta recognized Rudy's helplessness and stopped Max from leaving Rudy behind. "This one can't handle it alone," he said as he urged Max to take Rudy's hand and stay with him. It may have been Greta's directive that gave Max the sense of responsibility that caused him to insist on two tickets to Amsterdam. Ironically, this loyalty is what caused Max to be captured with Rudy and to be put in a situation where he would have to deny knowing Rudy.

In another sense, adversity affected Max's family in a positive way. Although he had been estranged from them for ten years, the danger to Max prompted his family to take action to save him. The lesson again is that love, in this case familial love, can overcome disapproval and danger. Although it is conditional love, offered with the restriction that Max must leave Rudy, it is still a step toward reconciliation brought about by an evil environment.

Gratuitous Love and Real Love

In the beginning of the play, Max knows only physical love, and it leaves him feeling empty. He runs away from emotional attachment through drugs, alcohol, and a continuous series of one-night stands. All the while, love is right next to him in the person of Rudy, but in his determination to be shallow, Max abuses and ignores that love. Perhaps Max does not want to believe in love because he thinks that he has lost his family's love. If your own family does not love you, then who will? When Uncle Freddie asks Max if he loves Rudy, he replies, "Don't be stupid. What's love? [b□□sh□□t]." When Rudy tells Max, "I really love you," Max replies emphatically,

"Don't." It is surely no accident that the line of the song that Max sings is "I cannot love for more than one day."

When Max and Horst make love verbally, Horst says, "We made love. We were real. We were human." Obviously, the message is that love is an important part of what makes us human. At that point, it is a lesson that Max still has to learn. When Horst tells Max that he loves him, Max warns him, "Don't love me. . . I can't love anybody back. . . . Queers aren't meant to love." Nonetheless, Max expresses love when he endangers himself to get medicine for Horst, encourages Horst to take care of himself, and tries to make Horst feel warmer. After Horst dies, Max holds the body and finally utters "I love you." In a flood of realization, Max admits that he thinks he loved Rudy and a boy at his father's factory years before. It can be said then that *Bent* is a story about how a man who looked for love in all the wrong places finally found it amidst the horrors of the concentration camp. Max and Horst developed love as a buffer against their adversity, so it is not really odd that Max rediscovered love in what seems an unlikely place. The message of real love is that it can create heaven in the midst of hell, solace in the midst of sorrow.

Appearances versus Reality

Max tells Wolf that he is rich, Polish, and has a country house, none of which are true, but the fake accent Max assumes makes Wolf fall for the lie. Greta has been a drag queen at a Berlin nightclub, but he has a wife and children. Uncle Freddie hides his homosexuality in order to maintain his position in their wealthy family. Ironically, Max, who cannot seem to face any kind of reality, has not hidden his gay life from his family and has therefore been disowned. However, to get two tickets to Amsterdam for himself and Rudy, he is willing to promise his family to assume a fake life and marry a widowed business connection. After he is captured, Max has to deny that he knows Rudy, he has to fake being straight to save his life, and he chooses to fake being a Jew rather than admit that he is gay. The play is filled with one act of deception after another. In the end, though, Max sacrifices his life to the reality of his feelings and his sexual identity.

Style

Plot as a Piece of the Whole

There was once a television show set in New York City that opened with a line explaining that the story being presented was only one of the millions of stories that could be found in that big city. Holocaust stories are like that. Millions of people were imprisoned in the concentration camps, and each one had his/her personal story. When a playwright chooses one episode out of a bigger story, there is more of a sense that the characters are victims of forces beyond their control. For example, the marriage of Romeo and Juliet was only one episode, albeit the final episode, in a long-standing family feud. Consequently, they were subject to all of the problems brought on by other people and less able to make choices that would determine their own future. In like manner, Max, Rudy, and Horst are victimized by the political problems and social hatred of their culture and times. Their loss of freedom limits their ability to determine their fate, but as prisoners throughout time have known, the enemy cannot enslave your mind, your dreams, or your love. Horst tells Max that he dreams about him; that knowing that he will see Max helps to keep him going. When they make verbal love, Horst exclaims, "We did it. They're not going to kill us." At the time, Horst probably thought that their love would help them to survive. Ultimately, it meant that the Nazis could not kill their capacity to love. As only an individual part of an enormous event in history, much of the control over their survival was out of their hands and in the hands of fate.

Contrast of the Two Acts

Bent has only two acts, and this division into two parts has a number of functions. Act 1 represents freedom and movement in a world filled with people, action, and color. There is a flight from danger and from self. Act 2 represents imprisonment and movement only from one rock pile to another. Everything is grey, and there are, in effect, only two people, and they cannot flee from danger but must face it and themselves. Act 1 characters talk without inhibition and often outrageously; in act 2, communication of any kind is forbidden and potentially fatal. Furthermore, in act 1, Freddie advises Max to hide his sexuality; in act 2, Horst encourages Max to proclaim his sexuality.

Act 1 is Max and Rudy; act 2 is Max and Horst. The introduction of a new protagonist in the second act is a risky move dramatically, but is not unheard of. The bigger risk was probably reducing the setting to one barren spot. John Moore of the *Denver Post* notes:

This confined new premise simply should not work, dramatically. But it does, emphatically. . . . Max and Horst move only 20 feet back and forth in a straight line, yet they embark on epic character arcs.

Concerning Max, he shows virtually no character development in act 1, but he moves toward a total transformation of mind and heart in act 2. Thus, Sherman's division of the

two acts is an intentional and masterful separation of two worlds and two stages of the life and development of Max Berber.

Language and Dialogue

In *Bent*, dialogue goes beyond being an element of stagecraft to qualifying as a theme. Dialogue serves to move the play forward while establishing mood, character, and situation. The campy exchange in the first scene establishes Rudy as silly and immature and Max as irresponsible and always working on a deal. The dialogue also reveals the state of their relationship. The portrayal of their self-absorbed situation with humor language heightens the contrast to the harshness of the Nazi purge that is about to come crashing down on them. Later in act 1, Uncle Freddie's language reveals him to be an aristocrat with a delicacy that compels him to use the word "fluffs" rather than "queers." His sensibilities, and his phony life, prevent him from facing the connotations of the more derisive term.

In the second act, language becomes a power that Max and Horst use for mental survival. It is the only thing left in their control, and even that is limited since they are not supposed to be talking to each other. Max tells Horst, "I got you here to talk." He bribed the guard to get Horst transferred with money that he was not likely to have replenished; money that could mean life or death in another circumstance. This expenditure indicates the critical value of the companionship of communication. Max knew that he had to have someone to talk to or go crazy in his isolation.

The emphasis on the importance of language to survival is taken to a new level by Sherman in the play's most famous scene in which Max and Horst make love totally through language and imagination. This extraordinary dialogue gave the play tremendous impact. Later, Max tries to keep Horst warm with the same technique. Mind over matter is achieved largely through our mind's language; in like manner, a successful play is achieved through the writer's skillful use of language in dialogue.

Historical Context

1930s Germany and the Origin of the Holocaust

From 1919 to 1933, the German government was known as the Weimar Republic. During this time, a rather avant-garde culture flourished in fields such as theater, art, and architecture, and included Einstein's physics and Heidegger's philosophy. An off-shoot of this culture was a decadent nightlife in the major cities, particularly Berlin, where open homosexuality was tolerated. There was even an attempt to reform laws against homosexual acts. However, the coming of the depression brought political unrest and new fears that included a growing homophobia. According to a 1995 article by Raphael Lev in the Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review:

The early and mid-30's brought bar closings, surveillance, beatings, censorship, and tough anti-gay legislation. From the mid-30's on, the campaign escalated, with stricter sentences, registration of homosexuals, 'preventive detention' in concentration camps for some, and the institution of the death penalty for homosexual activity in the SS and the police.

A large part of the reason for the increasing atmosphere of fear was the rise of Adolph Hitler to power. He became Chancellor of Germany in 1933 and was soon in total control of the government, which he called the Third Reich. Already on March 21, 1933, the Dachau concentration camp was opened by Hitler's top aide Heinrich Himmler for the purposes of punishment and terror. Dachau would later become the model for further camps and the murder school for the SS (Gestapo). One of Hitler's top supporters and the head of the Storm Troopers (SA), also known as Brown Shirts, was Ernst Röhm. Because of his closeness to Hitler, Röhm's homosexual lifestyle was tolerated until he fell out of favor with Hitler in 1934. In a purge of the SA called the Night of the Long Knives, which actually lasted from June 28 to July 3, 1934, Hitler arrested and later executed Ernst Röhm. In the process, the gay community was targeted and hundreds of homosexuals were murdered during this infamous week. Sherman's play *Bent* opens on the first day of the Night of the Long Knives. Supposedly, the boy that Max brought home, Wolfgang Granz, is the boyfriend of Karl Ernst, deputy to Röhm's second in command. Consequently, the SS comes to kill Wolf, and Max and Rudy have to flee for their lives. It is the subsequent persecution of gays that causes them to stay on the run for two years before finally being caught and set to Dachau.

American Theater in the 1970s

Off-Broadway theaters were the center of American drama during the 1970s for two reasons. First, starting in the 1950s, production on Broadway had become too expensive for anything but safely conservative and highly commercial productions. During the 1960s, anti-establishment movements shunned anything conservative. At the same time, the competition from television and the movies for audiences caused

theaters to turn to more experimental drama. These experiments, many quite radical, broke down some of the barriers between the spectators and the performers, thus challenging audiences.

Some of the new drama presented hitherto unseen racial and sexual materials. Playwrights brought feminist, black, homosexual, and other minority issues to the stage. The more avant-garde theater companies that were established in this time period became known as off-off-Broadway. While the openness to any subject or form resulted in some positive creative growth, there was also a lack of attention to artistry as some experimental sank into gratuitous violence, excessive nudity, and self-righteousness. By the late 1970s, the more radical and offensive experiments were rejected in favor of more conventional plays. Nonetheless, taboos of subject matter had been breached, a new creativity and vigor had swept through drama, and the tradition had been established concerning what one might find in off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway theater. These expectations hold true to this day.

Off-Broadway thereby became a testing ground for a number of upcoming artists, such as Edward Albee and Sam Shepard, who would later find acceptance on Broadway and win Pulitzers. Serious plays, because of the high risk of investment, usually had to prove themselves off-Broadway and in London before producers would take a chance on them on Broadway itself. That was the route for Sherman's *Bent*. It was first performed at the O'Neill Theatre Center in Waterford, Connecticut in 1978, then moved to the Royal Court Theatre in London, opening on May 3, 1979. Finally, on December 2, 1979, it opened in the New Amsterdam Theatre on Broadway. In 1980, *Bent* was nominated not only for a Pulitzer Prize, but also for a Tony Award as Best Play of the year. However, the Tony was given to *Children of a Lesser God*, another play that dealt with the special problems of a minority group.

Critical Overview

Although *Bent* has received mixed reviews, it has attracted packed houses and serious acclaim because of its groundbreaking subject and emotional impact. A typical example of this response to Sherman's masterwork is Walter Kerr's review for the *New York Times*. Kerr reported that: "the open sound of dismay that washed across the auditorium on the night I saw *Bent* was one I have never quite heard before□belief, disbelief, shock and half-understanding all mixed together." Kerr added that "dramatic blows do not often strike with this force." Nonetheless, Kerr felt that Sherman was able to carry his "powerful sense of theatre" through only two-thirds of his "bizarre, bloody journey." Kerr admitted, though, that the play ended with a "blistering climax."

A further example of a mixed review is Jack Kroll's piece for *Newsweek* in which he commented: "It is a jolting, troubling, worrisome play that at times rises to real power and at times sideslips into special pleading and a coarsening of its own historical and moral imagination." *The Library Journal* review of *Bent* says that Sherman's message is more universal than historical, i.e., the Nazis simply represent the antagonistic society in which gays continue to experience prejudicial treatment. In addition, Sherman "has given us the homosexual hero as everyman. . . . He is a human being after all, a man, not a curiosity." In other words, any one of us might have acted as Max did, given enough courage. The *Library Journal* review concludes that *Bent* is crafted "with illuminating economy" and is "a taut, highly charged (though not sensational) theater piece."

Liza Schwartzbaum, writing a review of the movie version of *Bent* in 1997 for *Entertainment Weekly* recalled that the stage version of the play was "brutal, effectively depressing" and groundbreaking. Other critics have commented on the predictable story line of the play and accused Sherman of crusading, overwriting, and getting maudlin. In fact, some critics felt that the script has enough weak spots to be reduced to melodrama if not handled carefully. Many critics used the word "power" in describing the play with adjectives such as visceral, raw, or crude. Most agreed that the play could hold an audience for two hours, even when they thought it started out slow. Finally, some critics thought the play was limp and that the action, though stunning, was not sustained if the Nazis were not around.

The groundbreaking aspect of *Bent* lies in its depiction of a homosexual experience during the Holocaust. Writing for the *Journal of European Studies*, Eric Sterling describes *Bent* as "one of the few gay plays to receive much critical attention and acclaim, partly because it has, to some extent, become analogous to contemporary gay struggles against oppression." Alan Sinfield, author of *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, a book about twentieth-century gay and lesbian theater, says that Sherman's play "has proved a significant exploration of our part in a great historic oppression, and of the conditions that may promote and thwart gay love." The 1995 *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* article by Raphael Lev also notes the historical importance of the play while otherwise finding fault with the play: "*Bent's* greatest strength is shining a light on an unexplored region of the Holocaust Kingdom,

but it is often one-dimensional, poorly written, dramatically unconvincing and even absurd." The further opinion expressed in this article is that *Bent* portrays a distorted image of both the Holocaust and of gays, and that the play is more about sexual fantasy than gay pride or the nobility of human nature under horrific circumstances.

The bottom line for *Bent* seems to be that, no matter it faults, it is unique and powerful enough to be an unforgettable experience for the audience, and that no one comes away without having learned or experienced something new. The play, according to virtually all critics, is judged to be thought-provoking, emotional, disturbing, and a worthy tribute to the remarkable durability of the human spirit.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is a freelance writer and part-time English instructor. In this essay, Kerschen examines the contradictions and the metamorphosis of Max Bergen.

The character of Maximilian Berber in Martin Sherman's play *Bent* not only carries the story, he is the story. *Bent* is about a wheeling-dealing homosexual, Max, whose promiscuity and drug use keep him in trouble. When the play opens, he is broke, behind on his rent, and unaware that he has seduced a Nazi storm trooper who is being hunted by the Gestapo. When SS soldiers raid their apartment, Max and his lover, Rudy, begin a life-and-death odyssey that will affect Max's very heart and soul.

There are so many contradiction in Max's behavior that the question arises as to whether the character is believable. However, people are complex creatures who are not always consistent in their behavior. The central conflict for Max is the concept of love, and love is a complex subject, too. Max does not believe in love, he does not think he is worthy of love, and he does not love anybody, he says. Sherman reveals in snips of information that Max fell in love with a boy at his father's factory when he was a teenager. His wealthy and powerful father, horrified at this homosexual affair, paid Max's lover to go away. As Max explained, "He went. Queers aren't meant to love." It is simple logic: if the boy had loved Max, he would not have left; since he did leave, he did not love Max and that must be because "Queers aren't meant to love." Perhaps it also means to Max that homosexuals in general are not allowed to love because specifically his father would not allow him to love.

Max has watched his Uncle Freddie hide his homosexuality all his life to keep from scandal. In rebellion, Max has flaunted his homosexuality. Although Max does not appear to have any crusading or noble intent, he nonetheless has defied his family to be true to himself, even if it means being disowned. For someone as concerned as Max about making deals for big money, this refusal to knuckle under to his family seems a strange contradiction. However, it is understandable when one considers the possibility that his openness about being gay is intended to hurt his father, even if it hurts himself.

Rudy loves Max, but Max has no appreciation of this fact. It is a convenience to have Rudy around to clean and cook and remind Max how badly he behaved the night before. Max is even foolish enough to think that Rudy likes Max to bring home other men. Despite this wretched treatment of Rudy, Max takes responsibility for him at Greta's urging as Greta accurately assesses that Rudy is too naïve to take care of himself in their treacherous situation. Max seemed ready to leave Rudy behind as he started his escape from Berlin. It seems odd that he could so easily be chastised into taking Rudy with him. It has been suggested that because Rudy was so weak and knew so much about Max that Max realized that he had to keep Rudy with him to keep Rudy from informing on him. However, Max knew that he was already wanted, and that he was clever enough to get away to some place that Rudy would not know. So, that theory does not hold, especially since Max refused to go to the safety of Amsterdam without Rudy. He even went so far as to offer to give up Rudy and return to the family business

in exchange for safe passage for Rudy. The reason for this loyalty comes at the end of the play when Max drops all of his pretenses and emotional walls and admits that he loved Rudy. It is likely that Max did not even know himself that he loved Rudy when he was making all those sacrifices for him. The phony front that he put up was so convincing that he had fooled even himself. If Max had not had a real love for Rudy, why then would he have blocked out Rudy's name after being forced to participate in Rudy's murder? Most likely, the memory loss was a traumatic amnesia.

Since Max was so open about his lifestyle among his friends and had endured the condemnation of his family for being gay, it is hard to understand why he was so determined to pass himself off as Jewish to the Gestapo. Perhaps the bottom line with Max was his own survival. He was gay while it was easy to be gay. Although he suffered an estrangement from his family and was continuously broke, it allowed him to hurt the father who had hurt him by sending his lover away. His lifestyle also allowed him to be irresponsible and decadent, even if it did not really make him happy, and he had to resort to alcohol and drugs for solace. It was fine to throw his homosexuality in his father's face, but not in the face of the Gestapo. As Greta said, "You don't play games with the SS." It was fun to live scandalously as long as his lifestyle was defiantly shocking to those he wanted to hurt, but the fun was over when his life was at stake. Then it was strictly a matter of survival, and Max was spoiled enough to want to avoid what he heard was the lowest level of prisoners.

Even though Max refuses to accept the lowest status in the concentration camp, in his own mind he has sunk to the very lowest level of humanity. Already at the beginning of the play, his self-destructive use of drugs and alcohol indicated a low self-esteem. Throughout the play he refers to himself as rotten and unlovable. Max tells Horst not to love him because he killed Rudy and will kill Horst, too, in his inevitably destructive way. His involvement in Rudy's death and his sexual act with the dead girl have convinced him that he is totally contemptible and worthless. Robert Skloot, author of the Holocaust book *The Darkness We Carry*, concludes that Max's success at getting a yellow star "comes at the price of denying his homosexuality, [and] is, according to Sherman, meant to be understood by us and, eventually by Max, as nothing less than self-annihilation." This self-loathing is, in effect, an admission of guilt about his self-destruction, just as his painful, halting confession to Horst is an admission of guilt. He has to tell someone what he did so that others will be as disgusted with him as he is with himself. They have to know that he is "a rotten person."

Needless to say, Max has trouble dealing with the tragic turn his life has taken. Anyone would. Sherman uses a repetition technique to illustrate Max's feeble coping mechanisms, but it does not seem to work effectively in the story. Max's tendency to count when he can't face what's happening does not come across well, perhaps because most people associate counting with an attempt to calm anger, not with avoiding reality. The repetition of "This isn't happening" in various forms is probably more annoying to the audience than effective in portraying denial.

It is ironic that Max does not want a pink triangle because of what Horst told him, and then it is Horst who tries to get Max to wear the pink triangle. Another irony is that Horst

is the one who tells Max how to survive on the train, but later it is Max who tries to teach Horst how survive the physical torments of their imprisonments (e.g. through exercise), and tries to keep Horst from turning into one of the walking dead. Otherwise, Horst becomes Max's teacher in many ways. He teaches Max about love, about being gentle, about being honest with one's self, and about dignity in death. Before Horst, being gay to Max was simply a means of seeking pleasure. After getting to know Horst, Max learns that being gay can include loving someone, and that there is value in love.

Max's suicide at the end of the story may seem contradictory to his previous determination to survive. However, in his efforts to survive, Max had given up his identity as a gay person and had participated in acts that violated his sense of humanity. It is paradoxical that Max wanted to live when he thought himself not worth saving, then purposely went to his death when he finally found value in himself. As Eric Sterling speculates in a 2002 *Journal of European Studies* article analyzing Max's self-destruction, Max apparently realized that the Nazis, not him, destroyed the bodies of Rudy and Horst. What he destroyed was his own soul. "Max cannot negate the damage he has inflicted upon others or even himself, but he may die with dignity, as the person he actually is□not as a fraud." Sterling concludes that in suicide Max finally takes control over his own destiny. He will no longer allow his father, or social codes, or the Nazis to control him.

The character of Max provokes many questions. How can someone so openly gay deny his sexuality? How can someone who says he does not believe in love sacrifice his safety for the sake of his lover? How does someone so selfish evolve into a caring partner for Horst? How can someone so shallow carry such deep pain? The answer is that Max wore many masks. His childish attempts to avoid facing the reality of crisis were nothing compared to the avoidance of reality he had practiced for years. Max used a persona that was too cool to care about anything or anyone while all the time his soul was burning with shame, pain, and confusion. Some people have to learn the hard way, and for Max that meant reclaiming his humanity in the concentration camp, the most dehumanizing place on earth.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on *Bent*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Petruso holds a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Michigan and a master's degree in screenwriting from the University of Texas. In this essay, Petruso examines the three main characters of the play, arguing that Max has a very weak character compared to that of Rudy and Horst.

In *Bent*, Max, who is the main character and supposed hero of the drama, is not heroic but rather is soft and weak. Max is generally selfish, uncaring, and mean. Even the moments where he seems kind often serve his own agenda. While Max makes deals to survive, he also ensures that he will not have to be on his own. When he finally comes to terms with himself in a deeper sense, it is only in one aspect: his homosexuality.

In contrast, two of the men Max is involved with are much more likable, honest, real, and heroic. Rudy and Horst are open about their homosexuality and about their lives in general. Both are nurturers who take care of Max in his own way. Both are loyal and caring and have strong characters. Rudy and Horst do not make deals and try to get out of uncomfortable situations like Max does; they want to confront them. They try to make the best of what they have, while dealing with Max and the problems that he brings. The pair patiently educate Max, who was raised in wealth but disowned by his family for his open□though somewhat superficial□embracing of a homosexual lifestyle.

That Max lives openly as a gay man is one of his strongest points. Max has not married a woman and had affairs with men on the side, which is what Max's uncle (Freddie) has done in order to remain in good standing with the family. Though Max's uncle supports Max by getting him a ticket and papers out of the country and sending him money in the camp, Max's uncle is a fraud who lives a dishonest life. Although Max is honest in the beginning about his sexuality, this character point is tempered because Max does not admit he loves the men he is involved with and later denies his homosexuality when faced with harsher treatment at the work camp. Max would rather wear a yellow star, which indicates that he is Jewish, than a pink triangle, which indicates he is homosexual.

It is also telling that Max cannot stand to be alone and not have some sort of homosexual relationship. Max has been living with Rudy for some time, perhaps years, but later on cannot remember his name. When Greta tells Max not to leave Rudy after the Nazis storm their apartment, it is somewhat for Rudy's benefit. Greta believes that Rudy would not survive on his own and tells Max to take care of him. Though Max is compelled to stay with Rudy, Max also benefits from the situation. Max does not have to face the world alone. Max tries to deny that he needs a relationship with Rudy or any man for that matter. In act 1, scene 3, Max will not take the single ticket and papers that will take him out of Germany and to Amsterdam. Instead, Max asks Freddie to obtain another ticket and papers for Rudy. Max will not admit the importance of his relationship with Rudy. Max tells his uncle "I just feel responsible." Max's issue seems to be more about being alone, for if he was traveling alone within Germany or out of the country, it would increase his chances of survival.

After Rudy dies, Max immediately begins a relationship with Horst. Max takes risks to get Horst assigned to his work detail by using the money his uncle sent him to bribe the guard so that Max can interact with him. To keep Horst alive when he becomes ill, Max performs a sexual act on a captain to obtain medicine for him. This inadvertently leads to Horst's death as the captain assumed Max was a heterosexual Jew and to perform such an act would humiliate him. When the Nazi figures out that Max is probably gay and did it for Horst's benefit, the captain kills Horst. Finally, alone with no potential relationships in sight, Max kills himself. While he does don Horst's jacket with the pink triangle on it before his suicide, a symbolic acceptance of his homosexuality, he also admits he does not even want to try to survive on his own as a gay man. Max is not willing to take any punishment from the Nazis for his homosexuality. He instead inflicts harm on himself by walking into the electric fence and ending his life.

Max readily admits his faults. He tells Horst in act 1, scene 6 "I'm a rotten person." Max makes his living doing shady deals, including selling drugs. Though he lives with Rudy and is in a relationship with him, Max brings home a man, Wolf, whom he met at Rudy's place of employment. This incident is after Max got so drunk that he does not remember what he did or how Wolf got there. Max and Rudy are forced to go on the run because of Wolf. Wolf was involved with a Nazi German official who was on the outs with Nazi leader Adolph Hitler and Wolf was arrested by the SS. If Max had not been so selfish in his actions the night before the play begins, Max and Rudy might have survived and continued in their normal lives.

Despite Max's many flaws, Rudy remains loyal. Rudy tells Max "I love you" in act 1, scene 1, even though Max embarrassed him at work and had sex with another man in their home. Rudy does not even want to tell Max what he did the previous night. He only does it when Max threatens Rudy's precious plants, a symbol of his ability to nurture like Horst's nursing. Max's reliance on Rudy is underscored by Max expecting Rudy to make decisions for him like stopping him from acting as he did the night before. Rudy will not do that, but he also does not threaten back. Rudy accepts his actions. Rudy takes care of Max through his hangover, offering him food and drink, and though it is very awkward, takes care of Wolf by offering him a robe and coffee.

After Max and Rudy are forced to go on the run, it is Rudy who again takes care of Max. In act 1, scene 4, in the tent city outside of Cologne, when Max says he has a temperature, Rudy feels his forehead and confirms it. At the end of that scene, he touches Max's face several times in a loving manner. Max pushes him away. Max then holds hands with Rudy, but only where no one can see. In the same scene, Rudy tells Max that he got a job digging a ditch so that he could buy them food, which Max refuses to eat. For Rudy, a dancer by training, this was a difficult job. It does not seem that Max has ever done an honest day's work. Rudy has also worked on ways of getting out of the country, discovering spots where one can walk over the border, but Max dismisses them.

Also in act 1, scene 4, Rudy describes an opportunity to get out of the tent city and to possibly start a better life. Rudy caught a ride with a man who was attracted to him. Rudy believes that the old man might have allowed Rudy to stay with him and perhaps

gotten him out of Germany. But Rudy, being loyal to Max, returned to the tent city and Max. Although at this point in the play, Rudy is somewhat resentful of Max and what Max has done to his life, he remains loyal. Max, while even more angry in some ways, is still afraid to leave him. Max makes meaningless promises about their life in Amsterdam, after telling his uncle in act 1, scene 3 that he would do whatever the family wanted□even marrying a woman to help with their business□if Freddie was able to get them both out of the country.

All of Rudy's loyalty to Max proves meaningless when in act 1, scene 5, Max contributes to Rudy's death on the train to the work camp. When Rudy is targeted by the officers, Max denies that he knows him. As Rudy is beaten by them, Max stands there, concerned only with saving his own life by not admitting he knows Rudy, has been with Rudy, and is homosexual himself. When the officers order him to, Max pummels the already dying Rudy. Rudy whispers his name, but Max ignores him. Max does not need Rudy anymore. He has found a new man to have a relationship with: Horst. It was Horst who had advised him to ignore Rudy to ensure his own survival on the train. Rudy gave Max some idea of how to care for someone. Rudy showed love for Max until the end.

In Max and Horst's first full scene together, Max tries to give Horst some of the vegetables from his soup because Horst was not given any by the Kapo because Horst is identified as homosexual. This is the kind of act that Rudy would have done for Max. Here, this act on Max's part is manipulative because he wants another relationship to sustain him. When Horst tries to leave a short time later, Max whines "I don't have anyone to talk to." While Max is still dishonest, Horst somewhat appreciates the connection Max is trying to make. Horst does not like the means (lying and manipulating) with which Max is trying to make the connection, but Max needs Horst to survive, much more than Horst needs Max.

Like Rudy, Horst still acts as Max's nurturer and confidant despite Max's faults. Though Horst knows Max is gay, he does not tell anyone else at the camp. As previously mentioned, it is Horst who advises Max on how to act on the train so that he can survive. After Max tells his story about how he obtained his Jewish star, Horst tries to touch his face. In act 2, scene 3, Horst admits that he loves Max and that their relationship, such that it is, is helping him survive the camp. Horst even devises a signal that tells Max that he loves him. As with Rudy, Max wants the relationship but will not accept the love that is part of it for the other man.

Over the course of act 2, Horst becomes Max's role model. Though Horst resents the fact that Max bribed a guard to get him assigned to his job at the work camp so that Max could have someone to talk to, Horst eventually breaks down and converses with him. After Horst apologizes for his behavior in act 2, scene 2, Max is able to say he is sorry later in act 2 because Horst has shown him how to express regret. Later, Horst initiates a sexual act with Max using only words in act 2, scene 2. When Max tries the same kind of sex act with Horst in act 2, scene 4, Max uses language that is makes the act rougher, a fact that upsets Horst.

Horst has also repeatedly tried to get Max to admit he is really homosexual and should be wearing the pink triangle. Horst shows Max that Horst tolerates abuse but has some dignity. When the SS captain tries to make Horst electrify himself on the fence, Horst refuses to die that way. He attacks the captain and is shot in the back. Max finally breaks down and admits he loved Rudy, Horst, and another man. Max then dons Horst's jacket with the pink triangle but, instead of taking the lessons he learned from Rudy and Horst and trying to fight his way out of camp, he decides to die. As with many other decisions he made in *Bent*, Max takes the easy way out and kills himself on the electrified fence. Though finally willing to admit his homosexuality in a deeper sense, Max will not let himself have a reason to live.

Source: A. Petruso, Critical Essay on *Bent*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #3

Martinelli is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Martinelli examines the relation of love to identity as the main character, Max, struggles to survive Nazi persecution of homosexuals.

Bent begins on an infamous night in gay history: June 29, 1934, also known as "The Night of the Long Knives." On this night, the Nazis purged Germany's old leadership and with it all of Hitler's political opponents. The purge resulted from political quarrellings between Nazi leaders subordinate to Hitler. Most notable to Sherman's play is the struggle between Heinrich Himmler and Ernst Röhm. Röhm was the head of the powerful Sturmabteilung leadership (SA) and, as it was, he was the leader of the only viable threat to Hitler's power. The SA was an enormous armed assault division that functioned as the key paramilitary organization of the German Nazi Party. Himmler was aware of Hitler's suspicion of Röhm and the SA and, thus, he fabricated evidence to defame Röhm and presented it to Hitler. This evidence fueled Hitler's mistrust that Röhm intended to use his powerful position in the SA to challenge Hitler's rise to power.

Although it is reported that Hitler was fond of Röhm, he was still under pressure to reduce the SA's power. Hitler's Nazi supporters were concerned with Röhm and the SA's socialist inclinations. In addition, Röhm's control of the 2.5 million strong SA division left many of Hitler's subordinates alarmed, if not completely fearful. Members of the Nazi party viewed Röhm and other leaders of the SA with great distaste because they frequently practiced homosexual behavior. On "The Night of the Long Knives," Röhm was arrested on the grounds of his homosexuality□behavior deemed incompatible with the Nazi party because homosexuals did not reproduce and perpetuate the master race. Röhm then declined the opportunity to commit suicide and was executed. This example, which demonstrates how Nazis felt about homosexuals, informs the reading of *Bent*.

The first half of Sherman's play is focused on a homosexual couple, Rudy and Max, as they attempt to flee Germany after Hitler's purge of homosexuals in the government. Knowing that if government officials are arrested and executed based on their sexuality, the two understand that their only chance is to escape Nazi Germany and find refuge outside of Hitler's grasp. However, the lovers are captured in Cologne and sent to Dachau. On the train, Rudy is dragged away and murdered by the Nazis. Here, in the first five scenes, Sherman dramatizes an important and often overlooked point□that homosexuals were also victimized by Nazis. Although countless books have been published about the persecution of Jews, there is only a limited number of works written on the suffering of homosexuals during the Holocaust.

Soon after Rudy is dragged away by the Nazi officer, Max meets Horst, a homosexual also bound for Dachau. Horst bears a mark of identification□a pink triangle□registering that he is homosexual. Sherman writes

HORST: I've been through transport before. They took me to Cologne for a propaganda film. Pink triangle in good health. Now it's back to Dachau.

MAX: Pink triangle? What's that?

HORST: Queer. If you're queer, that's what you wear. If you're a Jew, a yellow star. Political□a red triangle. Criminal□green. Pink's the lowest.

Now, indubitably informed that as a homosexual he is the lowest and the most worthless of all prisoners, Max begins his attempt to erase his identity. His hope is for survival at all costs, to efface himself from his identity as a homosexual and become someone else. Max takes this desire for survival to the darkest levels of despair. To convince the guards that he is not a homosexual, Max is instructed to rape the corpse of a young girl. Max tells Horst of his experience

And I said, I'm not queer. And they laughed. And I said, give me a yellow star. And they said, sure, make him a Jew. He's not bent. And they laughed. They were having fun. But . . . I . . . got . . . my . . . star."

With this abandonment of self, Max wins himself a step up in the prison class system. He no longer wears the pink triangle. He is no longer viewed as queer. With this act, Max becomes a staunch survivalist. A survivalist is an individual who views survival, at all costs, as the primary object, especially in the breakdown of society. His postmortem violation of the teenage girl earns him the yellow star and solidifies his position on survival at all costs, but with it Max completely destroys his identity and his conscience. Eric Sterling states in his article "Bent Straight" in *European Studies*

The difficulty Max experiences in confessing [to the rape of the young, dead girl] to Horst, with his many pauses, demonstrates to the audience that he feels shame and recognizes that he has preserved his life at an exorbitant cost□his identity and his dignity.

In this moment of irony, Max's actions increase his chance of physical survival, but he has self-executed that which is most important, i.e., his conscience and his identity.

The second half of Sherman's play is restricted to the wasteland confinements of a prison camp. Here, Max carries rocks from one pile to the next, then back again, in an exercise of complete futility. His task of moving rocks back and forth represents the crisis of his identity. Max, through his survivalist blinders, is left without any purpose. He is not a Jew, even though he may wear the yellow star and, thus, he lacks the identity of Judaism. Although he is queer, he must constantly deny his identity in order to survive. Thus, just as he passes the rocks from one pile to the next in an endless cycle of futility, Max continues to lie about his beliefs and deny his true identity in an empty, repetitious pacing between his appearance and his true identity.

Yet, regardless of this mind-numbing monotony, it is the safest work in the prison camp and, eventually, Max is able to bribe a guard to allow Horst to do the same. With this, Max again presents himself as a staunch survivalist. However, it also plays out as a

crucial turning point in Max's development as he shows a desire to help Horst. This is unlike any of Max's other actions. For example, when Max is speaking with his Uncle Freddie about tickets and papers to get Rudy and himself to Amsterdam, it is apparent Max is acting out of guilt, not love. When Freddie asks if he loves Rudy, Max responds "Don't be stupid. . . . I'm a grown-up now. I just feel responsible."

Although Max uses the last of his monies to have Horst moved to the rock pile, Horst is still critical of Max's denial of his true identity. Horst disapproves of Max's masquerading as a Jew. Not because he is anti-Semitic, but because Max is denying his identity as a homosexual. As the two grow closer and closer over the time they spend moving rocks, Horst begins to chip away at Max's survivalist unwillingness to wear the pink triangle, to admit to the world and to himself what and who he is. Oddly enough, it is at the rock piles (the representation of Max's anonymous futility) that Horst forces Max to confront his true identity. He tells Max, "I'm the only one who knows your secret . . . That you're a pink triangle." In Sherman's language of the play, Max's denial of his homosexuality is not only an attempt to survive but is also an act of a man afraid to surrender to love. Max's opinion on love is made clear in his discussion with Uncle Freddie. It is apparent that for Max, love is "[b□□sh□□t]" and with that, it seems, almost antithetical to survival.

Nonetheless, Horst's persistence eventually pounds home the message that love is, in fact, essential to survival. In a scene that is incongruous, emotional, and courageous, Max and Horst make love to one another with only words. Under the baneful stares of the Nazi guards, Horst and Max have an exhilarating exchange:

HORST: We can feel . . .

MAX: Feel what?

HORST: Each other. Without looking. Without touching. I can feel you right now. Next to me. Can you feel me?

Their exchange continues, and the two men are left inspired by their love for each other. Here, in the most unlikely of settings, Max discovers through his verbal lovemaking with Horst that he is capable of expressing his true feelings. Max, for the first time, feels love. Although he does not understand love, the discovery that he can express himself, even under such brutal conditions and stay alive, is a crucial breakthrough for Max.

Still, though, Max's true awakening to his identity and his understanding of love comes at another unlikely moment. In the closing scenes of the play, Horst becomes ill. He has a terrible cough. Without medicine, Horst will be incapable of continuing his work and will surely be executed. Again, Max shows his dedication to his survivalist nature. This time, however, his focus is not on his personal survival; it is wholly centered on Horst. Max suspects that a certain guard is homosexual and, with hopes of receiving special favors, Max offers to sexually please the guard for an exchange. Lucky for Max and Horst, the guard is indeed receptive to the sexual advance, and Max is able to acquire medicine for Horst. Max's sexual act with a Nazi guard is indicative of his devotion to

Horst because Horst benefits from Max's risk and sacrifice. Max, on the other hand, gains nothing and, in fact, places himself and his survival in harms way.

Until the end, both Max and Horst stick to their pragmatics. Max's survivalist nature is embodied in his early selfishness but is also evident in his later actions at the rock pile and his acquisition of medicine for Horst. Even near the end of the play, Max says "My yellow star got your medicine." However, it is not until the final moments after Horst's death that Max realizes it was not the yellow star that got them the medicine□it was their love for each other. Max realizes that it is more important to live truthfully, as Horst did all of his days, and have a shorter life, than to exist dishonestly and survive longer.

Upon Horst's death, Max puts on his lover's coat bearing the pink triangle. At this moment, standing proud in front of the Nazi guards, Max completely regains his identity and his conscience. Paradoxically, the act of self-affirmation also simultaneously results in a loss of status. In the eyes of the Nazis, Max has demoted himself to the most worthless class of individuals at the prison camp. For Max, he has restored his dignity. Finally, in these last moments, Max becomes a character of admiration, an individual who has loved, restored his conscience, and righted his identity. Although Max's final act is one of suicide, it is a statement to his liberation and final empowerment. Of his own volition, free of both his pragmatic survivalist nature and the demands of the Nazis, Max walks into the electric fence ending his life with a clear understanding of his love for Horst and for himself.

Source: Anthony Martinelli, Critical Essay on *Bent*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

A motion picture version of *Bent* was made in 1997 by the theater director-design team of Sean Mathias and Stephen Brimson Lewis. With a cast that includes Ian McKellen, Jude Law, and Mick Jagger, the movie is available in both VHS and DVD format from MGM/UA Studios.

Topics for Further Study

The play *Bent* mentions that, besides the yellow star worn by the Jews and the pink triangle worn by the homosexuals, there were other symbols for prisoners of the Nazis. Political prisoners wore a red triangle and criminals wore a green one. Research the designations and treatment of those who wore the red and green triangles. For example, people who sheltered Jews were considered political prisoners.

Some members of the Jewish community were offended that the character Horst said that the homosexuals were considered the lowest of the concentration camp prisoners, implying that they got the worst treatment. Do you think that Horst's statement diminishes the Jewish experience? What does Holocaust literature say about this issue?

Write a report on the "Night of the Long Knives." How does it compare to other notorious Nazi massacres such as Kristallnacht?

Cabaret is another famous Broadway play/movie that depicts the decadent nightclub scene in 1930s Berlin. Compare the descriptions of this lifestyle as presented in the two plays.

In the past twenty-five years, there has been an emergence of a subgenre of "gay" literature. List some of the more notable works included in this type of literature and comment on the acceptance that it has been given.

Compare and Contrast

Mid-1930s: Although the international set, notably in Berlin nightclubs and in Hollywood, is notorious for homosexual activities, homosexuality is a taboo subject in American society.

Late 1970s: Following the Stonewall riots in 1969, the struggle for homosexual equality gains intensity.

Today: In 2000, a theater in St. Louis, Missouri loses state arts council funding for putting on *Bent*, and the FBI continues to investigate 1,500 new hate-crimes against gays every year. Nonetheless, gay rights activists are pushing for legalized gay marriages.

Mid-1930s: Hitler takes over complete control of Germany. He leads the world, including the United States, into World War II and becomes one of the worst dictators that the world has ever known.

Late 1970s: The Ayatollah Khomeini takes over Iran, resulting in a tyrannical religious regime and the four-hundred and forty-four day-long hostage crisis for fifty-three American embassy workers.

Today: Iraq's Saddam Hussein loses power after years of a murderous dictatorship and two wars with the United States and its allies.

Mid-1930s: The 1936 Summer Olympics are held in Berlin with 148 countries represented. Hitler tries to use the games as a show of Aryan superiority but is embarrassed when black American Jesse Owns wins four gold medals in track.

Late 1970s: The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan results in a boycott by 60 nations of the Moscow Summer Olympics, although 81 nations still take part.

Today: The 2004 Summer Olympics will be held in Athens, Greece, the original home of the Olympics, with 202 countries participating.

Mid-1930s: The first analog computer is built in 1933, in 1934 the first bathysphere goes 3,028 feet down into the ocean, and radar technology is achieved in 1935.

Late 1970s: NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) lands spacecraft on Mars for the first time in 1976, the Apple II computer is produced in 1977, and the first ATMs (Automated Teller Machines) are built in 1978.

Today: Personal and laptop computers are common household items in the United States, cell phones allow instant communication, and NASA goes back to Mars for further exploration.

What Do I Read Next?

Take Me Out, published as a book in 2003, is Richard Greenberg's Broadway play about a professional athlete who announces that he is gay, and the ripple effect this news has on his team and the people around him.

Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God* beat out *Bent* for Best Play on Broadway in 1980. Later made into a movie that won an Oscar for Marlee Matlin, this story brought attention to the lives of the deaf.

The Elephant Man, a play published by Bernard Pomerance in 1979, depicts the life story of Joseph Merrick, a British man afflicted with a disfiguring disease and the problems he has in being accepted as an intelligent human.

Gad Beck's autobiographical story *An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin* is a nonfiction complement to Sherman's play.

Further Study

Friedman, Ina R., *The Other Victims: First-Person Stories of Non-Jews Persecuted by the Nazis*, reprint ed., Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

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Hammermeister, Kai, "Inventing History: Toward a Gay Holocaust Literature," in the *German Quarterly*, Vol. 70, Winter 1997, pp. 18—26.

This article discusses the controversy over the existence of a gay Holocaust literature and whether one is needed. He describes *Bent* as a good example of what such literature could be.

Plant, Richard, *The Pink Triangle: The Nazi War against Homosexuals*, Henry Holt, 1988.

Written by a German refugee who came to America in 1938, this is the first English-language book that comprehensively describes the Nazi campaign against homosexuals.

Shirer, William L., *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, Simon and Schuster, 1990.

This bestselling classic, first published in 1960, has remained the prime resource for a study of the era. The book covers Hitler, his staff, the camps, the effects on the German people, and the resistance plots as well as the political situation and much more.

Sterling, Eric, "Bent Straight: The Destruction of Self in Martin Sherman's *Bent*," in *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 32, Issue 4, December 2002, pp. 369—88.

This lengthy article gives historical background, an intense look of the character of Max, and an analysis of the historical accuracy of Sherman's story.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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