The Boys in the Band Study Guide

The Boys in the Band by Mart Crowley

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Introduction

Mart Crowley's first play, *The Boys in the Band*, is considered to be a groundbreaking work in American theater, the first truly honest portrayal of the lives of contemporary homosexuals. It opened in New York on April 14, 1968, at the off-Broadway Theater Four and ran for 1002 performances before being adapted to a successful motion picture. At a time when gay characters were seldom seen in commercial media except as crude stereotypes, this play presented a well-rounded view of what critics of the day referred to as "the homosexual milieu." Taking place in an apartment in New York's posh Upper East Side, the action concerns nine acquaintances who converge for the birthday of one of their friends. The group includes Michael, a lapsed Roman Catholic alcoholic who is undergoing psychoanalysis; Donald, a conflicted friend who has moved far from the city to spurn the homosexual lifestyle; Harold, who is turning thirty and is morose about losing his youthful looks; Bernard, an African American who still pines for the wealthy white boy of the house where his mother was a maid; Emory, who revels in his homosexuality by acting flamboyant and girlish; and Larry and Hank, a couple that lives together despite the fact that they do not agree on the issue of monogamy. Joining them are a male prostitute who has been hired as a "present" for Harold's birthday and Alan, an old college friend of Michael's, who claims to be straight but who becomes a little too emotional when his manhood is threatened and who is strangely reluctant to leave each time he says he is going. Modern audiences may find these character types overly familiar, in part due to the success of *The Boys in the Band*, which has bred countless imitations. Some of the plotting and staging devices used by Crowley show his inexperience as a writer, but his characters are presented with an honesty that is still effective today.

Author Biography

Mart Crowley was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1935. His early life was deeply rooted in the Catholic Church: he attended a Catholic high school and then went to the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., graduating in 1957. His family life was turbulent, with his father drinking heavily and his mother a hypochondriac who used drugs. Still, as Crowley told Ieva Augstums of *The Daily Nebraskan* in 1998, in one of his rare interviews, "As for my parents, well, they were supportive knowing that they had a weird kid." In the early 1960s, he moved to Hollywood to work as a set designer and worked at several production companies. Eventually, from 1964 to 1966, he was a secretary for the actress Natalie Wood. It was during this time that he began writing *The Boys in the Band*.

The play was produced in New York in 1968 and proved to be a hit, running for over a thousand performances. Crowley himself wrote the screenplay for the 1970 film adaptation, which retained the original New York cast. He chose William Friedkin to direct, having been impressed with his work in adapting Harold Pinter's play *The Birthday Party* to film. The film was not as commercially successful as expected. Crowley's next play, *Remote Asylum*, was produced in Los Angeles in 1970, but it closed quickly. His greatest play-wrighting success, after *The Boys in the Band*, was 1973's *A Breeze from the Gulf*, about his childhood in Mississippi. It won him second place in the New York Drama Critics' Circle award for that year. In 1979-1980, he served as an executive script editor and producer for the television series *Hart to Hart*, starring Natalie Wood's husband, Robert Wagner. Crowley wrote another small, seldom-produced drama, *Avec Schmaltz*, which was performed at the Massachusetts Theater Festival in 1984. One more significant play was his 1993 piece entitled *For Reasons That Remain Unclear*, about a scriptwriter and priest who meet in Rome and recall their past history together. It has been performed several times and is bound, along with *The Boys in The Band* and *A Breeze from the Gulf*, in *Three Plays by Mart Crowley*, published in 1994 by Alyson Publishers.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Boys in the Band opens in Michael's apartment in New York. Michael is preparing for the party: he has music on and drinks set out, and he is attempting to wrap a gift. The action begins with the arrival of Donald. Although Donald is not even familiar with the guest of honor, he has been invited to the party. It is revealed that he comes regularly to Michael's apartment on Saturday nights after seeing his therapist and then stays overnight before taking the long drive back to the Hamptons the following day. On this particular evening, however, Donald's therapist has canceled, and he has arrived earlier than expected. Michael gives him some things that he bought for him to use during his weekly visits: scented soap, his own toothbrush, and hair spray. Before the guests arrive, they have a long discussion about their lives.

Donald talks about the work he has been doing with his therapist. He has recently realized that he was "raised to be a failure" by his parents, Evelyn and Walt. His father wanted him to be perfect, and his mother smothered him with love when he failed, and, as a result, Donald retreated from society, dropping out of college and leaving the city. He is currently working as a janitor and living in a small, rented room in a distant suburb. Michael explains that his own parents affected him adversely by spoiling him so that now he is used to not working, living on unemployment, and relying on others to pay his bills as he indulges himself in expensive travel and clothing. Donald notices that Michael is not drinking, and he responds that he is tired of following a drunken cycle of doing things under the influence of liquor that he should not have done and then drinking even more the next day to forget what he has done.

Michael answers a phone call from Alan, an old college friend. Alan is in the city visiting from his home in Washington, D.C., and he needs to talk with Michael. He is crying. Michael tells him to come over for a drink.

Larry and Hank, who are a couple, arrive with Emory, who is girlish and flamboyant. An awkward glance passes between Larry and Donald; later in the play, it is revealed that they once had casual sex, one night at a steam bath, and did not even learn each other's names. Bernard enters next. Michael explains that he was not openly gay when he was in college and asks them not to do anything that would let Alan know that they are gay. Alan calls back and says that he is not coming, so when the doorbell rings, they assume that it the birthday cake being delivered. The men are all dancing together in a line when Alan steps through the door.

Alan is uncomfortable with this roomful of obviously gay men. He attaches himself to Hank, who is wearing a wedding ring, and, in the discussion that ensues, they find that they each have two children, and Hank describes Larry as his "roommate." Emory interrupts several times with sarcastic, wry innuendos about being gay. Later, when Alan is talking with Michael alone, he says that his friends all seem nice, specifically pointing

out, "That Hank is really a very attractive fellow." The only one he does not like, he says, is Emory: "He just seems like such a goddamn little pansy."

Downstairs, the Cowboy enters: he is a handsome male prostitute that Emory has hired to sing "Happy Birthday" to Harold. When Alan returns from the bathroom, Emory makes sarcastic remarks about Alan's prudish attitude until, abruptly, Alan snaps, lunging at Emory, swearing at him, and punching him in the mouth. In the pandemonium that ensues, the guest of honor, Harold, arrives, and the Cowboy sings "Happy Birthday" to him and gives him a big kiss.

Act 2

Emory has ice on his swelling lip, and Alan sits on the couch with his hands over his ears. Harold discusses his depression over getting older and the pleasure he takes from drug use. In the meantime, Michael has started drinking and smoking, despite what he said to Donald earlier about quitting. Alan rushes out of the room to vomit, either from drinking too much or from self-revulsion, and Hank goes with him to watch over him. Michael and Harold discuss Michael's religious beliefs, and Michael explains that Harold is keeping a secret cache of pills - "Hundreds of Nembutals, hundreds of seconals" - to kill himself with when he becomes too old and loses his good looks. After a brief time for eating and much more drinking, the lights are put out, and the Cowboy brings the birthday cake in for Harold, who opens his gifts. After the presents are open, they put music on, and once again the men are dancing with each other when Alan enters the room.

They decide to play a game. After several suggestions, Michael, who has gotten quite drunk, insists on playing a game that he just made up, called Affairs of the Heart. Each person must telephone the one person that he believes he has truly loved in his lifetime, and, if he makes contact, he must profess his love for that person. When several people do not want to play, Michael becomes aggressive with them. Alan asks Hank to leave with him, and Michael forcefully explains to him that Hank is not just Larry's roommate but his lover.

Bernard is the first to call. He calls Peter Dahlbeck, the son of the white family that his mother worked for as a domestic. When they were teenagers, Bernard and Peter had a brief romance one night, but they never talked about it again. Peter's mother answers the phone and says that he is out on a date, and Bernard spends the rest of the evening in a stupor, muttering that he should never have phoned. Emory calls Delbert Botts, whom he had a crush on in high school. At the senior prom, Emory found out that Delbert had told everyone that he was gay. When Delbert answers the phone, Emory refuses to tell him who is calling, and so he hangs up on him. Larry, who refuses to be monogamous with Hank, says that he is going to call "Charlie," the name he has for all of the other people whom he sleeps with. Instead, Hank calls the answering service that they both share and leaves a message for Larry that he loves him. Larry still refuses to stay faithful, so Hank suggests a *ménage à trios*. Larry explains that he loves Hank, but

it is pointed out that it does not count for the game if he did not say it over the phone, so he goes to the kitchen and calls from one of Michael's phones to the other.

Michael insists that Alan make a call, explaining to the others that a boy they both knew in college, Justin Stuart, said he had had several homosexual encounters with Alan. After being pressured, Alan takes the phone, dials it, and, stammering, finally gets around to saying "I love you"; Michael takes the phone from him and finds out that it is Alan's wife at the other end. The party breaks up after that.

In the end, Donald and Michael are the only ones left. Donald starts to leave, but Michael, who has been brutal throughout the evening, breaks down and begs him to stay. Donald says that he is going to finish drinking the brandy in the bottle and then leave but that he will be back the next week. Michael heads out into the night to attend midnight mass at the Catholic church.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The Boys in the Band is the story of nine gay men in New York City of 1969. They gather one evening for a birthday celebration which turns out not to be very festive. The play opens in the well-appointed apartment of Michael who is wrapping a gift when Donald arrives, bemoaning the cancellation of his therapy appointment. Donald's spirits lift at the proposition of a martini and some items Michael has purchased exclusively for his pampering. Donald suffers anxiety attacks and would not be in the city tonight if it weren't for the appointment with his analyst and the birthday party as he prefers to stay at home on Long Island.

Donald shares some of the insight he has gathered through analysis. He now understands that his parents are not only responsible for his being gay but are responsible for some of his dysfunctional behavioral issues as well. Donald acknowledges that he must be responsible for affecting any changes that he would like to make.

A phone call from Michael's college roommate, Alan, interrupts the conversation. Michael invites Alan over for a drink with but explains that there will be others at his home tonight for a birthday party. Michael knows that Alan is straight and that he would not understand the gathering. Michael asks Donald to help him keep things undercover until Alan has left.

While Michael and Donald wait for Alan to arrive, Michael says that he has quit drinking and smoking in order to have a clearer head with which to manage his life. The buzzer rings and it is not Alan at the door but Emory, Hank, and Larry, three of the dinner guests. Amid welcoming exchanges, there is a noticeable recognition between Larry and Donald intimating a relationship which is closer than mere friendship.

Michael tells the new arrivals to prepare to meet Alan and asks that they keep the gay behavior in check while he's here. The topic of school roommates launches the men into a discussion of their coming out experiences and Michael shares that he sometimes glossed over his early intimate encounters saying that they had been alcohol induced, as if he needed an excuse.

The buzzer brings yet another dinner guest, Bernard, an African American who stands out in the group for as much for his impeccably tailored clothes as for his ethnicity. The men welcome Bernard into the group with drinks and the stereotypical gay banter which borders on insults.

The conversation drifts to talk of their professions and the books they have recently read while they sip cocktails. Another buzz at the door is the bakery delivery boy who is

bringing a cake for the birthday party. The men, relieved that Alan has not yet arrived, break into a chorus line and kick in time with the music on the stereo.

At last the buzzer signaling Alan's arrival is heard only by Hank who lets Alan into the room where he is slightly shocked at the sight of the men intertwined in a kick routine.

Alan's black tie apparel signifies his formal demeanor and buttoned-up reserve. Drinks are served and discussion leads to sports and wives in an effort to make Alan more comfortable. Michael leads Alan upstairs so that they may talk privately and attempts to explain the nature of the party. Michael passes it off as one of those parties where everybody is invited and then unfortunately shows up.

Alan is complimentary of all Michael's friends with the exception of Emory who he thinks is too effeminate but Alan claims not pass judgment on other peoples' lifestyles. In spite of Michael's pleas, Alan refuses to divulge the nature of his distress on the phone earlier and the reason for his coming over tonight.

Downstairs Donald and Larry are speaking in an intimate situation which is viewed by Hank who can't resist bringing up the agreement, presumably that of an exclusive relationship, that he and Larry supposedly shared. Larry denies any agreement and the tension is broken by the arrival of Cowboy, a male prostitute who kisses Michael at the door.

Cowboy is Emory's gift for Harold, the birthday boy, who has not yet arrived. Emory is annoyed because not only has Cowboy kissed the wrong man, he has arrived much too early, killing the *Midnight Cowboy* joke. Cowboy has been paid to spend the evening at the party but begins to set the stage for an early exit due to some back pain excuse.

Alan emerges from the bedroom and mistakes Cowboy for the birthday boy. As Alan turns to leave he invites the men to his home in Washington, any time, to meet his wife. Larry comments to Hank that that would be a nice idea and Emory can't resist saying that they would all like to meet *him*, changing the pronoun to *her,* and implying that Alan is not a married man but gay like the rest of them are.

Alan attacks Emory and the men have to physically remove Alan so that he won't inflict any further abuse on Emory. Finally the buzzer announces Harold's arrival and he is aghast at the spectacle of the fight taking place on the floor. Donald quickly points Harold out to Cowboy who launches into singing *Happy Birthday* just as he was hired to do.

When Cowboy finishes, Donald puts new music on the stereo and Michael moves to the bar to fix a drink, his first of the evening. The stage goes black as Harold continues to laugh about his singing Cowboy gift.

Act 1 Analysis

Angst and tension stretch uncomfortably across the backdrop of what is supposed to have been a celebration of a friend's birthday. The identity issues and the struggle for acceptance in mainstream society are such a rapid undercurrent with these characters that all their dialogue and behavior are insults directed at the others as well as each man himself. The introduction of Alan, the straight friend, symbolizes the intrusion of mainstream thinking into their lifestyles. His presence forces them to be guarded and also deride him as if to say that they had no more choice in their lifestyle than he had in his. Alan's discomfort and rapid uptake of the insults belies an undercurrent of sensitivity implying that perhaps he is conflicted by his own sexual identity and is using the group to test his theory.

Stereotypical gay clothing, posturing and name calling appear frequently throughout and may have been offensive when this play was introduced in the late 1960's but the dialogue and scenarios seem quite tame today. The core element of the struggle to assimilate diverse sexual identities into a heterosexual society is exhibited through the defense mechanisms that the characters display.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

As the scene opens, Harold is still laughing and Michael accuses him of being stoned. Harold has self esteem issues caused by the difficulties of being a Jewish gay man with adult acne. After the fight has been explained to Harold, Alan announces that he feels sick and rushes out of the room. Harold lights a joint and he and Michael spar verbally about superficiality and religion. The others guests mingle while Emory puts the finishing touches on dinner.

Dinner conversation is another series of insults between Michael and Harold. Michael tells the group that Harold is fixated with his skin and has stored up of barbiturates so that he can kill himself one day, if he ever musters the courage. Harold replies that he has at least paid for his obsessions in full, while Michael lives on credit and luck.

The tension breaks when the lights dim and Cowboy enters carrying the birthday cake with the lighted candles. The group sings to Harold and ushers him over to the sofa so that he can open his gifts. The gift with the most significance is a silver-framed photo of Michael with a personal inscription which is an unexpected show of sentimentality given the verbal sparring between the two this evening.

Music fills the room and the men pair off to dance just as Alan enters the room as he did earlier in the evening. His presence halts their dancing and Michael suggests that they play games instead. The men settle on a game they call Affairs of the Heart, the object of which is to phone the one person you have always loved. The players get extra points if the caller actually verbalizes it their feelings to the person on the other end.

Alan feels sick at the idea of yet another round of gay theatrics but he can not bring himself to leave the party. Bernard is the first to play the game and he phones Peter Dahlbeck, the son of the woman for whom his mother keeps house. Bernard and Peter had had a drunken encounter one night after a pool party, yet nothing ever materialized between them, as Peter is straight was just ending his third marriage. Bernard's call doesn't reach Peter but Peter's mother with whom Bernard exchanges pleasantries and ends the call as quickly as possible. Bernard is mortified at what he has done and is haunted by it the rest of the evening.

Emory is the next one to play the game and he phones Delbert Botts, a dentist, who is quite a few years his senior. Emory had known Delbert from school but he only tried to develop a friendship with Delbert after he had gone to him for dental work. As a token of their friendship, Emory sent Delbert an engraved cigarette lighter and he became the laughing stock of the community when people found out about it. Emory's call to Delbert this evening results in the dentist hanging up on him because he thinks that the call is a wrong number.

The relationship between Larry and Hank comes to the surface when it's Hank's turn to play the game and he phones the answering service that he and Larry share telling the operator to give Larry the message that he loves him. His game points are in question because he only expressed his feelings to a telephone operator so Hank proceeds to dial the number of the second line in Michael's apartment so that Larry may answer and hear the message directly.

Hank and Larry have moved to the bedroom upstairs but Michael is not finished playing games. He taunts Alan with the thought of what the two of them could be doing in the bedroom and asks Alan if he knows what it means to be, "in the closet." Alan rebuffs the insinuation that he is gay but Michael won't let it drop. Michael brings up the name of another college roommate with whom Alan had been intimate. Alan's denials just inflame Michael who insists that Alan needs to face the truth about himself.

Michael taunts Alan to phone Justin as the finale to the game. Alan does dial the phone and he tells the person on the other end of his love and begs for forgiveness. Michael can't bear this show of honesty and he grabs the phone to confront Justin too until he hears the voice of Alan's wife, Fran. Good manners override his shock and he exchanges pleasantries with her before hanging up.

Now it's Harold's turn to hold Michael up to the same light that Michael has been exposing others to all night. His analysis of Michael is that he is a sad gay man who is trapped in the body and psyche of someone he doesn't want to be. He claims that if only Michael would stop fighting his nature and pursue an authentic homosexual life with the same fervor with which he hates, he might be happy one day.

Harold thanks all of them for the party and the gifts and he leaves with Cowboy in tow. Emory is also ready to leave and pulls at the slumped Bernard who is still depressed about placing the phone call during the game earlier.

As they leave, Michael drops down and begins to moan quietly at first and then with such fury that Donald rushes to him for comfort. Michael resists Donald's offer of Valium at first but relents when it is placed in front of him. Michael takes the pill and collapses heavily into Donald's arms.

Things would be different for Michael if only he could learn to not hate himself. Donald reassures him that he is improving and that his self acceptance is much better than it used to be and Donald knows that he'll continue to improve as long as he works on it.

Michael has passed through his anxiety attack and is back to his acerbic self as evidenced in his reply when Donald asks why he thinks Alan stayed all evening. Michael claims that Alan needed somebody to confront him and that he was begging for it. Michael shrugs off Donald's proposition that Justin could have lied about Alan. Michael no longer cares what the truth is as he has had enough games for one evening.

Since Hank and Larry are still in his bedroom, Michael decides to go to midnight mass in the hopes of seeing some celebrities. Donald decides to stay for a bit, have some brandy, and read a book. As Michael prepares to leave, Donald asks about Alan's

reason for coming here tonight and he wonders what could have been so important that couldn't wait. Michael doesn't know whether Alan's angst is over his fight with Fran or if there is some other source of his emotional distress. At this point, he is no longer concerned and he asks Donald to turn off the lights before he leaves.

Act 2 Analysis

Michael's angst is at the core of the action in this act as he tries in vain to control circumstances beyond his control, the largest one being his self loathing about his homosexuality. With the group being forced to socialize for the most part outside the mainstream, Michael's apartment symbolizes the microcosm of homosexual life in which all the human drama of love and hate are played out on some level with these characters.

Michael's love-hate relationship with himself is shown through his passive aggressive behavior toward people he claims to be friends with. He has a need to force others to feel the same pain he feels, even pushing Alan to an emotional brink, as if an admission of homosexuality would be some long lost victory for Michael himself.

Every cliché comes to the forefront as Michael blames his parents and God for his skewed identity and then transfers that hatred to the therapists and friends who do not have the power to save him from himself. His personal analysis at the end is correct; if only he could stop hating himself so much things would be so much better. The sense of frustration and futility running throughout this act propels Michael forward until he can not bear anymore and collapses unto the crutches of alcohol and drugs. He comes to the realization that he still has much work ahead on the road to acceptance.

Characters

Bernard

Bernard is the one African American in the group. He has a small part in the play until the end when Michael initiates the Affairs of the Heart game. Encouraged to phone someone he loves and tell him that he loves him, Bernard chooses to phone Peter Dahlbeck, the son in the household where his mother worked as a domestic. Once, when they were drunk, Peter and Bernard were intimate with each other in the pool house, but they never spoke of it again. When Peter's mother answers and says that he is off on a date, Bernard spends the rest of the play angry at himself for having been so stupid as to have phoned.

Cowboy

The Cowboy is a handsome young man dressed in a cowboy outfit, hired for twenty dollars to sing "Happy Birthday" to Harold and spend the night with him. Unfortunately, he shows up early, before Harold arrives. He wants to get home early and get to bed because he hurt his heel while doing chin-ups. Throughout the play, he asks naive questions, unable to keep up with the witty banter of the rest of the group. He leaves with Harold in the end.

Donald

Donald does not really know the other party guests well. He is a friend of Michael's. He lives outside of New York, in a rented room in the Hamptons, where he has worked scrubbing floors since he dropped out of college. Donald comes to town on Saturday nights to see his psychiatrist, and then he stays at Michael's apartment.

Emory

Emory is the joker of the group and the most flamboyantly gay. He is always referring to himself and to the others as "girls" or "Mary." He is the one who made most of the food for the party. It is his light, whimsical, girlish attitude that infuriates Alan, leading him to punch Emory at the end of the first act. During the game at the end of the play, Emory chooses to phone Delbert Botts, an older boy whom he had a crush on in junior high school and high school. Emory once embarrassed himself, begging Delbert to be his friend and buying him an expensive present, only to find out at the senior prom that Delbert had been laughing about him to others and was engaged to be married.

Hallie

See Harold

Hank

Hank left his wife and two children to live with Larry. He is a schoolteacher. Alan, noticing the wedding ring on Hank's hand, feels close to him, raising the possibility that Alan's attraction is not erotic but is because he identifies with Hank as the only other heterosexual in the room. In act 2, when Alan is feeling sick, Hank stays with him offstage. At the end of the play, when it is his time to phone the person that he loves most, Hank phones Larry, even though he knows that Larry has a difficult time committing himself to just one man.

Harold

It is Harold's birthday, and he is the last character to arrive, at the very end of the first act. He is a former ice skater. Harold copes with the depression and self-loathing that he feels by taking drugs: when he arrives, Michael mentions his being late and high on marijuana, and he explains, bitterly, "What I *am*, Michael, is a thirty-two year old, ugly, pock-marked Jew fairy." Later, commenting on the issue of beauty, he mentions his soul and notes, "if I could, I'd sell it in a flash for some skin-deep, transitory, meaningless beauty." Michael announces to the group that Harold is hoarding depressant drugs so that he can commit suicide before becoming old, a claim Harold does not deny. The Cowboy, who is beautiful and almost completely devoid of any intellect whatsoever, is attractive to Harold.

Larry

Larry is a commercial artist. He has had an affair with Donald in the past, although it was impersonal: they had sex but never even learned each other's names. As Larry explains it, "We haven't exactly met, but we've . . . Seen . . . each other before." Although he lives with Hank, Larry is reluctant to commit to a monogamous relationship, feeling that such a thing is unrealistic.

Alan McCarthy

Alan is an old college roommate of Michael's. Alan did not know that Michael was gay when they were in college, so Michael tries to keep it from him. Throughout the play there are several strong hints that Alan has homosexual feelings that he is trying to suppress. Alan is crying when he phones, asking to come over. Michael is afraid that Alan will find out that he is gay, a secret that is lost when Alan enters the apartment to find all of the men dancing together. Alan bonds with Hank after noticing the wedding

ring on his finger and stays around him during much of the play, telling Michael when they are alone, "That Hank is really a very attractive fellow." After a few drinks, Alan becomes enraged at Emory and lunges at him, shouting, "I'll kill you, you . . . little mincing swish. You . . . freak. FREAK! FREAK!" Late in the second act, Michael insists that Alan call Justin Stuart, a man who had a gay affair with Alan in college. It seems that he is acknowledging his homosexuality when he phones and says "I love you," but when Michael takes the phone, he finds out that Alan has called his wife and committed himself to his heterosexual relationship.

Michael

The play takes place at Michael's apartment. Michael is a writer who has sold a screenplay that was never produced. For the most part, he travels the world, running up bills and getting other people to pay them. He is aging, losing his hair (a fact that is commented on several times throughout the play), and seeing a therapist to help him deal with the self-hatred that he feels about his lifestyle. He is well versed in cinema history and has a movie reference for just about every occasion. Early on, he explains to Donald that he has quit drinking and smoking because he is unable to "get through that morning-after ick attack" when he realizes the things that he has said and done the night before while drinking. Later, after the hostility between Emory and Alan subsides, Michael starts drinking again. His behavior becomes increasingly bizarre and offensive. He eventually makes up a "party game" that is meant to humiliate all of the guests. In the end, in a reversal of the first scene, Michael leaves his own apartment, intending to go over to midnight mass at the Catholic church.

Themes

Self-Image

Much of *The Boys in the Band* is concerned with the various ways that gay men thought of themselves in the late 1960s. Each of the different characters represents a lifestyle or perspective that has one meaning in mainstream society but that operates on an entirely different level within this small social setting of New York homosexuals. Michael, for instance, cannot come to any clear understanding of his own religious feelings because the Catholic Church, which he was raised believing in, rejects homosexuals like him. Bernard is comfortable with being the only African American in his group of friends and can joke about it and accept their jokes, but he is humiliated when he has to contact the world that he grew up in, where his family was considered socially inferior: the combination of the social expectations about race with the need to keep his sexuality a secret leaves him shattered in the end, barely able to function. Hank and Larry are hampered as a couple by Larry's reluctance to promise that he will be faithful: the same problem, which affects many heterosexual couples, is made worse by the inability of homosexuals in 1968 to enter into any legally binding agreement like marriage. Harold's self-image is tied up in his youthful good looks, which diminish every day, causing his self-image to deteriorate before the audience's eyes. Emory seems to have a secure image of himself as a result of exaggerating the feminine aspects associated with homosexuality. His effeminate attitude makes him stand out, even among other homosexuals, but he is the member of the group who least wants to change who he is.

Alan is the play's most obvious example of someone whose image of himself does not match his behavior. When he calls Michael on the phone, he cries, and when he arrives in a roomful of obviously gay men, he develops a close bond with Hank, whom Alan describes as "an attractive fellow." But after a short while and a few drinks, he lashes out at Emory, the most feminine of the group, shouting insults that were commonly used against homosexuals. Alan's behavior seems to be overcompensation or panic because this evening has made him aware of homosexual yearnings within himself, especially when Michael reveals his past relationship with Justin Stuart. In the end, though, Alan returns to his wife, raising the possibilities that he has either narrowly avoided an identity crisis or that the signs of his unwilling homosexuality were not true.

Humiliation and Degradation

As he becomes more and more drunk, Michael becomes more offensive to his friends, making racial slurs at Bernard and anti-Semitic statements to Harold and even calling Emory a "nellie coward." His insults are bitter and crude, and the other men do not take them very seriously. This might be because they know that Michael is drunk and they forgive him, but it is also, in part, because they are used to living in a society that tries to heap degradation on homosexuals every day. To some degree, the anger that comes

from Michael is a reflection of the anger that Alan lets out when he attacks Emory, even though Michael is openly gay and Alan is not. They both lash out in ways that reflect more on themselves than on the people they are attacking.

The game that Michael devises in the second act is indicative of the sort of humiliation that homosexuals felt at the time that this play was produced. In order to get the men to participate, Michael shouts at them, swears at them, and does what he can to be offensive. His behavior is terrible, but the results of the game can be seen as being good for the participants, forcing them to come to grips with the reality of their lives. In most cases - as with Bernard, who plays first - the game actually has harmful psychological effects, leaving them dispirited and without hope. One of the central messages of *The Boys in the Band* is that the reality of being gay in a predominantly heterosexual - and often homophobic - society, which these characters are forced to face, is often humiliating and degrading. Hank and Larry come the closest to finishing the game with some dignity, but they still have to deal with a fundamental difference about whether their relationship should be monogamous or not. The other character who leaves his humiliation behind is Alan, who leaves the gay world and goes back to the married life that society accepts as "normal."

Secrecy

The lives of the characters in this play are based upon keeping their sexual orientation a secret from the general public. They frequent places like bathhouses and gay bars where they can be open about their sexuality, but for the most part their lives are spent pretending that they are not gay, as Michael asks his friends to do when he thinks Alan is coming over. Keeping the fact that one is gay a secret is compared to living life in a closet, and so openly admitting that one is gay is called "coming out of the closet," often shortened to "coming out," as when Michael explains that "long before Justin and I *came out*, we used to get drunk and 'horse around' a bit."

Because this play takes place in a limited, pro-gay environment, it can be difficult for contemporary audiences to understand the threats faced by these characters if they did not keep their sexual identities private. Most homosexuals kept their sexual preferences a secret in the 1960s because they suffered innumerable prejudices from society at large, from offensive slurs to random acts of violence to employment and housing discrimination. Many states in the country had laws against sodomy, meaning that homosexuals could be arrested for their sexual practices alone. The numerous activities that are meant to raise public awareness of homosexuality have served to remove some of the shame and threat from being gay, allowing homosexuals to live more openly.

Gender Roles

Although all of the characters in this play are men, their homosexuality leads them away from stereotypical masculine behavior. The clearest example of this is Emory, who acts almost thoroughly girlish, from pretending to be a topless cocktail waitress when serving

drinks to noting, when complimented on the food he has prepared, "I'd make somebody a good wife." Emory has a complete list of feminine names that he calls the other men, like calling Bernard "Bernardette" or Harold "Hallie." Like most of the others, he refers to other homosexual men as "she" or "her": in fact, his fight with Alan is a direct result of his saying, regarding Alan's wife, "they'd love to meet him-*her*. I have such a problem with pronouns."

Other than Emory, though, none of the characters in *The Boys in the Band* acts in a particularly feminine way. They may mock themselves for not conforming to traditional masculine values (as when Emory does his parody of a straight man by asking, with a deep voice, "Think the Giants are gonna win the pennant this year?"), but most of the conversation goes beyond gender roles, creating a middle ground for men who are not masculine but still are men.

Style

Setting

The Boys in the Band is a play that takes place in New York City in the late 1960s. It reflects a social situation in which gay men were free enough to gather together privately but were still oppressed enough to feel the degree of self-contempt exhibited by most of the characters here. The characters engage in urbane, witty dialog that *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes characterized as "camp or homosexual humor." Noting the effect of gay culture on New York, Barnes went on to note, "Indeed, the New York Wit, famous the world over, is little more than a mixture of Jewish humor and homosexual humor seen through the bottom of a dry martini glass." From the characters' awareness of fashion and good places to shop to the fact that Michael is characterized as a world traveler, there is every indication that these people could not exist as they do in anything smaller than the western hemisphere's center of culture and commerce.

Even though the mood of the time and place is important to understanding the social dynamics of the characters, still, the play takes place in one enclosed place, Michael's apartment. The world outside is experienced only through the things that the characters say about how they live their lives. The telephone is important because it connects them to society beyond that one apartment: in almost every case when they telephone out, they suffer from rejection, giving audiences of all time periods the sense of how closed and insulated homosexual society could be, even in a major city like New York.

Structure

Although *The Boys in the Band* does not have a strong plot line in the traditional sense, it does center around one particular idea, keeping readers in suspense over the outcome. At the center of all of the revelations that come out on the night of Harold's birthday party is the question of whether Alan McCarthy is ready to admit to himself and to others that he is gay. There seems to be little doubt about his sexual orientation from the start, when he is described as crying, "Great heaves and sobs. Really boo-hoo-hoo time—and that's not his style at all." Later, when Alan shows up, it is clear that he can tell (or at least has a pretty good idea) that everyone at the party is gay, but he does not leave. He becomes irrationally upset about Emory's effeminate behavior, as if he is threatened by the sight of a man who is comfortable with acting unmanly. All of the signs indicate that Alan will eventually admit to being a homosexual, leading right up to Michael's revelation that Alan has engaged in homosexual behavior before, with Justin Stuart.

The portion of the play that takes place before Alan arrives serves to establish Michael's normal character and behavior. After Alan reconciles with his wife and leaves, Michael stays on stage trying to cope with the changes that Alan's presence have effected on his

life. The whole drama is centered on Michael's relationship to what Alan knows and doesn't know and how Alan feels about himself. Michael is the central character, who is on stage throughout the play's running time, but his character is defined by what Alan does.

Style

The language used in *The Boys in the Band* is distinctive in its wit and cleverness, with frequent puns, sly put-downs, and allusions to movies, plays, and literature abounding. Just one instance would be the banter that ensues when a group of party guests arrives together:

Emory: (Loud aside to Michael.) I think they're going to have their first fight.

Larry: (Leans on landing) The first one since we got out of the taxi.

Michael: (*RE:* EMORY) Where'd you find this trash?

Larry: Downstairs leaning against a lamppost.

Emory: With an orchid behind my ear and big wet lips painted over the lipline.

Michael: Just like Maria Montez.

Donald: Oh, *please.*

Emory: (crossing to Donald) What have you got against Maria? She was a good woman.

To a great extent, this kind of language is a reflection of Mart Crowley's writing style, his way of keeping audiences entertained each moment they watch his play. Often, authors will write dialog that has all of the characters speaking with the same verbal style, and this is usually seen as a weakness, as a sign that the writer lacks the imagination to create different styles for each character. In this play, however, the consistency of speaking style helps to give readers a sense of the close-knit, unified worldview of this particular gay community. This is highlighted by the fact that the Cowboy does not "get" many of the sophisticated references: although he is gay, he is an outsider to this particular social circle, and so he is left out of the situation. The characters make fun of the Cowboy's simplicity, at his inability to keep up with their verbal banter, even though they accept him on a different, physical level.

Historical Context

Secret Meeting Places

At the time that this play was written, homosexuality was primarily an underground activity. Most large cities had homosexual communities, but these tended to stay to themselves, shut off from society at large. Most cities had clandestine gathering spots that were known as meeting places for homosexuals, but their existence was never officially recognized. For instance, certain areas of public parks, public rest rooms, train depots, balconies of movie theaters, and YMCAs were known among homosexuals as places to meet other gay men. Because of laws against homosexual activities and hostility toward homosexuals throughout the general public, the people who frequented these places tended to keep a low profile; still, their existence was fairly well known to the police, who would generally leave them alone, unless they were pressured for more arrests, such as when incumbent politicians were up for reelection.

Among the best-known places for gay men to gather in New York were the bathhouses. In *The Boys in the Band*, this is where Larry says that he and Donald had their brief, anonymous sexual encounter. Many major cities had public bathhouses dating back to the 1800s, when apartments with warm running water were scarce. By the start of the twentieth century, gay men had come to find the bathhouses, where men showered, steamed, and swam nude, to be convenient places to make acquaintances with each other. By the 1950s, there were bathhouses that catered exclusively to gay customers. Police could usually be bribed to leave these establishments alone, although they were always subject to raids. One of the most famous of the New York bathhouses was the Everard Turkish Bath, which opened in 1888 and was recognized as a meeting place for homosexuals by the 1920s. The one-dollar entrance fee included access to the pool, steam room, and a small cubicle with a cot in it. Other New York establishments included the New St. Mark's, Man's Country, and the New Barricks. In the 1970s and 1980s, with the rise of the Gay Pride Movement, the bathhouses became more open about being places for casual sexual encounters. By the mid-1980s, though, most closed down, as fear of the AIDS epidemic frightened away customers and public health officials moved to revoke the licenses of establishments that encouraged behaviors that would promote the spread of the disease.

The Stonewall Rebellion

The Boys in the Band premiered off-Broadway just a little more than a year before the single most significant event in the history of the Gay Rights Movement: the Stonewall Rebellion in New York. This event changed the way that the world looked at homosexuals and, more significantly, at the way that gays viewed themselves.

Throughout history, most societies have had a specific homosexual minority. In America, this group traditionally avoided confrontation, realizing that public exposure was usually

followed by persecution. During the 1950s, for example, when some politicians gained fame for themselves by stirring up fear of Communism infiltrating our culture, there was a rise of virulent homophobia. Gays and suspected gays were fired from their jobs regularly by people who believed that Communists could get sensitive secrets from them with blackmail, by threatening to expose their sexual orientation. In the 1960s, on the other hand, many minority groups followed the methods and reasoning of the Civil Rights Movement to gain recognition and respect. It was the start of the Black Power Movement, the Woman's Liberation Movement, and the American Indian Movement, to name just a few. The very fact that a play like *The Boys in the Band* was reviewed in national publications indicates that the country was aware that there was a homosexual culture that was distinct but really not that different than the mainstream.

On the night of June 27, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village. The Village, as it is referred to in Crowley's play, was home to quite a few bars catering to gay clientele: the Checkerboard, the Sewer, and the Snake Pit were just a few. In spite of laws that made homosexual activities illegal, police generally left the gay bars alone, but in the preceding few weeks they had made a sweep through the Village and shut several establishments down. Several factors came together: the growing recognition of gays and their resistance to being treated like criminals for their private sexual lives, the fact that many patrons at the Stonewall Inn were there because their favorite bars had already been closed, and the heat of the summer night. As police began to lead the bar's customers out to paddy wagons, a crowd gathered and began to chant. The situation erupted into violence when the last patron put up a struggle; as police tried to subdue her, the crowd threw coins, bricks, and bottles. The police on the scene had to retreat into the empty bar, which protestors set on fire. When the riot squad arrived, they managed to disburse the crowd, but the following night, violence flared up again in the Village. Over the next few days, gay men and women from the outlying areas, who had heard about the fledgling rebellion, came to participate. Riots were averted, but the message was clear that homosexuals would no longer quietly accept laws or practices that relegated them to the status of second-class citizens.

As a direct result of the Stonewall Rebellion, gay rights groups proliferated. Ten days after the initial action at Stonewall, the first "Gay Power" meeting was held in Greenwich Village. The movement grew, working to raise society's consciousness of the homosexuals among them and, more importantly, teaching gays to be proud of who they are. In just a few years, the self-loathing displayed by the characters in *The Boys in the Band* already looked dated, a relic of a time when gays had to live in seclusion and to regret being the way they were— as gay poet Allen Ginsburg, quoted in Rutledge (put it in a speech soon after Stonewall), "They've lost that wounded look fags all had ten years ago."

Critical Overview

The Boys in the Band was certainly not the first popular drama to have gay characters. For the most part, however, homosexuality was disguised in plays and film. One of the most powerful examples of this, which critics often point to as an immediate predecessor of Crowley's play, is Robert Anderson's 1953 drama *Tea and Sympathy*, about an effeminate boy who is mocked and threatened at a preparatory school. (He is given the nickname "Sister-Boy," and the headmaster's wife makes it her mission to "cure" him sexually.) What makes *The Boys in the Band* such a groundbreaking work is that it was the first mainstream piece to show gay men in their own environment, interacting with each other, acknowledging camp posturing, in-jokes, and psychological torment without mocking or overemphasizing. Critics took note of the fact that the characters are gay, and they pointed out the ways in which that situation, though central to their personalities, was overshadowed by their basic humanity. As Clive Barnes put it in the *New York Times*, "The power of the play, which I saw at one of its press previews, is the way in which it remorselessly peels away the pretensions of its characters and reveals a pessimism so uncompromising in honesty that it becomes in itself an affirmation of life." In general, reviews were as positive as Barnes's, crediting Crowley with getting beyond the stereotypical aspects of each character to a deeper understanding.

Though it opened off-Broadway, the play gained the attention of national publications, bringing awareness of *The Boys in the Band* into households across the country that were in small communities where the subject was still much more hidden than it was in New York. It received favorable reviews in *Time, Newsweek*, and the *Nation*; Harold Clurman, the reviewer for the *Nation*, noted that, while not being "profound, moving or 'psychological,'" it is a polished piece of entertainment, with "a smooth veneer applied in a vein now becoming fashionable." The unsigned review in *Time* praised the cast, which it called "expert," noting that they "interact with such flawless skill, timing and grace that they could declare themselves an ensemble company right now and be ranked with the best." Like most mainstream publications, *Time*'s favorable review comes with a warning for the squeamish: "Uncompromising in its vision, totally unfettered in its four-letter speech, *The Boys in the Band* is a play that may be repellent for some viewers."

Two years after its theatrical debut, the play was revisited by critics and audiences when the screen adaptation of it opened. Because the screenplay was written and produced by Crowley and the same actors appeared in it, the reviews for the film often referred back to the play. Vincent Canby, a respected and influential critic, noted that "My reservations about [the film] all have to do with the source material, which sounds too often as if it had been written by someone at a party." After noting Crowley's talent for "comedy-of-insult," Canby notes that "there is something basically unpleasant, however, about a play that seems to have been created in an inspiration of love-hate and that finally does nothing more than exploit its (I assume) sincerely conceived stereotypes."

Whether by coincidence of timing or a sign of the spirit of the times, *The Boys in the Band* was a groundbreaking work in a movement that gained power and popularity

quickly. Soon after the play appeared, taking a bold and unflinching look at the gay world that many heterosexuals knew existed but knew little about, the Stonewall Rebellion pushed the Gay Power Movement into high gear. The play's greatest innovation was to show people that homosexuals are people too; within the next few years, dozens of advocacy groups sprung up across the country, taking over that function. As the GayGate web page explains it, the play became obsolete as soon as the Stonewall riots took place. To modern gays, the play that once seemed liberating is now a threat, reaffirming old stereotypes about self-hating, psychologically tormented homosexuals to straight audiences who take its overly dramatic elements as a lesson in gay life. Modern critics also find it difficult to accept this play as a look at gay life because it was written with no awareness of the most critical, sweeping social change to affect the gay community during the 1980s and 1990s, the AIDS epidemic. Reviewing a 1997 revival of the play for *Tucson Weekly*, Margaret Regan notes the undeniable effect of AIDS: "The specter of early death has unequivocally transformed the gay community, as plays like *Jeffrey* . . . so readily attest." But it is not only the absence of any knowledge of the disease that softens the impact of *The Boys in the Band* for Regan: "Some of the play's psychology is dated, too. Crowley trots out the old myth of the overbearing mother creating the gay son, a tiresome staple of antediluvian psychotherapy now mercifully laid to rest by more persuasive genetic research. And let's hope that the stereotype of the self-loathing gay man, alive and well in the play, is on the way to the same archetypal graveyard." Like most material that was considered cutting edge in its time, *The Boys in the Band* is considered a quaint and naïve museum piece, interesting for its historical value but not really relevant today.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kelly teaches creative writing and drama as literature at Oakton Community College. In this essay, he discusses the historical significance of the play and looks at the reasons why its setting is so appropriate.

It was not too long after it changed the image that Americans had of homosexual men when it opened in 1967 that Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* came to seem dated and irrelevant. Such things can happen. Everyone has had the experience of meeting someone who makes a startling first impression and then becomes tiresome as hours drag by; certainly an innovative artistic piece is just as likely to lose its sheen once the novelty wears off. In the case of Crowley's play, the novelty was based on its respectful handling of the many facets of gay life. Coming at a time when the only homosexuals that showed up in popular entertainment were hysterical "fruits" or deviants bearing the burden of their "unnatural crimes," *The Boys in the Band* brought the spectrum of personality types among gays to the American stage.

Not coincidentally, the same wind of change that brought the play popularity brought the Stonewall Rebellion fourteen months after it. It was bound to happen; the gay subculture in the late 1960s was too vibrant to be constrained, repressed by laws governing sexual commerce in a country that bragged about being the land of the free. It was so ready for mainstream attention that a play about eight gay men gathering in a room and talking openly became a runaway success with heterosexual audiences. It was so ready that a few drag queens resisting arrest at the Stonewall Inn one summer night could generate a melee of bricks and bottles, turning the tables on the police and making them hide in fear from the power of homosexuals, building over the next few days to one of late-twentieth-century America's most significant political moments.

After the riots in Greenwich Village that started at Stonewall brought the struggle for recognition to the streets, there was suddenly less need for a stage play to tell the world about gay diversity. Lacking its social impact, *The Boys in the Band* was vulnerable to the criticism that almost always comes up when a work is conspicuously popular. Detractors said it was facile; that it dealt in stereotypes; that, truthful as it was, it failed to present the *whole* truth; and that it should set a more positive example for young homosexuals, one not so despairing. As quickly as the play ascended, so too did it burn out in a flash. The world was different for gays at the start of the 1970s, and *The Boys in the Band* was already a relic.

In his introduction to the collection of his most significant works, *3 Plays by Mart Crowley*, the author mentions, while discussing the autobiographical element of his writing, that *The Boys in the Band* was originally going to be set in a gay bar but that he changed the setting to a birthday party after attending a birthday party for one of his friends. It is in such seemingly random decisions that art is born. What it might have gained in authenticity from being in a bar setting, the play would have lost in sympathy for its characters. The bar scene has always been a part of the urban gay scene. Much of the cause of this is the social pressures that kept homosexuality underground for

most of the country's history. There were always secret meeting places known to insiders - certain park paths, movie balconies, subway platforms, and so forth - but these were out in the public, functional only for quick meetings, not for social bonding. It is only natural that gay bars would provide privacy in a social atmosphere. Still, a bar setting would have driven home the negative stereotyping that the play has been criticized for over the years. Any culture's bar scene is likely to highlight elements that the gay culture, in particular, has spent decades living down. A reputation for promiscuity, drug abuse, and for outrageous, decadent, open sexuality would only have been reinforced by a play set in a gay bar, with the extremes of the lifestyle shown at their most exuberant.

Besides, what could be more appropriate for a groundbreaking work than a birthday party carried out every time it is staged? Purists might insist that Stonewall represented the birth of the Gay Pride movement, but even they could not deny the significance of *The Boys in the Band* in bringing the culture to a point where Stonewall could occur. Like a birthday party itself, the play was a celebration when it first ran, a gathering for closeted gays who suddenly had a place to go to see other people like themselves. And, like a birthday party, there is always the specter of age, which leads inevitably to death, lurking somewhere about. In the play, Harold, the guest of honor, frets over the ravages of age and associates it with death, which he would welcome over the loss of his beauty. Ironically, in the real world, homosexuals had only a little more than a decade to celebrate their lifestyle out in the open before the advent of AIDS (which was originally called "gay flu" because it appeared to be some sort of virus that traveled among gays) cast the shadow of death over their lives. Since the early 1980s, it has been impossible to seriously discuss homosexual life without the impact of AIDS coming up. Those heady first days of liberation certainly seem like a party from today's perspective.

The play, though, does not seem like much of a celebration to audiences who experience it. Full of fighting, with egos broken, self-images rewritten, and the constant driving of the main character, Michael, to make his friends see the flaws in their lives, the action on stage shows no awareness of a new era dawning. Instead, it seems bent on trotting out the rottenness of every aspect of its times.

Critics who have dismissed the play for its self-loathing characters have a point but not as strong a point as they might think. The self-loathing aspect - such as Michael's cruelty to his friends or Harold's often-quoted introductory line about being an "ugly, pock-marked Jew Fairy" - are accurate reflections of their time. These men have a bunker mentality: like military men holed up in a bunker, they feel that they are under attack. They can realistically expect the violent, hostile world to come crashing into their lives at any time, and so they are ready for unmasking and humiliation at any moment. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that they would take the preemptive step of bringing up their own faults. If society sees them as sick, and if, lacking adequate support, they believe that they are, then there would of course be a taint of dissatisfaction with themselves in everything they do.

Modern audiences are, on the whole, astute enough to account for the fact that this play happened at a different time. They know that the homophobia that was common in the

1960s has much to do with why Crowley's characters are so harsh toward themselves. From a modern perspective, it is almost embarrassing to see how much these men treat their sexual orientation as a curse. But it would be too simplistic to say that this sends a message that being gay is bad. People who take this message from the play either lack historical sense or they don't trust others to have understanding and so they take on the role of censorship to keep other people from getting the wrong impression. Nobody really looks to Michael, Donald, Emory, and all the rest as "role models," and, with all that has happened during the past three decades, nobody expects them to provide a glimpse into the New York gay lifestyle anymore. Their only function now is to be interesting characters.

And they are interesting, in ways that are different from how they were interesting when the play first opened. Then, Michael, the angry, self-loathing party host, might have been taken seriously for his tortured Catholicism and his psychoanalytical interpretation of how his mother "made" him into a homosexual with her pampering ways. Now, it is merely interesting to know that people once thought that way. The religious positions declared by Michael and Harold show less interest in theology than showing themselves to be outside the mainstream Protestantism. It is ironic that Michael would try using psychoanalysis to "cure" his homosexuality: over time, homosexuality has become less stigmatized and has outlasted psychoanalysis, which has lost credibility. In fact, Michael's angst fits more closely with the recognized patterns of alcoholism than with anything his mother may have done.

The other most memorable characters are Emory and Alan. At the time, Emory might have come off as a crowd-leaser, a gay equivalent of the black-faced minstrel characters who embarrassed African Americans by talking in exaggerated dialects, acting out gross stereotypes of laziness and weak-mindedness. Today, though, Emory's giddy hysteria makes him the play's most vivid character, and his kindness toward Alan in the second act shows a depth of humanity that a stereotype could not have. Alan's fit of machismo, lunging at Emory while muttering slurs about gays, might seem dated, but the character is drawn with enough complexity to make him believable in any age. The other characters, though based in stereotypes, are the sorts that can be found in any gathering, and therefore they cannot be considered to be insults to their kind. Larry can't commit, but his partner Hank is the nesting type; Bernard is a minority within a minority; the Cowboy is kept around for his good looks and is dumb enough not to mind. Donald is the voice of reason that any good story will include.

Of course, *The Boys in the Band* is not as socially significant as it once was, but it is far from irrelevant. Times have changed, but there is enough insight in this play to give some insight to new audiences. The people who have written it off through the years seem to have mistaken it for a lecture on the social situation of gays, acting disappointed that they've come away from the lecture without taking any notes. It isn't a lecture; it's a party. Like any party, there are going to be unpleasant moments and moments when the meaning behind the rituals is lost in time, but the mood of celebration is still there every time this play is performed.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *The Boys in the Band*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Scheie discusses the controversy over the representation of gay identity in the play The Boys in the Band, *calling into question what it means to be a "gay spectator in the 1990s" while assessing various audience reactions to the play over time.*

"Bellwether," "watershed," "crossroads," "turning point": with these and other ponderous terms, critics have hailed Mart Crowley's 1968 *The Boys in the Band* as the breakthrough production that brought frank and direct representations of homosexuality to American theatre. Where earlier plays had disposed of their "deviant" characters in a denouement that was often tantamount to a cleansing of the homosexual taint, spectators of *The Boys in the Band* witnessed for the first time a group of men discussing their sex lives, dancing together, kissing, and even having sex on a mainstream stage. The play takes the spectator to an exclusively gay birthday party at the apartment of Michael, a troubled man who coerces his guests into playing a truth game that elicits a series of witty barbs, confessions, and emotional outbursts as each tells the story of his life and loves. In a marked reversal of theatre tradition, the sole straight character, Michael's former college roommate Alan, is the outsider; it is his unexpected arrival that triggers an explosive scene in Crowley's play, and the restoration of order requires the purging of the straight man from the stage. *The Boys in the Band* was a hit (1002 performances). Thereafter, gay characters have frequently occupied center stage instead of the more pathologized regions of the margins, and "gay plays" have flourished in the years since *The Boys'* success.

Despite the play's groundbreaking status, the unflattering portrait of gay identity *The Boys in the Band* puts forth—a group of unhappy, self-destructive men who attend a boozy party that ends in an emotional bloodbath—did not leave all spectators with a feeling of exhilarating freedom. Infamous lines such as "You show me a happy homosexual and I'll show you a gay corpse" fueled growing suspicions that the play, far from empowering, suggests instead the impossibility of a viable gay identity. One spectator writes, "I felt like I had been discovered . . . I wanted to fall into the earth. I was horrified by the depiction of the life that might befall me. I have very strong feelings about that play. It's done a lot of harm to gay people." *The Boys in the Band* starkly illustrates the dangers of entering representation, and the unease it has generated over the years refutes the commonsensical notion that increased visibility constitutes an unequivocal gesture of empowerment for a historically invisible and oppressed minority.

Consequently, when a new production of *The Boys in the Band* opened in New York City in the summer of 1996, nearly thirty years after the first run had ended, one might have anticipated that its tarnished reputation would have quelled the enthusiasm of potential spectators. This was not the case. Although it raised a few eyebrows, audiences generally received the revival well; after a successful run at the WPA theatre, it moved to the larger Lucille Lortel theatre for several more weeks. I saw the revival at both theatres and on each occasion witnessed what appeared to be a predominantly gay audience thoroughly relishing the show. I too enjoyed it, yet was not entirely

comfortable with my reaction, nor with that of the audiences. After all, aren't we supposed to have a problem with *The Boys in the Band*? I wondered at the audience's —and my own—willingness not only to tolerate but to derive pleasure from watching the taxonomy of pathetic and self-loathing characters that inhabit this play. After decades of discomfort or even disavowal, what had changed to make this play acceptable, meaningful, or at the very least entertaining for a gay spectator in 1996?

This begs the question of what it means to be a "gay" spectator in the 1990s in the first place. The idea of "gay" as a self-evident category of identity and an easily definable community has lost considerable currency in the age of the queer. In contrast with the struggle to make visible and to affirm proudly a viable gay and lesbian identity that characterized many theatre productions of the 1970s and 1980s, a queer commentary, informed by a poststructuralist and postmodern interrogation of fixed subject positions, reveals the margins, the internal contradictions, and the instability of identities, with no exemption for the categories of "gay" and "lesbian." From a queer perspective, the articulation of sexuality that presupposes a stable "gayness" assumes a naive, uncritical, and even dangerous position, one that, be it closeted, oppositional, or assimilationist, risks re-inscribing the categories of a heteronormative epistemological regime.

Although *The Boys in the Band*'s rehabilitation coincides more or less with the rise of the queer, it seems unlikely that this new critical sensibility could account for the play's new-found appeal. Theatrical performance has occupied a marginal and frequently discredited position in theorizations of queer, which more often examine television, film, and "everyday life" performances. A salient example of this trend would be Judith Butler's influential articulation of performativity, one of the most widely revoked theories in queer critiques, which borrows a theatrical vocabulary that suggests an affinity to the stage but rarely includes live performance in its discussion. When Butler does address the stage specifically, it is to define a "critically queer" performativity against the conventions of theatrical performance. Furthermore, conventional mimetic theatre—and there is no mimesis more conventional than the fourth-wall realism of *The Boys in the Band*—purports precisely to make visible the "reality" of its gay characters, and would more likely draw the reprimand of a queer commentary. Dramatic realism remains fraught for the representation of homosexuality, and critics have been quick to note that in even the most well-intentioned gay plays homosexuality is more often than not the problem in need of solving that motivates the plot. A more radical theatre, one that refuses recourse to a fixed identity that exists outside of its representation, would seem to demand a new mode of performance. In the 1980s, many artists eschewed the conventions of realism for a performance art that explicitly targets categories of identity, very often gendered and sexual identity, for deconstruction. In articulating the necessity of performance art, David Román writes that "realist drama is so embedded in the prevailing ideology of naturalized heterosexuality in dominant culture that it offers no representational position for gay men or lesbians that is not marginal or a site of defeat." While a materialist analysis of the history of realism and its reception—Elin Diamond's theorization of a realism without truth or "unmade" mimesis, for example—might refine such a sweeping critique, *The Boys in the Band* nonetheless exemplifies this tendency when in its denouement Michael has a near nervous breakdown and Donald embarks

on an alcoholic binge. The revival, it should be noted, deployed no subversive performance strategies that issued an ironic or critical comment on the play; it played it "straight" (as it were).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's analysis of the unstable distinction between minoritizing and universalizing discourses on homosexuality proves illuminating for an assessment of reactions to *The Boys in the Band*. Minoritizing discourses cast the homosexual as a segregated, distinct identity, while universalizing ones integrate gay men into society at large. Regarding AIDS and AIDS prevention, to use Sedgwick's example, a minoritizing discourse would speak of the male homosexual as part of a distinct "risk group," while the universalizing discourse would refer to "safe sex practices" that do not specify the sexual identity of the subjects involved. Neither, it should be noted, is inherently oppressive or unquestionably "correct." Universality or equal treatment under the law usually underlies civil rights initiatives, and is in word if not in deed an ideological underpinning of the American ideals of freedom and equality. However, exclusive recourse to the universal is not always a desirable trajectory for gay activism. As Sedgwick writes: "substantial groups of women and men . . . have found that the nominative category of 'the homosexual,' or its more recent near-synonyms, does have a real power to organize their experience of their own sexuality and identity." Universality can be synonymous with invisibility, and staking a claim to a minority identity is crucial for many gay activist strategies. Making visible differences, however, is a double-edged sword: one person's Gay Pride march is someone else's idea of a freak show, or yet another's sell-out to the myth of a tolerant inclusive pluralism. What proves most interesting and productive for Sedgwick, and for the discussion that follows, is not which of the universalizing or minoritizing discourses is better or more true, but how these discourses align themselves in unpredictable and contradictory ways. They often uncomfortably intersect a single utterance to betray the "radical and irreducible incoherence" that inheres in discourse on sexual identity. The deceptively simple bumper sticker slogan "Gay rights are human rights" betrays this internal contradiction, at once defining a distinct community (gays) and erasing this difference under the rubric of the "human." This double movement radically disturbs the invocation of both gay and human identity; both stand on the shifting ground of a constitutive instability. The destabilized identity that emerges from Sedgwick's analysis makes hers a distinctly queer critical approach, one that proves particularly useful in that it does not simply refute the universalizing and the minoritizing discourses on gay identity but invites and even depends on an analysis of both to "queer" the identities they purport to describe.

The three reviews written by *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes during *The Boys in the Band*'s first run illustrate the contradictory interplay of these opposed discourses. In his 15 April 1968 review, *The Boys* draws his praise for its open representation of gay characters after decades of innuendo-laden closet-dramas: "The play, which opened last night at Theater Four, is by far the frankest treatment of homosexuality I have ever seen on the stage. We are a long way from 'Tea and Sympathy' here." However, Barnes ultimately grounds his enthusiasm for the play in distinctly universalizing terms:

The point is that this is not a play about a homosexual, but a play that takes the homosexual milieu, and the homosexual way of life, totally for granted and uses this as

a valid basis of human experience . . . The power of the play . . . is the way in which it remorselessly peels away the pretensions of its characters and reveals a pessimism so uncompromising in its honesty that it becomes in itself *an affirmation of life.*

Barnes hails the play for its daring "homosexual" content, but then draws the newly visible identity under the umbrella of a universal human identity. Thus validated as a card-carrying human, Barnes's homosexual can serve as the hero who "affirms life" for all spectators, regardless of the particulars of their own lives. If *The Boys* is a play about "human experience," however, it is nonetheless about gay men, and homosexuality still constitutes the problem that drives the plot forward. The unsavory minoritizing tendencies of the play— evoked in Barnes's use of the word "homosexual," a juridico-medical term of pathological provenance— haunt Barnes's evaluation, and in his second review of 18 February 1969 he deploys a more ambivalent balance of the two discourses:

The play is about a *homosexual birthday* party—or rather, to be precise, it is set at a homosexual birthday party. It is actually about *self-loathing and the malignant destructiveness* that develops from it. . . . But I do hope that Mart Crowley is wrong and that all homosexuals are not as wretchedly miserable as he paints them.

Barnes tries once again to dissociate the characters' sexuality from a more universal self-loathing, but concedes that this might not be possible and frowns on the troubled portrait of "homosexual" identity that emerges in Crowley's play. Barnes explicitly pathologizes the play's homosexual characters as "malignant," and tacitly opposes them to the relative "health" of the human (read: heterosexual) spectator. The stigmatized minority identity thwarts the desired elevation of its characters into the universal humanity, and Barnes tempers his praise for *The Boys in the Band* accordingly.

Barnes's assessment, no doubt a function of his mainstream readership, favors the liberal "we'rethe-same-only-different" universal and vilifies the irrecuperably minoritizing aspects of the play, thereby failing to weigh the drawbacks of the former and the potential benefits of the latter, and *a fortiori* the instability of both positions. Barnes eventually could not see beyond the self-destructive stereotypes in Crowley's play. Adding to this concern, the dramatic events of the 1969 Stonewall riots upstaged *The Boys in the Band* and made visible in the streets a very different type of gay man, one who boldly took action in defense of his dignity. The powerless, self-blaming, washed-up characters of Crowley's play no longer announced the future, emblematizing instead a troubled past that contrasted starkly with the nascent gay liberation movement. Barnes's final review of 18 August 1970, written shortly before the play closed, betrays a marked change of heart:

The "Boys in the Band" has just entered its third year at Theater Four on West 55th Street, and the damndest thing has happened to it. It has become a period piece. Two years ago, when the theater was young and innocent, Mart Crowley's comic-tragedy seemed sensationally frank. To an extent it still is, but the liberating sense of breakthrough is missing. I am also more and more disturbed by the *antihomosexual* element in the play.

The breakthrough quality, the inclusion of gays in the great "human" family that validated the play, has dwindled to mere memory. Magnified to a "disturbing" level, the stigmatized minoritizing tendencies have eclipsed the universal value.

Gay history was moving very fast in the early 1970s. *The Boys in the Band*'s self-hating characters, who wished so desperately that they could be straight, not only alienated mainstream critics like Barnes but also quickly became anathema to the new mantra of Gay Pride. The new gay identity rallied those who proudly embrace their difference from the mainstream. Doric Wilson's 1982 play *Street Theater* crystallizes this sentiment in a scathing indictment of Crowley's characterizations. Wilson takes homosexuality out of a closeted apartment and, as the title indicates, brings it into the streets. *Street Theater* confronts the spectator with its own taxonomy of gay and lesbian types: leathermen, butch lesbians, hippie kids, "juicebums, hopheads, odd-balls, weirdos, queers . . . the usual gutter crowd you got to expect to contend with down here in the Village." Instead of wallowing in self-pity and mutual disdain, however, this diverse group defiantly bands together against the harassment of the police. *Street Theater* also includes in its cast the lead characters of Crowley's play, Michael and Donald, who, in preppie dress, refuse to participate in this counter-cultural community and berate the "uppity" gay and lesbian characters while loudly lamenting their own situation. As the characters angrily muster and prepare to join the incipient Stonewall riots at the end of the play, Donald exclaims, "You faggots are revolting!" "You bet you're sweet ass we are!" a closeted man retorts, before running off to the uprising in the first open expression of his new gay identity. Significantly, on the night of the incendiary raid on the Stonewall Inn, up on 55th Street *The Boys in the Band* was in the middle of its successful run. *Street Theater* would play thirteen years later in a small space in Tribeca and then in the Mineshaft leather bar. Its gay audience and use of a gay space stand in telling counterpoint to the mainstream appeal of *The Boys in the Band*. Wilson condemns Crowley's closeted and self-blaming characters for their complicity with the forces that repress them, a tacit alliance that perhaps contributed to the play's success in a mainstream venue. His critique of *The Boys in the Band* therefore operates through both universal and minoritizing discourses. The "universal" impulse that for Barnes validated *The Boys in the Band* is here branded a sell-out, as ill-regarded as the play's stigmatizing representation of a minority gay identity. In the place of the Michaels and Donalds who lament their exclusion from a heterosexual mainstream, Wilson draws an unambiguous battle line that ideologically but also very literally delineates the newly liberated and proud gay community, which coalesces into a unified "we," from the oppressive mainstream and those who fear to challenge it.

The proud gay identity had deposed the pathologized homosexual, and *The Boys in the Band* became a reference point, an important but provisional first step in the history of gay theatre. Often invoked but rarely studied or performed, in the 1970s and 1980s Crowley's play was virtually relegated to the toxic waste dump of cultural memory: a drum of tainted cultural sludge whose existence is readily acknowledged, but which would preferably remain buried—until now, that is. In recent years *The Boys in the Band* has resurfaced not only in New York, but also in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and even Fort Wayne, Indiana. A new edition of the play was also published in 1996. Who are these readers and spectators who find the play so appealing and have guaranteed its

success in the 1990s? Are they good old-fashioned pragmatic liberals who see the universal struggle for "human" self-respect? Do they represent self-identified gays, for whom the characters' outdated angst serves as incontrovertible evidence that the fight for gay pride over the last thirty years has met with a great measure of success? Or are they critical queers, who find an exemplary illustration of the delusions of realism and the dangers that inhere in staking a claim to the "truth" of gay identity? Without surveys or interviews it is impossible, of course, to know who the audience members were and exactly how they received they play. However, Barnes and Wilson carve out two spectatorial positions, one striving for the universal and the other for a minority identity, from which they and others have historically condemned the representation of homosexuality in *The Boys in the Band*. To conclude, I would like to weigh how these positions might also serve as a justification for the play's renewed success, adding to them a third perspective, that of a queer commentary.

The universalizing liberal humanist account appeals, as is typical, to common sense and to a comforting belief in progress. From this perspective, one could maintain that times have changed for the better and that, although discrimination exists in many forms today, often brutally, gay men have achieved heretofore unknown visibility and acceptance. They have become a recognizable part of mainstream culture, and, without necessarily implying that the homosexual/heterosexual distinction is fading as a fundamental opposition for thinking about identity, it no longer represents the stigmatized and exclusionary opposition to the extent it once did. The more tolerant cultural climate generates revised readings of *The Boys in the Band*. John M. Clum writes that the 1968 audience was positioned to identify with the straight Alan, who looked upon the gay characters with disgust and pity and who, like the spectators, leaves the party-goers and their world behind for a "normal" life at the end of the play. In the 1990s, however, Alan comes off as an intolerant bigot, and the audience identifies with the gay characters as the play's heroes. It is the most outrageously effeminate character, the lisping interior decorator Emory, who emerges as the hero of the group when he defiantly stands up to the boorish insults of the drunk Alan and, at the risk of physical injury, dares to exhibit his sexuality while all the others attempt to pass as well as they can. Furthermore, the current range of gay personae on stage, film, and most recently television relieves *The Boys in the Band* of the heavy responsibility of being the first and only frank depiction of gay men a mainstream audience could see. Unlike Barnes, who sought the universal but ultimately could not see past the characters' homosexuality, the 1990s spectator, gay or straight, can "get over" it and accept these characters not as the definitive representation of gayness, but as one inflection of the human experience among many; even the nellyest queen can be elevated to the status of an Aristotelian hero. Criticism has come full circle, and a 1990s spectator might agree with what Barnes unsuccessfully attempted to establish in his reviews: that this is not ultimately a play about homosexuality, but the story of oppressed people who struggle against impossible odds and at great risk to maintain a sense of dignity in a hostile world.

It would be difficult to argue that the increased and hard-won acceptance of gays has in no way altered the reception of the play. The universalizing explanation of the revival's success nonetheless ignites the well-rehearsed critique of realism, which warns that

even the most positive and ostensibly innocuous representations of gay characters betray a compromise with a heteronormative regime of power relations. In an eye-opening critique of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, for example, David Savran responds to those who greeted the complex and varied representations of gay men and persons with AIDS with enthusiastic approval. Savran identifies "ambivalence" as a dominant trope in *Angels in America*, and concludes that because Kushner's characters speak both from within and against the oppositional or alternative discourses (including Marxism, Mormonism, and liberal humanism), they ultimately neutralize dissent in an agreement to disagree. This consensus for inaction represents a fundamentally conservative ideal of a pluralistic state in which everyone has a place, or, more cynically, in which everyone *knows* her place. Savran questions the play's ability to challenge the order of white, heterosexual, and bourgeois America while also being an economically successful Broadway show. He ultimately reads this contradiction as a relationship of antagonistic complicity, and the "opposition between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic" that characterizes both the story within the play and that of its long and profitable run ultimately resolves in the myth of an inclusive pluralism. If even the sympathetic and empowered characters of Kushner's play are suspect, the troubled men in *The Boys in the Band* conform so completely to homophobic expectations that their appearance would seem to constitute not a liberating breakthrough for gay men but a naturalized justification of gay self-loathing. If gays are admitted to the table of "humanity," theirs is not a place of honor, no matter how valiant they show themselves.

A more militant and proud gay spectator might therefore feel anxiety instead of elation over inclusion—one might say absorption—into the mainstream and point out that the universalizing humanist account of the revival's success conspicuously fails to acknowledge the overwhelming *gayness* of it all: of the characters, of the audiences, and of the play's place in the history of the gay rights movement itself. It is, therefore, on very different grounds that the revival of *The Boys in the Band* might appeal to a minority gay identity, one that today finds itself somewhat a victim of its own success. Michel Foucault writes that repressive regimes unwittingly spawn new sites for sexuality. The proliferation of secret places where gay men congregate would confirm Foucault's hypothesis; without the constraints that create its necessity, that notorious corner of the public park would just be a shady grove of trees, not an outdoor cruising area invested with intense sexual energy. However, these constraints have to varying degrees been eased, permitting a dispersal of gay sexuality from the confined but erotically charged crucible of those secret places out of society's sight—the unmarked bar, the bath house, the dark cruising area—which consequently lose some of their dire necessity. Men who would have met in a back alley gay bar thirty years ago might today openly express their sexuality without having to leave the circles of their institutionalized class, their neighborhood, their place of employment, or even their religious community. As feminists grapple with the question of exactly which women they are speaking of and for, gay activists and theorists similarly address a diverse community with a broad range of interests and characteristics, many of which would be incompatible in a single person. While many gay men choose to live in the gay "ghettos" of major cities and continue to frequent the "dark places," the difference between their much ballyhooed "homosexual lifestyle" and that of their straight neighbors is often riding on one increasingly less salient difference among a flood of possible similarities.

Anxiety over the increasingly ill defined gay identity lends urgency to a minoritizing counterexplanation of the revival's appeal. Harold's birthday party represents another one of those places out of society's sight where gay men meet. The characters in *The Boys in the Band*, though similar in some respects, are also black and white, nelly and butch, conservative and free-thinking, Catholic and Jewish, city-dwellers and suburbanites . . . the list could go on. They are a heterogeneous bunch who appear to have very little in common. They often don't even seem to like each other. In the opening scene, when Donald asks who is coming to the party, Michael replies, "the same old tired fairies you've seen around since the day one." A few lines earlier, he had stated only half-jokingly, "if there's one thing I'm not ready for, it's five screaming queens singing 'happy birthday.'" The party itself, with the exception of a nostalgic and riotous line dance sequence, serves up a steady flow of vicious insults that crescendo to an unbearable breaking point. One common interest above all others explains why these diverse characters come together in Michael's apartment: they are gay. Furthermore, it is not only in the action on stage that the WPA and the Lucille Lortel theatres joined the cruising spot and the bar as one of those dark places where gay men congregate; the revival brought gay men together in the audience as well. The dimmed house lights muted the differences among the spectators, who could collectively identify not with the characters' life in the closet, but with the distinctness of their minority gay identity and the strength of the bonds it forged between men, even if they were forged under constraint. *The Boys in the Band* created a certain *communitas*, the ritual reduction of difference, and fostered a clear-cut and unambiguous, if unproblematized, sense of gay identity.

Both universalizing and minoritizing tendencies, therefore, potentially explain the success of the revival. Wilson's double-bind becomes a win-lose or even a win-win situation in the 1990s. However, the chiasm of positive and negative assessments, articulated through both universalizing and minoritizing discourses on identity, generates a complex range of intersecting possibilities that coexist in contradictory tension. The revival therefore appeals to the third fictive spectator as well, the critical queer who, versed in poststructuralist theory, would make short shrift of the purportedly "true" and stable identities, be they human or gay. A queer commentary would reveal that the category of the human subsumes homosexuality into a universal ideal that in fact represents the norms and interests of a heterosexual society which itself only makes sense in opposition to the homosexual, and that, furthermore, the emergence of an ostensibly oppositional gay identity is just another effect of this same regime of power relations. "Human" and "Gay" are two sides of a single coin that conceal, while they gird, their opposite face. A contradictory internal logic undermines both the liberal humanist and the militant gay faith in mimesis and betrays the constitutive instability of the imaginary identities that these discourses erect.

The queer commentary appears to be the most theoretically evolved of the three hypothetical positions, and it offers a compelling critique of the other two. However, in this scissors-paper-rock scenario, queer in its turn is not immune to critique. The queer interrogation of identity has provoked unease in critics who note that it reproduces the occlusion of difference that has historically worked to the favor of some and the detriment of others, and that it absorbs gay identity once again into a universal, even if it

is a universal refusal of identity. Sue-Ellen Case worries over the radical evacuation of the category "lesbian" in queer commentaries and wonders if they are not just one more mechanism to keep the lesbian in her historically invisible place. Leo Bersani sees queering as a fundamentally degaying" gesture, one that "repeats, with pride, a pejorative straight word for homosexual even as it unloads the homosexual referent." He takes Sedgwick to task specifically, protesting her claim that homosexuality inheres in the oppositions that support Western thought:

It [Sedgwick's claim] rips us [gays] right out of our marginal status and relocates us, distinguished and incarnate, at the very heart of the epistemological endeavor, at the root of the western pursuit of knowledge.

By these accounts, "queer" represents the latest inflection of an old and all too familiar disappearing act. Case and Bersani refuse to relinquish the meaning of "gay" and "lesbian" as oppositional categories of identity, and resist their subsumption into both the universal Western humanity and the disturbingly similar "gayless" world of the queer.

There is no doubt that some queer theorizations have demonstrated a tendency to evoke an ideal, post-identity utopia as their implicit goal. Almost all, however, also warn that the present constraints are not easily dislodged and problematize the possibility of an autonomous, unilateral refusal of identity. Hitting on a crucial distinction, Jill Dolan writes that "to be queer is not who you *are*, it's what you *do*. To this one might add that even when "doing" queer you cannot simply cease to "be." Living on the near side of a perhaps not so imminent epistemological break, the fact that I "do" queer does not imply that I may wilfully shed the requisite identities, however imaginary, that I am constrained and/or privileged to "be"—gay, male, white, middle-class, and so on. Gay and queer are not mutually exclusive terms. In fact, the opposition between them is somewhat specious, for they are not fully commensurate: gay is a discursive position, but, until the advent of a post-symbolic utopia, queer will retain a measure of meta-discourse. Sedgwick fosters an uneasy co-existence of the two, and Bersani perhaps overstates the "degaying" gesture of her study. The analysis in *The Epistemology of the Closet* operates through the homosexual/heterosexual binary, not against it, and nowhere in it does Sedgwick contend that it is desirable, let alone possible, to eliminate "gay" as a defining category of identity. Sedgwick's stated aim to "render less destructively presumable 'homosexuality' as we know it today" could be read as a diminution of the category, but it also announces an attempt to enrich it, to rescue it from the poverty of unidimensional stereotypes and unquestioned normative assumptions.

The queer spectator therefore joins the humanist and the gay as fictive positions of hypothetical purity; none, in practice, enjoys autonomy from the others and freedom from contradiction. These three untenable extremes prove useful, nevertheless, by staking out a field of possibilities within which a spectator might locate a more viable, though inevitably ambivalent, position. Dolan plots one of these when she maintains that "'queer' opens spaces for people who embrace all manner of sexual practices and identities, which gives old-fashioned gays and lesbians a lot more company on the front lines," while also hoping that "we'll celebrate the achievements of gay and lesbian theatre and performance, along with the queer version, so that we can remember our

history." Through the uneasy but necessary tension that arises between the universalizing queer and minoritizing gay tendencies housed in these two statements emerges a fourth possible spectator of *The Boys in the Band*. This spectator both "is" gay, because he cannot live outside of this category into which a society has interpellated him, and "does" queer by recognizing and interrogating the contradictory pressures that both shape and subvert this identity. The gay spectator "doing" queer might realize Dolan's hope, queerly keeping the category of gay open while recognizing *The Boys in the Band*'s uniquely significant situation as a play whose history, in 1996 as in 1968, participates in and is marked by that of gays themselves. Furthermore, although this position hovers somewhere near the gay/queer vector in this triangulated field, it nonetheless retains a certain measure of universal humanism as well, despite or, as Bersani might argue, because of its queerness. In the dark of the theatre, this spectator identifies with the community of spectators—not necessarily all gay—who come together and watch this play in a shared recognition of history, desire, and constraint, while never forgetting that the lights will come up to reveal this imaginary "we" as a heterogeneous crowd, transitory and provisional, whose few hundred individuals will quickly disperse into the city streets.

Source: Timothy Scheie, "Acting Gay in the Age of Queer: Pondering the Revival of *The Boys in the Band*," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 42, No. 11, Spring 1999, pp. 1-12.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Carrithers, focusing primarily on the movie version of The Boys in the Band, *discusses the concept of the "gaze" in terms of a heterosexual audience and homosexual subjects and argues that the film's gay stereotypes work to the advantage of the heterosexual norm.*

Few critics discussing spectatorship or the "gaze" of the spectator address the ways a heterosexual audience might view a film whose primary characters are homosexual. Even fewer of these critics address the ways such films attempt to accommodate these viewers. For a film to be successful, at least financially, it must attract the often larger heterosexual (straight) audience. A work such as *The Boys in the Band* (dir. William Friedkin), a 1970 Cinema Center Films release, modifies its images of gay sexuality in order to provide a "comfortable" experience for straight viewers. In films such as this one, which feature homosexual sexuality, there is a privileging of heterosexually inspired images (the most predominant being monogamous gay "marriage") - images that are antithetical to the redefinitions of sexuality and relationships supported by many gay men of the post-Stonewall generation. Such mediated depictions comfort the straight audience - primarily its men - by not forcing them to encounter (and, by extension, perhaps to accept) the possibility of other forms of sexuality, particularly non-monogamous gay forms.

Simultaneously such a film negatively depicts those gay lives that do not follow heterosexual paradigms, reinforcing long-held stereotypes of gays as sad, troubled, and unhappy people. Gay viewers, hoping to see themselves and their lives reflected on the screen, find instead two equally distasteful options: either they must behave like straight men if they want to succeed, or they must accept a definition of their identity imposed by straight men. Richard Dyer says that by stereotyping, "the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinate groups, find the latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups' sense of legitimacy of their domination." They can, in other words, take comfort in knowing they were right all along if no images on the screen call those stereotypes into question. In *The Boys in the Band*, this message emerges from the film's climactic scene, involving an emotionally brutal party game and its winners, which serves to reinforce the dominance of heterosexuality, not only by privileging monogamy and marriage, but also by "distorting, maligning or just plain ignoring" what the political action group Queer Nation, Los Angeles chapter, called in Frontiers "our true queer lives."

Writer/producer Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* was performed first as a play in 1968 and then released as a film two years later, giving it a unique place in gay history. Its two versions appear on either side of the 1969 Stonewall uprising, a series of riots and demonstrations in New York City over incidents of police brutality and raids of gay bars. It remains perhaps "the most famous Hollywood film on the subject of male homosexuality." Yet its narrative becomes problematic for gay viewers because forms of sexuality that are alternatives to heterosexual paradigms - forms supported by activists since the beginning of the modern gay civil rights movement - are presented as failures.

The only successful or happy men in the film are Hank and Larry, whose relationship most closely resembles (at the film's conclusion) a heterosexual marriage, and the token straight character, Alan, whom the other characters suppose to be gay (a "closet queen") but who exits the action with an intact heterosexual identity - wife and children included.

None of the other characters in the play or film elicits sympathy from the audience for gay men and their lives, a criticism that has been made for more than 20 years now. Michael is the main character, who is giving a birthday party for Harold. He suffers a brief nervous breakdown, and he and Donald, his ex-lover, are both in psychoanalysis to help them accept their identities as gay men - identities that persistently trouble them, causing them guilt. Harold is a guilt-ridden, unattractive Jew who must get stoned before appearing at his own birthday party. Cowboy is Harold's birthday present from Emory; he sells his body for money. Emory, the interior designer with an immaculately coiffed poodle, is too "nellie" (or effeminate) and therefore unable to assimilate fully into the mainstream of either gay or straight communities. Bernard, listed in the character outlines of the play simply as "twenty-eight, Negro, nice-looking," must face the prejudices of racism and homophobia; his role is remarkably peripheral. None of these men represents what might be considered an acceptable image of gayness because they are too stereotypical, as the character descriptions by Crowley indicate.

Indeed, *The Boys in the Band*, in its presentation of a social conflict between gay and straight identities, ultimately "functions" to the advantage of a straight spectator. That spectator's double is Alan, the token straight man who watches the proceedings. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe such conflicts: "In class society where social conflict is always present these sites [of symbolic and metaphoric intensity] do not necessarily coincide with the 'objective' conflict boundaries of an antagonistic class but will nevertheless function to the advantage of one social group rather than another." In this text, the advantage belongs to the straight audience. Laura Mulvey states, "mainstream film coded the erotic [or the sexual] into the language of the dominant patriarchal order," which, in this case, is heterosexual. Heterosexual audience members can reassure themselves of the stereotypes of gays, especially the negativity believed to be inherent in homosexuality.

The discussion that follows focuses primarily on the film version of *The Boys in the Band*, not the play or the 1968 printed version of the play as it was originally performed off Broadway. However, Hollywood's fidelity to the original script in preparing it for filming - using the playwright as the screenwriter - remains a remarkable achievement. The entire off-Broadway cast reprise their roles in the film, and the only major change in the scenes, aside from the opening credits montage, is the addition of a rainstorm that forces the party guests into Michael's apartment where they play the telephone "truth" game devised by Michael. Even though the film came out just one year after the Stonewall uprising, the impact of the uprising and the subsequent emergence of a new sense of identity for gay men (now known as "gay pride") do not appear. Although it is not too surprising that the film does not acknowledge these events - the uprising was barely mentioned in the mainstream media - what is surprising is the degree to which

The Boys in the Band has kept rigid, pre-Stonewall stereotypes of gay men in public view for the past 25 years.

Typical - almost stereotypical - of the reactions to the play (and its later incarnation as a film) is John Simon's 1968 review: "The homosexual part of the audience is to feel purged and to some extent vindicated by this play and production, whereas heterosexual spectators are to be made more aware of homosexual life styles and, if possible, sympathetic to them." He adds later that the play "may prove a lesson in majority and minority coexistence - though at *The Boys in the Band* (as often, elsewhere) it is hard to tell which is which." Simon's suggestion becomes difficult to support because of the play and film's devalorization of homosexuality. Even Crowley admitted that Michael's self-hatred, echoed by most of the other gay characters, was the message "that a very square American public wanted to receive" - a straight majority that the theater often needs for financial success. Gay viewers may search for a positive depiction of their lives, the diversity of their lives, but that search will be in vain. What is evident in *The Boys in the Band*, as in other gay films that become part of the so-called mainstream, is that "cinematic identification not only functions to affirm heterosexual norms, but also finds its most basic condition of possibility in the heterosexual division of the universe."

The division between homosexual and heterosexual is most apparent in the film's most predominant type of shot: the close-up. The screen often shows only one man, suggesting that he is not part of a community, but alone, separate, emotionally isolated. Each time the camera focuses on a group of the men (or the entire party), it soon changes back to close-ups. When Emory tells of his love for "Delbert Botts, DDS," for example, the camera begins with Cowboy, Harold, and Michael also in the frame. It then zooms in on Emory, slowly removing the other men, isolating Emory. He cannot depend on the others; he must face the audience alone to be judged. And the straight audience, though unable to look at any other image on the screen, may find absurd or repugnant the tale of Emory's obsession for the straight married man who does not return his love. The straight viewer need not feel empathy, but he can instead feel more distance between himself and these gay men. Close-ups in other films may allow the audience to identify with the characters, connecting viewer and object. Here the close-ups are of men describing the sadness of their lives. They speak of lost loves, the pain of coming out, the emptiness and self-hatred they often feel. Although gay viewers may empathize, straight men in the audience confront stereotypical depictions of homosexuality - they cannot make a similar emotional connection.

The scenes that most clearly illustrate the method by which *The Boys in the Band* affirms heterosexual norms involve the telephone truth game that ends the night of partying, confession, angst, and internalized homophobia. The rules of the game require participants to call "the one person we truly believe we have loved." Players win points based upon how successful the call is. As Michael explains it:

If you make the call, you get one point. If the person you are calling answers, you get two more points. If someone else answers, you only get one. If there's no answer at all, you're screwed . . . When you get the person whom you are calling on the line - if you

tell them who you are, you get two points. And then if you tell them that you love them - you get a bonus of five more points! . . . Therefore you can get as many as ten points and as few as one.

Five of the party guests participate in the game - dubbed "'Affairs of the Heart,' a combination of the truth game and murder." Two of the characters "win" by accumulating as many points as possible - Alan, a married straight man, and Larry, whose emotional commitment soon emulates the model of monogamous heterosexual marriage. The others lose.

Bernard makes the first call but gains just two points. He then becomes depressed because he was unable to confess his love for a childhood friend. Emory accumulates only three when he calls the straight, married dentist he knew while they were still students in high school. He becomes too drunk to continue participating in the party activities. Hank, the school teacher who has left his wife and children for his gay lover, Larry, calls the answering service he and Larry use, asking the operator to leave a message for his lover. He gets seven points for his call. He then explains his need to "come out" to Alan and the other guests: "Because I do love him. And I don't care who knows it."

Exasperated at the constant bickering over his promiscuity, Hank's lover Larry calls Hank on another extension in Michael's apartment and gains 10 points (the maximum possible). He tells Hank, "For what it's worth, I love you." Mimicking the remarks he said moments earlier about his inability to maintain a monogamous relationship, he says, "In my own way, Hank, I love you, but you have to understand that even though I do want to go on living with you, sometimes there may be others." Philip Gambone writes about the years immediately after the Stonewall uprising: "Monogamous gay mating, it was argued, was an unimaginative and even oppressive copy of heterosexual marriage; as gay and lesbian people, we were free to love, have sex with, and show affection for others outside the realm of 'marriage.'" When Larry joins Hank upstairs in the bedroom after this reconciliation over the telephone, it implies a possible curtailing of his extracurricular (or is it extramarital?) sexual activities. "I'll try," says Hank on one extension; "I will too," says Larry on the other. Hank will try to demand less of Larry's attention, to seek fewer signs of his commitment. In turn, Larry will try to be faithful, to be as monogamous as a spouse in a straight marriage should be.

The final, reluctant player - all others refuse to play the game - is Alan, who is forced to confront and question his sexuality (which he reaffirms as heterosexual). Michael demands that Alan play the game, mistakenly believing he will call Justin Stuart, a gay friend from his past. (Justin had claimed Alan was his lover.) Instead Alan calls his wife, Fran. He apologizes to her, reconciling with her after a disagreement, making this scene virtually an exact re-enactment of the reconciliation between Hank and Larry. Thus he also acquires 10 points, becoming co-winner with Larry. The remainder of the film depicts Harold's scathing indictment of Michael as "a sad and pathetic man"; Harold leaving with his present, Cowboy; the departures of the game's two losers, Bernard and Emory; and a distressed Michael collapsing into Donald's arms. The conclusion leaves the viewer with three emotionally stable party guests: Alan, Hank, and Larry. Their

status provides more comfort to the straight viewers than to the gay ones because their relationships perpetuate heterosexual norms.

The Boys in the Band unsettles some audience expectations about Alan, however, before the stabilizing ending. The questioning of Alan's sexuality begins early, when he telephones Michael just before the guests arrive for Harold's party. Michael, who has not told Alan he is gay, tries to persuade him not to come to the party; he does not admit that all of his guests are gay. Alan begins to cry over the telephone, saying he needs to talk to Michael, his old college roommate. After Alan's arrival at the party, his sexuality becomes more ambiguous (or questionable) with the attention he pays to Hank. He tells Michael, "That Hank is really a very attractive fellow"; a statement he makes repeatedly and that begins to suggest that he desires more with Hank than just a conversation about sports, the topic that begins what amounts to a flirtation between the two men, who are or have been married to women. (That they are paired in the narrative remains a point overlooked by most critics, but it is one that calls into question the stability of heterosexual marriage.)

Michael confronts Alan: "What you can't do is leave [the party before playing the truth game]. It's like watching an accident on the highway - you can't look at it and you can't look away." Neither can the audience. In one tight close-up after another, viewers watch the characters. They are forced to see and hear these men talk about their lives. The ensuing "homosexual panic" (the straight man's fear that he might be gay) reaches its apex with Michael's tirade against Alan: "He knows very, very well what a closet queen is. Don't you, Alan?" As evidence of that he cites Alan's earlier remarks about Hank: "What an attractive fellow he is and all that transparent crap." That "transparent crap" gets reinterpreted with Alan's later, more confident heterosexual comments to his wife over the telephone and afterwards to the others. The fear of being gay (for either Alan or the heterosexual male spectator) must be removed so that, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms, no longer is "a man's man . . . separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being 'interested in men.'" The straight men in the audience confront this fear and become more confidently heterosexual; they are not like those gay men on the screen.

Alan's reaffirmed identity (and perhaps the straight audience member's as well) as a heterosexual comes, though, after much attack from the others regarding his sexuality. Although Michael is the most adamant in directing his anger at Alan, the others - particularly Emory and Larry - take their turns as well. Larry notices Alan's attraction to Hank, for instance, and uses it as an opportunity to criticize Hank for behavior for which Hank has criticized Larry. At one point, when Alan and Michael start to go upstairs for a private discussion, Larry says to Alan, "He'll [Hank] still be here." Although the party guests "try to force Alan, the unexpected, 'straight' guest, into the stereotypical role of 'closet queen' . . . Alan returns the one quality they cannot accept: 'ambiguity.'" The audience, whether gay or straight, cannot maintain this sense of ambiguity about him. Alan enters Michael's apartment as a straight married man and leaves the same way; no questioning can negate that.

After Alan has been attacked for being a "closet queen" and has attacked Emory to defend himself, he pleads, "Hank, leave with me." The implication that he wants Hank as a sexual or romantic partner resurfaces, but also surfacing is the possibility that Alan feels homosexuality is something that can be escaped. He and the once-married Hank will remain straight (or become straight again) if they leave the "gay ghetto," the exclusive gay environment of Michael's apartment. As already noted, when Alan leaves the apartment, he does reaffirm his status as a heterosexual - a move that must serve as a comfort for straight audience members who earlier identified with Alan but who may be feeling as insecure as he about their sexuality. They can leave the theater; they can re-enter the heterosexually dominated world outside. They can "look away."

Even the physical placement of the actors reinforces the privileging of heterosexuality. During a private conversation with Michael in the bedroom, Alan stands most of the time that Michael sits. He can always look down on Michael. He is more brightly lit during the scene, even when he is sitting across from Michael. He is always in focus in the frame; Michael is not. And, in camera shots that include most or all of the people in the apartment, Alan is always placed differently. If the others face the camera, he faces away from it. If they sit, he stands. He is not part of the group; he is separate from it. The straight male spectator, watching his double on the screen, feels this same separation. He is not part of that community either. He too is just a viewer like Alan.

The heterosexual male spectator's fear of "contamination" from just watching a gay-oriented film also dissipates with the depiction of Hank and Larry's relationship, although their relationship at first confuses Alan and the straight audience members he represents. Alan "can't believe" Hank and Larry love each other. Their more stereotypically "masculine" appearances do not present a sexuality that is, in Foucauldian terms, "a secret that always [gives] itself away" - as Emory's more effeminate sexuality, for example, inevitably does. Film historian Russo argues that the "big lie about lesbians and gay men is that we do not exist . . . When the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected, on screen and off, as dirty secrets." Hank and Larry cannot be such "dirty secrets"; they act too much like heterosexual men, like Alan, like many of the straight men in the audience. Hank and Larry fit no commonly held stereotypes of gay men, as the others do. The equation of masculinity with the heterosexuality that they contradict illustrates a condition that "reflects the shame about our own homosexuality." That shame disturbs gay viewers who are unable to recognize themselves within the confines of a "happiness" represented only by Hank and Larry's model.

This should not suggest that Hank and Larry's relationship falls to support a positive image of a committed homosexual couple. Their characterization does avoid stereotyping. However, gay viewers must question whether this is truly a positive image. Most of the film depicts them constantly bickering, suspicious of each other's motives - hardly suitable role models for gay men wanting a monogamous relationship. Straight audiences may begin to assume that such relationships cannot last: gay men cannot be monogamous or committed to each other. They may suspect the game's resolution will not change Hank and Larry, and gay spectators may have the same suspicion. Larry, for example, voices the emotions gay men in unhappy or confining monogamous

relationships might feel: "I love 'em all. And what he [Hank] refuses to understand - is that I've got to have 'em all. I am not the marrying kind, and I never will be." At that point, he adds, "Why am I always the g-damn villain in the piece? If I'm not thought of as a happy-home wrecker, I'm an impossible son of a bitch to live with." In this one sentence his identity moves from an image analogous to the "other woman" who breaks up a heterosexual marriage to the philanderer who demands the absolute freedom to cheat, like an unfaithful husband. Either scenario is unacceptable to Hank, whose requests for monogamy or proposed compromises (such as a ménage á trois) go unheeded. Indeed they often result in loud and frequent arguments. Larry's revelation of a prior sexual encounter with Donald prompts a fight - the "first one since the last one," Larry calls it. They even dispute their separate interpretations of previous arguments:

LARRY: We have no agreement.

HANK: We did.

LARRY: You did. I never agreed to anything!

Simply put, until the destructive truth game, they cannot agree. Then the agreement follows heterosexually constructed possibilities of monogamy and marriage. By the end of the film they have changed from having a relationship that permits one of the partners to be promiscuous with other men to a newly defined relationship with its basis in mutual consent to monogamy.

This presents, from one viewpoint, at least, a disturbing form of transgression. As Russo points out:

What scares Alan and the audience, what they could not come to terms with or understand, is the homosexuality of Hank and Larry (Laurence Luckinbill and Keith Prentice), who are both just as queer as Emory yet "look" as straight as Alan. The possibility that there could be non-stereotypical homosexuals who are also staunch advocates of a working gay relationship is presented by the two lovers throughout the film.

And it is "when Larry and Hank express affection for each other physically and verbally that the audience and the lone straight guest are most uncomfortable." Yet the film's concessions to the straight audience again make that discomfort disappear. The most obvious example is a scene that depicts Hank and Larry comforting each other in Michael's bedroom that was shot for the film but not used. Such changes still are being made in film and television; a similar shot of two gay men talking in bed, apparently after sex, for the television program *thirty-something* in 1990 resulted in a reported loss of $1 million in advertising revenues for ABC. The episode with this scene never aired a second time, not even in syndication.

If the heterosexual audience cannot accept the two men together, neither can the characters in the film nor, it seems, the camera itself. Someone is always coming between Hank and Larry, trying to separate them just as Larry's numerous sexual encounters threaten to divide them. In a cab on the way to the party, Emory sits

between Hank and Larry. Michael stands between them when they enter his apartment. Even Alan separates the couple visually; he sits between them after he arrives. The two men are seldom even in the same frame. The most notable exception occurs when Larry telephones Hank for the truth game after an argument about what constitutes a gay marriage. Their conversation is a two-shot scene that ends with both men facing the same direction - toward the stairs that lead to the bedroom. They behave in unison at last.

Neither they nor the other men, however, can be erotically associated in the bedroom, at least on camera. Three groups of men appear in the bedroom during the film. Michael and Donald are no longer involved in a relationship, so what might be erotic images of them together (Michael taking off his sweater, Donald's naked buttocks as he gets into the shower) are ultimately de-eroticized. The two do not desire each other; they are just friends. Michael and Alan confront each other in the bedroom, where Michael tries to justify his friendships with the other men. They remain separate, though, both physically and ideologically. Hank takes Alan through the bedroom after the fight with Emory, however they encounter Bernard and Emory, and another fight almost ensues. No sexuality is associated with the bedroom until Hank and Larry enter. Then the door is closed. We are not allowed to see two men making love. Heterosexual male viewers might have to recognize that Hank and Larry are lovers, but they do not have to see the two men sexually involved. They are not made too uncomfortable.

Larry and Hank ultimately settle for the possibility of a monogamous relationship, removing the sexual freedom celebrated by gay rights activists. Rather than upset straight viewers - a possibility likely with the representation of gay men whose sexuality is not readily apparent or whose relationships do not mirror heterosexual ideals at the end of the film - *The Boys in the Band* reminds its gay viewers of a more repressive era, a time when their sexuality was unacceptable and unaccepted.

The difference made by the events following the Stonewall uprising, articulated perhaps most clearly by Claude Summers, was "the change from conceiving homosexuality as a personal failing or social problem to a question of identity." The film's appearance a year after Stonewall, in a form virtually unchanged from the version performed the year before Stonewall, suggests that it "immediately became both a period piece and a reconfirmation of the stereotypes" popularized before the uprising - "one Jew, one black, one Wasp, one midnight cowboy, one nellie queen and a married man and his lover." What dominates the literature about gays before Stonewall (like the play) is the belief that "[i]dentification as a homosexual is frequently accompanied or preceded by feelings of guilt and shame and by a sense of (often quite justified) paranoia, for to be homosexual in most modern societies is to be set apart and stigmatized." The film version of this play reinforces those feelings of guilt and shame by its failure to acknowledge changes set into motion by the events at Stonewall.

Pivotal events in gay history - whether for the individual or the community often are overlooked. Edmund White, for example, writing about the morning after the initial uprising in June 1969, has his characters in *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* note the lack of attention garnered by the beginning of the modern gay civil rights movement: "we

couldn't find a single mention in the press of the turning point of our lives." Almost a year later than the events that end White's novel, *The Boys in the Band* commits the same offense as the press. A gay male after Stonewall may turn his attention toward finding positive representations that mirror his own. As Wayne Koestenbaum describes it, "Reading becomes a hunt for histories that deliberately foreknow or unwittingly trace a desire felt not by author but by reader, who is most acute when looking for signs of himself." Frequently the reader or viewer (in the case of a film like *The Boys in the Band*) is disappointed.

This gay male viewer confronts a film ostensibly about his community, his experience, his life, and his sexuality. However, the dominance of a heterosexual audience in this country means he also must accept that "I am neither there to be looked at, nor am I the agent of the look." What becomes obvious is that in films like *The Boys in the Band*, with its predominantly gay cast of characters, "heterosexual role playing was the role." For some gay men, the experience of watching the film "was like watching people from Venus." As one gay man points out, "I remember going to it with my wife and saying to her afterward, 'Look what you saved me from.' That was how I took the film at the time, which was how I think most people took it, a film about how inherently miserable most homosexual lives are." The film offers few alternatives to that reaction.

Today *The Boys in the Band* still places many homosexual men on opposite sides of a debate about its significance. Al LaValley remembers a panel discussion about this first "gay film" by Hollywood: "when Gay Lib used it as this icon of stereotypical pre-Stonewall homosexuality, I was just totally baffled . . . If homosexuals weren't like that, what was the need for Gay Liberation." This suggests at least one reason why the film, coming after Stonewall, became such a disappointment for gay men. As New York Times film critic Vincent Canby remarked after its opening, "There is something basically unpleasant . . . about a play [adapted into a film] that seems to have been created in an inspiration of love-hate and that finally does nothing more than exploit its (I assume) sincerely conceived stereotypes." The unpleasantness becomes even greater when the homosexual spectator is forced to acknowledge that, whether or not the stereotypes are "sincerely conceived," the love (at least happiness and comfort) goes mostly to straight men, like Alan, and the hate (self-loathing or psychological scars) to a majority of the gays.

Source: Joe Carrithers, "The Audiences of *The Boys in the Band*," in *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 64-71.

Adaptations

Mart Crowley wrote the screenplay for the 1970 film version of *The Boys in the Band*, which starred the entire Broadway cast (Frederick Combs, Leonard Frey, Cliff Gorman, etc.). It was directed by William Friedkin and is available on CBS/Fox Home Video.

Topics for Further Study

The Boys in the Band was one of the first plays to show gay life realistically. Research ways that plays and movies presented gay people before 1968 and explain what these depictions say about society's attitudes toward gays.

Why do you think Crowley decided to set this play at a birthday party? Discuss how Harold's birthday affects each of the characters on the stage. Explain how you think the play would have been different if it had been set elsewhere.

Use the Internet to find out about the many references to movies and literature that are made in this play, from Barbara Stanwyck to Lady Chatterly, "Down to Earth," and so forth. Identify aspects from each that might appeal to the characters in the play and then propose modern movies, books, and actors that they might like if this play took place today.

If you were going to cast a revival of this play, which actors would you want to play each of the parts? Why?

Do some research and come up with photos of the kinds of clothes and hairstyles you think these contemporary, urbane young men would have been wearing in the 1960s.

How much do you think alcohol and drug use affects what goes on in this play? Research the chemical effects of alcohol and marijuana and use those findings to explain the behavior of Michael, Emory, Bernard, and the rest.

Compare and Contrast

1968: Homosexuality is considered a criminal act in many states.

Today: Although a few states retain anti-sodomy laws (most notably Georgia, which went to the Supreme Court in 1986 to defend theirs), they are seldom enforced.

1968: Homosexuality is listed as a disease by the American Psychiatric Association. Homosexuals go to psychiatrists to be "cured."

Today: The APA dropped its disease designation in 1974. There is still conflicting research regarding whether homosexuality is genetic or learned.

1968: When homosexual characters show up in movies or plays, they are often flamboyant comic characters or pathetically confused individuals who end up killing themselves. Homosexuals rarely appear on television.

Today: Well-rounded gay characters are increasingly common on television, in plays, and in films.

1968: Gays are considered promiscuous and incapable of forming lasting personal relationships.

Today: Several states allow commitment ceremonies that accord gay couples legal rights similar to those given to heterosexual marriages. Gays still cannot marry, in part due to a "Defense of Marriage" act signed by President Clinton in 1996.

1968: Homosexuals live in fear of physical attacks by those who are violently opposed to homosexuality.

Today: Such attacks still occur, but most states and municipalities have hate crime legislation that threatens severe punishment to anyone who attacks someone because of his or her sexual preference.

What Do I Read Next?

The Boys in the Band is compiled with Crowley's other most important works, *A Breeze from the Gulf* and *For Reasons That Remain Unclear*, in *Three Plays by Mart Crowley*, with a forward by Gavin Lambert. It was published by Alyson Publishers in 1996.

Several lesser-known gay dramas from recent times are collected in the 1996 anthology *Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater*, edited by John M. Clum and published by Westview Press.

John-Manuel Andriote's 1999 book *Victory Deferred: How AIDS Changed Gay Life in America* gives some perspective for how differently gay men and women see the world today from the way they saw the world when Crowley wrote this play.

Tony Kushner won the Tony Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 for his 1991 work *Millennium Approaches* and another Tony in 1994 for *Peristroika*; together, these plays comprise a sprawling work called Angels in America. The plays concern the interwoven lives of eight men in the post-AIDS world.

Terrence McNally's play *Love! Valor! Compassion!* is somewhat like an updated version of *The Boys in the Band*, with a group of gay men gathering at a country house and peppering each other with witty dialog. The Tony-winning script was published in 1994 by Plume.

Stonewall, by Martin Duberman, takes a narrative approach to history, following the lives of six gay men and women before and after the 1969 riot that changed gay history. It was published in 1993 by the Penguin Group.

Some of the best gay fiction and memoirs of the vibrant period after the Stonewall riots were written by members of the Violet Quill Club. Many of these pieces, from authors such as Edmund White, Robert Ferro, and Felice Picano, have been collected in *The Violet Quill Reader*, published by St. Martin's Press in 1994.

Further Study

Adam, Barry D., *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement*, rev. ed., Twayne, 1995.

Called "the classic of its field," this academic text traces the movement for gay rights back to its origins in Germany in the 1890s. More concerned with gay politics than any of the characters in the play, it is still useful for background to the world that Crowley changed.

Kaiser, Charles, "The Sixties," in *Gay Metropolis: 1940-1996*, Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

This much-lauded history of New York contains a long section explaining the ground-breaking impact of *The Boys in the Band* when it first appeared.

Marcus, Eric, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Rights, 1945-1990*, HarperCollins, 1992.

The Boys in the Band falls right in the middle of the area covered by this oral history, which includes interviews with people from all walks of life who talk about what it was like for homosexuals while the world was beginning to acknowledge gay rights.

Rutledge, Leigh W., *The Gay Decades: From Stonewall to the Present*, Plume, 1992.

This book gives a detailed, month-by-month account of gay history right after the opening of *The Boys in the Band*, starting with Judy Garland's death on June 22, 1969, and continuing up into the 1990s.

van Leer, David, *The Queening of America: Gay Culture in Straight Society*, Routledge Press, 1995.

van Leer examines the ways in which homosexual sub-culture has been incorporated into mainstream America, a feat that *The Boys in the Band* is famous for.

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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 unnamedfor 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).

BOOKRAGS

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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