Blood Relations Study Guide

Blood Relations by Sharon Pollock

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Introduction

Blood Relations was first produced in 1980 at Theatre 3 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. This was not the play's first appearance on stage, however, as Sharon Pollock often extensively revises her plays, even after the first couple of productions. The previous version was produced as *My Name Is Lisabeth* in 1976 at Douglas College with Pollock herself playing the role of Lizzie Borden. After significant revision, she renamed the play *Blood Relations* and staged it as a new work in 1980.

The play is based on historical fact: die 1892 double murder of Lizzie Borden's father and stepmother, a crime for which Lizzie herself was charged. The crime shocked the Massachusetts community of Fall River, as well as the whole nation, and citizens read with fascination reports of the trial. Lizzie was acquitted but the crime was never solved, and her innocence was questioned by the public. In contemporary times, the figure of Lizzie Borden has achieved iconic status. Many perceive her as an early feminist who did not shy from acting and thinking as an individual. It has often been theorized that, if *Lizzie* did in fact commit the murders, her actions were based on self-preservation, an attempt to escape from an abusive family situation.

Some reviewers of *Blood Relations* challenged Pollock for writing a work that failed to adequately confront feminist concerns, instead choosing to direct the play towards a more general political agenda. Pollock's work appears to be "more involved with studies of oppression in general and political processes in particular than ... in specific struggles of women," said S. R Gilbert in *Contemporary Dramatists.*

Blood Relations was the first full-length play Pollock produced. A published version of it, released in 1981, won her the Governor General's Award, the first time such an award was made for a piece of dramatic literature.

Controversy often followed *Blood Relations,* specifically in 1982 and 1983, when Pollock sued a television station for damage to her literary reputation when it decided to drop her play and develop its own script. The case was settled out of court.

Author Biography

Sharon Pollock was born on April 19, 1936, in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. Named Mary Sharon Chambers, she was the daughter of a physician and politician. Her mother died when she was sixteen, evidently a suicide. She studied at the University of New Brunswick but dropped out to marry Ross Pollock, a Toronto insurance broker, with whom she had five children before the marriage ended.

Pollock then became involved in theatre in New Brunswick and later moved on to Calgary, Canada. In 1971, after having worked as an actress, she began to write plays Her first work to be staged was *Walsh,* which was produced in 1973. The play examines the Canadian government's treatment of Native North Americans. Like *Walsh,* her subsequent work often deals with political themes. *The Komagata Maru Incident,* which was first produced in 1976, addresses the issue of racism.

Blood Relations was first produced in 1980 (although an early version of the play was produced in 1976 under the title *My Name Is Lisabeth*) and signaled a shift in Pollock's drama towards the individual as seen in family and social relationships. The play earned Pollock a Governor General's Literary Award, the first time a published dramatic work received such an honor. A second Governor General's Award came to Pollock for *Doc,* produced m 1984. This play later evolved into *Family Trappings* and is based on autobiographical material about Pollock's family. Other productions of Pollock's work include *Fair Liberty's Call,* which premiered at the Stratford Festival in 1993, and *Saucy Jack,* performed first at the Garry Theatre in Calgary, where she is founder and artistic director

Pollock's other literary honors include the Canada Australia Literary Award (1987) for her body of work, the ACTRA Nellie Drama Award for National Radio, and a Golden Sheaf Award for writing for television.

Pollock has not limited her activity solely to creating her dramas; she has taught play writing at a number of Canadian universities and has worked as a director. She has been chairperson of the Advisory Arts Panel of Canada Council, headed the Playwright's Colony at the Banff Centre for Fine Arts, and has been associate director for both the Stratford Festival Theatre and the Manitoba Theatre Centre In addition to the contemporary stage, she has written for radio and television She has also written numerous dramatic works for children.

Plot Summary

Act I

The play opens on a late Sunday afternoon in the parlor of the Borden house in 1902, in Fall River, Massachusetts. Miss Lizzie enters with tea for the Actress, who protests she doesn't like the tea and toast routine while Lizzie puzzles over the proper way to pour tea. Lizzie worries that Fall River is a little boring for the Actress. She says she is there to see Lizzie. She gives a report about how her rehearsals are going. She reports hearing children in the alley singing a little song about Lizzie killing her parents. Lizzie asks if she defended her. The Actress reports she closed the window. They put on a record and dance as the Actress tries to figure out if Miss Lizzie looks jowly, a comment made m news reports during the trial. The Actress complains that Lizzie never tells her anything, when Lizzie fails to respond to the question of whether she committed the crane or not.

Lizzie wonders aloud whether part of the Actress's success is due to her connection with an infamous accused murderess such as herself. The Actress bristles at this, but Lizzie says that, ten years after the events, people still talk about her and the crime Lizzie complains that Emma keeps asking, "did you?" The Actress starts to imitate Emma, carrying on both sides of an imaginary conversation with Lizzie's older sister.

The Actress says she wants lo know the truth. Lizzie suggests they play a game in which the Actress will play Miss Lizzie and Lizzie will play Bridget, the maid the family had in 1892.

The action shifts to Lizzie's murder trial that took place ten years before. The Defense questions Lizzie as Bridget, and she describes the Borden family, including the visit of Harry, Mrs. Borden's brother. This recollection dissolves to another Hash-back to the Borden home. Harry has arrived, and it is clear that the purpose of his visit is money, either for himself or his sister, who is Mr. Borden's second wife. Lizzie had Harry thrown out the last time he visited. He wonders what Bridget is doing with bread crusts. She says they are for Lizzie's pigeons, and Harry says Lizzie prefers animals to people. The Actress, now playing Lizzie, appears and Harry slips off to split wood.

After Bridget reports a conversation between Mr. Borden and his brother-in-law. Lizzie calls Harry a stupid bugger, flustering Bridget with her foul language. Lizzie voices her concern that Harry is only visiting to connive more money out of her father. Emma appears, complaining of the noise that has kept her from sleep. Emma indicates she's heard Lizzie's bad language. Emma doesn't want to deal with the reality of the family farm, which is in financial ruin, or Harry's schemes to get more of their father's money. Lizzie tries to make her talk about it.

Mrs. Borden, the girls' stepmother, comes down for breakfast and questions Bridget about Harry's appearance and whether Lizzie knows he's here. She comes to the

conclusion that Lizzie is really quite spoiled, There is obvious tension between Mrs. Borden and Lizzie revolving around Mr. Borden's money. Mr. Borden appears and they discuss Lizzie and a widower, Johnny MacLeod, who is interested in her. Her father pressures Emma to talk with Lizzie. She goes off in a huff, unwilling to be the family mediator and communicator.

The scene shifts to Dr. Patrick and Lizzie talking outdoors, where she flirts with him, inviting him to run off with her, although he is married. Harry passes by and tells Lizzie to come in for lunch, even though they have just finished breakfast.

The scene shifts and Bridget and Lizzie talk about the expectation that Lizzie should get married and have a home of her own. Meanwhile Harry reports to Mrs. Borden that Lizzie has been consorting with the doctor. Mrs. Borden and Harry gang up on Mr. Borden. saying he can't control his own daughter. Mr. Borden says he'll talk with her.

The scene returns to the courtroom, and Lizzie recalls how she never was quite good enough as a girl, supposing that she never got at birth that magic formula for being a woman. The Defense returns and questions whether Lizzie could have delivered the ax blows that killed her parents.

The scene switches to a conversation between Borden and Lizzie as he tries to persuade her to see the widower MacLeod. "'He's looking for a housekeeper not a wife." Lizzie contends. Mrs. Borden joins in and they talk of Lizzie leaving the house and the dowry she'll receive if she marries. Mr. Borden slaps Lizzie. Her stepmother reminds her that she is financially dependent on her father and that she can't hope to inherit a third of his estate when he dies.

Harry and Mr. Borden talk, revealing Harry's business He wants the fallow farm put in Mrs. Borden's name and leased to him Harry will conduct horse auctions and have buggy rides on the property, giving Borden twenty percent. What they are unaware of is Lizzie's presence, and she confronts her father Borden's anger erupts and he directs it at the pigeons Lizzie keeps Taking the hatchet Harry has brought in from splitting wood, Borden smashes it into the table. Ax in hand, Borden says he is going to take care of the birds. The act ends back in the present with Lizzie saying she loved the pigeons.

Act II

The action returns to Lizzie and the Actress's re-enactment. It is the following day Emma tells Lizzie she is going away for a few days. Lizzie accuses Emma of running away from things. Lizzie underscores the reality—Harry is getting the farm signed over to their stepmother and will be living there. They will be essentially cut out of their father's will, left to subsist on only a small allowance.

The scene returns to the courtroom. The Defense reappears and questions Lizzie about what happened on that day, and she recalls going for a walk, eating pears, coming back, finding her Papa dead, and calling for Bridget.

The scene shifts back to that day. Mrs. Borden comes down for breakfast and soon Mr. Borden joins the table. Harry pops in and gets an invitation to go to town with Borden. Lizzie, knowing they plan to sign papers m town, tries to persuade her father not to go.

The scenes fades to another talk between Dr. Patrick and Lizzie. Lizzie says she could die if she wanted. They walk, and she is going to show him her birds but the cage is empty She asks him whom he would save if he could only save one of two people dying from an accident. Then she asks if he met Attila the Hun and could kill him, would he? He says he would fight in a war but is uncomfortable with this line of questioning She launches into an attack on her stepmother but she doesn't get the support she wants and accuses Patrick of being a coward.

The scene turns to Mrs. Borden and Lizzie, who talks about her father killing her birds with an ax Mrs. Borden is uncomfortable and decides to go upstairs. Lizzie asks her to carry her clean clothes upstairs and put them in her room. Mrs Borden starts up the steps, and Lizzie follows, describing how she would kill someone, as they exit.

Lizzie comes back with a hatchet concealed in her basket of clothes and appeals to Bridget for help, coaching Bridget to say that someone broke in and killed Mrs. Borden.

The scene changes, and Mr Borden is home. Lizzie talks about how much she loves him and the ring she once gave him. She encourages him to sleep and when he does, approaches him with the hatchet. The stage darkens.

Back in the present, Emma and Lizzie discuss the Actress. Emma considers the relationship "disgraceful." Emma again asks her sister if she did it. Annoyed by her sister's repeated inquiries, Lizzie threatens Emma with "something sharp." If she is guilty, Lizzie states, then Emma is guilty as well because Emma raised her and taught her everything. The play ends with the Actress deciding Lizzie did commit the murders. Lizzie, however, points her finger at the Actress and the audience.

Characters

The Actress

The Actress is Lizzie's friend and, by all appearances, lover. It is at her request that the tale of Lizzie's past is re-enacted Once the flashbacks begin, the Actress assumes the role of Lizzie. In this capacity, she recreates the events leading up to the murders Basing her assumptions on what she knows of the family's history, the facts of the murders, and her own personal knowledge of Lizzie's personality, the Actress pieces the past together She arrives at the conclusion that Lizzie did commit the murders as a means to escape the claustrophobic life that her family—and society—imposed upon her.

Abigail Borden

She married Mr. Borden, a widower with two young girls, and she has never had a good relationship with Lizzie. She would rather not deal with her stepdaughter at all. When she is forced to confront Lizzie, she is harsh and critical, telling the girl that she must do what is expected of her (get married, move out, and have a family of her own) if she wants to progress in the world. Abigail is manipulative, jealous, and, like her brother, Harry, scheming. She sees Lizzie as a threat to the lifestyle that she wants for herself. Unlike her husband, who is stern with Lizzie because he is confounded by her, Abigail's animosity is rooted in dislike and jealousy.

Andrew Borden

Mr. Borden is the man of the house and therefore the one with power. He makes the decisions. Yet he is nagged by his wife and badgered by Lizzie, in their running feud over her future. He prefers not to deal with Lizzie if he can help it. He is pleasant to her if she is being good, but when he is exasperated with her, he can explode, as he does when he attacks her pigeons with the hatchet His confusion with his daughter's behavior leads him to avoid her when possible and brutalize her when he is cornered by her. While he is not a physical threat to Lizzie's survival, his deal with Harry will effectively terminate the small amount of freedom Lizzie enjoys. For this reason his death is rationalized by Lizzie (and the Actress playing her in the dream thesis portions) as necessary for her own survival.

Emma Borden

Emma is Lizzie's older sister. Since her mother's early death, Lizzie has essentially been raised by her sister. Emma is a kind and loving person, but she is also meek and non-confrontational. She refuses to face facts, preferring to let any problems work themselves out over time When Lizzie exhorts her sister to help her put a stop to Harry's

plans, Emma refuses and instead goes off to visit some friends at the beach. While she loves her younger sister, Emma does not understand Lizzie. Like the Actress, Emma also believes that her sister committed the murders. She, however, cannot grasp the circumstances that might explain why her sister would commit such a crime.

Miss Lizzie Borden

Lizzie is the play's central character, the axis around which the play events occur. Ten years after the murder of her parents, a crime for which she was accused and later acquitted, she lives with her sister Emma. In both the play's present and in the flashback sequences, Lizzie is a headstrong, slightly eccentric woman. She has very firm beliefs about living her life by her own rules. Contrary to the expectations placed on women in the late 1800s, Lizzie has no desire to marry and become a glorified domestic -servant to a man she does not love. She wishes to follow her own path and, like the pigeons she kept, soar above the confines of the earth.

In the play's present, ten years after the murders, Lizzie has evolved into something of a legend in her hometown. There are still whispers of her guilt, and her obvious sexual relationship with the Actress give further credence to the town gossip that she is an antisocial freak, an aberration of nature. True to her belief that people should be allowed to pursue their own interests regardless of what others think, there is a part of Lizzie that relishes her outlaw status. By living her life publicly without shame or apology, she is showing others like her that it is okay to be yourself

Pollock allows the audience to view the character of Lizzie from two unique perspectives in the play. The first is the actual Lizzie who entertains the Actress in her home during the play's present tune frame. The second Lizzie is presented in the flashback sequences In these scenes, Lizzie is portrayed by her friend the Actress, an outsider to the events that took place ten years prior.

Dr. Patrick

Patrick is Lizzie's closest ally. He frequently visits her, going on long walks during which the two discuss their escape fantasies. While he is sympathetic to Lizzie's hopes and dreams, he does not fully understand her or her need for personal freedom. He responds to Lizzie's flirtation and intellectual ponderings, but when she challenges him in a mental game about the value of life—and the possibility of taking life—he has no real answer. In the courtroom sequences, he also plays the part of the Defense, arguing for Lizzie's innocence.

Harry Wingate

Harry is Lizzie's step uncle and the catalyst for her decision to murder her parents. He arrives at the Borden home to convince Lizzie's father to sign away ownership of the family farm to his wife, Harry's sister. Harry will then run the farm as an auction site. The

deal that Harry and her father arrive at convinces Lizzie that she will be slowly eliminated from the family, her means of support cut off. Knowing that, once in control of the family's resources, her stepmother will force her out of the house and into a marriage that she does not want, Lizzie knows that she must act to preserve her life. Harry is little more than a two-dimensional conniver whose presence is more or less a wake up call to Lizzie.

Themes

Truth

The question is raised what is truth? The Actress asks, "Did you do it?" A question to which Lizzie does not - or cannot - respond. Emma asks her regularly, a litany each day. "Did you - did you - did you?" And Lizzie is again mute. Throughout the play there are more questions raised than answered. The audience would expect empirical evidence, and the play produces the Defense attorney who questions the suspect and her maid. But their authenticity, their authority are in question because the events are being recounted by Lizzie. By presenting the evidence of the case through the memory of the accused, there is no certainty that the events portrayed are real or are figments of Lizzie's imagination.

Although it is based on an actual event, Pollock goes beyond the historical facts to delve into the mind and motivation of her central character. While the end results are the same - Borden and his wife are dead and Lizzie has been acquitted of the crime - Pollock raises questions as to the actual path taken to reach those results. She forces the audience to question their own assumptions and conclusions about the truth of things, about why things may have happened as they did

Sacredness of Life

"Is all life precious'" Lizzie questions Dr. Patrick. She really isn't looking for an answer from him because she rejects immediately the affirmative response he offers. She cannot accept that the life of that "fat cow" (her stepmother) is precious, so she pursues the question further. She poses an ethical enigma to the Doctor If he could only save one of two people injured and dying from an accident, whom would he choose? Would it be the bad person or the one trying to be good?

Lizzie focuses her questioning in a way that leaves the Doctor uncomfortable. In the same way, the spectator may become uncomfortable because it is clear that Lizzie is rationalizing the murder of her parents to preserve a way of life for her and her sister. In Lizzie's mind murder becomes logical and acceptable. An analogy is made to puppies on the farm who must be done away with because they aren't quite right. This is presented to further rationalize Lizzie's assumption that bad elements must be removed so that regularity (in this case her personal freedom) can be maintained.

When Lizzie's pigeons are killed, it is clear something important in Lizzie has been violated. The birds' deaths are symbolic of the fate that awaits her and her sister if they allow Borden and his wife to go forward with their plans. She cannot stand by without any response. The puppy that is not quite right - who is a threat to normalcy - and is killed becomes the people who are obviously sick and must also be removed This

allows the audience to understand Lizzie's way of thinking and, in some way, understand her motives for violence.

Women's Roles

Lizzie's father wants her to consider Johnny MacLeod as a husband MacLeod is a neighbor who is a widower with three young children and is looking for a wife. With his daughter already in her thirties, Borden is worried that Lizzie will never go out on her own. The only solution for her is to marry. It's only natural, he tells her.

Lizzie resists, saying she won't be around when MacLeod comes to call. "He's looking for a housekeeper and it isn't going to be me," Lizzie says to her father. Her stepmother sees nothing wrong with such a domestic arrangement. That's essentially what happened with her. She came and married Lizzie's father, who had two young children, and cared for them. In exchange, she received a nice house to live in, food to eat, and companionship.

But this is not what Lizzie wants from life. She just can't fit into the mold society offers her She complains to her father, "You want me living life by the Farmer's Almanac; having everyone over for Christmas dinner; waiting up for my husband; and serving at socials." This is not a life with which Lizzie can ever become comfortable.

It's not her fault, Lizzie tells the Actress at another moment. Somehow she didn't get that magic formula that is stamped indelibly on the brain, the formula for being the socially-acceptable version of a woman. "Through some terrible oversight... I was born defective."

Lizzie even begs her father to let her go to work with him and learn how to keep books. He refuses. That's not a woman's place, he tells her. She responds that he can't make her do anything she doesn't want to do. Her stepmother urges her as well to consider MacLeod, reminding her that her father is taking care of her. Lizzie volunteers to leave but, with no means to earn a living that isn't a possibility. Her stepmother tells her, "You know you got nothing but what he gives you. And that's a fact of life. You got to deal with the facts. I did "

All that *Lizzie,* can see is that she is entitled to a third of what her father has .She thinks this only fair. But she has no right. Her stepmother says that her father is going to live a long time and indicates she won't be included in the will. "Only a fool would leave money to you."

So even though Lizzie is proud and defiant, she is without any real power. She is not supposed to be out walking and talking with married men, as she does with Dr. Patrick. She is without any money other than what is doled out to her. She has no right other than the birthright of her body. She can marry and have children. This is not a choice Lizzie could ever accept.

While contemporary women have many choices in deciding their life course, this was not the case in the late 1800s. Women were second-class citizens expected to fulfill specific - limited - roles in society. While Lizzie is spoiled, she is also prepared to work to preserve her independence. She offers to work in her father's office but that option is denied to her. Presented with the choice of conforming to a way of life she abhors (an arranged marriage with MacLeod) or living as little more than a servant (to her stepmother and step-uncle), Lizzie decides to actively alter her and her sister's fate.

There are many examples of Lizzie's desire to act and live independently - to stretch beyond the boundaries of traditional women's roles - in the play. This is illustrated by her open relationship with the Actress, a relationship that appears to be homosexual in nature. Such activity was scandalous in the nineteenth century, respectable women were not supposed to be overtly sexual - especially not with each other. While this is strong evidence of Lizzie's quest for independence, Pollock's most powerful statement lies in the murder itself: Lizzie is willing to kill to earn her personal freedom

Style

Dream Thesis

Pollock has labeled Lizzie's re-enactment of the 1892 murder ten years prior as the "dream thesis." The play avoids realism and defies logical time progression. There aren't clear entrances and exits. The actors weave in and out of the present and past. There are three real characters on stage, Lizzie, the Actress, and sister Emma. The others are pulled up from the memories of the 1892 event. This gives the scenes with Borden, his wife, Harry, and Dr. Patrick a hazy, hallucinatory quality; they are the ghosts of Lizzie's memory.

To make these sequences more surreal, the flashbacks are not played in a straightforward fashion. Events from the present, the trial, and the days leading up to the murder are jumbled together— representative of the randomness of dreams and memories. The ambiguity of the play increases when Lizzie proposes playing a game in which the Actress will play her. And so as the dream progresses, the audience is unable to keep a distance. There is always a question of what is real and what is not. As the two women assume their roles in the re-enactment, the boundaries between Lizzie and the Actress fade. And then it is unclear who is the real Lizzie.

This approach provides the opportunity to consider the fluidity of truth, or perhaps the idea that there are many sides to truth and therefore many truths The dream sequence is part of the structure that incorporates a play within a play, where action and conflict are happening on different levels.

By having the Actress re-live Lizzie's past, to perceive the events as Lizzie did, Pollock encourages the audience to do the same, to view Lizzie's life through the eyes of an outsider to the family. This technique effectively illuminates for the viewer the personal path that Lizzie took to the murders.

Documentary Theatre

The roots of documentary theatre go back to 1925 and the work of Erwin Piscator According to Robert C. Nunn in *Canadian Literature,* this approach "forgoes the traditional emphasis of dramatic theatre on the timelessness of the human condition in favour of an emphasis on the human situation unfolding in a specific historical context." It's an attempt to get at the truth that can be hidden by the existence of fact.

Documentary theatre is a way to look at how performers relate to the audience and how performance relates to reality. Techniques that are used include dreams, reflections, monologues, and flashbacks that are laced throughout the work. "These break into the action," said Peter Weiss, a German dramatist known for his connection with the Theatre of Cruelty As Weiss wrote in *Theatre Quarterly,* "causing uncertainty, sometimes creating a shock effect, and showing how an individual or a group are

affected by the events portrayed Laying bare the inner reality as opposed to external trappings."

Blood Relations successfully jars the audience away from their comfortable understanding of truth and raises questions that are not answered in the play, questions that are meant to play over in the viewer's mind after the drama has ended.

Symbolism

Blood Relations weaves m two important images: the hatchet and the pigeons Viewers are introduced to these images early in the play. The birds are brought up when the crusts of bread that Bridget has for them are seen and their importance to Lizzie is made known. The birds represent the part of Lizzie that can fly, that can be free. This is seen in her flirtatious talk with Dr. Patrick and her fantasies of stepping off to Boston with him Like the birds, however, which are caged, Lizzie also is tied down. And Lizzie also is fed the crusts. The birds' link to Lizzie is further illustrated when Borden kills them. Just as he literally cuts them to pieces, he figuratively "cuts" Lizzie off from the life she desires, shattering her dreams.

The hatchet is a sharp-edged implement that clarifies and separates. Harry wields it, as does Mr. Borden. This symbol of masculinity and control is usurped, however, when Lizzie takes the hatchet to both her stepmother and father. In addition to being the instrument of liberation from her oppressive parents, the hatchet gives Lizzie value and a place in the community. She is more than just an old spinster; she is the one who took the ax and killed her father and stepmother, a source of tremendous talk even ten years after it occurred. The hatchet is symbolic of Lizzie's ability to transcend the patriarchy that she felt enslaved her.

Historical Context

The 1970s were an important time for the women's movement. Although women received the right to vote in the 1920s, most of society's advantages still resided with men. The women's advocacy group the National Organization of Women (NOW) was formed in 1966 and a few years later the feminist movement was given an important media voice with the debut of *Ms.* magazine The women's movement had its highest profile in the years from 1972 to 1982, when an attempt to pass a constitutional amendment addressing the issue of equal rights for women was underway. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was passed by both houses of Congress. The only hurdle was the requirement that the amendment be ratified by three-quarters of the states in America. A strong opposition movement, fueled by irrational fears that women would lose special privileges and would have to go to war and share public washrooms with men, gathered steam. The opposition was successful and the ERA was defeated.

In the Supreme Court, however, a victory for women was won in 1973 m the historic *Roe vs. Wade* case. This legal precedent established the right of an American woman to have an abortion. Some power was left in the hands of the individual states, which could place some limitations on the procedure. It was, however, a victory for feminists and, in essence, gave women the right of control over their own bodies.

The success of the forces that opposed the ERA represented a growing movement of conservatism in the U.S. It was that movement that resulted in the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. He represented a broad base of Americans who had survived the massive changes in the 1960s and 1970s and believed that the government shouldn't be bothered with assuring the rights of all peoples. Reagan arrived on the political scene at a time when the economy was floundering and America's position of power in the world seemed threatened by numerous enemies. If government withdrew from certain areas of life, this conservative movement asserted, the economy would flourish and everyone would be better off.

Reagan's campaign had promised support for the family What became clear was this was not support for women's issues but rather an attempt to keep women m traditional domestic roles. This position turned a blind eye to certain sociological realities: namely that many more marriages were ending m divorce and that there was a significant increase in single-parent families. For many women's activists, the 1980s served as an era during which their dedication to independence was renewed.

Struggles for freedom were also occurring on the world front in 1980. A significant event in Poland foreshadowed the eventual breakdown of the communist dictatorship that controlled the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Shipyard workers in Poland went on strike to protest arise in meat prices. Their stand unified the majority of workers in the country who had grown uneasy with the way the government ran their lives. The spirit of protest spread to the general population of Poland. The slogan "Solidarity" was adopted to exemplify the working-class's unity. Ultimately the strikers' demands were met, including the release of jailed dissidents. This event gave Polish citizens a foothold m

controlling their rights. The strikers were eventually able to gain control of the government and their leader, Lech Walesa, became Poland's new president.

Also in 1980, former Beatle John Lennon was shot to death by a disturbed fan, Mark David Chapman, shocking the world and ending for good any fantasies that the Beatles, who had gone their separate ways m the early 1970s, would reunite. Lennon's death stirred a continuing debate about gun control that was given further strength when John Hinckley attempted to assassinate President Reagan a short time later.

Critical Overview

Pollock's early plays quite clearly were focused on making a comment about society, earning her the label of social playwright "With *Blood Relations* people who don't like social comment plays seem to think I've 'moved' considerably and I'm finally beginning to concentrate on character, that I've learned a few character traits and maybe they can expect some 'better' work from me," Pollock once said in an interview in *The Work' Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights.*

Although not well-known in the U.S., Pollock has an impressive reputation in her native Canada. Jerry Wasserman of the *University of Toronto Quarterly,* labels her one of the "two finest living [Canadian] playwrights." Richard Paul Knowles seemed in agreement when he wrote in *Atlantic Provinces Book Review* that "Sharon Pollock is one of only a handful of playwrights in Canada who have put together a solid and developing body of work over a number of active years in the theatre, and of that handful she is one of the best."

Some critics have been disappointed in what they perceive as a lack of clear feminist focus in *Blood Relations.* According to S. R. Gilbert, the play "does not adequately explore issues of women in Victorian (or modern) society"

Pollock commented on how male reviewers failed to see any connection with feminism in this work, with some seeing the play as a mystery play while others as perhaps a psychological study of a woman. "It's only women who see it making a statement about women today," the playwright noted.

Pollock's claim that *Blood Relations* does have a feminist message has been echoed by many women critics "In many ways the play epitomizes the strengths and originality of theatre about women imprisoned in a man-ordered universe," said Ann Saddlemyer in *Rough Justice. Essays on Crime in Literature,* "but at the same time ... it speaks beyond this framework to explore even more far-reaching concerns of time and spirit" The structure of the play has received a good deal of attention and credit is given to Pollock for her effective use of the dream thesis.

Paul Matthew St. Pierre, writing in *Canadian Writers since 1960,* praised Pollock for her ability to reach audiences in "imaginatively and strikingly unconventional manners." The critic lauded her for the use of the dream thesis m which the past is called up with the assistance of the Actress. St. Pierre claimed that this technique creates far more dramatic suspense than the actual physical action of the ax. "This technical accomplishment, more than anything else, is the source of the play's triumph."

The structure of *Blood Relations* allows for the ambiguity that is interwoven throughout the play. Nowhere does the play state in absolute terms that Lizzie is guilty (although the Actress's perception, playing Lizzie in the dream thesis, seems to indicate so). And the court acquits her. But then there's the Actress who arrives at the conclusion, after playing the role of Lizzie, that she is guilty.

A basic question that resounds throughout the play is "did she?" The play remains ambiguous and never really fully answers this. According to Saddlemyer, Pollock successfully re-frames that question by pointing the finger (and ultimately the hatchet) at the viewer and asking, in Lizzie's shoes, what would you do?

Mary Pat Mombourquette noted in the *International Encyclopedia of Theatre* that Pollock is not one to let the audience off the hook. Passivity is not allowed. "Instead she demands that the audience acknowledge that the act of judging makes them active participants in the theatrical event."

Pollock, in the interview in *The Work,* entertained the thought that there may be more to the story, and that she has another play to write that takes off where *Blood Relations* ends. That play, she staled, will examine what happens to the woman who is unable to kill her father or mother, or even herself. That play will be "about women and madness."

Pollock has been labeled a regional playwright, living and working on the western coast of Canada. This is a label she both accepts with pleasure, looking askance at New York and London for acceptance, and one that she resists. Diane Bessai, in her introduction to *Blood Relation and Other Plays,* thinks the label is limiting, stating that "few playwrights practicing the craft in Canada today have her range and technique."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Worthington is a playwright and educator. In this essay she examines the victimization experienced by Lizzie Borden in Pollock's play.

Long before she was arrested for the murder of her parents, Lizzie Borden was more than likely thought of as an eccentric personality around Fall River, Massachusetts Even within her family she had a reputation. Her father avoided bringing up uncomfortable topics with her. He seemed to be afraid of what she might say or do. Harry, her stepmother's brother, would creep around, trying to avoid her, claiming Lizzie loved animals but "what Miss Lizzie doesn't love is people." And her stepmother avoided her when she could, complaining of Lizzie to anyone who would listen; "The truth is she's spoilt rotten."

Yet in spite of this seeming display of power, Lizzie is essentially impotent. Her influence over people only extends to trivial matters. When it comes to exerting her will to attain something that is truly important to her, she is powerless Within the social structure of the late-nineteenth century, Lizzie is at the mercy of female stereotypes. This headstrong, peculiar young woman, who was accused of killing her parents with a hatchet, is in fact a victim of the conservative era in which she lived

Pollock's *Blood Relations* shows us a woman who is trapped in a body and an assumed role for which she is not suited. Confiding in her friend the Actress, Lizzie acknowledges that somehow she didn't get that special something that brands one as a socially-acceptable woman at birth. Lizzie puzzles over whether it was because her natural mother died at birth. Whatever the cause, she knows that she is different, she does not fit die mold.

Her isolation from social norms is highlighted when her father attempts to arrange a marriage between her and a local widower. She tells Borden that she tries to do what he expects of her, "but I don't want to get married. I wouldn't be a good mother."

It's only natural to be interested in a man, her father tells her, mistaking her talks with the married Dr. Patrick as some kind of love interest. But Lizzie's interaction with the doctor is removed from romance; she seeks his company because he is willing to listen to - and at times participate in - her ideas, hopes, and dreams. Unfortunately, Lizzie has no one else with whom she can relate (and, despite his willingness, Dr. Patrick is not the kindred soul she seeks). She feels isolated within her own family and ill-suited to fulfill the role expected of her. She is a victim of her body, put in a woman's body without having the "natural" inclinations of a woman. Ten years after the murder, Emma nags Lizzie about her relationship with the Actress, implying that they are lesbians. "People talk," Emma tells Lizzie, who, it is clear, cares very little what others think of her behavior (and may even relish her scandalous reputation as a murderous lesbian). The proper Emma, however, is horrified with her sister's action and finally bursts out, "It's ... disgraceful!" Lizzie Borden lives a life that others might consider enviable. Even her stepmother envies her, jealously complaining about the trip to Europe her father had

given her. And although she is well provided for, she *is* the victim of abuse. While Lizzie appreciates the material comforts her family provides her, what she really craves is acceptance for who she is and encouragement to live her life as she feels she must. Yet her family - and the community at large - are too entrenched in subscribing to "normal" and "acceptable" female behavior to ever allow such freedom. Instead, Lizzie's family is often frustrated with her stubborn eccentricity, and they are unsure of how to interact with her. Borden vacillates between avoiding and ignoring her, to favoring her with gifts, to outright brutality when she tries his patience excessively.

This is illustrated in a flashback when Lizzie overhears Harry's scheme to have the farm signed over to his sister, Lizzie's stepmother. Lizzie bursts in on the men, Harry slinks off, and she demands to see what her father has hastily stuffed in his pocket. "What are you doing with the farm?" she demands. He insists it's not any of her business, but she presses him and tries to grab the papers from his pocket. He slaps her. Harry returns with a hatchet that Borden grabs and announces that he's going to eliminate the problem of the birds. "No," Lizzie pleads These pigeons are more important to her than the humans who people the house. Borden realizes how vital the birds are to Lizzie. By destroying them he is consciously trying to wound her. It is possible that his intentions are to shock her into more acceptable behavior, but it is equally logical to assume that his act is one of pure malevolence. In any event, the birds' deaths have a profound affect on Lizzie. Not only did she love them as pets, the pigeons, and their capacity for flight, were a symbol of the freedom for which Lizzie yearned.

Borden's brutality is so stark and dramatic that we question the singularity of his act; this is not the first time that Lizzie's father has cruelly attacked her way of life. We understand, then, her attempts to please her father, her proclamations that she is trying to be good. Behind her tough guy act, Lizzie is a woman who has for years had to dodge the explosive, brutal anger of her father. She fears him and what he might do.

Borden forms the cornerstone of the dysfunctional family in the play. But in addition to the brutal, distant and controlling father, there is the conniving and bitter stepmother. She feels that Borden spoils his daughters - especially Lizzie. When she is ineffective at changing her husband's behavior, she schemes with her brother to gain control of the farm and gradually squeeze the girls out of Borden's financial support So it is Harry that reports to Borden that people in the town are talking about him and that it's bad for business. "If a man can't manage his own daughter, how the hell can he manage a business - that's what people say."

Mrs. Borden brings all her resentment to bear on Lizzie. She has suffered, marrying a man and having to mother his two children (and have none of her own). She feels that Lizzie presence is undermining her own happiness, spoiling what would otherwise be a good life.

Emma is brought into the triangle when her father asks if she has talked to Lizzie about entertaining MacLeod. Emma has, despite Mrs. Borden's claims of mothering the girls, essentially raised Lizzie herself and has been made to feel responsible for her. It's not a role she enjoys, but she continues to look after her younger sister. But she complains as

well. When pressed to influence her sister's thoughts on marriage, Emma indicates her unwillingness to get involved. "Then why don't you tell her?" she bursts out. "I'm always the one that has to go running to Lizzie telling her this and telling her that, and taking the abuse for it!"

Lizzie makes a valiant but unsuccessful attempt to solicit Emma's support in her opposition to Harry's scheme to take over the farm. Although it is highly unlikely that the two of them allied against their father would have had much impact, Lizzie still feels that she has to take a stand. Emma, however, chooses to sneak off to visit friends at the beach for a few days to avoid any confrontation. Lizzie feels betrayed and misunderstood, since the loss of the farm impacts Emma's future as much as it does hers.

Emma is less fretful of the future, trusting that things will somehow work themselves out. She prefers to avoid confronting her problems. As she tells Lizzie: "If I want to tell a little white lie to avoid an altercation in this house, I'll do so. Other people have been doing it for years." Lizzie pushes Emma away from her, recalling the experience of finding her birds dead and her father's callous attitude."He didn't care how much he hurt me and you don't care either Nobody cares." Unable to find comfort and support within her own family, Lizzie feels victimized and alienated.

But as she stated in *The Work,* Pollock sees Lizzie's problems as more than just her family."As soon as you start dealing with the politics of the family, it's not so easy to know who the bad guys are ... *Blood Relations* is a play in which the woman is in conflict, not with her father - she loves her father - but with the society around her" While it is clear that her family could offer her more in the way of support, it is also evident that their subscription to social mores prevents them from endorsing the kind of life *Lizzie,* wishes to lead. Lizzie is ultimately a victim of her times and her society.

Lizzie has ideas in her head of how she wants to live her life. What is clear is that she will never succumb to the pressure to marry even though it - and motherhood - were the only real roles for women at the end of the nineteenth century. When her father points out that marriage is a natural thing, she asks him if, because she does not want to marry, she is unnatural. It's a question to which he does not want to respond. If his daughter is, by biological definition, a woman and yet also not a *woman* by social definition, then the whole social order is in question. It is more than Borden can comprehend.

Lizzie tries to explain to her father what she wants."I want out of all this ... I hate this house I hate.. I want out. Try to understand how I feel.... Why can't I do something?... I could go into your office . I could... learn how to keep books?"

This question of course has no answer. Her father tells her that women do not work in offices. He begs her to think sensibly As the daughter of a wealthy respectable community member, he and society expect her to function as a responsible and appropriate woman. And living apart from her family, or working outside the home, does not fit into the narrow constraints of society's expectations

The double edged sword is this, even if she were allowed to strike out on her own, Lizzie has no real property rights. She can own property, and have her "own" life, only as connected to a male family member, whether father, husband, or brother. She demands as her right a third of the farm, but her stepmother makes it clear that she has no rights - neither society nor her family will give her any.

The only future she can envision is one in which her father has passed on, and she continues to live in this house with her intolerable stepmother and step uncle Harry. She foresees her sister obediently waiting on their stepmother while she, Lizzie, will just sit alone, isolated, in her room. This future is intolerable to her She strolls and chats with Dr. Patrick, the one person with whom she can engage m fantasy of life with a bit of freedom. And although she may chat about going off to Boston, she counters that with talk about death, even her own: "If I wanted to die - I could even do that, couldn't I?"

Dr Patrick is flustered and tries to ease her out of her depression by discussing a fantasy they have shared about going to Boston. But this doesn't deter Lizzie from considering death, either for herself or someone else, as a solution to her problems When she is with Dr. Patrick she allows herself the fantasy that she is free, that she could do this or that. But on this particular day, that fantasy is crushed when she has to confront again the brutal killing of her pigeons. She has reached the point where fantasy is no longer satisfying. She must take action in deciding her future.

What follows, or what may have followed, may seem like a premeditated and cold-blooded criminal act. The facts that are known for certain are these - both Borden and his wife were killed by blows from an ax. The defense proclaimed Lizzie innocent. The court believed Lizzie's story and found her not guilty Ten years later, however, the question still lingers. Her sister Emma and her lover, the Actress, badger her for the truth. Did she do it?

Lizzie doesn't answer. On the surface it might appear that Lizzie is a criminal. But the surface as Pollock shows it in *Blood Relations* is a blurred area. The story is recalled as a kind of waking dream. Lizzie's experiences from that past are recalled by an outsider to the events, the Actress It is unclear whether the story related is the truth or what the Actress assumes to be the truth. The facts of Lizzie's life offer a plausible motive for her to have committed the crime, but because she remains mute on the subject, the audience is left to ponder her actual involvement.

Lizzie was brutalized by her father, her family, and a society that insisted she act in a way that was inconsistent with her nature. There was no escape, or so it seemed to her. She was the victim, something we understand as the play ends and Emma again begs to know the truth. The Actress, arriving at her conclusion, says "Lizzie, you did." "I didn't," Lizzie responds. Pointing at the Actress and then the audience, she states, "You did."

The question at the center of *Blood Relations,* according to Ann Saddlemyer in *Rough Justice,* is "which is the greatest crime: imprisonment of the soul, or life at any price?" The evidence presented in Pollock's play seems to confirm Lizzie's acceptance of the

latter. Realizing that to continue living in her parents' house meant a slow death of her ideals and the imprisonment of her independence, Lizzie chose to take action. Born in an era unwilling to accept a woman as a unique individual and misunderstood by her family, she saw herself as a victim. To Lizzie it was her parents' life or her own. Her final gesture, an accusatory finger pointed at the audience, is a call for the viewer to look at their own prejudices and preconceptions of what is "normal," what is "acceptable." While modern society has made great strides in accepting behavior that was once considered odd or antisocial, there are still many people who are persecuted because society at large cannot understand them. In accusing the audience of the crime, Lizzie is saying that, by imposing strict roles for women, nineteenth century society was just as guilty of the Borden murders as the woman who picked up the ax.

Source: Etta Worthington, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

Stone-Blackburn discusses Pollock's play from a feminist perspective. She also explores how the play fits into the category of metadrama - works that, in the critic's words, "examine the conventions... of dramatic representation itself."

In her introduction to a new collection of feminist essays on contemporary women's theatre, Lynda Hart reminds us of Marilyn Frye's analogy between women and stagehands. In the foreground of our collective world view, Frye observes, is "Phallocratic Reality," constructed by men and presented as objective reality The analogue is dramatic realism, which depends on sustaining the onstage illusion of reality. In both cases, attention is not to stray to the background. Women's experience in the one instance and offstage reality in the other are kept in the dark, while men's experience and onstage action are illuminated. Feminism moves our focus of attention to the background, as does theatre that challenges the conventions of realism Hart speaks of "a shift in the last decade" of feminist criticism "towards rigorous exploration of the language of representation itself" *[Making a Spectacle,* University of Michigan Press, 1989] The dramatic analogue would be metadrama, those plays about drama and theatre that examine the conventions - the language - of dramatic representation itself.

Feminism and metadrama intersect in the role-playing of Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations.* The character of Lizzie Borden is created at the point of intersection. Her character is defined both by the social role-playing that was imposed on her by family and the rest of society in 1892 and by the Actress' 1902 performance as Lizzie, when she imaginatively creates Lizzie's part in the ax murders. The first kind of role-playing is a feminist concern; the second is metadramatic

The part of the play that recreates the events of 1892 presents the independent, strong-minded Lizzie in contrast with her mousy older sister Emma. Except that she is not married, Emma is what society, represented by the senior Bordens, expects of a woman. "Emma's a good girl," as her father says. Lizzie rebels against the role she is expected to play. She straggles against the role of the dutiful daughter, alternately pleading with and raging at her father. She is contemptuous of the expectation that she will pose as eligible and alluring when she has no wish to become a dutiful wife and mother. Her flirtation with the married Catholic doctor is carried on out of boredom and defiance, not because she is attracted to him, as her father assumes, but because she can amuse herself and annoy her family without running the risk of being pushed into marriage with him. Lizzie's hatred of dependence and her individuality cannot be accommodated in her society. Her father, whom she loves, approves of her only when she wears a mask that horrifies her, when she pretends things she doesn't feel, when she reflects her father's idea of femininity .The first act closes on a highly theatrical depiction of Mr. Borden's slaughter of Lizzie's birds. Act II opens on the subject of death, not directly Lizzie's reflections on her father's destruction of the birds she loved, but her memory of her father drowning a puppy during one of her childhood stays at the family

farm. The puppy was "different," Lizzie reflects - as she is "different" - and "different" things are killed The atmosphere of death is pervasive from this point on.

Mr. Borden's destruction of Lizzie's birds recalls Jean's destruction of Julie's bird in *Miss Julie.* Pollock keeps the outcome of Strindberg's play before us, as Lizzie considers the possibility of taking her own life. The trap tightens around Lizzie, as her prospects for further freedom are cut off by the transfer of her father's property to her stepmother. As death looms ever larger, the only options are Julie's - suicide - or murder. "I want to die, but something inside won't let me," Lizzie says. "Something inside says no." So the murders can be seen as an act of strength, an assertion of Lizzie's own value, of the repressed woman's right to life.

Lizzie's parents portray traditional modes of thought. Mrs. Borden, whom Lizzie despises, is caught in the same trap as Lizzie, but she accepts it as inevitable. Mr. Borden is driven frantic by his inability to make his daughter conform to the only role for women he understands. He is bewildered and frustrated by her refusal to accept what he is convinced is best for her Lizzie's murder of the senior Bordens can be taken as an attempt to destroy blind male authority and female acceptance of it.

In the part of *Blood Relations* that depicts events that take place in the Borden household in 1892, then, we are shown a woman who rebels against the social role expected of women; the role is so far from her sense of her true identity that she feels herself being destroyed by it; the role is a killer, and she reacts by becoming a murderer, enacting instead of suffering destruction. This fits Helene Keyssar's emphasis in *Feminist Theatre* on transformation rather than recognition as characteristic of feminist theatre. From the tune of Aristotle, Keyssar observes, the recognition scene has been central to drama, but feminist drama presents metamorphosis in place of serf-discovery. Lizzie Borden's transformation from repressed daughter to murderer, from victim of society to destroyer of paternal authority, is an instance of such transformation. The key development of the play is not a moment of self-recognition but rather Lizzie's decision to change, to seize power and strike out for freedom after a lifetime of powerlessness in which every possibility for freedom has been denied her.

Pollock's feminist exploration of social roles and their limitations is complex in a number of ways I do not propose to discuss in detail. Lizzie's Lesbian relationship with the Actress accounts for her rebellion against traditional courtship; her homosexuality is just one of the ways in which her individuality runs counter to the prescribed social role that stifles her. The contrast between Mrs. Borden, who is able to use the woman's role to her advantage, and her stepdaughters, who cannot, is instructive. And certainly it is noteworthy that it is the very strength of society's conviction that woman must be what popular belief dictates she is that acquits Lizzie in the murder trial. The Defense moves towards his concluding assertion of Lizzie's innocence with: "Gentlemen! If this gentlewoman is capable of such an. act - I say to you - look to your daughters - if this gentlewoman is capable of such an act, which of us can lie abed at night, hear a step upon the stairs, a rustle in the hall, a creak outside the door?..."

Blood Relations is a feminist play, but it goes beyond the feminist study of the restrictions of women's social roles and the feminist emphasis on the possibility for change. These ingredients were in the early version of the play called *My Name is Lisbeth,* performed at Douglas College in 1976, a version that was judged wanting by Pollock and by others. The play that earned the first Governor General's award for drama and many productions across Canada and beyond is more - not only a feminist study of social roles but a sophisticated metadramatic exploration of role playing. The University of Calgary's collection of Sharon Pollock's manuscripts shows how she worked to create and strengthen the metadramatic impact of her play. In *My Name is Lisbeth,* there is no Actress, no 1902 frame, just the depiction of the events of 1892 in the Borden household. Later, the Actress and the role-playing device are introduced. Still later, the Actress' role is strengthened to the point at which it dominates the play. Even after she published the script in 1981, Pollock extended its metadramatic suggestions further in a production she directed.

In *Blood Relations,* Lizzie's choice of murder in response to the threat of self-destruction is portrayed by the Actress in 1902; we do not see a "direct" presentation of the events or characters of 1892, but rather what Pollock calls "a dream thesis" - all the characters of 1892 are imaginary. Miss Lizzie (the script's designation for the 1902 character), who has been toed and acquitted, will not say whether or not she committed the murders The Actress comments on Miss Lizzie's awareness of the "fascination in the ambiguity. .. If you didn't I should be disappointed... and if you did I should be horrified " If she didn't, Miss Lizzie is nothing more than "a pretentious small-town spinster," and the Actress is doubtful whether that is better than being a murderer (21) Certainly the ambiguity was central to Pollock's conception, which is reminiscent of Pirandello's *Right You Are (If You Think So)* and *Henry IV.* In a holograph note on the back of the penultimate page of a nearly final version of *Blood Relations,* Pollock wrote, "The ambiguity of her art is what keeps the Lizzie Borden legend alive" Historically, the ambiguity is maintained by the fact that although Lizzie was acquitted, no one else was ever convicted of the murders. In the play, Miss Lizzie's relationship with the Actress apparently depends on the fascination of that ambiguity. Metadramatically, the central ambiguity of the play is the relationship between Miss Lizzie and the Actress - not the sexual relationship, but their identities and their interaction in creating the events of 1892.

The device of the Actress' creation, under Miss Lizzie's guidance, of the circumstances that lead up to the murders, and then a gradual move into her part in such a way that the enactment of the murders is her own creation, produces the desired ambiguity. It also extends the exploration of role-playing with a construct that is overtly metadramatic. Like feminism which rejects conventional social roles, metadrama subverts dramatic conventions by calling attention to them, spotlighting the assumptions about the relationship between drama and life that underlie most dramatic performance. We have traditionally thought in terms of difference: actors play roles on stage, while offstage they revert to their true selves. Drama is about life, even if a play inevitably presents a perception of life rather than an imitation of life, as Richard Hornby argues in *Drama, Metadrama and Perception.* Metadrama is about our means of perception, about how we organize our experiences to present them in dramatic form; "it occurs

whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself." *[Drama, Metadrama and Perception,* Buckrell University Press, 1986] Much feminist drama, including *Blood Relations,* is about socially dictated gender roles. But *Blood Relations* is also about how we perceive role-playing itself. There is considerable use in the play of dreams, game-playing, images, all of which point to perception, rather than action, as central to the play. Most evident of all in this complex of non-naturalistic devices is the central device of role-playing, which raises questions of identity and reminds us "that all human roles are relative, that identities are learned rather than innate."

In the early stages of the Actress' adoption of Lizzie's role, she is tentative, guided by Miss Lizzie in her role of the maid Bridget to understand the family relationships and the situation. Miss Lizzie/ Bridget subtly corrects her mistakes and leads her towards an understanding of her role. As the Actress gains confidence in her role, Miss Lizzie, as Bridget, fades into the background. The Actress is never assigned a name of her own. She blends into Lizzie, both on stage as they change roles and in Pollock's designations in the script, where she is first THE ACTRESS, then LIZZIE and sometimes ACTRESS/ LIZZIE. Even before the role-playing is undertaken, Miss Lizzie has a line which begins to blur the line drawn between the two: "You look like me, or how I think I look, or how I ought to look ... sometimes you think like me... do you feel that?" The Actress concurs- "Sometimes." The two can be seen to comprise one complete identity, each supplying something that is lacking in the other.

By Act II, the Actress is fully in control of her portrayal. Her Lizzie is now an independent creation, though we may not realize it as the drama unfolds. There are many reminders that Miss Lizzie and the Actress are role-playing in Act I, but there are fewer in Act II. The outlines of Lizzie's character are consistent with those developed under Miss Lizzie's guidance in Act I, but the Actress' performance of Lizzie's actions on the day of the murders is almost completely uninfluenced by Miss Lizzie/ Bridget, who is mostly absent from the stage during the buildup to the first murder. Bridget exits just after the beginning of Act II, reappears twice, briefly, instructing the Actress/Lizzie only once - "You mustn't cry" - before the Actress/Lizzie leads Mrs Borden upstairs to her death.

Later, Miss Lizzie/Bridget appears unobstrusively just before the Actress/Lizzie picks up the ax to murder her father as he sleeps. Under Pollock's direction, the blackout that occurs just as the ax hesitates at the apex of its path was accompanied by a chilling scream. Who screams? One thinks of Bridget, horrified by Lizzie's deed. But could it be that Lizzie is horrified by the Actress' depiction of her as murderer of the father she loved? (Of course it could have been pure theatricality - just a scream, to underscore the horror of the moment.)

Because the Actress' portrayal of Lizzie as an ax murderer is so vivid and so psychologically convincing, and because our absorption in the unfolding events of Act II is virtually undisturbed by reminders that this Lizzie is an actress' creation - despite the theatricality of the blackout at the moment before the "onstage" murder - an audience is very likely to accept the truth of events as they have been portrayed. However, the end of the play provokes second thoughts on both die truth of the events just witnessed and the characterization of Lizzie as feminist heroine.

The characterization of Lizzie as a strong and independent woman in 1892 in undercut by the realization that in the frame play ten years later, Miss Lizzie still lives in the same house (which she had earlier longed to escape) and she still lives with her conventional sister Emma. Her dream of social prominence in a corner house on the hill remains unrealized, as does her alternate wish to live by herself on the family farm. Emma's concern about what people will think still intrudes on Miss Lizzie's life. Miss Lizzie has formed a bond with the unconventional Actress, but she is still chained to the old values, represented by Emma. Quite realistically, she has been unable to free herself entirely from the social role she might have hoped to escape with the death of the older Bordens - her transformation is limited. She is independent enough to maintain a socially unacceptable liason with the Actress, but hardly more independent than she was ten years earlier in her flirtation with the married doctor. Lizzie occupies a middle ground between Emma and the Actress on the scale ranging from social constraint to freedom from social role-playing. It is the Actress, the *professional* role player, who is freely unconventional, uninhibited, strong. And, as the last line of the play (Miss Lizzie's "I didn't. You did") reminds us, it is the Actress who enacted the murders, who might be said to have created a Lizzie strong enough to commit them.

In the final scene, Lizzie rebuffs Emma's persistent questioning about whether she committed the murders. In a sequence which Pollock originally placed early m the play but which gained power when she moved it to the end, Lizzie turns the spotlight on Emma: "Did you never stop and think that if I did, then you were guilty too?... It was you brought me up.... Did you ever stop and think that I was like a puppet, your puppet... me saying all the things you felt like saying, me doing all the things you felt like doing, me spewing forth, me hitting out...." This speech suggests a parallel between the Actress' creation of Lizzie and Emma's creation of Lizzie, an assertion of psychological reality in which the differences between life and art fade into insignificance. And the implication that Lizzie is what Emma created is no more true or false than that she is what the Actress created The Actress projects herself into a situation described by Lizzie and creates a Lizzie who murders her parents Emma, Lizzie claims, created Lizzie to respond to a situation as Emma never dared to herself - as the Actress would respond. The good girl needs the feminist, which is why Emma stays with Lizzie, even though she has good reason to fear her. One might say that Emma deliberately absented herself from the home on the day of the murders, to give Lizzie more opportunity to act A feminist reading would see how all three women share complicity in the murder - and the stage direction has the Actress looking at the audience when Lizzie concludes the play with "You did," which suggests an extension of complicity to the audience as well.

However, Lizzie is not necessarily either Emma's creation or the Actress'. She is ultimately an unknown. As Lizzie claims in trying to explain to her father that she cannot live simply as the reflection of what others want to see, "If no one looks in the mirror, I'm not even there, I don't exist!" Both Emma and the Actress as creators constitute a defense for Miss Lizzie, barriers to any claim she might make to autonomy, to self-definition - or to responsibility. But this recognition, interesting as it may be to us intellectually, carries relatively little dramatic impact. Dramatically, the truth is that "Lizzie" is a murderer. The murders are psychologically convincing, theatrically vivid. They are not realistically presented - the "onstage" murder is highly stylized, in fact, not

actually depicted at all. But the drama is more powerfully convincing than the theoretical possibility of a different reality. The drama satisfies, leaving an audience incurious about the reality, despite the invitation in the play's conclusion to dismiss the staged events as just an imaginative construct of the Actress'. Lizzie's life remains an enigma, but the Actress' dramatic portrayal is vivid and arresting. The Actress outshines her subject, and the drama eclipses whatever the reality might have been. The art is more real than life.

Source: Susan Stone-Blackburn, "Feminism and Metadrama Role-Playing in *Blood Relations"* in *Canadian Drama,* Volume 15, no 2, 1989, pp 169-78.

Critical Essay #3

Simon reviews Pollock's play, finding the work well-crafted and thought-provoking yet a less than diverting evening of theatre.

Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* is ... quite routinely boring. Lizzie Borden may not be the most original subject for the stage (Elsie Borden might have been more interesting), but a woman who, as Miss Pollock plainly suggests, could ax her father and stepmother to death in 1893, and even in those pre-Alan Dershovitz days, get herself acquitted, is not likely, you would think, to yield an infinitely talky, monotonous, and in most ways unsurprising play. It is this most successful Canadian playwright's notion, however, that Lizzie was a lesbian feminist as well as a free and cultured spirit stifling in the burg of Fall River. When her father kept signing over more and more of her rightful inheritance to his crude wife and her cruder brother, and would not listen to reason, what else was Lizzie to do?

The play begins m 1903, showing us Lizzie and "the Actress" (presumably based on Nance O'Neil) together *chez* Lizzie, in the most discreetly conveyed flagrante delicto This line is not pursued; instead, the two women act out a highly sanitized version of what happened back then, with the Actress playing Lizzie, Lizzie playing the Irish maid, the parents and an uncle playing themselves, and one other actor playing both Lizzie's married swain and her defense attorney An awkward conceit, especially as some character is always skulking or lowering around the periphery, while the story lurches this way and that, and the revelations come thin and slow.

The language is genteel and civilized enough, though now and then somewhat anachronistic ("hooligan" appears several years too early, and I doubt if in that time and place anyone would "soak up the ambience"). But the serious prolepsis is in the characterization: "To have murdered one's parents or to be a pretentious small-town spinster—which is worse?" asks one or another of the Lizzies. The author's accusing finger, I'm afraid, points to the latter. I felt uncomfortably throughout that I was supposed to view the case as justifiable homicide. Under David Kerry Heefner's routine direction, and in a handsome production with a particularly apt set by Ron Placzek, all the actors are adequate, and both Lizzies, the mysterious Jennifer Steinberg and the extremely subtle Marti Maraden, outstanding.

Source: John Simon, "Stages of Boredom" in *New York,* Volume 16, no. 9, February 28, 1983 , p 78

Topics for Further Study

Research the O.J. Simpson murder trial. How was that case similar to the Lizzie Borden case? How was it different?

Investigate the facts of the actual Lizzie Borden murder case. How consistent are the facts with the way the material is presented in the play? What do you think Pollock was trying to communicate?

Look up the concept of documentary theatre. Come up with a list of essential elements for this approach. How well does *Blood Relations* fulfill these requirements?

Research recent crime cases in which women were acquitted for violent crimes that they most obviously had committed. What are the similarities between these cases and the Lizzie Borden case that is presented in *Blood Relations?*

Investigate the history of women's rights in the U.S. Make a timeline of the major events. If Lizzie Borden had been living today, how might her situation have been different?

Compare and Contrast

1892: Lizzie Borden is arrested for the brutal murder of her father and stepmother, a murder which left the community aghast. Later an all-male jury acquits Lizzie of the murders

Today: Sports hero O. J. Simpson is accused of the brutal slaying of his estranged wife Nicole Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman. Media coverage of the trial is enormous, and the proceedings are dubbed "The Trial of the Century." Despite a preponderance of evidence implicating Simpson, he is acquitted. He is later found responsible for Nicole and Ron's deaths in a civil case, which establishes his liability in terms of money owed to Goldman's family. Despite the civil trial results, many consider him a murderer who escaped justice through the deceit and trickery of his skilled defense attorney, Johnny Cochran.

1890s: A rash of mergers and buyouts result in the formation of trusts, which are designed to reduce competition. This results in major increase of wealth for a few individuals, while the real wages of workers increase so slightly that they remained on the verge of financial ruin

Today: Microsoft, a multi-billion dollar computer software company, has successfully eliminated or reduced most of its competition, making chairman Bill Gates one of the wealthiest men in the world. Microsoft is under investigation for charges that it has violated antitrust laws created to prevent market monopolies.

1976: The first Michigan Woman's (the intentional misspelling removes the word "man" from the gender tide) Festival convenes, bringing women together from all over the country. The event attracts mostly gay women and makes the lesbian community quite visible.

1980: The beginnings of the AIDS epidemic calls attention to political concerns of the gay and lesbian communities.

Today: Ellen Morgan, the main character in the popular sitcom *Ellen,* comes out as a lesbian, as does the actress playing her, Ellen DeGeneres. Although there is significant protest from conservative religious movements, the show continues on prime time television. Gays continue to fight for equal rights and for the right to marry same sex partners.

What Do I Read Next?

Trifles is a play by Susan Glaspell, written in 1916, with some interesting parallels to Pollock's work. It's the story of a farm woman arrested for murdering her husband. When looking for clues to prove her guilt, investigators find a canary dead of a broken neck.

Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* is a look at an explosive family situation, also involving a farm and which relative will inherit the land. Like *Blood Relations,* the play involves a stepmother and a violent act that tears the family apart.

Another Sharon Pollock work, *Saucy Jack,* deals with a historical murder case. First produced in 1993, this play explores the story of Jack the Ripper.

The Angel of Darkness (1997) by Caleb Carr deals with a forensic psychologist tracking a murderous governess. The novel deals with common nineteenth century perceptions of female roles and the often sociopathic lengths to which a woman wishing to live independently resorted.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was written in 1879 and shocked the theatre world when its female protagonist, Nora, rejects the role that society expects of her and stakes out on her own.

Further Study

Langley, Winston E, and Vivian C Fox, Editors. *Women's Rights in the United States A Documentary History,* Greenwood Press, 1994

This is an overview of the progress of women's rights in this country The subject matter provides good background for understanding the circumstances of Pollock's female characters in *Blood Relations.*

Porter, Edwin H, *The Fall River Tragedy: A History of the Borden Murders,* King Philip Publishers, 1985

Written by one of the reporters who covered the Borden murder case, this is a reprint of the book issued after taal Reports say that all the books in the first pressing were bought up by Lizzie Borden

Steele, Apollonia, and Jean F. Tener *The Sharon Pollock Papers,* Canadian Archival Inventory Series, 1989

An excellent overview of Pollock's work. This includes a critical essay on Pollock by Professor Denis Salter.

Zimmerman, Cynthia, Editor. *Playwriting Women Female Voices in English Canada,* 1994.

This works studies six Canadian Women playwrights, including Pollock, and issues of feminism in their plays

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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

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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.

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- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
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- 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.□
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- 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.
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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.
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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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