

Blue Surge Study Guide

Blue Surge by Rebecca Gilman

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Introduction

Rebecca Gilman's *Blue Surge*, first produced in 2001 (and published by Faber and Faber in the same year), was a bit shocking when it first opened to enthusiastic audiences at Chicago's Goodman Theatre. It is, after all, a play about prostitutes, and it utilizes full frontal male nudity in the first scene. However, audience interest in the play stemmed more from the fact that Gilman is a local Chicago playwright, and her plays are known for their cutting-edge social commentary. *Blue Surge* is no exception.

The overall theme of this play is the wide gap between the people of upper-class society, with their wealth and seemingly easy lives of opportunities, and the people of the lower, working classes, with their economic and educational limits (at least in Gilman's portrayal). This gap is dramatized through the interactions of a vice-squad policeman and his interest in two women. His live-in girlfriend comes from the privileged class. She is an art student and lives off a trust fund inherited from her grandfather. The young woman with whom the policeman would like to begin a new relationship is a massage-parlor prostitute, whose only ambition is to make enough money to retire by the time she is thirty.

The title *Blue Surge* reflects a mixture of sadness, poverty, desire, and misunderstanding, other motifs that run through the play. There is mention in the play of a piece by the jazz master Duke Ellington called "Blue Serge." The protagonist, Curt, hears the title and thinks it is "Blue Surge," because he finds the music rather dark and melancholic. When Curt tells his prostitute friend, Sandy, about this misunderstanding, relating that blue serge is really a type of material used to make men's suits, Sandy imagines that perhaps the songwriter felt sad because he could not afford a suit. Thus, Gilman uses the misunderstood title of the jazz piece to pinpoint one of the messages of the play, a play in which her characters have particular longings that are difficult for them to fulfill. As Gilman portrays it, the main hindrance for those who are left wanting in their desires is poverty, and the creators of that poverty are the rich.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1965

Rebecca Gilman was born in Trussville, Alabama, in 1965 and studied at Middlebury College in Vermont. Later, she returned to her home state and gained her undergraduate degree from Birmingham Southern College. Then she attended the University of Virginia, majoring in English, because she thought she might be interested in teaching. However, she soon discovered that her real passion was writing. After receiving her master's degree at Virginia, she fought hard and eventually made it into the prestigious writers' program at the University of Iowa, where she earned an MFA in playwriting.

Her writing began with a play she wrote when she was only eighteen years old, about a group of disgruntled employees in a doughnut shop who suffocate their boss in a vat of dough. Many of her early plays were never produced. To support her writing in those early years, Gilman took on various clerical positions, never believing that she could make a living at playwriting.

Gilman wrote several plays before her first successful play, *Spinning into Butter* (1999), which probes the nature of the racism that lurks behind the mask of liberalism worn by her characters. The play received a Joseph Jefferson Award for best new play and the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for new American plays. *Time* magazine included this play on its list of best new plays for 1999.

The Glory of Living (1996) was Gilman's next big hit, earning another Joseph Jefferson Award as well as the *Evening Standard* (London) award for most promising playwright and the British George Devine Award. Gilman was the first American ever to receive either of these honors. The play is based on a true incident in which a young bride becomes an accomplice in her husband's serial killing. *The Glory of Living*, which was first staged in 1996 in Chicago, gained more attention and acclaim in 1999 when it traveled to London. In 2002, it was named one of *Time* magazine's best plays and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Gilman's *Boy Gets Girl*, about a man who stalks a woman, was produced in 2001. Then came *Blue Surge*. It was followed by *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball*, which premiered in London in 2004. The play deals with a young female artist who must confront debilitating fears and eventually admits herself to psychiatric care. The young woman ends up feigning schizophrenia in an effort to convince her doctors that she is the famed baseball player Darryl Strawberry.

Gilman has been referred to as one of the most sought-after playwrights in the United States. Her plays have been called provocative and edgy. She is one of the few playwrights in America who do not shy away from taking on social issues in order to

make their audiences think. Gilman once said that at the beginning of her writing career, she was afraid of voicing her opinions through her works. With repeated success, however, that has all changed.



Plot Summary

Act 1

Scene 1 of the first act opens in a massage parlor located in a midsize city in the Midwest. Sandy, the masseuse, enters with Curt. Sandy tells Curt to get undressed and then leaves the room. Curt acts nervous while he takes off everything but his underpants. When Sandy returns, Curt tries to make conversation with her, but he is awkward at best. Curt is a policeman, and he thinks that Sandy has no idea of his occupation. He tries to persuade Sandy to admit that her main purpose is not to give massages but to have sex with her patrons. Through their conversation, Curt learns that Sandy actually has no training in massage therapy, but he cannot get her to say anything that he can use in a police case against her as a prostitute. Once Sandy begins to massage Curt's back, Curt decides he cannot go through with the sting operation. He insists on getting dressed. "I don't know what I'm doing," Sandy says, as she watches Curt. Curt responds: "It's okay. Neither do I."

A week has passed when scene 2 opens. The location is the same massage parlor, but the characters are new. Doug, who is Curt's police partner, walks into the room with Heather, another prostitute. When Heather asks Doug to strip, he does so without any signs of self-consciousness. In contrast to Curt, he takes everything off and stands on the stage stark naked. Doug proceeds to ask Heather various questions about sexual acts and about whether she will perform them. While Heather does not admit to anything, she does insinuate that she would be willing to do them. Doug then reaches for his badge and tells Heather she is under arrest. Heather cries out that he has entrapped her.

Scene 3 takes place in a room at the police station. Sandy has been taken to the police station but is not charged with a crime. She is merely warned that the police suspect her of prostitution. Curt is telling Sandy that she is free to go. He warns her, though, that the next time she might not be so lucky. Before Sandy leaves, Curt asks her if she knew that he was a cop when he visited the massage parlor. Sandy admits that she did. When Curt asks how, Sandy says it was because he refused to take off his underpants.

Doug enters the room and is angry because his case has fallen through. Heather's accusation that Doug entrapped her has been upheld. Once Sandy is excused, Doug and Curt discuss how they fouled up the bust. Curt points out Doug's mistakes, and Doug emphasizes Curt's lack of experience. Then Doug talks about his sexual fascination with Heather.

In scene 4, Curt's girlfriend, Beth, is introduced. Curt and Beth are having an edgy conversation. Neither seems pleased with the other. Beth makes fun of Curt's partner, Doug. Then she demeans a restaurant that Curt mentions. Curt calls her on both points. When Curt tries to explain what he has gone through that day, Beth sticks up for the prostitutes and says the police should leave them alone. Curt counters by telling Beth



that she does not know the first thing about the hazards of prostitution. When Curt offers further details about his day, Beth becomes jealous that Curt was somewhat intimate with another woman and that he seems to have been drawn to one woman in particular.

As Beth is about to leave Curt's apartment, she suggests that he find a new job. Curt mentions the limited possibilities that are open to him, since he has only a high school education. He also throws out the fact that Beth lives off a trust fund. He does so to suggest that her life is easy, especially compared with his own life. Their arguing intensifies, until Beth admits that she is really angry that Curt chose a particular masseuse at the parlor. Curt denies that he had any interest in the woman, saying at the end of the scene: □I can't even remember what she looked like.□

Scene 5 takes place in a bar. Heather has lost her job at the massage parlor and is working as a bartender. Curt is listening to Heather complain, when Sandy walks in. Curt has asked Sandy to meet him there. Heather continues to talk about how Doug has cost her the massage parlor job. Sandy informs Heather that Curt knows all about the story because he, too, is a cop. Heather walks away in a huff.

Sandy and Curt make small talk. Curt tells Sandy that he wants to help her. Sandy tells him that she does not need any help. She likes what she does. The only part of her job that she does not like is turning over half the money she earns to the owner of the massage parlor. The single thing she would change about her life would be to own her own place. She could then continue as a prostitute but would not have to share the money she made with anyone else. Curt and Sandy then share personal information. They discover that their childhoods were somewhat similar. They were both raised poor. Sandy's mom has been married five times. Curt tells Sandy that his father was a grave robber. Curt encourages Sandy to get out of the prostitution business. He suggests that she take classes at a community college. Sandy believes that community colleges are only for losers. She explains how easy it is for her to earn a lot of money doing what she does. The scene ends with Curt asking whether Sandy will do him a favor, something that his girlfriend will not do. This is sexually suggestive, but the audience later finds out his favor has nothing to do with sex. He wants help memorizing the names of trees.

As scene 6 opens, Sandy and Curt are in Curt's apartment. Sandy is holding up plastic-encased leaves, which Curt is naming. Curt talks about his aspirations to one day work at a nature center. After flipping through several of the leaves, Sandy grows tired and is about to go. Before she does, she says that she would like to meet again. They set a date for the following Friday.

In scene 7, Curt and Doug are at the police station. Continuing demonstrations outside the massage parlor by citizens who want the place shut down have put pressure on Curt's supervisor. In retaliation, Curt has been demoted and transferred from the vice squad to the burglary unit, which he hates. Doug admits he has been seeing Heather, who has moved in with Sandy. Doug has talked with Sandy and insinuates to Curt that the discussion they had was about sex. When Doug suggests that he might pay Sandy to do him a sexual favor, Curt punches Doug in the mouth. Curt says that Doug is ruining his life; nevertheless, Curt apologizes for hitting Doug, and the scene ends.



In the next scene, Curt hears someone knocking on his door at home. When he answers, he finds Sandy standing there in her bare feet. She is crying. Sandy tells Curt that Heather is having a party at Sandy's apartment and that the people are getting carried away. Curt invites Sandy to stay at his place for the night. Sandy's stepfather has died, and this has made her feel miserable. Curt believes that he is part of the reason why Sandy is sad. He fears that he has put too much pressure on her to find another job and to do something more constructive with her life. Sandy does not agree with Curt, but she consents to spending the night.

Act 2

Scene 1 is set in Curt's apartment two days later. Sandy is wearing some of Curt's clothes. She seems to have remained at Curt's apartment, but no explanation is given as to why she has done so. Curt talks about Duke Ellington's "Blue Serge." Curt and Sandy agree that it is a sad song. Curt explains how he had misinterpreted the title of the piece, believing it was "Blue Surge," or a surge of sadness. This leads Sandy and Curt to discuss their sad memories of growing up. Curt tells a funny story, and as the two of them continue talking and laughing, Beth walks in on them.

Sandy wants to leave, but Curt does not want her to. Beth wants to know why Sandy is there. The conflicting needs of the three people produce much confusion. Sandy wants to get out of the way, to avoid causing a scene. Curt is torn between Beth and Sandy but leans toward wanting to make sure that Sandy is all right. After she leaves, Curt wants to go after her. He tells Beth that he wants to help Sandy, confessing that Sandy is the woman from the massage parlor. Beth calls Sandy a whore. When Beth threatens to leave, Curt does not stop her.

In scene 2, set in the bar in which Heather now works, Heather and Doug are planning a date. Curt enters and asks whether they have seen Sandy. No one has. Curt tells them that he had gone by Sandy's apartment looking for her. Instead, he found an eviction notice and a large padlock on her apartment door. Heather and Doug mention the wild party that had taken place in Sandy's apartment. They tell Curt that they, too, left Sandy's apartment while the party was still going on.

Sandy enters. She is angry because she has had to pay her landlord five hundred dollars for the damage done to the apartment. Sandy admits that she went back to the massage parlor to make the money. This angers Curt, who thought Sandy might give up prostitution. Curt tells her that he spent the whole day looking for her. The only place he did not go was the parlor, saying, "I did not once think you would be stupid enough to go back there!" Sandy leaves after Curt yells at her. In the meantime, Heather, realizing that she has to find a new place to live, asks Doug if she can move in with him.

Beth and Curt confront each other in scene 3. Curt tells Beth that he likes Sandy because he is able to talk to her. With Beth, he confesses, he only seems to argue. Curt explains that there is too much of a gap between the two of them, since Beth does not understand what it is to be poor. He tells Beth that the only reason she stays with him is



that she pities him. He goes on to say that she has agreed to marry him because she wants to shock her parents. This leads Curt to explain why he hates working in the burglary unit. He goes to rich people's huge homes and must make reports of stolen items that they do not even remember they own, because they have so many things. Curt says he sweats when he is in the presence of rich people, including Beth. Rich people make him feel as though he stinks. The difference in their social status makes Curt feel less than human around Beth. The scene ends with Beth insulting Sandy and Curt defending her—or at least explaining how he and Sandy are the same.

In scene 4, Doug and Curt are back in the police station, where Doug tells Curt that the police are going to bust the massage parlor. Curt wants to know whether Heather has heard from Sandy. Doug says the two women are not talking to each other. Then Doug describes how trashed Sandy's apartment was. When Doug mentions that the police raid on the massage parlor was planned for the end of the week, Curt realizes that it is the end of the week, and he disappears.

Curt has gone to the massage parlor in scene 5 to warn Sandy that there is about to be a raid and to give her an envelope filled with money. She is to take the money and never come back to the parlor again. Sandy refuses to accept the money; by the time Curt talks her into it, the cops have arrived. Sandy notices that the money has a paper band with an evidence number around it. Curt has stolen the money from the police department, and Sandy cannot believe it. Curt takes the money back from her. The scene ends with Sandy asking: "You wanted us to live together on stolen money. What sort of stupid fantasy is that?" Curt replies: "Mine, okay?"

In scene 6, Curt is still at the massage parlor, sitting in the same room, alone. Doug walks in and tells him that half of the police department is in the lobby. They discuss what Curt should do now that the police have arrived to find him there with stolen money. Doug tells Curt to get a good lawyer and says that none of the women has been arrested. The police, however, are seizing the massage parlor. Curt is despondent; he does not care what happens to him. Doug tries to turn Curt's perspective around. "It's your life," Doug tells Curt, "and it matters." Then Doug adds: "You got to believe that you deserve the best in this world. Do you believe that?" When Curt responds in the affirmative, Doug presses on, telling Curt that he really has to believe it in his heart.

Scene 7 takes place a year later at the bar. Doug and Heather are there together, and Heather is pregnant. Curt soon enters with a takeout dinner for the three of them. They fight over who is going to pay for the food. Sandy walks in, very smartly dressed. She has brought a present for the expected baby. Curt tells Sandy she is looking good, and Sandy returns the compliment, noticing Curt's uniform. Curt explains that he is working as a security guard. His lawyer cut a deal for him, but he had to resign from the police force. Sandy tells Curt that she is still a hooker, but now she is her own boss. She keeps all the money and is doing fairly well. Curt says his new job is boring, but it gives him time to attend classes. He has not been able to take the courses he wanted, but at least he is studying.



Sandy confesses that she stole one of Curt's plastic-encased leaves from his apartment and hung it in her house. Curt tells Sandy that he probably will never get a job at a nature center now, but he is touched that Sandy took one of the leaves. The play ends with Sandy and Curt sitting on the bar stools, holding hands. As they sit there, they □look toward something outside themselves that they can't quite see.□



Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Sandy is a massage therapist who works in a massage parlor in the Midwest. She is very young, just 19 years old, and clearly new at her profession. She is also very thin, flat-chested and not very attractive. Curt is one of Sandy's clients. He comes in for a massage, but hopes for more than a just a massage. As he takes off his shirt, pants, shoes and socks Sandy gets a form for him to sign. He leaves his underwear on and is reluctant to sign the paper, but she tells him it's just a waiver for pre-existing medical conditions. He signs it "Bill" and Sandy starts her massage. Curt doesn't like the oil she uses because it smells like Bengay.

As Sandy massages Curt he persistently asks if she does more than massages. He implies that he knows massage therapists perform other sexual favors and not just massages. Sandy starts to get irritated, to which Curt sits up and starts to dress himself so he can leave. She tells him he does not have to leave, but she will only do a massage for him. They joke a bit and Sandy shares a story with him about how her mother used to keep her shirt warm when Sandy visited the doctor's office. Her mother would sit on the shirt, so when Sandy put it on again it was warm.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The play begins by informing the reader of the setting: it is Autumn in the Midwest. The play starts in a well-lit massage parlor and the characters of Sandy and Curt are the first to enter the scene. Sandy is described as young, thin, flat-chested and "not a knockout at all."

Curt is clearly new at getting massages and Sandy is new at giving them. She reveals to Curt that she has been in the business for three months. Curt persists, despite her refusal, to have her perform more intimate duties aside from the massage. This leads to a confrontation of sorts and Curt gets up to leave and Sandy tells him to stay. They make nice in the end.



Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

The scene opens at the same massage parlor one week later. The masseuse is Heather and the customer is Doug. Heather has Doug sign the same waiver that Curt signed the previous week and she leaves the room while Doug undresses. He takes everything off, including his underwear. She returns and asks what type of massage he would like. Heather and Doug go around and around regarding what Doug's choice therapy will be. He tries to get her to recommend something and she avoids it until he asks what \$100 will buy him. She chimes in with, "\$100 will buy you some fun." He asks for sex and she says she will for \$200 and he then asks if she will have anal sex with him for \$300. In the end he takes out his wallet, shows her his badge and places her under arrest. She insists that he has no evidence against her to which he takes out a tape recorder. He taped the entire thing. She is furious, but has no leg to stand on.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Doug has obviously performed a bust of this nature before, as he came prepared with a tape recorder to get the entire conversation on tape. The reader of the play feels as if they've gone to the other end of the spectrum with this scene, having Heather agree to sex whereas in the previous scene Sandy did not agree to sex and was upset when asked to perform anything other than a massage.



Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

At the police station Sandy sits waiting for the outcome of the arrest at the massage parlor. Curt enters and tells her it's her lucky day, for she is not being charged. Curt is also an undercover policeman and he asks Sandy if she knew he was a cop. She tells him she knew because the fact that he left his underwear on for the massage gave it away.

Doug enters the room and Sandy recognizes him. She asks how his brother is doing and Doug realizes that they all went to school together. Sandy was in the band with his brother, Scott. Doug preaches to Sandy about how lucky she is to not have charges brought against her and tells her to find a real job. Doug also mentions another hooker he knew and how she ended up in a ditch with no clothes on. Sandy listens and agrees to find other means of employment. Doug then vents to his colleague about how his arrest will not stick with Heather. Apparently when she said \$100 would buy him some fun, she could have meant anything and thus the evidence was not incriminating. She is set free with no charges.

Doug is furious, but there's nothing he can do about it. Curt is upset with Doug, because they went over their plans for the "bust" several times and due to Doug's lack of questioning techniques they were unable to shut down the prostitution ring that was being run out of the massage parlor. Doug finishes the scene remembering the anal sex offer he'd given to Heather and asks Curt if he has ever had anal sex. Curt tries to change the subject, but Doug is fascinated by the whole prospect.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

The police station is introduced in this scene. Sandy thinks this is her lucky day, since she avoided arrest and was released from the grasp of the law. She's not entirely released before being given a lecture from the policeman named Doug. Curt feels he's being a little harsh, but Sandy listens nonetheless. Doug had experience with hookers in the past and doesn't want Sandy to end up like some he'd seen in the past.



Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

Curt is at home in his apartment with his girlfriend, Beth. He tells her how Doug blew the "bust" at the massage parlor. Beth wonders why the massage parlor is such a big deal where it is located and Curt explains that it's next to a restaurant that people take their families to. The people that eat there don't care for having to explain what's next to the restaurant. Curt wonders out loud to Beth how the girls at the massage parlor have sex with their clients. He explains that there is only one table that looks unstable and a regular high-back chair. Beth listens, but soon gets annoyed. He then goes on to explain how the whole encounter took place as he entered the massage parlor.

Beth gets irritated and a little jealous as he explains how he had to choose a girl to give him a massage. Beth says she needs to go and he asks her why she is not spending the night with him. She tells him she has to pack before her trip the next day and will be back on Sunday. He does, however, get her to confess that she's a little mad and irritated.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

This scene delves into what the actual scenario would be in a prostitution massage parlor. Curt goes as far as to wonder where the actual sex takes place. He wonders if it's in the chair or on the table. There are only those two choices. Beth's first response is that she doesn't know. She rebuts with her opinion that it should be legalized, so that the girls could have insurance and benefits. Curt tells her that would be no good, that he has seen the girls and they are not well off. A lot of them are on drugs and in bad shape. The realization hits Beth that Curt, her boyfriend, was in a situation she isn't very comfortable with. He was in a room full of girls and got to choose which one would be performing his massage, and whatever else would go on. She realizes at the end of the scene that she is being a little ridiculous and they leave things alone. She will return on Sunday.



Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

Heather gets a job at a local bar after being fired from the massage parlor. Curt is sitting at a bar stool in the same bar and Heather starts talking to him about being arrested, then fired. She has no idea that he was one of the cops on the arrest. Heather has had a few drinks and is getting intoxicated. She pours Curt a drink as well. Sandy comes in a few minutes later and Heather gets filled in on how he was there at her arrest. Heather is livid and walks to the other side of the bar.

Sandy and Curt talk and decide to play a game of pool. Sandy wants to know why Curt wanted to meet her at the bar and he tells her he just wants to help. He has a girlfriend and doesn't want a date, but wants to help Sandy get out of the prostitution business. Sandy says she enjoys what she does. She explains how the men that come to see her are overweight and ugly and they come really fast and therefore she doesn't put a lot of effort in, but gets paid quite well. Sandy goes on to tell him about her past. Her mother had been married four times and now lives with a lesbian lover. The lover brought four other people with her, so Sandy got fed up and moved out. Her relationship with her mother leaves a lot to be desired.

Curt shares with Sandy that his father was a grave robber. Once caught after a piece being spotted in a pawnshop, Curt's mother divorced him and moved with Curt. The scene ends with Sandy telling Curt that her desire is to keep all of the money herself instead of paying half to her employer. Curt asks Sandy for help with something his girlfriend won't do and the scene ends.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

Sandy tells Curt the story of her circumstance, a little about her history and how she came to be in the situation she was in. Curt wants to help her, although she is reluctant to his help. Sandy knows that she should probably finish her education or find a different line of work, but it suits her for the time being and she will not be swayed otherwise.

Although Curt doesn't push Sandy too hard, he clearly wants to help her and will not give up so easily.



Act 1, Scene 6

Act 1, Scene 6 Summary

It's later that evening and Sandy is in Curt's apartment. His big dream is to be a forest guide and Sandy helps him learn leaves by holding them up for him to guess what type they are. Each leaf has a number in the upper corner of the plastic bags that holds it. She matches the number to the key to see if Curt's guesses are right. Sandy asks why Curt's girlfriend doesn't like doing this for him and he tells her that his girlfriend gets the numbers backwards. She gets frustrated, so Curt doesn't ask for her help anymore. He tries to quiz himself, but it's too hard.

Sandy finds it quite interesting to quiz him and offers to do it again the following Friday. They almost kiss in this scene, but don't. Curt confesses that he's going to marry Beth and Sandy thinks that's nice.

Act 1, Scene 6 Analysis

Having found a way in which to make Sandy feel she is useful and needed, Curt feels as if he's accomplished something. His way of having her quiz him with his leaves is helpful to him and makes her feel useful. She has an important purpose in life besides being a prostitute and Curt wants her to see this. At least while she is with him she will be doing something other than selling her body and it enables him to have time to talk her out of it.



Act 1, Scene 7

Act 1, Scene 7 Summary

The scene is set in the police station. Curt leaves a meeting to find Doug asleep at one of the tables outside the conference room. Doug is surprised to hear that the meeting is over. Curt tells him that the Lieutenant has taken them off the massage parlor case and Curt is back on burglary duty, which does not make him happy. Curt further tells Doug that they are off the case because Doug blew it. The front page of the newspaper featured a photo and caption of picketers in front of the massage parlor.

Doug confesses that he is tired, because he has been dating Heather and has been frequenting her house in the evenings. Curt cannot believe his ears. Doug says that Heather has sex with him and he doesn't have to pay for it and that Sandy mentioned, not in so many words, that she has been seeing Curt. He also mentions that he's been intrigued by the anal sex offer since Heather mentioned it in the massage parlor, but she won't do it with him. Sandy, however, said she would. Doug doesn't want to cheat on Heather though, now that she's his girlfriend.

Hearing this infuriates Curt. He punches Doug in the nose and calls him a "shit." Doug starts to cry and says that Curt has a nice life. Curt hits Doug with the newspaper and Doug keeps saying he's sorry and that he feels as if Curt has a much better life than he does.

Act 1, Scene 7 Analysis

Curt is overwhelmed by everything Doug is telling him. He cannot fathom the fact that Doug is actually dating a girl he arrested a week ago. It's also hard for him to believe that his partner is actually contemplating having anal sex with his friend Sandy. There seems to be a certain amount of jealousy between Curt and Doug. There is also the realization that Curt must have some feelings for Sandy, otherwise he wouldn't become so defensive at the mention of Doug having sex with her.

Act 1, Scene 8

Act 1, Scene 8 Summary

The scene is set in Curt's apartment. It is late at night and Sandy is knocking on his back door. He lets her in. She has been crying and is not wearing a jacket or shoes. Curt gets her a towel to wipe her feet off and asks her what's the matter. She tells him that her apartment is filled with 50 people that Heather has invited over. Sandy had asked her not to bring any more people over and threatened to kick her out, yet Heather still brought people over. Since Sandy can't sleep, she comes to Curt for help.

She apologizes for not making it over on Friday, because her stepfather passed away. Curt says he feels as though he expected too much from Sandy. This makes her mad and she gets up to leave. He stops her and asks her to spend the night. She accepts and the scene ends with him turning the lights off.

Act 1, Scene 8 Analysis

Finding a way to escape the apartment filled with people was foremost in Sandy's mind as she knocks on Curt's back door. When Curt lets her in she feels relieved. The reader feels for Sandy and her plight and knows that both Sandy and Curt have feelings for each other that they are not sharing yet.



Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

The scene is set in Curt's apartment two days later. Sandy is dressed in Curt's sweatpants and is reading the paper. She's trying to find a job and doesn't want to work in the fast food industry. Beth comes home from her trip and opens the door to find Curt and Sandy sitting at the table together. She looks shocked. Curt introduces them and Beth asks what Sandy is doing there.

Curt and Sandy start arguing as to why this strange woman is in Curt's apartment and Sandy decides to leave. Curt adamantly asks her not to leave, but Sandy gets dressed anyway and leaves. Curt tells Beth that he met Sandy a few weeks prior and wanted to help her. Beth thinks Curt is cheating on her. Curt gets upset and decides to go after Sandy, to which Beth objects. She tells Curt that if he leaves she will not be there for him when he returns, but he leaves anyway.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Curt thought it important to go after Sandy, even though he barely knew her. The reader senses both Beth's outrage and Curt's tenderness toward Sandy. It is clearly an insecurity issue with Beth, for she is engaged to Curt. There is no trust there. When Curt leaves to go after Sandy, that is the breaking point for Beth.



Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

The scene is set in a bar. Heather and Doug are sitting at a table when Curt walks in looking for Sandy. Curt tells Heather and Doug that there is a padlock on the door of Sandy and Heather's apartment. He asks what happened, but Heather has no idea. She explains that her and Doug had gone to Doug's apartment to get some sleep, leaving everyone at her apartment still partying.

Curt tells them that he has been driving around for hours looking for Sandy. Heather believes Sandy is at work. Curt can't believe she would go back to work at the massage parlor. Curt asks if Heather knows where Sandy's mother lives, to which she says no. Sandy walks into the bar a few minutes later and announces that she went back to the massage parlor to work, because she needed \$500 to get back into her apartment. The landlord met her in the hallway and yelled at her for having so many people in her apartment. The apartment is trashed.

Curt is absolutely livid that Sandy went back to the massage parlor. He calls her a whore and a cunt and says that he left his girlfriend standing in his apartment to go look for Sandy and the whole time she was at the massage parlor. Sandy tries to defend herself saying that she went to her mother's house, but her mother wouldn't let her move in, so she had no choice but to try and earn \$500 as quickly as possible. She looks at Heather and tells her that she owes Sandy \$500 and lectures her on leaving all of those people there.

The scene ends with Curt yelling some more at Sandy and storming out of the bar. Sandy, in turn, yells at Heather and leaves the bar.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Curt is stunned to find out that Sandy has gone back to the massage parlor, where she promised not to return. Sandy is overwhelmed by the fact that her apartment is trashed and she needs \$500 just to get back into her own apartment to retrieve her belongings. She wants to escape her situation, but seems to fail on every attempt. The frustration levels run high in this scene and the reader wonders what will come of the relationship between Curt and Sandy.



Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

It is two hours later and Curt is sitting at his kitchen table drinking a beer with the lights out. Beth comes in and is startled to find him sitting in the dark. She confesses that she came to wait for him. Curt tells her that he thought she would never speak to him again. Beth asks him again about Sandy. He tells her nothing happened between Sandy and him. She's not sure whether or not to believe him.

Curt is apparently on a mission of self-destruction as he proceeds to elaborate on how he feels about Beth and her rich family. He believes the rich are twisted, because they will call the police when they are robbed of even the smallest, unimportant objects. Curt says that most of the time when he arrives at the scene they cannot even remember what they have been robbed of. He tells Beth that even she treats him as if he is less than her because she comes from a rich family. Beth tries to protest, but Curt keeps going on and on about how he showers numerous times per day and still doesn't feel clean enough for Beth.

In her outrage Beth asks Curt if that is why he likes Sandy and the scene ends with Curt stating that he is a lot like Sandy. "She's just like me," he says. "She fucks herself."

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

It is obvious that Curt is in self-destruct mode as he explains to Beth that he cannot stand her or her parents, as they are rich and make him feel less than human when he's around them. He comes from a poor family and Beth's is rich. Beth tries to rebut, but Curt continues talking about how he showers several times every day and still does not feel clean enough for her. She cannot believe how he feels. She says he does not come from a poor family, to which he replies that there are a lot of things he has not shared with her because of his embarrassment of his upbringing.

Beth listens as he continues telling how it angers him when he arrives at a rich person's house to fill out a burglary report, and they cannot even remember what has been stolen. It is usually something so insignificant that they cannot even remember what it is. He says that Sandy doesn't make him feel poor. He doesn't understand his feelings and does not feel that Beth is marrying him for the right reasons. He tells her that he thinks she doesn't really love him.



Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

The scene takes place in the police station. Curt walks in to find Doug reading the newspaper. They greet each other and Curt asks how things are going now that Heather is living with Doug. Doug says things are great but his only concern is that Heather might be faking the fact that she likes him. He references hookers and how they have to fake things a lot. He wonders if she's doing that to him. Doug also mentions to Curt that there will be a raid at the massage parlor later in the week. Curt brings up the fact that it is the end of the week. Curt asks if he's seen Sandy. Doug says Heather and Sandy had a fight, so they weren't talking. They left Sandy cleaning her apartment and haven't spoken since. Curt leaves asking Doug to cover for him at the meeting in a little while. Doug obliges and Curt leaves the police station.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

Curt's feelings for Sandy are apparent in this scene, for when he hears from Doug that there will be a raid at the massage parlor he immediately asks Doug to cover for him in the meeting. He wants to leave and find Sandy so that he can warn her of the raid. He leaves almost immediately after obtaining this information from Doug.



Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

Sandy has just finished a job at the massage parlor and Curt walks in to see her in her bra and panties. He tells her there will be a raid, hands her an envelope full of money and tells her to go out the back door. Sandy says they will be suspicious if she leaves early. Curt tells her to just leave and do it quickly. He tells her to stay away for a couple of months and then come back and he will take care of her. She opens the envelope of money and notices it is evidence from the police station. She gets upset at the fact that Curt stole money from the station.

He keeps telling her to leave when the buzzer goes off and they end up stuck together at the massage parlor, because the police have arrived.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

All this time Curt was only trying to help Sandy, yet he gets caught in the middle. He had hoped for her to have a smooth escape somehow. Curt learns very quickly that this does not matter. Under the current circumstances he was caught with her at the massage parlor and he is also caught with \$1,500 of evidence money that he stole from the department.

The reader feels remorse for him and Sandy, as they truly belong together but keep getting the short end of the staff.



Act 2, Scene 6

Act 2, Scene 6 Summary

It's an hour later at the massage parlor and Doug arrives to tell Curt that it was not a raid, but it ended up being a records confiscation. Curt can't believe it. Doug says that they heard everything he said to Sandy. They got it all on tape. Curt tells Doug that he'll turn himself in to the Sergeant. Doug tells him to call the union and get an attorney. Curt tries to tell him otherwise, but Doug insists in a stern voice that he must call the union and get an attorney. He tells Curt that his life is important and that he doesn't want to go to prison.

Act 2, Scene 6 Analysis

Curt is not realizing that he is in as much trouble as he is. Doug comes in and makes him realize that he will end up in jail unless he goes to the union and hires an attorney. This scene shows the true friendship between Curt and Doug. Doug goes on to tell Curt that he considers him a good buddy and he doesn't want to see him end up in jail.



Act 2, Scene 7

Act 2, Scene 7 Summary

It is one year later and Heather is pregnant, still working at the bar. Doug comes in out of the cold and tells her he will go get her something to eat. She tells Doug that Curt has already gone out to get her dinner. Curt comes back and Doug thanks him. Doug tries to pay him and Curt won't accept it. Heather finally takes \$10 out of the cash register and gives it to Curt. Curt orders a beer and puts the \$10 back on the bar.

Sandy walks in with a gift bag for Heather since she missed the baby shower. Everyone says hello to Sandy. Heather and Doug retreat to the back of the bar to leave Sandy and Curt alone, and the two catch up on life. Curt is now a security guard working days and nights. Sandy took on the clients of the massage parlor once it closed down, working as her own boss and keeping all of the profits. Curt is attending community college.

Sandy keeps saying, "That's great." Curt comments on how she used to say that to her cousin when she really didn't mean it. Sandy apologizes and they continue to talk. Curt starts to cry and says how nice it is to see her again. Sandy offers to hold his hand and stay for a while. The scene ends with Curt taking her hand.

Act 2, Scene 7 Analysis

Curt and Sandy's new lives have begun. Curt is a security guard and will finish college and Sandy is her own boss, which is something she has always wanted. It's not exactly as Curt had wanted, but it's a start. Heather and Doug have a child on the way and things are really looking up for them. Sandy welcomes the newness of Curt's situation and offers to console him in his time of need. The reader feels connected to all four characters in their new relationships together.



Characters

Beth

Beth is Curt's rich girlfriend. She is the least developed of the characters, representing not much more than the privileges of her class. She does not have to work, as all the other characters in the play do. She is attending art school. The other characters cannot afford to do this, or else they do not have those kinds of aspirations. It is not clear from what Beth says whether she truly loves Curt, though she does seem to want to try, at least a little. She just does not try very hard.

Beth's big scene occurs about halfway through the play. She arrives at Curt's apartment to try to straighten out their relationship. Although she argues her case, she appears resigned to the differences between them. She is not arrogant, but she does jump to conclusions about people, often casting people unlike her into stereotypes. But she is torn. At one point, for instance, she stands up for prostitutes, telling Curt that their profession should be legalized so that they can come together and demand benefits. However, after she suspects that Curt has fallen for a prostitute, Beth refers to Sandy as a whore. Beth leaves the play quietly. Her presence is barely missed.

Curt

Curt, a policeman, is the protagonist of the drama. It is around him that all the dialogue and action take place. The play opens with Curt inside a massage parlor as an undercover cop, trying to catch one of the masseuses in the act of soliciting sex. Because of his sensitivity or his sheer innocence and lack of experience, he fails. He is portrayed as being too honest to lie about his position. He cannot go through with entrapping the young woman. It later becomes apparent that part of the reason is that he is attracted to Sandy, the young prostitute.

At heart, Curt is a romantic. He wants to help people, and Sandy appears to need his help. At least, that is what Curt believes or wants to believe. Curt seems more motivated to sacrifice most of his life doing something that he does not like (being a policeman) and waiting until he retires to do what he really wants (working as a nature guide). In Sandy, he falls for a woman who is much younger than he is and who, in Curt's view, is the victim of poverty and lack of education. Curt has seen prostitutes who are hooked on drugs and who, in many circumstances, are treated like slaves by those who make money off prostitution.

Still, Curt's ethics are not fully defined. In the end, he steals evidence, in the form of money, from the police station to help Sandy find a better way of life. In some ways, he is trying to buy Sandy, much like other men try to buy her. Even though Curt may want Sandy for more than just sex, he uses money as a lure to get her. By the end of the play, Curt has changed, but not for the better. He has lost his girlfriend, Beth, and his



job, and he has forsaken his dreams. He has been humbled by his experiences, but it is not certain that this is an improvement in his life. His humbling is more like a complete dissolution.

Doug

Doug is Curt's partner on the police force. At times, he seems to be more experienced or more tuned in to life than Curt, although his mind is often distracted by sex. Doug offers comic relief through his fascination with sex. Doug falls for Heather, although, in the beginning, it seems that he wants her only for sex. However, as the play evolves, Doug appears to be developing true feelings for Heather. His sensitivity also extends to his partner. Doug is the only character in the play who encourages Curt to stop feeling sorry for himself and to respect all the good things he has in life. In the beginning, Doug acts like a bit of a bumbling fool, but by the end he acts stronger than Curt. He has taken on the responsibilities of fatherhood and seems to be a caring spouse.

Heather

Heather is something of a bimbo at the beginning of the play. She does not pick up on clues that Doug might be a cop when he comes to the massage parlor intent on arresting her. Neither does she recognize that Curt is a policeman when he comes to the bar where Heather now works. Heather, in a drunken stupor, takes advantage of a missing bar owner by serving free drinks from behind the bar. Later, a group of people follow her to Sandy's apartment. While those people are trashing Sandy's place, Heather leaves. She does not accept any responsibility. Instead, she becomes angry when Sandy suggests that she should help pay for the damages.

However, at the end of the play, Heather speaks of how she cannot button her coat because she has grown so big with her pregnancy. She does not offer much in terms of resolving any of the issues of the play, but rather she appears to feature in the play as a statement that prostitutes are real people too.

Sandy

Sandy is the prostitute whom Curt befriends and tries to help. Of all the characters, she seems to be the only one with her head on her shoulders, despite her profession. She does not know at the start of the play exactly what she wants. She has only a vague idea, and yet she is the one whose dream comes true. She is also a very strong character. She does not fall for Curt's weak promises of a better life when she could easily have done so. She enjoys being treated well by him. Even though she finds herself in fairly dire straits throughout the play, she stands up on her own two feet.

At one point in the play, Curt tells Beth that he and Sandy are alike, and on some level this is true. Sandy and Curt have had difficult childhoods. They both come from families who have no wealth, and they would like to rise above their station in life. But it is Sandy

who is able to do this, at least financially. She does it by not taking Curt's advice and instead following her own dream.



Objects/Places

Naughty But Nice Massage Parlor

This is the main scene for the play. It is a massage parlor that provides a cover for a prostitution ring. Sandy and Heather both work at the parlor and as masseuses and as prostitutes. Doug and Curt are the two police officers who originally try to entrap Sandy and Heather and make a bust to bring down the massage parlor.

The Local Police Station

This is where Curt and Doug come together several times throughout the play. They have meetings here and also discuss the different scenarios in which they have come to be and the unsuccessful bust at the massage parlor. Curt used to be in the burglary unit and after the unsuccessful bust at the massage parlor he was reassigned to the burglary unit. This is the place in which the news came to be.

Curt's Apartment

Curt's residence is a typical apartment of a bachelor, bare and largely unfurnished. A few scenes take place here with Sandy and Beth. Curt is doing the best that he can and his apartment is very modest. Sandy thinks it is a very nice place, but his fiancée, Beth, will not even spend the night there. It is a place where revelations are made and Curt's realizations of his relationship with Beth are encompassed.

The Neighborhood Bar

The bar is a place in which Heather gains employment after her release from the massage parlor. Four of the characters frequent the bar (Heather, Doug, Curt and Sandy). The bar is the first place in which Heather meets Curt and realizes that he is one of the cops that lead to her unemployment at the massage parlor. It is also the last scene of the play where all four meet up again after a year of being apart.



Themes

Working Class versus Leisure Class

Four of the five characters in Gilman's play come from the working class. These are the most developed characters and the ones who are more often present on stage.

Gilman's focus is on the working class, but she uses the character of Beth, Curt's girlfriend, to show contrast and to make her point about the differences between the two classes.

Beth does not have to work. She is going to school not to become a dental assistant or a data processor or take up some other practical vocation but rather to develop her creativity. She is in art school. To some people, who must struggle every day to earn minimum wage, painting might appear frivolous and a waste of time. Beth has the luxury of time, however. Her days are not spent in a meaningless job or in worrying about her next meal and how she will pay the rent. She is a shallow character, probably because Gilman did not want to portray the leisure class in a favorable light.

While Curt must work at a job that he does not like, Beth can pursue a profession in which she is fully engaged and through which she can expand her talents and nurture her soul. Beth has the potential to become an artist. She is inspired. She believes that everyone can and should follow her example. She pushes Curt to improve himself by seeking a better job. Curt, however, feels that being of the working class, he has few options. There is a ceiling over his head, and it is very low. He did not have the opportunity to go to a good college full time after graduating from high school. He had to find a job and provide for his mother.

Sandy also belongs to the working class, but she differs from Curt in many ways. She does not believe that education is her ticket out. She knows she can afford to attend only a community college, which she sees as not much more than a technical school, from which students emerge with minimal skills needed to perform boring jobs. She does not see community college as a stepping-stone to a bachelor's degree and a broader education. But she does have aspirations, unlike Curt, who has accepted his fate and goes through life in a sort of zombie-like sleepwalking state—not totally depressed but definitely not happy. Curt's only aspiration is to find something he might like to do after he retires.

Sandy and Beth are somewhat similar. They know what they want, and they go after it. They are independent thinkers. But while Beth uses her mind, Sandy uses her body. In society's terms Beth is legitimate, whereas Sandy must live on the outer edges of legitimacy. Through them, Gilman portrays another aspect of the differences between social classes.



Poverty

Curt wears his poverty as he wears his police badge. In some ways, his poverty gives him a weird sense of authority. He also has a poor concept of himself and does not give himself much credit for knowing anything, but he claims to know all about poverty. He knows what it is to be hungry and to struggle. He understands poverty and can relate to it. When he finds comfort in being with Sandy, it is not her personality or skills or even her appearance that attracts him. It is her poor background that puts Curt at ease. Through their similar childhood struggles Curt relates to Sandy in a way he could never relate to Beth.

Gilman seems to be saying that it is lack of money that keeps people down. Without money, the dreams of people are small. Poor people are permanently handicapped in life. They will never get ahead unless they do something that is illegal, such as prostituting themselves or stealing money. It is their poverty that leads them to break the law.

Excessive Materialism

In one long monologue, Curt tells Beth of his feelings about people who have a lot of money. He is angry that he must return to the burglary unit. He has worked in it before, and it makes him feel bad. He must go into people's houses and take reports about stolen property. He claims that often these people cannot even identify what has been stolen, because they have so many objects filling up their big houses. This excessive materialism makes him feel that he physically stinks. He sweats profusely around rich people, because they make him nervous. They make him feel worthless.

The excessive materialism reminds him of how little he had as a child and how little he still has. It makes him realize that his chances of ever catching up to the rich are nonexistent. He thinks that if everyone were poor, there would be no disparity, no jealousy, no belittlement. But when some people have so much—when their wealth in material objects is excessive—he feels that they have taken something from him. This could be one of the reasons why Curt has no second thoughts about stealing money from the police station. His attitude appears to imply that since he needs it to help someone else (as well as himself), it is his right to take it. It makes sense to him, at least while he is doing it.

Choices and Consequences

Gilman's play progresses through a series of choices and their consequences. At the beginning of the play, Beth chooses not to spend the night with Curt. This leaves him open to invite Sandy to stay at his apartment. When Beth returns to Curt's and finds Sandy there, Curt decides not to stay and explain everything to Beth but to go after Sandy instead. He has obviously chosen Sandy over Beth. Curt gives up the high-society woman he was going to marry but with whom he did not feel comfortable



because he would be marrying someone beyond his social class. Curt chooses to pursue Sandy.

Sandy, however, does not choose Curt. Sandy does not seem to need a man in her life, at least outside of her business. She also chooses not to go to school. She is comfortable in her life, except for having to work for someone. She wants to become more independent, and she leaves the massage parlor and takes a chance on setting up her own private business. She is successful, enjoys what she does, and is making a fairly good amount of money—which was most important to her.

Doug chooses to allow Heather to move in with him, and the couple is going to have a baby. There is very little dialogue about Heather and Doug, but the overall sense at the end of the play is that they are both happy with the outcome.

Beth disappears about halfway through the play, so the audience does not know how she fares with respect to the consequences of her choices. Curt, however, seems to be the least affected by his choices. He has lost the woman he was going to marry. He also lost Sandy, although it is unclear if he ever had her. And he lost his job and all hope of the one dream that he had—becoming a volunteer at a nature center upon his retirement. All of the consequences Curt experiences, however, do not seem to have changed him very much. He did not seem happy at the beginning of the play, before he made all these choices, and he does not seem happy at the end. Curt seems to be neither happy nor sad. He remains somewhat numb throughout the play.

Poor Versus Rich

The central focus of this play is that people are not always as they seem. People are from different backgrounds and upbringings and they do not always see eye to eye on things. No one knows what someone's life is like until they live it themselves. Since that obviously cannot happen, the encounters that two policemen find are what brings them to see the lives of two women in a different perspective.

Demons of the past

All five characters have demons from their past to deal with and they deal with them in their own ways. Curt tries to help Sandy deal with her problems, when in reality he has his own vices and problems to worry about. Doug wants to get to know Heather and learn about her demons. Their encounter leads them to be with one another and they become a happy couple. They move on to another life together and have a child on the way, whereas Curt and Sandy do not have the same luck in conquering their demons. They come to two different outcomes. They do not end up together and the two lead their own lives.

Opposites attract



Doug and Heather are a prime example of this scenario, as Doug is a policeman with a career ahead of him, and Heather is merely a young woman working as a prostitute. Doug is making a bust at the massage parlor and meets Heather for the first time. Heather is the hooker in disguise that he tries to arrest (unbeknownst to her). Although they are from two completely different backgrounds, Doug is very attracted to Heather and finds himself talking to Curt about her continuously. As time goes by they end up, not only dating, but living together and are very happy.

Style

Opposition

To add tension to her play, Gilman uses oppositions. There are oppositional characters and themes. For example, there is the aloof and somewhat sophisticated Beth, who works with children to expand their artistic talents. She is well educated, well off financially, and, during the play, quite sexless. In opposition to her is Heather, who appears a bit light in the brain department, and who is represented as sex-personified through her profession, her conversation, and her ultimate pregnancy. While Heather teeters on the verge of disaster, seemingly following a path of least resistance, Beth has a definite plan of what she wants to do and how she intends to accomplish it.

Other obvious oppositions include poverty versus wealth; the difference between money inherited, money earned, and money stolen; cop versus prostitute; and legitimate women versus illegitimate women. Opposition not only creates tension, it also provides a means for Gilman to point out some of her beliefs or some of the ideas that she wants her audience to go home and think about. By showing opposites, Gilman gives her audience a choice: she seems to be asking her audience to choose which side they are on.

Conflict: Internal and External

Conflict is the meat of most plays. It can provide action and provoke thought. Conflict can be both external and internal; Gilman's play has both.

The external conflict in the play exists in the disagreements between Curt and Beth, Curt and Doug, Curt and Sandy, and Sandy and Heather. Personal values, dreams, and intentions clash. Implied external conflict in Gilman's play is represented by the demonstrators outside the massage parlor as well as the conflict between the police department and the prostitutes. Gilman's characters are challenged by the conflict that the playwright creates for them. They must find some way to come to grips with it, and that need drives much of the action of the play.

There is also internal conflict, which heightens the effect of the external conflicts. The audience does not see the internal conflict but can infer it from the dialogue of the characters and the characters' emotional outbursts. Such internal conflict is exemplified by Curt, who is constantly questioning whether he is good enough. His conflict derives from not fitting into his society. He feels poor and criticizes the rich, but inside he wants to be part of the rich class. He has a wealthy girlfriend, for instance, but this is not enough. He is not happy with her. He criticizes the wealthy, who he claims are hoarders and extravagant materialists; still, something about them gets under his skin. The rich would not bother him if he did not have any inclinations to be like them.



Gilman's audiences stay tuned in to the drama because they want to see how these internal conflicts will play out. Audiences are interested for another reason as well. They can relate to internal conflict. Who does not experience it? Internal conflict makes Gilman's character real.

Offstage Characters

There are many offstage characters in the play, characters who are never seen. There are the other policemen and policewomen at the station. The police force is also present in the lobby at the massage parlor toward the end of the play. Then, too, there are the people who hold the party at Sandy's apartment and trash her place. And there is Sandy's landlord, who fines her. Sandy's mother and her lover play an absent role in this play, as do Sandy's stepfather and Curt's grave-robbing father. There are the groups who protest in front of the massage parlor and Curt's boss, who demotes him.

These invisible characters add to the depth and breadth of the play. Although the play has only five characters, the audience perceives the cast to be much larger. The police station and the massage parlor, for instance, are full of people, even though the audience sees only two at a time. The offstage characters provide the audience with a sense of the world around the play, rather than a world focused only on the five onstage characters. They are not isolated and unaffected by society, and this is one of Gilman's points.

Passage of Time

The first act of Gilman's play takes place over the course of two weeks. It begins with the meeting of Curt and Sandy and ends with Sandy's spending the night at Curt's place. By having everything happen so quickly, Gilman focuses her audience's attention on a brief encounter between two people—one that will eventually change their lives. They meet, become friends, share thoughts, and try to work out a relationship but fail.

Most of the action of the second act is contained in one day. In that day, a climax is reached. Until the second act, there was still a slight hope that Sandy and Curt might work things out between them, but Curt blows it. He tries to do the right thing, but he does it the wrong way. The tables are turned, and Sandy, who is supposed to represent the illegitimate one, exposes Curt's illegitimacy. This happens very quickly; after this point, there is not much more to say, so Gilman makes the biggest leap in time in the whole play. In scene 7 of the second act, a year has passed. This is the epilogue of the play, summing up what has happened to the characters and bringing the audience to the place where the consequences of the characters' individual actions have brought them.



Point of View

This story is told from Curt's point of view. He speaks to the others throughout the play and comments on how they make him feel in each scenario. One knows that he is quite taken by Sandy, yet cannot seem to help her in the way he would like to. He finds the quest to help her interesting and he pursues it relentlessly. He thinks that in helping her he might actually help himself. Curt's point of view in regards to his fiancy is that he thinks she's too good for him. He actually has very low self esteem and that causes the end of their relationship. Through his eyes and in his point of view he can't ever seem to do things that live up to her standards. This is only Curt's point of view, as Beth feels very differently.

Curt's opinion of his friend Doug is that of a somewhat solid friendship. Although Doug ruins the bust in the beginning of the play and Curt is upset by it, it does not end their friendship. Curt continues to confide in Doug and in turn, Doug confides in Curt. As the story unfolds, it remains seen through the eyes of Curt and his relationships with each other character.

This play is fiction, a work in which one man's conception of life and the meaning of fulfillment is challenged by events that occur beyond his control.

Setting

The play opens in the Naughty But Nice massage parlor in the 21st century and fluctuates between four places: the massage parlor, the bar, the police station and Curt's apartment. The massage parlor is where the story starts. This is the setting in which Sandy and Heather work as prostitutes under the masking of the massage parlor. This scene is where four of the main characters meet for the first time. As the officers, Curt and Doug, who are merely doing their duty, meet two other characters, Sandy and Heather, the story is set into motion.

The bar is one of the settings that is frequented throughout the play. The characters meet there for drinks and talk about things. Heather actually ends up working at the bar after she loses her job at the massage parlor.

The police station is where Curt and Doug spend their working hours and occasionally there are meetings they must attend. This is the setting in which Curt and Doug share inner feelings pertaining to the women in their lives and their goals and dreams.

Curt's apartment is the setting where he finds solitude, but also gets to know Sandy better. This is also the setting in which the viewer of the play gets a glimpse into the lives of Beth, Curt and Sandy.

The setting shifts between the places but the characters remain the same. Sometimes there are only one or two characters per setting, and other times there are more of them. There are only five characters in the play and each plays an important role. The



story is set with four of the characters not knowing anything about one another and ends with them having close relationships with each other.

Language and Meaning

The language is full of street slang and vulgarity. The characters speak to one another very candidly and although they originally don't know one another, the tone used is more straight forward than friendly. The play is written in the 21st century and there is distinct knowledge the author portrays when writing about the policemen and the prostitutes. The language is appropriate for the characters and the timeframe in which the events occur. This play is told in a plain, clear way. The language is simple and easy to understand, but has vulgarities throughout which may not be appropriate for every age group.

The play is filled with memories of the character's pasts and events that happened which affected their lives in one way or another. There are also references to sex and the characters frequently call each other harsh names. It is an adult play, not made for young children. The language is straight forward and easy to understand.

Structure

The play is told in two acts. The progress of the play is linear, starting with the attempted bust at the massage parlor and ending in the bar one year later.

Historical Context

Social Realism

Gilman's plays are often said to reflect the characteristics of social realism. Her concentration on certain aspects of society that are not always easily discussed in general conversation places her dramas on the edge of American theater, away from mainstream productions, such as Broadway musicals. She did not, however, create this form. Social realism has been around since the nineteenth century, a time when artists and writers turned to a more realistic approach, in defiance of the romantic movement that was, at that time, predominant. A definition commonly used for social realism refers to the influence of everyday conditions on a creative work. Whether it is a painting or a play, the artist or writer attempts to present the world as it is, not as some people might wish it be. Social realists place an emphasis on the working classes and the poor, and the work is often critical of the environment that has produced these less-than-satisfactory conditions.

Works of social realism became prevalent in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s and early 1940s. These works depicted the awful conditions of poverty, the hardships of bad employment environments, and the cruelty of racial discrimination. This was when Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) was staged. This play (and novel of the same title) is about the oppression felt by a black man living in Chicago and his subsequent violent reactions. Another popular work, John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), focuses on the plight of a poor family struggling to make a living after having lost their home. No matter how hard they try, their lives keep getting worse. At this time, too, Diego Rivera, the famed Mexican muralist and avowed Communist, came to the United States and influenced the direction of American art with his realistic paintings dwelling on such themes as modern industrialization and Mexican history and peoples.

By the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, American theater was turning more toward the difficult topics of the social realists, at least off Broadway and in small regional theaters. Plays that dealt with homosexuality, AIDS, sex, and racial issues not only were produced but also won awards. Productions that dealt with socially realistic themes included Moisés Kaufman's *Laramie Project* (2000), about the brutal murder of a young, homosexual college student; Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities* (1993), about race riots in New York City; Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* (1999), about incest; and Eve Ensler's Obie-winning hit, *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), about women's body parts.

Prostitution in Chicago

Massage parlors that doubled as sites for prostitution still existed in Chicago in 2005. Various websites on the Internet even featured reviews of these parlors. However, the



Chicago police department was trying hard to make prostitution, if not a thing of the past, at least a matter of embarrassment. In 2004, it was reported that the police department recorded more than three thousand arrests for prostitution. According to one newspaper article, Richard Daley, who was mayor of Chicago when Gilman's play was produced there, gave the city's police department permission to engage in website postings of its own. Pictures of women arrested for soliciting sex, as well as of the johns who patronized them, were made available for viewing on special pages. Their names and addresses were also provided in an attempt to embarrass these people into quitting. Apparently, traditional arrests, fines, and impoundments of vehicles just were not working.

Community Colleges

The first public community college in the United States, Joliet Junior College, in Joliet, Illinois, was founded in 1901. Like other two-year colleges that would follow, it focused on liberal arts education. That focus changed during the years of the Great Depression, when community colleges began offering job-training programs to help ease the problems of unemployment.

By the 1960s, there were more than four hundred community colleges in the United States. Students attended these schools for a variety of reasons. Some people used them as stepping-stones to entering four-year colleges. Others went to gain associate degrees in specific trades. As of 2005, there were more than fifteen hundred community colleges, which educated more than half of the nation's undergraduates, and more than one hundred million people had taken classes at community colleges since the Joliet school was established.



Critical Overview

Blue Surge premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago on July 9, 2001. Chris Jones, referring to this production and writing for *Variety*, calls Gilman's play "a racy, smart piece of gritty social realism that's alternately funny and politically provocative." Although Jones finds moments in the play that seem to be forced, a plot that appears at times to be contrived, and some language that might be "more suited to cable television" than to a small theater, he also says that "Gilman's writing is heartfelt and the narrative crackles along with plenty of surprises." Jones concludes his review by calling Gilman's work "a lively, flashy, gripping and typically smart piece of theater."

Joel Henning, a critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, also writes a mixed review for Gilman's play. There are moments that Henning finds exceedingly well done and others that he considers boring. At one end, Henning states that Gilman "controls her plots to a fault." For this reason, Henning concludes that, in some ways, *Blue Surge* is "too predictable, more like pallid television than edgy theater." At the other end, however, Henning compliments Gilman's concepts. "Some of her ideas," says Henning, "and much of her dialogue" though occasionally loony "are often dazzling." Henning finds the least believable character in the play to be Beth. If this play is about stripping "away Beth's veneer of social and economic altruism," it did not work, in Henning's opinion. The dialogue that this character is provided is some of Gilman's most contrived, Henning states. It is through this character that Gilman supposedly tries to make a point about "the motives of the rich," but this attempt does not come off well. Instead, the character of Beth "never seems to be much more than a cardboard poster." In conclusion, Henning holds out hope for Gilman as a playwright. "Ms. Gilman is young," he writes. "We can hope that her future plays will remain funny and accessible, full of meaning, yes, but meaning delivered other than with a cudgel."

In an article written for *Crain's Chicago Business*, Brian McCormick comments on the audience response to Gilman's work. "Much of that response," McCormick writes, "results from the writer's intense subject matter, an in-your-face ethos that is decidedly at odds with her soft-spoken, gentle demeanor." McCormick goes on to remark on Gilman's choice of subject matter for her plays. He states that Gilman's credo seems to be that the "more incendiary the topic, the better." McCormick reports that theater critics seem to be divided in their reviews of Gilman's plays. Some critics praise her for her intelligence, while others "complain of an emptiness behind her provocations."

One year after *Blue Surge* premiered in Chicago, it moved on to a stage off Broadway in New York. Simi Horwitz, a writer for *Back Stage*, interviewed the play's director, Robert Falls. In this interview, the director says that he found the play to be "uncommonly beautiful, exquisitely written, and ultimately uplifting." Horwitz offers his own comments about the play, stating that it is "an unexpectedly touching play." Horwitz also writes that the subject matter of the play "may be a little alien, if not off-putting, to some audiences."



Another writer for *Back Stage*, Victor Gluck, refers to it as possibly Gilman's best play yet. This play, says Gluck, "is that rare play about unsympathetic people that claims your sympathy. Extremely moving and beautifully written, it dramatizes its themes of social class and poverty without preaching." Gluck goes on to praise the director and some of the specific actors of the New York City production. He then remarks on Gilman's ability, saying that she creates "character by building up specific and unusual details that fill in a complete portrait."

The reviewer Ben Brantley, writing for the *New York Times*, states that Gilman's play, despite the fact that it was written and set in the early part of the twenty-first century, makes him feel as if he were watching a "grainy black-and-white film" from the Depression era—which Brantley attributes to the subject matter of the play. Gilman's characters, Brantley finds, are similar to the "young idealists" of those early movies, who "realize they are trapped, trapped in a society that will never give them an even break." Brantley praises Gilman for her work, which often presents "impeccably detailed, clear-eyed and sometimes overly schematic works." However, he points out some weaknesses. "While the appealing young cast members all occasionally hit emotional notes that resonate," Brantley writes, "there's an air of self-consciousness abroad that teeters on the brink of melodrama." Brantley ends his review, however, on an upbeat note. "Ms. Gilman," he says, "has the undeniable virtue of focusing with lucidity and evenhandedness on subjects that are more often sensationalized in the popular arts."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



Critical Essay #1

Hart is a freelance writer and published author with degrees in English and creative writing. In this essay, she examines the function of Beth in Gilman's play and the elements that make Beth such a flat character.

Gilman's play *Blue Surge* is about class and economic structure in the United States. The playwright portrays her ideas on these topics through the various characters of her play, with four characters representing the poorer side of society and only one of them the moneyed class. The single character who is rich is Beth, the girlfriend of Curt. Beth has few lines and is seldom seen onstage, and yet hers is a pivotal role, at least in an abstract way. Despite the fact that she is a minor character, she carries the weight of the oppositional point of the argument—the argument of the working class versus the privileged.

Critics have complained about Beth, calling Gilman's creation a flat character, one that has little depth. If Beth is the only representative of the rich, does not this also mean that Gilman's reflection of the upper class is flat? To push this question a little further, has Gilman's play provided a legitimate example of the rich versus the poor, or has she merely presented a one-sided view? To see whether Gilman has, in fact, done this, one needs to look closely at the role of Beth. What lines is she given? How does she represent her class? Does she ever defend herself?

The first lines out of Beth's mouth are not very flattering to her character. They demonstrate Beth's sense of superiority and lack of compassion. She starts off with a criticism of Curt's friend and police partner, Doug. Once she finishes with Doug, Beth moves on to disparage a local restaurant that caters to people who do not have much money to spend when they go out to eat. She insinuates that this particular restaurant is no better than a McDonald's. She also implies that the people who go to this restaurant do not have good taste. They do not, in Beth's opinion, know the difference between a salad made with iceberg lettuce and one made with gourmet mixed greens, typically served in better-class restaurants.

As the dialogue continues, Beth carries on with her assessments, changing from the people Curt must deal with in his life and his job to Curt himself. As she persists in pointing her judgmental finger, she also maintains her lofty position. Through her words, Beth puts Curt in a lower position. She gives him credit, when he insists upon it, for knowing more about prostitutes than she does. But her statement is loaded, insinuating that she knows more than he does of matters that are more significant. "Okay," she says. "You know more about hookers than I do. Okay? Fine. Congratulations."

Beth's tone does not improve. After Curt explains how he bungled the arrest of the suspected prostitute at the massage parlor, Beth turns from being judgmental to being sweet, nauseatingly so. "Honey, you shouldn't feel bad that you didn't know how to go to a hooker. That's a good thing." Here Beth sounds as if she is a schoolteacher talking



condescendingly to a kindergarten child who has just complained of not being able to make a spitball.

In this introduction to Beth, the audience has been given very little upon which to make a positive assessment of the play's solitary character from the wealthier class. There is not much to like about Beth, and the dialogue between Beth and Curt is not indicative of a healthy and loving relationship. Curt, on the other hand, has already become endearing to the audience. He has bungled his attempts to arrest a prostitute. He has admitted to Sandy that he does not know what he is doing. He is, in other words, human and thus easy to relate to. He shows humility and sticks up for his friends as well as the so-called common people. He is easy to empathize with.

Beth also exposes some of her weaknesses, but they are not nearly so appealing as Curt's. The next flaw that she demonstrates is her tendency to contradict herself. When Curt first brings up the topic of the prostitutes, Beth thinks the police should leave the women alone. She stands up for them; for a brief moment, some members of the audience might applaud her. Not only has she taken a humanitarian approach to prostitution, she has also put a positive spin on her argument. Prostitution should be legalized, she suggests, but Beth's stance turns out to be an abstract one, not all that well grounded in reality. Shortly after Curt reveals that he had to choose one of the women in particular, Beth becomes jealous. She forgets her original support for the prostitutes and now refers to them as "scuzzy girls," a description of prostitutes not meant to be flattering.

This is how the second scene of the play ends. Beth has made her appearance, and it is not a very attractive picture. She has shown herself to be wishy-washy and critical. She demonstrates when she becomes jealous of the prostitute that she is not totally secure in herself; for most of her time on stage, however, she takes a superior stance. Beth's superiority is not established from having elevated herself, but rather from having pushed other people down to a position below her.

Beth represents the privileged side of Gilman's opposition of class and money. Beth has been described as living on a trust fund left her by a wealthy grandfather. The other characters belong to the working class. They struggle through life, working at jobs they do not necessarily like. They were raised poor and had parents who were less than ideal, to say the least. They seem to trip through life, falling into one pit after another and picking themselves up and trying again. They are, as Gilman portrays them, the underdogs of life. In contrast, Gilman portrays the rich as having easy lives, with opportunities handed to them without much effort on their part (other than being born); worries are erased from their lives because they have money. In addition, the rich, as Gilman expresses it through Curt, may have it easy, but they are not very good. Rich people make poor people feel bad about themselves. They make Curt feel as if he stinks when he is in their presence.

Beth's appearance on stage reinforces Curt's description of the rich. Beth makes Curt nervous. He sweats when he is around her and has to take many showers so that he does not become smelly. Beth hears these comments from Curt, but she does not



defend herself. She does not try to bridge the gap. She just stands there in front of him and takes it. It is as if she cannot speak, although she is not tongue-tied when it comes to making herself look like an arrogant fool. It seems as though Beth has been set up to be the scapegoat.

Beth does not return until act 2, and her return is not graceful. She confronts Curt when she finds him with Sandy and, before leaving the stage, quickly sums Sandy up as a whore. Beth resorts to judging people again, and she does so through unflattering and hurtful stereotyping. Calling Sandy a prostitute would be one thing, but in using the word *whore*, Beth is further denigrating her. Admittedly, Beth is angry and hurt at that moment. But her actions further alienate her from the audience, who has seen the more human side of Sandy and is beginning to relate to and empathize with her. Beth remains on the outside, and Gilman does not give Beth a chance to state her case.

Although Gilman provides details of Curt's and Sandy's lives and of their personal philosophies and opinions of life, there is little or no such exposition given on Beth's behalf. She makes quick entrances and just as quick exits. Her dialogue consists mainly of questions directed at Curt, or else she is flinging out sharp retorts meant to inflict some degree of pain. She does not try to understand Curt. Neither does she defend herself and the class of people she is supposed to represent. She is, however, given one final chance to do so. It is in scene 3 of act 2. Unfortunately, Beth blows it again. She tries to defend herself from Curt's description of how she looks at poor people, including Curt, but she never makes a statement that might turn a better light onto the wealthy class—one that might make rich people look more lovable, or even likeable.

There is nothing said in this play that is complimentary of the rich. The upper class, represented by Beth, is never developed. From beginning to end, the rich remain stick figures, while the poor characters are fully fleshed out. A more rounded play might have tried a little harder to present the other side.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *Blue Surge*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



Critical Essay #2

Heims is a writer and teacher living in Paris. In this essay, he argues that Gilman considers that how people are valued is more important than what values they hold.

Whatever other factors may contribute to the quality of human relationships and to the cohesiveness of society, whether people share the same values or are in conflict over their values fundamentally influences the strength and the nature of all human association. In *Blue Surge*, Rebecca Gilman explores how social and moral values and how social and moral valuation influence the way individuals react to and interact with each other and, especially, how they value themselves and each other. Against the background of an effort by a group of fundamentalist Christians to shut down a massage parlor, which is really a front for a house of prostitution, Gilman presents the story of four people—two police officers and two prostitutes—who are transformed by their contact with each other as they function inside of and respond to the larger social issue and find their own values and identities challenged and, to a greater or lesser degree, changed.

In act 1, scene 4, of *Blue Surge*, Gilman shows the antagonism that defines and seems to fuel the relationship between Curt and Beth. Curt is a police officer on the vice squad. He was raised in poverty—a big dinner at my house was deviled ham and crackers—by his mother after his father, a gravedigger, was sent to prison for robbing the corpses he was burying. Beth, his girlfriend, is an art teacher who is able to be unconcerned that she does not make much money, since she lives on the interest generated by stocks that her grandfather placed in her name when she was born. The disparity in their backgrounds is the cause of a constant clash between them. They argue about their values. Curt feels that Beth does not value him because of his class background, and he resents her because of hers.

—He wastes everybody's time, he totally blew it, and it's like there are no repercussions with him. He's oblivious.— This is what Curt says to Beth about his partner, Doug, who, because of his clumsiness, has botched the arrest of a prostitute and, in consequence, the attempt to close the massage parlor. Beth seems to be in sync with Curt when she responds, —I don't see why you're still friends with him.— Curt's answer seems straightforward, —We're not friends, really. We're just partners.— Given this response, Beth's comment —He's such a jerk— appears to be inoffensive, merely an echo, in fact, of what Curt has been griping about. Curt, however, does take offense. —Could you not rag on my friends for once?— he snaps at her. The man who Curt has just said is not his friend suddenly becomes his friend, and Beth is accused of —ragging on— him when it was Curt himself who has been doing the ragging.

Rather than argue and point out the contradiction, Beth ducks. She attempts to change the subject. —So what's with this massage parlor?— she asks. But no topic of conversation is safe for them. As Curt explains, —It's right next to the Ground Round. These Christian Coalition people take their kids there. . . . They're freaking out.— Flippantly, perhaps appreciating the double meaning suggested by the name of the



restaurant, Beth responds, "That's what they get for going to the Ground Round." Curt does not find her quip funny. For him, rather, it is an indication of elitism. He takes it as a put-down of ordinary people and responds defensively. Another squabble begins. Again Beth retreats and says, "You know, you shouldn't close down this massage parlor, you should legalize it. These women aren't victims. They made a choice to be sex workers. If it was legal, they could unionize and get health benefits. And safe working conditions."

Curt answers her with sarcasm, saying, "Sounds good." Now it is Beth who feels demeaned by Curt. "If you think I'm full of [sh*t], tell me," she says. "Okay," he says and continues:

You don't know the first . . . thing about it. Drive over to Malton Road some night and see if these women look like they're in charge of anything. . . . They get the [sh*t] beat out of them on a regular basis and every single one of them is hooked on something because it's just about the most demeaning thing you could possibly do.

Beth becomes petulant rather than explaining to Curt that his description of the situation, if it is accurate (and Gilman's portrayal of both the prostitutes, Sandy and Heather, indicates that it is not), reflects exactly what she was saying. She claims that the oppressive nature of prostitution is not the consequence of prostitution itself but of the working conditions spawned by making prostitution illegal. "Of course," she says, "you know more about this than I do." Curt responds, "On this particular subject, I do. Yes. . . . It's one very small area. But when I'm actually an authority, I wish you'd just let me be the authority."

The way in which Curt insists on his authority reveals the depth of his insecurity. This exchange between Curt and Beth, moreover, is but one example of their constant state of discord. Their discord is the result of that insecurity and of the crippling sense of inferiority that haunts him and that he fights against by blaming her for his feeling it. The source of his misery is not Beth, however, but his own self-pity and self-contempt, which he uses her to experience and which he blames on her. "No matter how hard I try," he tells her in act 2, scene 3, after they have broken up, "I am never going to be as good as you." Even though she tells him that this is not so, he dismisses what she says:

I was so surprised when you said you'd go out with me. . . . And for four years I've been . . . trying not to say the wrong thing. . . . I get this nervous sweat. Around you. And it smells bad. That's why I shower so much. . . . I've walked around for four years afraid that you think I stink.

It is not surprising, given how Curt feels about himself, that he is comfortable around Sandy, the nineteen-year-old prostitute whom he first tries to arrest and then makes it his mission to help. With her, he does not feel self-disdain, because he is able to think of himself as morally superior to her. His relationship to her, throughout most of the play, is defined and fueled by his attempts to raise her up from what he considers her fallen state. But the attempt to "save" her proves fatal to him, for the more deeply involved



with Sandy he becomes, the more evident it becomes that his need for help is greater than hers.

When Sandy and Curt meet after she has been released, Sandy tells Curt that she does not want to stop being a prostitute, that what she really wants is not to have to hand over half her earnings to □the house.□ She wants to be her own boss and keep everything for herself. Ironically, this is exactly what Beth had been saying when she spoke about legalizing prostitution. But Curt does not snap at Sandy as he snapped at Beth. In fact, after she makes it clear to Curt that she does not want his help, he replies, □Well, if I can't help you maybe you could help me.□ He means that he wants her to help him study, by testing him to see whether he can correctly identify tree leaves by name. By the end of the play, however, it will be clear to both of them that he needs a far deeper kind of help. The scene that begins with his offering help ends with his asking for help. Even if that is only a ploy that allows him to keep seeing her, it signals the start of a painful but humanly essential transformation for him. Rather than guarding himself, as he does with Beth, Curt exposes his wounds to Sandy.

To her, he reveals a layer of himself that is hidden below the person he appears to be on the surface. Rather than a policeman, Curt really wants to be a nature guide. That is why he is learning to identify leaves. But he is incapable even of guiding himself. This becomes clear as he and Sandy grow closer. She yields to his encouragement and attempts to find work other than prostitution. When she is pressed for money, however, she returns to the massage parlor. This enrages Curt. He sees it as betrayal. His confused relationship with Beth, however, has made it impossible for him to attend to the difficulties that have forced Sandy back to prostitution. Curt's incompetence as a guide is further revealed in his final attempt to save Sandy. Instead of saving her, he endangers himself.

When he learns that there will be another raid on the massage parlor, Curt goes there to warn Sandy and brings her evidence money that he has stolen from the police station to enable her to flee and look for other kinds of work. Of course, he is caught. Through the efforts of his lawyer and the union, he escapes imprisonment but is dismissed from the police force. He becomes a security guard and begins to take biology courses at a local community college. Sandy leaves the massage parlor and establishes herself as an independent sex worker, able to pocket the full amount of her receipts.

When next they meet, it is a year later. Theirs are not the only lives that have changed. Heather has left the massage parlor, works as a bartender, and is having a baby with Doug. Because of Heather, Doug has lost some of the righteous moralizing that characterized his earlier opinions and has admitted and gratified some of his own, perhaps less socially acceptable, sexual desires. As Curt and Sandy open up to each other again, he shows a clarity of insight about himself that he had not had before. □All those years,□ he tells her, □and all that work. I didn't throw it away on you. . . . I got so mad and I threw it away on feeling sorry for myself. . . . All I can figure is, I just got tired.□ He does not say what made him tired or what he got tired of. Nonetheless, it seems clear that Curt grew tired of his own resentments and self-pity, of using them to resist his own grief and sense of need. He got tired of bearing the burden of his past, of



trying to deny who he was, and of trying to meet an expectation of himself that he projected onto others, especially Beth. He got tired of trying to give help when he so much needed it.

Sandy responds to his vulnerability, and he is able to allow her to do so. She says, simply, "If you want, I could sit here for just a little while, and I could hold your hand. If you want." After a slight hesitation, which indicates his ongoing struggle with himself in order to bring himself to accept the help he so deeply wants, he gives her his hand.

Thus, *Blue Surge*, which appears to be a play about a social conflict regarding prostitution and the clash of moral and class values, does not really attempt to resolve those issues. It shifts away from them and focuses on individual experience without judging the individuals. Rather than concentrating on social conflicts, Gilman focuses on the resulting frustrated longing of bruised hearts and on the struggles her characters must endure as they realize the heart's pain. When they do—and if they can surrender to that pain—Gilman suggests, they may transcend it; only then will they be able to accept the tender help of an offered hand that such surrender might make possible. In *Blue Surge*, Gilman seems to be showing that the values people hold are of less importance than how each person values himself or herself and how each person is valued.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on *Blue Surge*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



Quotes

"So, um, tell me...do you always just give massages?" Act 1, Scene 1, p. 9

"Okay. But you know, sometimes you hear that you do other things in these places. Besides massages." Act 1, Scene 1, p. 10

"If I gave you three hundred bucks, would you have anal sex with me?" Act 1, Scene 2, p. 15

"I'm not really clean down there." Act 1, Scene 2, p. 15

"Can you believe this shit? I totally did not entrap that girl." Act 1, Scene 3, p. 19

"Let's not beat around the bush. We know you're a hooker. We maybe can't prove it right now, but we now you're a ho." Act 1, Scene 3, p. 20

"She knew you were a cop. That's why she didn't have sex with you." Act 1, Scene 3, p. 22

"Where do you do it? There was just this table and one chair. I guess you do it on the table, but it didn't seem very stable. It seemed like it would collapse." Act 1, Scene 4, p. 27

"You always call it a trust fund, but that's not what it is. My grandfather gave me those stocks when I was born." Act 1, Scene 4, p. 30

"She's my mom's partner. Or wife or whatever you want to call it. Her lesbian life partner, I guess." Act 1, Scene 5, p. 36

"She's a full-time alcoholic. When I graduated, I gave her my diploma and I said, here. You take this because you never graduated from high school so I want you to have it and hang it on the wall as a reminder of the one thing I did that you never did." Act 1, Scene 5, p. 38

"I lost it. Beth started crying. It was ugly. So it seemed like I better do it myself. But it's hard to do by yourself." Act 1, Scene 6, p. 45

"You know, there was that one thing about Heather that I was interested in. Which, you know what that was. But the thing is, she won't do it. She said that was something she did for money, but it's not like she likes doing it, so she won't do it." Act 1, Scene 7, p.55

"Every time I try to have something nice it just gets totally ruined. I don't have any nice clothes. I don't have any nice furniture. I have one nice thing my grandmother gave me and now it's ruined." Act 1, Scene 8, p.59



"No. I just met her and she needed a place to stay. She came over here, it was raining outside, she didn't even have any shoes on." Act 2, Scene 1, p.69

"....drove all over town - I left my fiancy standing there thinking I had slept with you, like I would come near you...." Act 2, Scene 2, p.78



Topics for Further Study

Read a history of prostitution, such as Nils Johan Ringdal's *Love for Sale* (2005) or William Sanger's *History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects Throughout the World* (1986). Write a synopsis of that history, including such details as times or countries in which prostitution was looked upon differently. Have attitudes toward prostitution changed in the United States over time? Was prostitution ever legal in America, such as during the development of the West? Are there signs of changing attitudes in the twenty-first century?

The last stage directions of this play mention that Curt and Sandy are sitting at a bar, holding hands and looking into the distance at something they cannot see. What do you think Gilman is referring to by this statement? What could Sandy be trying to see? What about Curt? Use your knowledge of the play but also use your imagination to write up an account of what both characters might be searching for.

Listen to Duke Ellington's song "Blue Serge" and describe the way the music affects you. Research the way in which music theorists have described this piece. Go to the musical director at your school and ask her or his opinion of what this music is all about. Find out what elements within the song impart a feeling of sadness. Bring the music to class and describe what you have discovered.

Doug often comes across in this play as a figure of comic relief, providing humor to ease some of the tension. Still, by the end of the play, Doug seems more grounded and philosophical than Curt. Compare these two characters throughout the play. Where do their characters stand in relationship to each other at the beginning of the play? When does their relationship begin to change? Which one of them, by the end of the play, appears to have changed the most? What are those changes? Write a paper describing your findings.

What Do I Read Next?

Gilman's play *Spinning into Butter*, published by Faber and Faber in 2000, takes place at a liberal Vermont college, where political correctness prevails. Unfortunately, racial prejudice also thrives on the campus, despite many of the faculty members' denials. Gilman exposes how racism can exist in the deep recesses of anyone's mind, even so-called liberals.

Boy Gets Girl, another of Gilman's plays, premiered in 2000 in Chicago. It tells the story of a blind date gone wrong. After the protagonist rejects the young man, he begins to terrorize her by stalking her.

In 1999, Gilman's award-winning play *The Glory of Living* premiered in London, capturing the awe and fascination of Gilman's British audiences. This play takes place in the rural South and focuses on a young teenage prostitute who runs away with a no-good car thief. The couple marry, and the husband forces the protagonist to lure other young runaway girls to their house, where both husband and wife become involved in their murders.

Neil Labute is another playwright who, like Gilman, focuses on social issues in his work. Labute is a prolific writer, and one of his best-appraised works is a collection of three one-acts called *Bash: Three Plays*, published in 2000. It includes *Medea Redux*, the tale of a woman who relates a story about a relationship with her English teacher; *Iphigenia in Orem*, about a Utah businessman who confesses to a stranger a crime he has committed; and *A Gaggle of Saints*, about a young Mormon couple who relate a violent crime in which they were involved.

For another take on prostitution, the journalist Lael Morgan's *Good Time Girls of the Alaska-Yukon Gold Rush* (1999) can be recommended. This story chronicles the lives of some of the women who went to Alaska in search of wealth.



Further Study

Iwasaki, Mineko, *Geisha, a Life*, Washington Square Press, 2003.

Although a geisha would never call herself a prostitute, there are a few similarities in the two professions. In this book, Iwasaki exposes some of the elements of her profession, for which she began training at the tender age of five.

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This rare collection of historical data focuses on dramatists who happen to be women. More than two hundred female playwrights are included, with information on the plays they produced as well as the critical response that the plays received. This is a good book about the evolution of plays written by women.

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The beginnings of American realism are explored in American novels written by such authors as Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and Mark Twain.

Rank, Mark Robert, *One Nation Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Professor Rank argues that people who are poor are not totally responsible for their condition. Rank makes a powerful case that poverty is a condition imposed by the failures of U.S. economic structure and politics. He also provides a workable solution.

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Sutton invited police officers from all over the United States to write stories about their lives and their line of work. This book is a collection of those stories. While some of them are naturally very sad, especially those that deal with the terrorist attacks in New York City, other stories are surprisingly funny.

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A person who has never been to New York City might never have guessed the circumstances that are captured in this book of police stories. Someone who has lived in New York City will probably still be surprised and shocked at what goes on in the city.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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



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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized



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

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



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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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



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

Citing Drama for Students

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

“Night.” Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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