

Biloxi Blues Study Guide

Biloxi Blues by Neil Simon

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Plot Summary

Biloxi Blues is the second in a trilogy of semi-autobiographical plays by Neil Simon that cover the life of a writer growing up in 1930s New York City. The “Eugene Trilogy” begins with the play *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and ends with *Broadway Bound*. Eugene Morris Jerome is the title character and in *Biloxi Blues*; it is 1943 and he has just been drafted into the U.S. Army. The play covers the period of time that Eugene spends in basic training in Biloxi, Mississippi. *Biloxi Blues* opened in Los Angeles in 1984 and then in New York City in 1985. It won the Tony Award for Best Play in 1985 – the first of two times that Neil Simon was honored with that award.

The play starts on a crowded train as several young soldiers from the East Coast are shipped off to the U.S. Army basic training camp in Biloxi, Mississippi. Eugene Morris Jerome stays awake, writing in his memoirs, as the other soldiers around him try to get some sleep. As each character is presented, Eugene reads his written commentary about the young man to the audience. There is Roy Selridge, a smelly guy from Schenectady, New York who has “cavities in nineteen out of thirty-two teeth.” Next up is Joseph Wykowski from Bridgeport, Connecticut who will eat anything and has a “permanent erection,” and then Donald Carney from Montclair, New Jersey who insists on singing despite his awful voice. Arnold Epstein, from Queens Boulevard, New York, is intellectual and well-read but suffers from poor digestion. Eugene explains that he has never been away from home before but that he has three goals for his time in the war: to stay alive, become a writer and lose his virginity.

After arriving in Biloxi, the young men meet their commanding officer, Sergeant Toomey. Toomey is a tough-talking soldier with a steel plate in his head who tries to break the men by enforcing unfair rules and ordering latrine duty as punishment for disrespect. Arnold Epstein enters a battle of wills with Toomey that lasts throughout basic training and earns Epstein many pushups, although he is willing to do them, as he believes that he is standing up for his dignity. The other men just try to stay out of Toomey’s way and do the minimum to survive the training.

Eugene is able to fulfill one of the goals on his list when he loses his virginity to a prostitute. Soon after he meets Daisy Hannigan: a beautiful, well-read Catholic girl who goes to an all-girls’ school in Gulfport. The two begin writing letters and seeing each other as much as possible. Eugene confesses his love for Daisy just before his deployment and she tells him that she loves him too. Even though the chances of Eugene and Daisy ending up together following the war are slim, Eugene says that his relationship with Daisy has given him something to live for.

In the final scene of the play, the young men are back in a train car traveling away from Biloxi and basic training. As his comrades sleep, Eugene addresses the audience and tells them what happens to each character following the war. The audience learns that Eugene accomplishes his goals of staying alive and becoming a writer, although maybe not in the way that he had expected.



Act I, Scene I – III

Summary

Act I, Scene I: The play opens on a crowded train car in 1943. The coach car is full of young men on their way to basic training for the Army in Biloxi, Mississippi. The men are all from the East Coast and about twenty years old. The narrator, Eugene Morris Jerome, is the only one awake and he writes in his journal about his surroundings and the men he has met. Roy Selridge is from Schenectady, New York, and is rough around the edges. Eugene says that Selridge smells like a “tuna fish sandwich left out in the rain.” Selridge makes jokes about his private parts and lays into the other soldiers to try to get a laugh. Joseph Wykowski from Bridgeport, Connecticut has what Eugene describes as a “permanent erection” and is able to eat anything, including Hershey chocolate bars with the wrappers still on them. Donald Carney sings “Chattanooga Choo-Choo” in his sleep and is awoken by the others who tell him to shut up. Carney is from Montclair, New Jersey, and believes that he is a good singer because someone told him once that he sounded like Perry Como.

Arnold Epstein sleeps on an upper bunk and passes gas, much to the disgust of the other young men. Epstein is from Queens Boulevard, New York, and too intellectual for the Army. He tells Eugene that if he wants something good to read, he can check out anything from the third floor of the New York City Public Library. As the other men fall back to sleep, Eugene continues to write his memoirs, admitting to the audience that he has never been away from home. He says that he plans to stay alive, lose his virginity, and become a writer during his service to his country.

Act I, Scene II: The young men reach basic training camp in Biloxi and claim their bunks. Sergeant Merwin J. Toomey enters the barracks and yells for the men to stand at attention. Toomey does roll call, insisting that the men answer with a simple “Ho!” when their name is called. Epstein responds with “Ho Ho!” This irritates Toomey who goes off on a tangent explaining that he has served overseas and seen a lot in his military career. This makes him the “cruellest, craziest, most sadistic” commanding officer the men will ever see. Epstein responds correctly but begins to fidget in line because he has to use the bathroom. Toomey refuses his request to go to the restroom.

When Carney gives what Toomey believes to be a smart aleck answer to a question, Toomey makes him drop and do 100 pushups. Toomey asks Eugene if this is fair punishment and after trying to avoid the question, Eugene says that it is unfair. Toomey yells at Selridge to get down and do pushups, even though it is Eugene that he is angry at. He follows up by having Wykowski drop to do pushups too, saying that sometimes one soldier must make the sacrifice for another, even if it is unfair. Eugene volunteers to take over the pushups for Carney who is struggling but Toomey makes Epstein drop to do pushups instead. Toomey puts Eugene in charge of supervising his peers who are all doing pushups. Eugene tells the audience that he is considering shooting off an



unimportant body part to get out of military service but can't think of which one he will not need later on.

Act I, Scene III: The men have dinner in the mess hall. They are served creamed chipped beef and Wykowski is the only one who is enthusiastic about eating it. Epstein tells the other men that army food needs to be palatable and that he is going to complain about it. James Hennessey, a soldier in the men's unit, comes to the table and warns them that they need to eat everything on their plates or else they will be placed on KP or latrine duty, as he has been. Hennessey explains that he has been on KP duty for two weeks because he left two spoonfuls of soup in his dish.

Sergeant Toomey arrives and tells the men that they will be going on a 15-mile march at midnight. Epstein protests and says that they have not had a good night's sleep since boarding the train for Biloxi. Toomey excuses Epstein from the march but says that he has to clean all of the base latrines instead. Toomey tells the men that they need to clean their plates and Epstein shows him a note from his doctor in New York that outlines his digestive disorder. Toomey tears up the note and tells Eugene, Carney, and Epstein that they will sit at the table until all of their food is gone. When Toomey leaves, Epstein tells the others to put the food on his plate because he has no plans to eat his anyway. He reasons that there is no sense in all of them suffering.

Analysis

The playwright does an excellent job of establishing characters in the first few scenes of the play. The narrator Eugene provides a neutral backdrop for the eccentricity of the other characters. It becomes clear that Arnold Epstein is the voice of reason in the group and that he is the least likely to excel in the Army despite his intelligence. The immature, boisterous attitudes of the other members of the unit are representative of the youth of the World War II time period; they are relatable to young men today. Although difficult issues like being away from home for the first time, challenging authority, and the mentality of war will be explored in the play, the humor and lightheartedness of the first few scenes gives the play a less-serious tone and helps the audience settle comfortably into their seats.

Sergeant Toomey is every young soldier's worst nightmare. Toomey is part experience, part sadistic, and part crazy. The men know that they need to rely on Toomey in order to succeed in basic training, but they do not yet respect him. Just when the men think that they have Toomey figured out, the sergeant throws in a twist. In scene two, Toomey makes all of the soldiers do 100 pushups, except for Eugene. This is his way of breaking the men and showing them that going to battle is not always fair. Toomey will not let Eugene be noble by taking over some of the assigned pushups; this is Toomey's way of showing that the rules that apply to civilian life are thrown out the window when it comes to war.

The way that Eugene directly addresses the audience gives the play a flashback feel. Instead of telling the audience how he feels in that very moment, Eugene frames his



addresses in the past tense, as if he is reading it from a completed memoir. This allows for greater understanding of characters and events since he has had time to mull over what it all actually meant. Readers and audience members get the benefit of seeing action in the present, but also get the analysis that comes with an older man remembering the events of his youth.

Vocabulary

representational, fatigues, memoirs, cadence, amble, barracks, dysentery, syphilis, gonorrhea, veracity, sadistic, latrine, illiterate, deformity, palatable, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, psycho, internist, lunacy, capitulate, Perry Como, matzo ball



Act I, Scene IV - V

Summary

Act I, Scene IV: All of the men except for Epstein return from the 15-mile hike. Eugene tells Epstein about it and says that they were up to their necks in swamp water with snakes and leeches all around them. Epstein is irritated and tells Eugene to leave him alone. Eugene says that he is Epstein's friend and Epstein tells him the story of cleaning the latrines. Epstein says that after he had got the toilets looking great, the fat cook and another soldier came in and did not flush. He asked them politely to flush, but instead they dunked his head in the pee-filled toilet latrine and then hung him upside down from a ceiling pipe with a belt. Epstein says that he is going to leave the army and Eugene tells him that he cannot go AWOL or else he will be caught and arrested. Epstein tells Eugene that he is "naïve."

The rest of the men come into the barracks from the showers. Carney says that he heard on the radio that the U.S. is planning to invade Europe and Japan on the same day. This gets the men talking about battle and the likelihood that many of them will die if they face a battlefield. Eugene asks the other men what they would do if they knew that they only had one week left to live and could do anything with the time. All of the men put in \$5 and Eugene judges the best answer. Most of the men's wishes have to do with fame, money, or girls. Epstein says that he would make Sergeant Toomey do 100 pushups in front of their barracks. Eugene gives him an "A+" for the answer and Epstein wins all the money. Wykowski starts to make cracks about how it is always "the Jews" who take all the money and Epstein tells him that he is not going to take his offensive talk. Sergeant Toomey comes into the barracks and tells the men that he will not tolerate racial slurs or offensive talk, especially not from a Polack like Wykowski. When the lights go out, Eugene tells the audience that he felt ashamed for not standing up for his fellow Jew, Epstein, but that he was just trying to remain neutral to survive.

Act I, Scene V: The men prepare for their first 48-hour leave. Wykowski discovers that the \$62 in his wallet has been stolen and immediately starts accusing Epstein of taking it because he is a Jew. Hennessey tells Carney, Selridge and Wykowski that he is half-black; the men are surprised that there is a black man in their "white" unit. Sergeant Toomey enters the barracks and has the men line up. He says that the one thing that has no excuse in the Army is burglary. Toomey says that if the guilty man does not step forward, none of the men will get 48-hour leave. Epstein takes \$62 out of his wallet and sets it on the table. Toomey is surprised at this gesture because it was actually him who stole it to prove a point.

Toomey takes Wykowski's bills out of his pocket and demands to know the motive behind Epstein admitting to a crime he did not commit. Epstein says that he does not have to give an answer, especially since he is not guilty of a crime. He goes on to tell Toomey that it is not necessary to dehumanize other people in order to make them perform. Toomey says that he can arrange for Epstein to eat cotton balls for every meal



and commands him to stay behind and clean the latrines. When Toomey is gone, Wykowski thanks him for taking the blame and shakes his hand. All of the men besides Epstein leave the barracks for the weekend.

Analysis

The playwright provides extra insight into the characters by presenting a classic “what if” game in Scene IV. By allowing the characters to use their imagination and go beyond any limitations, the audience gets a more in-depth look at what is important to each of them. For Carney, becoming a famous singer is his deepest desire and something that he wants to accomplish before he dies. For Wykowski and Selridge, emphasis is placed on beautiful women, riches, and fame. Hennessey says that he would simply spend the time with his family, which is considered a lame use of the time by the other men’s standards but also shows Hennessey’s relative maturity. Eugene, the romantic of the group, just wants to find love. The winning answer comes from Epstein who would take the time to exact his revenge on Sergeant Toomey by giving him a taste of his own medicine. By lifting all limits on the characters’ imaginations, the playwright gives the audience a better look at what makes each young man’s mind tick.

Epstein’s insistence to break the unwritten rules of Army life presents itself again when he admits to stealing Wykowski’s money even though he did not steal it. Epstein beats Toomey at his own game by doing something unexpected and ruining Toomey’s plan to teach all of the boys a lesson. This visibly irritates Toomey, which pleases Epstein. While Toomey uses physical punishment to shame the young men, Epstein uses psychological warfare to show that he is the superior man. Epstein can see through Toomey’s motives and this is evident when he admits “he’s trying to break my spirit.” Even with unpleasant outcomes, Epstein sticks by his beliefs and accuses Eugene of not doing enough to stand up for his own.

Vocabulary

maggot, Kike, AWOL, naïve, leeches, morbid, jubilantly, moronic, dumbstruck, battalion, Polack, mick, mutiny, sodomy, Armistice, leniency, abstention, complacency, avarice, Neanderthal, obstruction, dehumanize, pulverize, Talmudic, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Herman Melville



Act II, Scene I – III

Summary

Act II, Scene I: Selridge, Carney, and Eugene sit in a cheap hotel room, waiting for Wykowski to finish with a prostitute so that they can each have a turn. Selridge explains that the woman charges every time a customer has an orgasm and that they should have never let Wykowski go first. Eugene, a virgin, tries to act experienced and tells the others that there are 52 sex positions. He addresses the audience and says that he did not want his first time to “be like this” but that there are 21,000 soldiers on leave in Biloxi and only 14 girls – all of which go to Catholic school. When Wykowski emerges, Selridge goes in next. He is back in a matter of moments and Carney tells Eugene to go next. Carney admits that he has a girlfriend back home that would be angry if he had sex with a prostitute. He tells Eugene to not expect too much from his first time and to not be completely discouraged from having sex again.

Act II, Scene II Summary: Eugene enters the prostitute’s room. Her name is Rowena and she is sitting at her vanity, putting on perfume. Eugene lies and says that it’s his second time having sex but Rowena can tell it is only his first. He gives Rowena a fake name and tells her that he is from Texarkana. He nervously gets on top of her and she turns off the lights. A few seconds later the sex is over and Eugene is proud of himself for finally doing it.

Act II, Scene III Summary: Eugene is the last to return to the barracks from leave. While he is gone, the other men find and read his memoirs. Hennessey refuses to listen and thinks it is wrong that the others are reading Eugene’s private writing. Epstein does not object because he says it was stupid of Eugene to leave his memoirs unlocked. Wykowski reads aloud each part about a different person but Eugene returns before he can read about himself or Epstein. At first, Eugene does not notice that his notebook is missing. He exaggerates about his experience with Rowena to the other men. When he cannot find the notebook under his bunk, he asks if anyone has seen it and Wykowski produces it from under his own bunk. Eugene is furious that Wykowski is reading his personal memoirs and demands that he return it.

Selridge holds Eugene’s arms behind his back as Wykowski continues to read. He comes upon the part about himself and even though Eugene says that Wykowski lacks “culture,” Wykowski is pleased that Eugene says he will likely come out of the war with a medal. Wykowski returns the memoirs to Eugene but Epstein demands to know what they say about him. Eugene hands it over reluctantly and Epstein reads it out loud to the others. Eugene’s review of Epstein is mostly good but at the end, he wonders if Epstein is a homosexual. This implication annoys Epstein, who throws the book back to Eugene and rolls over to go to sleep.



Analysis

The shallowness of the physical part of sexual experience is highlighted in the first scene of Act II. Eugene, who has already said that he wants to find love, feels compelled to lose his virginity to a prostitute simply because he thinks that it is time that he “becomes a man.” There is nothing special about the experience for Eugene and he is more excited at the idea of losing his virginity than the actual intimacy that took place. Rowena is no stranger to men like Eugene and treats sex with the same disconnection that her overly-anxious customers do. Eugene is surprised that Rowena is married but she remarks that her husband knows and does not care what she does for a living. There is no romantic side to sex: the characters see it as a necessary action in life that does not need to be dressed up to serve its function.

The dynamic among the men in the barracks changes drastically after Wykowski finds Eugene’s memoirs and reads them aloud. The men are hurt by the words that Eugene uses, perhaps mostly because his honesty stings. Hennessey is the only one who is not interested in what Eugene has to say about him, which once again shows the heightened level of maturity that Hennessey possesses. Eugene’s observation that Epstein may be a homosexual is a humorous turn and seems to be untrue based on Epstein’s reaction. Epstein’s level of intellectualism makes him different from the other men and Eugene’s young mind has no way to compensate for that other than to assume that Epstein has a different sexual orientation. This is representative of the ways that young people try to categorize others who are different from themselves.

Vocabulary

Cretin, proportion, obstinacy, malice, John Wayne, defamation, inexhaustible, self-righteous, excommunicated, mucous, membranes, hanky, twerp, ignoramus, tacky



Act II, Scene IV – VI

Summary

Act II, Scene IV Summary: Eugene and Carney go outside the barracks to smoke a cigarette. Eugene tries to explain what he said in his memoirs about not being able to trust Carney with his life in a tense situation. Eugene says that all he meant was that Carney is very indecisive and that someone who takes too long to make decisions is not the type of person you would want to be next to in a foxhole. Carney says that his fiancé Charlene has another boyfriend because she feels that he is too indecisive and does not want to wait for him to make up his mind. Eugene asks if he and Carney are back on good terms, and Carney says that he will have to think about it. Eugene goes back into the barracks to fall asleep.

Act II, Scene V Summary: Sergeant Toomey wakes the men in the barracks in the middle of the night, demanding that they get to their feet. He tells them that two men were caught performing oral sex on each other in the bathroom. One of the men was already apprehended but the other was seen running into the barracks. Toomey tells the man responsible to step forward and no one does. After Toomey leaves, Eugene apologizes to Epstein for what he wrote in his memoirs and Epstein does not deny the assumption that it is he who is guilty. The next morning, Toomey returns and tells Hennessey to step forward. Hennessey bursts into tears and is taken away to be questioned by the military police for his involvement with the incident in the bathroom.

Act II, Scene VI Summary: Eugene attends a dance at the U.S.O. and meets Daisy Hannigan, a young woman who attends Catholic school in Gulfport, Mississippi. The two dance and discuss important “Daisies” from literature. Daisy says that her father is a writer and that he got his start by writing his memoirs. The nuns give Daisy a dirty look for spending too much time with Eugene, so she gets up to mingle with more men. She tells Eugene where she goes to school and he promises to write to her. Eugene addresses the audience and expresses his joy that he has found a nice, intelligent, pretty girl like Daisy. He says that Daisy has given him “something to live for.”

Analysis

The impact of Eugene’s writing shows its strength when Carney admits that what Eugene wrote is true. After hearing Eugene’s explanation of what he actually meant with his words, Carney says that his fiancé has described him in the exact same way. Though Eugene’s comrades acted upset at each portion of the memoirs that described them, it becomes clear that Eugene may have touched a nerve because of his honest perspective. Eugene may be an even better judge of character and writer than even he believes that he is.



The issue of sexual orientation in the military is one that is still hotly debated in contemporary times. Though the fact that Hennessey was actually thrown in jail for a homosexual act seems old-fashioned to many readers and audience members but is not far removed from what soldiers in the U.S. military faced before the retraction of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” This play premiered in 1984 and the irony of Neil Simon including the controversy with Hennessey was that not much had changed on the issue in four decades. Even after the sexual revolution of the 1960s, homosexuality was still viewed by many as unnatural and even criminal: especially in the U.S. military. Hennessey’s sexual orientation is as much of a comment on World War II-era military politics as it is on contemporary military views.

Vocabulary

immortalized, prejudiced, headway, The Great Gatsby, Fred Astaire, watchword, mediocrity, Leavenworth, indiscretion, dexterity, paratrooper, court-martial, foxhole, fellatio



Act II, Scene VII – IX

Summary

Act II, Scene VII: Sergeant Toomey calls Epstein to his private quarters in the middle of the night. He is drunk and has a loaded gun in hand for much of the conversation. He begins by berating Epstein and telling him that he can never win in a match of wits and discipline. Epstein, afraid of the dangerous drunk man, calmly agrees to everything that Toomey says. Toomey then reveals that he is going to be shipped off to a veteran's hospital the next morning and is being discharged from the army. Epstein says that it is a shame.

Toomey says that he overheard the men playing the game about what they would do if they only had a week to live and that he wants to add his own wish to the list. Toomey puts down \$5 and says that he would want to make an honest, disciplined soldier out of a man who was the farthest thing from it. He then tells Epstein to have him arrested for threatening him with a weapon. Epstein refuses and Toomey calls in the other men from the barracks as witnesses. When the other men arrive, Toomey says that Epstein is planning to have him arrested for using threats with a loaded weapon. Epstein again protests but Toomey insists that there must be a punishment. Instead of having him arrested, Epstein tells Toomey to drop and do 200 pushups. Epstein counts off as the other men watch in amazement. Eugene tells the audience that Epstein was right to win the bet about the one-week-to-live fantasies because his actually came true.

Act II, Scene VIII: Eugene visits Daisy at her Catholic school in Gulfport. Daisy says that she only has ten minutes to talk because it is Good Friday and dating is not allowed. Eugene tells her that he is shipping out any day since his basic training is over. He asks her to send him a picture and she says that she will continue to write to him while he is away. Eugene tells her that he loves her and she says it back. They kiss passionately and Daisy gives him a blank book to help him write his memoirs. She leaves to go back into the school.

Act II, Scene IX: All of the men from the train in Scene I are back on board. They are being deployed to the Atlantic front. As the others sleep, Eugene addresses the audience and tells listeners what happens to each character in the war. Selridge serves in every campaign in France and becomes a training sergeant back in the U.S. Wykowski does not earn a medal but is cited for outstanding courage in battle after being injured in the leg and hip. Carney is hospitalized for severe depression and other mental problems as a result of what he encounters in battle; he also stops singing. Epstein disappears and is reported missing in action, but Eugene says that he thinks Epstein just found a way to outsmart the situation and started a new life somewhere that he could not be found by the U.S. Army.

Daisy Hannigan marries a Jewish doctor and continues to write to Eugene about her babies. Eugene is injured in a Jeep accident on his first day in England. Instead of being



sent home, he becomes a writer for Stars and Stripes magazine. The play closes as Carney sings a verse from the popular 1940s song “Tangerine.”

Analysis

The back-and-forth tense relationship between Epstein and Toomey reaches a resolution in this part of the book. Even though neither man is ever going to agree completely with the other, it becomes clear that Toomey has developed respect for Epstein. It is almost as if Epstein has gotten inside of Toomey’s head and caused him to rethink everything he thought he knew about military training and dealing with young soldiers. Epstein shows respect towards Toomey too, and seems disappointed at the news that his commanding officer is leaving. Though Epstein has the chance to have Toomey arrested, he exacts his revenge in a more appropriate and even sympathetic way.

Basic training ends and the men head out to start the next chapter of their lives. Though only ten weeks have passed, the train ride away from Biloxi is a lot different than the train ride there. Many of the same immature, boisterous traits still exist among the young men, but the bond that they have formed is evident. Instead of leaving the audience to wonder what becomes of each character, the playwright allows Eugene to summarize each life. Not all of the stories are happy ones, as in the case of Carney who suffers neurological damage from the stressful toll of the war. The love story of Daisy and Eugene also comes to an end as the audience learns that she marries another man.

While Eugene accomplishes all of the goals that he set out to achieve during his military service, the reality of how the things take place is bittersweet. Though he loses his virginity, it is in an unromantic and non-feeling way. He stays alive but not because he is brave or valiant; rather, he is injured in a car accident on his first day overseas, which ensures that he does not see any action on the front. He becomes a writer, but only because there is a horrible war to write about. The ideals that Eugene held before entering the Army are lost, although he is still one of the lucky ones to come out of the war alive.

Vocabulary

tangerine, señoritas, caballeros, vicissitude, reinforcements, eccentricity, illogical, wrest, inebriated, brandishing, provocation, malcontent, Arlington Cemetery, Jack Benny, dung, incredulous



Characters

Eugene Morris Jerome

Eugene is the narrator of the play. He is a twenty-year-old from Brighton Beach, New York who has been drafted into the U.S. Army. It is 1943 and World War II is well under way. Eugene is sent to Biloxi, Mississippi for basic training and is determined to stay alive, become a famous writer, and lose his virginity by the time his service in the war is over. He writes his memoirs as he trains alongside the other men and manages to find the humor in all of the situations he encounters.

Eugene is a romantic at heart. He often talks about meeting the perfect girl and falling in love. When he meets Daisy Hannigan, he is immediately smitten and believes her to be the love of his life. This proves not to be reality, but serves as a lesson for Eugene who looks at life in too much of an idealized way. At the end of Act I, fellow soldier Epstein accuses Eugene of simply being a witness to life, and not an involved party. He tells Eugene that it is not enough to just stand by and write about things, but that he must get involved and take a side.

The character of Eugene is based on the playwright, Neil Simon. Like Eugene, Neil Simon grew up in New York City and was involved in military service during World War II. He never traveled overseas but was familiar with boot camp and many of the military scenarios that appear in the play. Each play of the “Eugene trilogy” represents a different part of Neil Simon’s life and the feelings and naivety of Eugene are representative of what Neil Simon felt at the same point in his own life.

Roy Selridge

Roy Selridge is a member of Eugene’s unit and is from Schenectady, New York. Eugene describes Selridge as smelling like “a tuna fish sandwich left out in the rain.” Selridge is loud and boisterous, believing himself to be funny even when others do not think so. Selridge does not often live up to his big talk and falls short of the “big man” image he tries to portray. A good example of this is when he builds up how his time with the prostitute will go and then returns from her room only seconds after entering.

Joseph Wykowski

Joseph Wykowski is a member of Eugene’s unit and is from Bridgeport, Connecticut. He has two unique characteristics: he can eat anything and he has a permanent erection. Wykowski bullies everyone, especially Epstein, and makes racial slurs about Jews. He is known for his incredible sexual prowess and is unashamed to masturbate several times a night in the barracks. Despite his crass ways, Eugene writes in his memoirs that Wykowski is the most likely to win a medal of honor in battle.



Donald Carney

Donald Carney is a member of Eugene's unit from Montclair, New Jersey. He often sings, even in his sleep, and has a mediocre singing voice though he thinks that it is good. Carney says that if he only had one week left to live and could have any wish, he would wish to sing in Radio City Music Hall to 4,000 pretty girls. Carney has a fiancé named Charlene who he admits has another boyfriend. He tells Eugene that she has another boyfriend because she thinks that Carney is too indecisive and will not make up his mind about their future.

Arnold Epstein

Arnold Epstein is a member of Eugene's unit from Queens Boulevard, New York. Unlike the other young men, Epstein is intellectual. He likes to read and tells Eugene that his favorite book is "War and Peace." Epstein has terrible digestion, which causes problems during basic training, especially when he refuses to eat the food served in the mess hall. Epstein is the most disgusted by the treatment of soldiers in the Army and stands up for himself, despite risking punishment from his commanding officers. He tells Sergeant Toomey that his treatment of his inferior is "Neanderthal" in nature and that he could get better results if he just treated the men with respect. Though his attitude often earns him the punishment of cleaning the latrines, in the end Epstein wins out when he has the leverage to make Sergeant Toomey do 200 pushups in front of his comrades.

Sergeant Merwin J. Toomey

Sergeant Merwin J. Toomey is a tough-talking commanding officer who tries to break in the new arrivals at basic training in Biloxi. Toomey has been in the Army for twelve years and has earned medals from his service. He tells the men that he served fourteen months in North Africa where seventy-three percent of his comrades died. Toomey has a steel plate in his head from an injury suffered on the battlefield. He warns the men that he can be cruel, crazy, and sadistic. Toomey and Epstein have a tumultuous relationship, as Epstein's intellectualism irritates him. In Act II, Toomey tells Epstein that he is being discharged from service and sent to a veteran's hospital to deal with his head injury. He insists that Epstein hold him accountable for pulling a weapon on an inferior soldier and ends up doing 200 pushups in front of the men in the platoon.

James Hennessey

James Hennessey is another of the men in Eugene's unit. He is more cautious than the other guys and tries to stay out of trouble. He tells the other men that he is half Irish, half black, an admission that shocks some of the men in the unit who do not think that a black man should be serving with the white soldiers. Though his ethnicity does not bar him from serving with the platoon, his sexual orientation proves detrimental. Hennessey



is put in military jail for a few months and kicked out of the Army after he is caught engaging in a sexual act with another soldier in the latrine.

Daisy Hannigan

Eugene meets the beautiful Daisy Hannigan at a U.S.O. sponsored dance. She is smart, beautiful, and literate. Daisy tells Eugene that she is originally from Chicago but that her father now works for a newspaper in Gulfport, Mississippi. The two discuss literature and begin to write to each other a few times per week. When Eugene goes to see Daisy before his deployment, the two confess their love for each other. She promises to send him a picture and that even if she never sees him again, he will always be her first love. Even though Daisy ends up marrying another man, Eugene says that her love gave him “something to live for” during his time in the service.

Rowena

Rowena is a prostitute that the young men visit on their first 48-hour leave. She is matter-of-fact and unromantic in her love making. When Eugene first sees her, she is sitting at a vanity and spraying herself with perfume. She tells Eugene that she also sells bottles of perfume and black panties, if he is interested in buying either thing for his girlfriend. Rowena says that she is married and that her husband used to be a customer of hers. She takes Eugene’s virginity.

Charlene

Charlene is Donald Carney’s fiancé. Though Carney refuses to spend money on a prostitute because it might upset Charlene, he admits that she has another boyfriend. Carney tells Eugene that Charlene feels like Carney is indecisive and will not make up his mind about his future with her, which is why she has another man on the side.



Objects/Places

Biloxi, Mississippi

The basic training camp is located in Biloxi, Mississippi and even though it is early spring, Eugene comments on how hot and uncomfortable it is in Biloxi. The men take a 15-mile hike through a swamp on their first night in Biloxi and complain about the heavy density of mosquitoes.

The Barracks

Many of the important scenes in the play take place in the barracks that Eugene shares with his comrades. It is in the barracks that Wykowski steals Eugene's memoirs and reads them aloud to the other men. It is also where much of the tension and bonding between the men takes place.

The Mess Hall

On the first night the men arrive at Biloxi they eat in the mess hall. The food is inedible and, in a show of solidarity, Epstein tells some of the others that they can put their food on his tray because he is going to refuse to eat it anyway. While the meals are supposed to be a relatively relaxing part of the day, the men are tense because of the constraints placed on them to eat the horrible food.

The Latrine

The disgusting bathroom habits of the men at basic training are encapsulated in the latrine. Although it is never seen, it is described by the men that to be put on latrine duty is the worst possible discipline. Epstein is humiliated by two fellow soldiers while he is cleaning the latrine and Hennessey is later caught performing oral sex on another soldier there.

The Hotel Room

A "tacky" hotel room is the place where Eugene loses his virginity to a prostitute named Rowena. Eugene waits in an adjoining hotel room as his comrades take turns with Rowena, paying her \$5 for each finished sexual act. Eugene tells the audience that he did not wish for his first time to "be like this" but that there are very few options in Biloxi, especially with 21,000 soldiers on 48-hour leave.



Eugene's Memoirs

Throughout the entire play, Eugene writes and reads to the audience from his memoirs. The other men tease him about his writing and become offended when Wykowski steals it and starts to read aloud. The men are not happy with the way that Eugene portrays them in the journal and it causes tension amongst Eugene and his comrades. Eugene later says that the incident helps him realize the power of words and the responsibility of a writer.

“War and Peace”

When Eugene asks Epstein to recommend a book to read, Epstein tells him to read “War and Peace” by Leo Tolstoy. The book is regarded as one of the best works of literature of modern times and Tolstoy wrote it from a perspective of being a battle veteran. This recommendation suggests that Eugene should take in all of the details of the war in his own memoirs in order to write something meaningful later on.

Army Food

The young men are forced to eat disgusting food in the mess hall, whether they want to or not. This is especially troublesome for Epstein's digestion and he says that he plans to file a complaint. Of the creamed chipped beef the men are served on their first night in Biloxi, Selridge says “they oughta drop this stuff over Germany. The whole country would come out with their hands up.”

Aqua Velva

Aqua Velva is the cologne that Eugene wears. He uses copious amounts of it to cover up his insecurities and is wearing it when he loses his virginity to a prostitute named Rowena.

Cigarettes

Numerous characters smoke cigarettes, especially in tense moments of the play. Eugene and Carney smoke together outside the barracks after Wykowski has read Eugene's memoirs aloud to the other guys in the bunk. Eugene also has a cigarette in his mouth just before losing his virginity to Rowena and she comments on how unnatural he looks smoking.



Themes

The Naivety of Youth

The narrow view of young people is portrayed in a humorous and sometimes serious way in the play. It is ironic that men on the brink of fighting a world war arrive at basic training with lunches packed by their mothers. Eugene admits that it is the first time he has been away from home and it is safe to assume that is the same for the other young men as well. They each enter the Army with their own set of narrow life experiences; they will be forced outside of their comfort zone in the coming months. Wykowski, for example, is extremely prejudiced but he is also uneducated. Epstein is naïve in believing that standing up for his dignity and self-respect will earn him any points in the military, even though it may have been the letter of the law where he was from. Carney shows his own lack of know-how with his belief that he is a good singer, even though he clearly is not. Someone “back home” told Carney that he had a nice voice one time and it was enough to make him believe in its merit.

Eugene is perhaps the most obvious example of ignorance in youth. The playwright takes liberties with Eugene’s outlook on life because it is meant to reflect his own at that time. Eugene does not see the war as something scary or as a thing that could potentially kill him; he sees it as an opportunity to further his own personal and career goals. Although Eugene essentially does accomplish his goals, in reflection he admits that he feels some guilt for using the war for his own personal advantage. The innocence that accompanies the youthful outlook of the characters in the play is slowly stripped away during the action and completely shed when Eugene tells the audience what became of each character in his final monologue.

The Mentality of the Military

The stark contrast of military and civilian life is emphasized in the play. Eugene comes from a comfortable home and admits that his mother packed him several lunches before he left for basic training. Children growing up post-World War I and who survived the Great Depression enjoyed relative comfort in their domestic lives. While many of their fathers may have served as soldiers in World War I, the young men being shipped off to fight in World War II did not grasp the concept of war or the discipline that went into training for one. This disconnect between the carefree days of youth and the reality of war still exists in young people who are sent off to fight today.

Sergeant Toomey represents an “old school” view of military life. By belittling the incoming soldiers, Toomey believes that he is helping them become stronger for battle. In some ways these tactics work, but in other ways, they cause the soldiers to resent each other and their commanding officer. Epstein symbolizes a new way of thinking that calls for more respect of the men risking their lives for their country and less humiliation. Even though Epstein suffers greatly for standing by his beliefs, he maintains his self-



respect and even manages to bring Toomey somewhat into his line of thinking . The playwright uses extreme views of military life to show that there must be a balance between discipline and respect in order for any army to be successful.

Sex Versus Love

Right up there with staying alive and becoming a writer, Eugene tells the audience that he wants to lose his virginity. Although having sex for the first time may seem like a humorous addition to his life goals, it is actually just as important in young Eugene's mind as the other two. When he is able to reach his goal, Eugene feels that he has now entered manhood. Even though he is over the age of 18 and training to become a killer for the government, Eugene does not feel that he is completely a man until he loses his virginity. All that matters to Eugene is the end goal ; he is not ashamed that in order to achieve it, he must pay a stranger.

Meeting Daisy fulfills the part of Eugene's sexual nature that is still empty despite the fact that he is no longer a virgin. The incomplete feeling that accompanied the physical act becomes apparent when Eugene meets "the perfect girl." Though the two never pass the point of kissing, Eugene is able to understand that sex without a relationship is less fulfilling. Rowena represents Eugene's animalistic sexual nature and Daisy represents the romantic, rational side of Eugene's sexuality. Both characters and traits are necessary in order for Eugene to develop a complete sense of sexual self.



Style

Point of View

The play is narrated by the protagonist, Eugene Morris Jerome. Eugene is a 20-year-old Army draftee with an idealized outlook on life. Although the action takes place in the present tense, the entire play is a collection of Eugene's memories. This allows for reflection and deeper realization of the importance of the events taking place. The audience is able to perceive the youthful ignorance of the characters, including Eugene, with the knowledge that it is based on past events.

The way that the playwright portrays the other characters is commented upon when those characters read Eugene's description of them in his memoirs. Just as Neil Simon uses some of his own memories to shape the play, Eugene writes his memoirs based on what he feels at the moment, even if it is not entirely accurate or true to life. In this way, the playwright's point of view is explained and defended through the character of Eugene.

Setting

The play is set at a U.S. Army basic training camp in Biloxi, Mississippi. The barracks, mess hall, and quarters of Sergeant Toomey make up the individual scenes that take place at the camp. The latrine is often a point of reference but is not part of the actual set. Eugene remarks that Biloxi is much hotter than the East Coast, which is where all of the young men in his platoon are from.

Some of the scenes take place off the military base. The first and final scenes of the play happen on a crowded train car transporting the young men to and from the camp. Another scene takes place in a "tacky" hotel room in Biloxi while the men are on 48-hour leave and visiting a prostitute. Eugene meets Daisy Hannigan at a U.S.O. sponsored dance, and then visits her outside her Catholic girls' school in Gulfport.

Language and Meaning

The play is written in plain language and does not attempt to disguise the inappropriate way that young men often speak. Profanity and sexualized content are part of the dialogue of the young men and, even then, they are embarrassed to use the words that they want. A good example of this is when Selridge is explaining the way that Rowena charges her customers and neither he or Eugene are able to say the word "orgasm." They are comfortable using words like "hump" but, like most young people, have trouble saying the technical words that accompany sexual interactions.

Each character speaks according to his or her personality. Epstein is considered the intellectual of the group and this comes across in his language, even to his commanding



officers. Wykowski is uneducated and his words reflect his lack of breeding and refinement. Eugene is a romantic and tends to idealize the situations around him as if they are part of a story that he is writing and not part of real life. This ever-changing language dynamic makes the play fun to watch and keeps it interesting for the audience.

Structure

The play is structured in two acts with several scenes in each. The first act has five scenes that include the train ride to Biloxi and several scenes on the military base. The second act has nine scenes and wanders off base a few times. The final scene bookends the play by taking place in the same train car where the first scene took place. This gives the play a definite frame of time: in this case, ten weeks of basic Army training.

The main plot of the play is Eugene Morris Jerome entering a new phase of his life and accomplishing three goals: to stay alive, to lose his virginity and to become a professional writer. Only one of these happens during the course of the play, but the audience is aware that the other two take place because Eugene confirms this in his final address to the crowd. Subplots include the tension between Epstein and Toomey, the relationship between Daisy and Eugene, and the revelation of Hennessey's homosexuality.



Quotes

Roy Selridge from Schenectady, New York, smelled like a tuna fish sandwich left out in the rain. He thought he had a terrific sense of humor but it was hard to laugh at a guy who had cavities in nineteen out of thirty-two teeth.

-- Eugene (Act I, Scene I)

If the Germans only knew what was coming over, they would be looking forward to this invasion.

-- Eugene (Act I, Scene I)

Toomey: "Something wrong with your dinner, Carney?" Carney: "Yes, Sarge. It's the first food I was ever afraid of.

-- Toomey and Carney (Act I, Scene III)

If nobody obeys orders, I'll bet we wouldn't have more than twelve or thirteen soldiers fighting the war. We'd have headlines like, 'Corporal Stanley Leiberman invades Sicily.

-- Eugene (Act I, Scene IV)

This is a tough one. I find it completely unredeeming in every way. Morally, ethically and sexually... but it's got style... A-minus!

-- Eugene (Act I, Scene IV)

Sodomy is the result of doing something you don't want to do with someone you don't want to do it with because of no access to do what you want to do with someone you can't get to do it with.

-- Toomey (Act I, Scene V)

I don't think it's necessary to dehumanize a man to get him to perform. You can get better results raising our spirits than lowering our dignity.

-- Epstein (Act I, Scene V)

Men do not face enemy machine guns because they have been treated with kindness. They face them because they have a bayonet up their ass. I don't want them human. I want them obedient.

-- Toomey (Act I, Scene V)

Without problems, the day would be over at eleven o'clock in the morning.

-- Epstein (Act I, Scene V)

I didn't want my first time to be like this... I really tried to meet somebody nice but there are twenty-one thousand soldiers on leave in Biloxi and fourteen girls... Those are tough odds. Especially since the fourteen girls all go to Catholic school and are handcuffed to nuns.

-- Eugene (Act II, Scene I)



Carney: "You putting this in your memoirs?" Eugene: "Sure. I put everything in my memoirs." Carney: "That's smart. Because people don't like books unless there's sex in them.

-- Carney and Eugene (Act II, Scene I)

Once you start compromising your thoughts, you're a candidate for mediocrity.

-- Epstein (Act II, Scene V)

I knew at that moment I was a long way from becoming a writer because there were no words I could find to describe the happiness I felt in those ten minutes with Daisy Hannigan.

-- Eugene (Act II, Scene VIII)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Eugene Morris Jerome? What is his religious background? Where is he from? Why is Eugene in the Army? What is he writing throughout the play? What are Eugene's three goals for his time in the military? Does he accomplish these things? What cologne does Eugene wear? Do you think that Eugene is a good soldier? Why or why not? In what ways is Eugene like the playwright, Neil Simon? Describe Eugene's feelings for Daisy Hannigan.

Topic 2

Who is Sergeant Toomey? How many years has he been in the Army? Where has he served overseas? What injury did Sergeant Toomey suffer? Describe the relationship that Toomey has with Epstein. Why does Epstein bother Toomey so much? Do you think that Toomey actually likes Epstein? Why or why not? Toomey says that if he had one week left on earth, he would do what? Where does Toomey go at the end of the play? In your opinion, is Toomey a good commanding officer? Why or why not?

Topic 3

Who is Roy Selridge? What does he say he would do if he had one week left to live? Who is Donald Carney? To what famous crooner was Carney once compared? Who is Joseph Wykowski? What is Wykowski's opinion of Jews? Who is James Hennessey? What secret about Hennessey is revealed during the play? Who is Arnold Epstein? How is Epstein's attitude different from the other young men in his platoon? What does Epstein say he would do if he had one week left to live? What does Eugene say about Epstein in his memoirs?

Topic 4

Who is Daisy Hannigan? What two "Daisies" from literature do Eugene and Daisy discuss? Which one does Daisy say is her favorite? Where does Eugene meet Daisy? What does Daisy's father do for a living? Where is she from originally? Why is Eugene drawn to Daisy so quickly? When he is getting ready to deploy, what does he ask Daisy to do? Do you think that Eugene was really in love with Daisy? Why or why not? Who does Daisy marry?



Topic 5

Name the two other plays in the “Eugene trilogy.” What periods of time does each of the three plays cover? What does semi-autobiographical mean? Why do you think Neil Simon waited so late in his career to write this trilogy? Not much focus is placed on the actual facts of World War II in this play – why is that? Explain how Neil Simon encompassed the feelings to angst young people feel about love and sex. Name the other play for which Neil Simon won a Tony Award for Best Play.