The Browning Version Study Guide

The Browning Version by Terence Rattigan

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Introduction

The Browning Version is the play that cemented Terence Rattigan's reputation as a serious, mature playwright. It is viewed as one of his best works, and one of the best one-acts ever written. First performed at the Phoenix Theatre, London, England, on September 8, 1948, *The Browning Version* was coupled with another one-act by Rattigan entitled *Harlequinade* under the umbrella name, *Playbill*. This show ran for 245 performances, and Rattigan received the Ellen Terry Award for *The Browning Version*, his second. (The first was won two years earlier for *The Winslow Boy.)*

The Browning Version made its New York debut with *Harlequinade* on October 12, 1949, but only ran for sixty-two performances. While praise from British audiences and critics was nearly universal when the play was performed in England, American critics were generally not as kind to the Broadway version, perhaps due to the subject matter.

The Browning Version concerns the life of Andrew Crocker-Harris, a classics schoolmaster at a British public school. Andrew is disliked by his unfaithful wife Millie, his colleagues, and his students. Rattigan based the character and the story of *The Browning Version* on a classics master he had at school as a student.

The Browning Version is sometimes derided for being too sentimental, but many critics draw a distinction between its sympathetic sentiment and overt sentimentalism. Most critics and scholars believe that Rattigan' s skills as a playwright transcend such problems. Though only a one-act play, *The Browning Version* is a well-crafted and complete psychological study, indicative of his future direction as a playwright.

As John Russell Taylor writes in *The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play, "The Browning Version,* as well as being at once Rattigan's tightest and most natural-seeming construction job up then and his most deeply felt play, marks the beginning of his most distinctive and personal drama."

Author Biography

Terence Rattigan was born on June 10, 1911, in London, England. His father, William, was a career diplomat, and served in countries such as Turkey and Romania. While his parents lived abroad, Terence and his brother were raised by their grandparents in England. Rattigan was about eleven years old when his parents returned. By that time, he had fallen in love with reading and going to plays. He wrote his first play about the age of ten.

Rattigan was educated at the Harrow School from 1925 until 1930, when he entered Trinity College, Oxford. His experiences at the former, a public school, informed such plays as *The Browning Version*. Although Rattigan was training for the diplomatic core, by the time he reached Oxford, his interest was focused on the stage.

His first play, *First Episode* (1933) was written with Philip Heimann while still attending Oxford. It was a complete failure. Yet this did not deter Rattigan from leaving school and moving to London to become a professional playwright.

He achieved early success with his comedic play *French without Tears* (1934), which did extraordinarily well in London and in several other countries. At the time, the play held the record for the longest-running play in England. It was based on Rattigan's experiences studying French. His next few plays were much less successful, both at home and in New York.

While Rattigan served in the Royal Air Force during World War II, he continued to write plays, producing about one a year until the early 1960s. His *Flare Path* (1942), a war-themed romantic drama, was well-received in London. Rattigan also began a career writing screenplays with *A Quiet Wedding* (1940). Although his plays were popular with critics and audiences in London, critical acclaim in the United States continued to elude him.

This changed with Rattigan's next two works. *The Winslow Boy* (1946), which concerned the Archer-Shee case in Great Britain, was lauded on both sides of the Atlantic and received several prestigious awards. His reputation as a serious dramatist was cemented with *The Browning Version* (1948), which received a similar critical response.

After 1948 Rattigan's plays garnered mixed critical and commercial success. Such plays as *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952) about a woman's obsessive love for an unworthy man were not well-received.

One of Rattigan's last big successes was *Separate Tables* (1954), which concerns people's loneliness and isolation. By the early 1960s, Rattigan stopped writing for the stage when his ideas about the theater were criticized for being old-fashioned. He focused on writing screenplays and traveling for several years; but he returned to writing for the stage in his final years. His last produced play was *Cause Celebre* (1977), based

on the trial of Alama. Rattenbury in 1930s England. Rattigan died of bone cancer on November 30, 1977.

Plot Summary

The Browning Version opens in the sitting room of the home of Andrew and Millie Crocker-Harris. A young student, John Taplow, knocks at the front door, then lets himself inside. He steals a chocolate from an open box, then uses his walking stick to practice his golf swing.

Frank Hunter, a young schoolmaster, watches Taplow's moves unseen. Finally, he interrupts and gives Taplow pointers on his swing. They converse for a few moments. Taplow has come for his tutoring session with Andrew, although it is the last day of school. The young man is worried; however, that Andrew will not give him his "remove." He plans to study science, which is Hunter's subject.

Taplow does a wicked impersonation of Andrew, which he almost immediately regrets. However, Frank asks him to do it again, then suggests that since Crocker-Harris is rather late, Taplow should go play golf. Taplow is appalled at the suggestion. Despite his problems with Andrew, Taplow does like him and fears him enough to stay. Taplow relates an incident and again mimics Andrew for Frank's benefit. This time, Millie Crocker-Harris appears at the door, and she listens for a moment before coming inside.

Taplow is afraid that Millie has overheard his imitation. Millie informs Taplow that her husband will be tied up at the Bursar's for a while and that he could go, but he decides to wait. Millie sends him on an errand.

Once Taplow is gone, Millie and Frank have a more intimate discussion, and it becomes clear that they are lovers. They make plans for a rendezvous later in the summer. Millie tries to kiss him, but Frank fears they will be caught by her husband. Millie asks Frank if Taplow was imitating her husband when she walked in. When the answer is affirmative, Millie says that it seemed like a rather good one.

Millie discusses her troubled relationship with her husband. She explains that he once aspired to be a headmaster and had more ambition than he has now. After another kiss, Millie tells Hunter about her day. She was saying good-bye to all the wives of the faculty. Andrew is leaving his teaching position, ostensibly due to a heart condition.

Just as Millie and Frank are about to kiss again, Andrew finally arrives. He is somewhat peeved that Millie sent Taplow on an errand. Andrew invites Frank to sit down for a while, and they make small talk. Andrew reveals that his next position is at a school for "backwards" boys. Frank is sympathetic, but Andrew dismisses his concerns.

Taplow returns. After Millie goes to make dinner and Frank leaves, Andrew and Taplow begin their session. Taplow is translating *Agamemnon* from the Greek as he reads, and adds a touch of the dramatic to his interpretation, which Andrew chides him for. But Andrew also tells Taplow that he once wrote a free translation of the play in verse. Their lesson is interrupted by the appearance of the school's headmaster.

The headmaster, Dr. Frobisher, wants to talk to Andrew privately, so Taplow is dismissed. Frobisher informs Andrew that the Gilberts, who will take over the flat, will be dropping by. He also tells Andrew that the school will grant him no pension, because he has only been at the school eighteen years. Andrew asks about an exception to this rule that had been recently made, but Frobisher explains that the circumstances were different.

Furthermore, Frobisher wants Andrew to speak first at the prize ceremony the next day, although he is the most senior staff member and therefore entitled to speak last. The other man is more popular, and involved with the cricket team. Andrew agrees to the change. Millie enters, and after the headmaster takes his leave, she chides Andrew for just accepting, without argument, the denial of his pension.

Their discussion is interrupted by the arrival of the Gilberts. Millie shows Mrs. Gilbert around the flat. Andrew makes conversation with Mr. Gilbert, who informs Andrew that he has heard that Andrew is renowned for his discipline. The headmaster describes Andrew as "The Himmler of the lower fifth."

Andrew is upset by Mr. Gilbert's comments, and he discloses some of his experiences as a teacher to Mr. Gilbert. Confessing that he is a failure as a teacher, Andrew explains that by being funny, a character, he thought that maybe his students would learn something. Yet, as a result, he is extremely disliked by his students and colleagues. Embarrassed at his revelations, Andrew wishes Mr. Gilbert luck with his new position. The couple leave.

Taplow returns. He has come to say farewell, but he brings a gift: a verse translation of Agamemnon, authored by Browning. Andrew is deeply touched, especially by the inscription the boy has written. Frank Hunter returns. When Andrew shares the inscription with Frank, he is again overcome with emotion. Frank signals Taplow to leave, which he does after saying his good-byes. Andrew is embarrassed about his display of emotions, and apologizes to Frank. Frank is understanding.

Millie returns to the sitting room. Frank shows her Taplow's gift. Laughing, Millie maintains that the gift was a bribe for Taplow's remove and tells her husband that Taplow was imitating him earlier. Andrew goes to his room for a moment.

As soon as he is gone, Frank tells Millie to take back what she said, or he will tell Andrew that it was a lie. Millie's negative response and vicious attitude compel Frank to end their relationship. Millie does not believe him, but Frank is appalled by her cruelty. He tells Millie to look after Andrew and tries to leave, but she will not let him go. Millie says that Andrew is dead inside and not a man. Frank is revolted by what she is saying.

Andrew returns from his room and Millie exits. Frank says that Taplow was imitating him, but that Taplow also said that he liked Andrew. Frank believes the gift was genuine and that Andrew should keep it. Andrew claims that the book is not that good anyway, and believes that Taplow is probably spreading the story of Andrew's expression of

emotion to his friends right now. Frank does not believe this is true and decides to leave.

Frank advises Andrew to leave Millie, and is appalled to find out that Andrew knows about the affair because Millie told him. Andrew says that he has never been able to satisfy his wife. Again, Frank tries to convince him to leave her. Frank wants to visit him at his new position in September, and insists on getting his new address.

Millie returns, and asks if Frank will stay for dinner. Frank declines and leaves. Millie tells Andrew that Frank will visit her, not him. Andrew does not believe he will visit either of them. He also tells her of his decision to stay for the summer. Millie informs him that she will not be going with him to his new job. When Dr. Frobisher phones, Andrew informs him that he will speak second at the ceremony. After he gets off the phone, he asks Millie to serve dinner. She does so.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The setting for this single-act play is in the sitting room of a ground-floor apartment in a large Victorian building providing accommodation for masters at a public school in the south of England. The large, gloomy room is conventionally and elegantly furnished, and a stained glad door leads to small garden. The apartment is occupied by school master Andrew Crocker-Harris and his wife, Millie. It is the largest apartment in the block that also has the privilege of a garden. To the rear of the room is another door, concealed by a screen, which gives access to the rest of the apartment.

There is a timid knocking at the door, which goes unanswered. It is followed by further knocking, then the cautious appearance of student John Taplow as he enters the room. Taplow, about 16 years old with glasses perched upon his plain round face. And sporting grey flannel trousers, a dark blue jacket and a white scarf, stands in the room for a few seconds, uncertain, then goes back out to the hall and calls, "Sir! Sir!" Re-entering the sitting room, he opens the garden door and calls once more through it.

When there is no response, Taplow sighs and closes the garden door. As his calls continue to elicit silence, he places a book, notepad and pencil on a table and examines a small box of chocolates lying upon it. It probably represents an entire month's ration. He counts the chocolates, and then helps himself to two. After eating one, he decides to return the second to the box, either because he thinks he may be found out if he takes two or because he thinks he is being greedy.

He picks up a bent-handled walking stick and pretends that it is a golf club, taking swings. His concentration on what he is doing is such that he does not hear somebody entering the room from behind the screen.

Wearing a purposely-cultivated air of ruthless honesty, Frank Hunter has the rugged and self-confident appearance of a popular master. He watches Taplow from behind the screen for a few moments before telling him that he is not using his wrists correctly. He stands behind Taplow , puts his hands over the boy's, and tells him to take another swing. Taplow hits the carpet more effectively than previously.

He tells Taplow that it's no use hitting the ball like a headmaster striking a pupil, because the ball won't go anywhere. He explains that golf is more a matter of rhythm and aesthetics than brute force.

The boy stares at the carpet. When Frank asks him what is wrong, he says that they have torn the carpet. Frank glances at the tear and replies that it was already there. He asks Taplow whether he knows him, to which Taplow replies, "No."

The master asks Taplow's name, and whether he's taking science. Taplow replies that he's still in the lower fifth and can't specialise unless he's given a remove – a promotion

to a higher class – the next term. Frank is surprised that Taplow doesn't yet know whether or not he will get his remove, and Taplow explains that his teacher, Crocker-Harris, doesn't give the boys their results before the last day of term. Frank asks why that is, and Taplow says that Crocker-Harris isn't like the other masters. When Frank asks why not, Taplow replies, "You know what he's like, Sir."

There is a rule, Frank says, that it is the Headmaster who gives out the results on the last day of term, but according to Taplow, nobody takes any notice of that except Crocker-Harris. Frank admits that he gives his students their results beforehand, then asks what specialist subject Taplow will take if he is given the remove.

He replies that he will take science, of course, and when Frank says sadly that he gets all the slackers, Taplow indignantly responds that he's very interested in science. Frank announces that he isn't personally interested in the science he teaches, and Taplow says that at least it's more exciting than "this muck," pointing to his book.

When Frank asks what he is referring to, Taplow replies that it is Aeschylus' *The Agamemnon*. When Frank asks Taplow if he really believes that *The Agamemnon* is muck, Taplow replies that the story of a wife murdering her husband and having a lover is a good one, but his complaint is with the way it is taught – a load of Greek words strung together, and fifty lines if you got it wrong.

Taplow agrees with Frank that he feels rather bitter because he's been given extra work when he could be out playing golf. He would have thought that Crocker-Harris had enough to do, as he was leaving the school for good the next day, but because he'd missed a class because of having the flu the master had given him extra study. Frank sympathises, but encourages him by saying that it's almost certain that he'll get his remove for behaving himself and taking the extra work. Taplow, however, is unsure. He believes that any other master would certainly not hold a student back after giving them extra work because it would reflect badly on them, but Crocker-Harris is different. He asks Frank how he thinks Crocker-Harris had replied the previous day, when he'd asked him directly whether he'd been given a remove.

The master asks what Crocker-Harris' reply was, and Taplow, imitating the gentle, throaty voice of Crocker-Harris, says, "My dear Taplow, I have given you exactly what you deserve. No less, and certainly no more." He tells Frank that he thinks the master may even have marked him down for taking extra work, and he believes the man is hardly human. Then he stops himself and asks if Frank thinks he has gone too far. Frank agrees that he has gone much too far. Taplow apologises, saying he had gotten carried away.

He picks up a copy of *The Times* newspaper, then asks Taplow to repeat what Crocker-Harris said to him. Taplow does so, and Frank laughs and pretends to be stern, saying it was nothing like Crocker-Harris, and tells Taplow to read his *Aeschylus*. He then suggests that because Crocker-Harris is now 10 minutes late for his meeting with Taplow, the boy should go and play golf, as he could still get in nine holes. Taplow is shocked, saying he doesn't believe any pupil has ever failed to keep an appointment

with "The Crock." He can't imagine what punishment would be bestowed were he to do so.

He says that he is envious of the fear Crocker-Harris instills in his pupils, who all seem scared to death of him. He asks Taplow what Crocker-Harris does to terrify them, and if he beats them. Taplow replies that Crocker-Harris isn't a sadist like some of the others, and when Frank asks what he means, Taplow gives him a definition of a sadist. Frank tries to lead him further and get him to name masters who are sadistic, Taplow says he will not mention names, and Frank must know who they are. He says that because Frank is relatively young, a scientist and a Labour party supporter he must know what sadism means. A shocked Frank asks what is becoming of public schools.

In any case, Taplow says, Crocker-Harris is not a sadist, and if that he were he would be less frightening. As it is, he is a man devoid of any outward feelings who seems to hate the idea of anybody liking him. He finds that strange, as all the other masters want to be liked.

All the boys trade on that weakness, Frank says, and Taplow responds that while that's natural, "the Crock" seems different. Frank tries to re-establish the master/pupil relationship by saying, "Mr. Crocker-Harris."

Accepting the correction, Taplow continues by saying that despite Crocker-Harris' behaviour, he can't help but like him; however, Crocker-Harris seems to dry up even more when he sees that. Frank says he thinks Taplow is exaggerating, but the boy responds that during a class, when Crocker-Harris made a joke nobody laughed at because they didn't understand it, he himself laughed – not to curry favour, but out of politeness and sympathy for the master's failed joke. He says he cannot remember what the attempted joke was, but sits down at the table and tells Frank to laugh. When Frank does so, Taplow imitates Crocker-Harris, beckoning Frank to advance to the table. Frank is interested in knowing about this incident.

He does an imitation of Crocker-Harris, congratulating him on his understanding of the joke that he appreciated the laughter, and asks him to explain the joke to the rest of the class so that they might enjoy it, too.

Unbeknownst to the men, a woman has entered the room while he is talking. Pulling off her gloves, she is thin and more smartly dressed than is usual for a schoolmaster's wife.

When he notices her, Taplow is horrified, but Frank seems relieved. She and Frank say "hello" to each other, and after putting some parcels on the table and removing her hat, she walks to the hall.

An anxious Taplow asks Frank if he thinks she overheard him, because if she did, she might tell her husband and he wouldn't get his remove. Frank reassures him. Millie Crocker-Harris comes back into the room and asks Taplow if he's waiting for her husband. When he replies that he is, she says that her husband is having a meeting with the Bursar that may take quite a long time, and that Taplow should leave. A doubtful Taplow doesn't wish to disobey her, but Millie insists, saying that she will take any

blame. She then gives him a shilling and asks him to collect Crocker-Harris' prescription from the pharmacy, suggesting he take his time and have an ice cream. As Taplow leaves the room, he whispers to Frank not to let her say anything to her husband of what she has overheard, and Frank agrees.

She detains Taplow for a moment to say that her uncle, Sir William Bartrop, had met Taplow's mother at a fête and he had found her quite charming. Uninterested, Taplow replies politely that his mother is very good at that sort of thing. After realising that he has been tactless, Taplow rephrases his statement to say that he is sure his mother found Millie's uncle charming, too, and exits.

She then thanks Frank for coming and asks whether he'll be staying for dinner. He replies that, if he may, he'd like to. She tells him to give her a cigarette, and when he offers her one from his case she remarks that he hasn't given it away yet. When he asks if she had expected him to, she says that she had, although as it's a man's case and he's unlikely to give it to one of his girl friends.

Millie asks where he's been all week. When he replies that he's been marking exam papers and writing reports for the end of term, Millie says that even her husband Andrew has found time to take a few hours and say goodbye to people. Frank excuses himself by saying that he has been appallingly busy; in any event, he will be coming to visit her in Bradford. Millie says that won't be for over a month because Andrew won't be starting his new job until September. He replies that he was intending to be in Devonshire then, and Millie quickly asks him where he would be staying. He says that he'll be visiting his family, and she suggests he go to Bradford earlier, in August. Frank points out that Andrew will be there in August, and when Millie agrees, he says that he thinks he can manage to visit in September. She says that would be better, except that it will be six weeks before she sees him. She agrees when Frank says she'll survive it, but says she won't survive it as easily as he will. He doesn't respond. Millie says she hasn't much pride, and tells Frank how much she loves him. He briefly kisses her then moves away, saying it's impossible because of the screen to see if anybody is coming in.

She asks if he and Taplow were making fun of her husband when she came in, and he admits that they were. It was a good imitation, Millie says, and she'd like to see Taplow do it again one day. She says that Frank was wrong to encourage him because it's bad for discipline, and Frank agrees. He regrets that after only three years of being a master he's becoming used to finding ways of making the boys like him.

He says wishes masters weren't afraid of the boys and could act naturally without having to put on an act of being hearty and friendly or acting like petty, soulless tyrants like Crocker-Harris. She replies that no matter what he does, Crocker-Harris would never be popular. He wonders why Crocker-Harris had become a schoolmaster in the first place, and Millie replies that he believed it was his vocation and at one time had ambitious plans to become a house master and eventually a headmaster. Bitterly, she remarks that he hasn't made a success of it. The idea of Crocker-Harris as a headmaster, Frank says, is a funny one, and Millie says he once had more guts – or she had thought he had. She doesn't want to talk about him anymore, saying it depresses

her. He says that he feels sorry for Crocker-Harris, but Millie says it's she who deserves to be pitied. She stretches out her arms and he kisses her hurriedly and unentangles her clinging arms. Frank asks her how she has spent the day. She replies that she's being saying farewell to the other masters' wives, and that she still has some more to see the following day. She complains about other wives' patronising attitudes and how Betty Carstairs has commiserated with her about Andrew's heart condition, which has forced his exit, when he might have been given the housemaster's position that he had been passed over for so many times before.

There is a word for women like Betty Carstairs, Frank says, but not one he would use in front of a lady. While Betty Carstairs has her eye on Frank, Millie replies, he says he detests the woman. She asks what he was doing at Lord's cricket ground in the Carstairs' box, and he replies that it was a good place from which to watch the match. He suddenly remembers that Millie had invited him to watch from the grandstand with her and Andrew and is embarrassed, saying he had forgotten their invitation.

She asks him if he has ever been in love and whether he knows how hurtful his behaviour was to somebody like her who loves him so much. Frank repeats that he had simply forgotten her invitation. An argumentative Millie says that he had something better to do than watch the match with her in the grandstand, and why doesn't he admit it. Becoming irritable Frank says she can believe what she likes. She begs him to show her some pity and asks if he thinks it is less hurtful to have been forgotten than deliberately ignored.

As Frank turns away from her, she curses herself for having caused a scene when she had promised herself that she wouldn't mention the incident at Lord's. She begs Frank to tell her he's not running away from her, and he reassures her that he's coming to see her in Bradford. As he steps towards her there is a sound as Andrew Crocker-Harris appears by the screen covering the door, neatly dressed in a suit and stiff collar despite the summer weather. He is carrying a portfolio and looks calm and complacent. In his normal, gentle voice, he asks if Taplow is there.

She replies that she had sent the boy to the pharmacy to collect Andrew's heart medicine. Frank says that there was no need for it, as she could have telephoned the pharmacist and they would have delivered it in good time; now he will have to wait for Taplow, and he already has so many things to do that he doesn't know how to fit them all in. He sees Frank as he enters the room, and the two men greet each other courteously. He apologises to Frank that he won't be able to spend much time with him because he has to work with Taplow, and Millie interrupts to say that Frank will be staying to dinner. In that case, Andrew says, they'll have some time together, but Frank will have to excuse him when Taplow returns.

He offers to leave, but Andrew invites him to sit down and tells Millie to give Frank a cigarette. Millie says that she doesn't have any and has already begged one from Frank. Andrew reminds Frank that they had expected him at Lord's, and Millie says Frank had forgotten. Frank is once again embarrassed and apologises, but Andrew says it was alright because they'd managed to sell the seat to somebody else, who was a charming

old gentleman, although he was on the other side. After offering Frank tea, which he declines, Andrew asks if he would like to see the timetable that he has drafted for the next term. Frank politely agrees, and Andrew produces a great roll of foolscap sheets all pasted together and covered with his neat writing.

He tells Andrew that he didn't know he drew up the timetables. Frank replies that he has been doing so for the past fifteen years, although they are distributed under the headmaster's signature. He shows Frank some modifications he has made and invites Millie to have a look, but she tells him that the timetables bore her rigid. Frank is embarrassed by the way she speaks, but Andrew does not react, apart from saying that Millie doesn't have the head for that sort of thing. Frank is very complimentary about the timetable, and Andrew says that he feels it is a worthwhile task.

He says the school will miss Andrew, who replies that they will find somebody else. Frank asks what sort of school he's going to, and Andrew asks whether Millie has already told him. Frank says that Millie had mentioned a private school as he just stops himself from saying "crammer," and Andrew says that he's going to a crammer in Dorset, a school for backward boys which is run by an associate of his, and which his doctor thinks will be less demanding and better for his heart condition. Frank expresses his sympathy for Andrew, who responds that he doesn't need it because he is looking forward to the change.

At that moment there is a knock at the door, and Taplow, holding a bottle of medicine, enters rather breathlessly and with a look of slight guilt. Andrew asks Taplow if there was a queue at the chemist's, and the boy agrees. When Andrew then asks whether there was also a queue at Stewart's (presumably where the ice cream is sold), an embarrassed Taplow looks at Millie for support. She points out that Andrew was late for the meeting as well. He agrees and apologises to Taplow, pointing out that they still have an hour left, so nothing has been lost. Frank asks whether he may use the shortcut back to his lodgings, and says that if Andrew is still busy he and Millie can sit in the garden. Millie says that she must prepare the dinner in the meantime, and leaves the room.

Then, Andrew tells Frank that Taplow is hoping to have a remove to enable him to join Frank's science form the following year. When Frank asks whether Taplow has obtained his remove, Andrew says he has obtained exactly what he deserves, nothing more and nothing less. Taplow laughs loudly and Frank nods, then leaves through the garden door. Andrew takes no notice of Taplow's laughter, then indicates that the boy should sit next to him at the table and begin reading line thirteen hundred and ninety-nine.

The boy reads haltingly as Andrew continually and automatically corrects his grammatical errors. When Taplow mentions "the bloody corpse of a husband you have slain…," Andrew asks him why he is inventing words that are not there. Taplow replies that he had made the words up because he thought they were more exciting than the Greek text. Andrew congratulates him on his interest in the drama, but reminds him that he is not meant to be collaborating with the author on the play, but translating from the Greek.

He daringly remarks that he is using a translator's licence on the play, and Andrew is slightly taken aback. He says that *The Agamemnon* is possibly the greatest play ever written. Cheekily, Taplow says he wonders how many boys in the form would agree, then quickly apologises to Andrew and asks if he should continue. Andrew looks into the distance, and in a soft voice tells Taplow that when he was a very young man he had written his own free translation of the *Agamemnon* in rhyming couplets, and that he had thought the end result very beautiful, probably more beautiful than the original work. He asks whether it was ever published. Andrew replies that it wasn't, and that when he'd looked for it the previous day he'd been unable to find it, it was probably lost for ever.

He sympathises and asks whether he should continue reading, but Andrew tells him to go back to the previous line. Taplow pulls a face, starts reading again, and is interrupted by Andrew telling him to start again without pulling the face. At that moment, Millie comes into the room to say that the headmaster is coming up the drive, and tells Andrew not to let the him know that she is home, as she hasn't yet put the fish pie in the oven.

The boy suggests that he should leave, but Andrew says that there are other people living in the building and they don't yet know that the headmaster is visiting them. However, when there is a knock at the door and Andrew invites the caller to enter, Dr. Frobisher comes in looking more like a diplomat than a classical scholar. He apologises for intruding, and wonders whether the extra work that Taplow is doing is due to Andrew's over-conscientiousness or Taplow's considerable backwardness. Andrew replies that it is probably a bit of both.

The headmaster says that he has to talk to Andrew and that he suggests Taplow leave, which the boy does with great relief. As he collects his things, Andrew apologises and asks Taplow to explain to his father what has happened and assure him that he will refund the money paid for Taplow's extra tuition. Taplow replies that he's sure that will be alright, and leaves.

He asks whether Gilbert has visited the apartment yet, and Andrew asks who they are. Frobisher tells him that Gilbert is his replacement who will be moving into the apartment, and that he and wife would like to have a look at it. Andrew replies that that will be quite alright. Frobisher continues that Gilbert is a brilliant scholar who has won many high honours at Oxford, although not as many as Andrew. He names some of the honours that Andrew won which Gilbert did not, and Andrew asks if Gilbert won the Hertford Latin. Frobisher is temporarily taken aback, replying that Gilbert had not won it, and asks if Andrew had. Andrew replies that he had, and Frobisher says it's hard to remember that Andrew was once the most brilliant scholar at the school. Realising his tactlessness, he carries on quickly that it is because of all Andrew's other talents, particularly his work on the timetable and the way that he has refused to allow the rebellious and soul-destroying lower fifth to defeat him. Andrew replies that the lower fifth have not destroyed his soul, and Frobisher responds that he was joking. He asks whether Andrew's wife is at home and, hesitatingly, Andrew replies that she is not there at the moment. Frobisher says that he'll say goodbye to her the next day, but in the

meantime he has two delicate matters to discuss with Andrew. Andrew asks him to sit down, which he does.

He comments what a great pity it is that Andrew's poor health is forcing him to retire from the school at such an early age, and so soon before he would have qualified for a pension. He does not look at Andrew, but studies his fingernails instead. Andrew asks if Frobisher has decided not to give him a pension, but the headmaster replies that it was a decision taken by the governors who could not make an exception to the rule.

Rather shocked, Andrew says that he and Millie had both understood an exception had been made for another master in similar circumstances several years before. Frobisher replies that the circumstances were quite different with the master in question, Buller, who had received an injury playing rugby against the school and a petition of over 500 names had been received from pupils and parents. Andrew says that he would have signed the petition if he had been asked to. Frobisher comments on what a splendid fellow Buller was, and how well he is doing now. Andrew responds that he is very pleased to hear it. Frobisher says that Andrew's case is, if anything, more deserving than Buller's, but that rules cannot be broken. He quite understands, says Andrew, and Frobisher asks him whether he has any private income. Andrew says he doesn't but his wife does. Frobisher says that Millie has told him about her father's business, and when Andrew says that his father-in-law runs a men's clothing shop Frobisher replies that he had understood that it was something a little grander. Andrew says that Millie's father had settled £300 per annum on her when they married.

He replies to Frobisher's question that he will be earning £200 a year at the crammer, and will have board and lodging for eight months of the year. Frobisher mentions a charity for cases of hardship, but Andrew replies that there will be no hardship. Frobisher says he had hoped that Andrew's income would be a little more handsome, and that he had understood from Millie that her background was rather more elevated than was the case. Andrew brings the subject to a close and asks about the second subject the he wishes to raise.

They discuss the giving of prizes the following day, and Andrew confirms that he is preparing a farewell speech, as is customary when a master leaves. Frobisher says that it's better to keep these things unsentimental, and that he has planned to say a few light-hearted words about Andrew in his opening comments. Andrew mentions that he has written a few words himself, including some little jokes and puns. He tells one to Frobisher, who belatedly laughs and says that he has a favour to ask of Andrew in connection with another master, Fletcher, who is leaving to take a position in the city. Although Fletcher is junior to Andrew and has only been with the school for five years, he has distinguished himself during that time by improving the school cricket team and he is extremely popular with the boys. Andrew agrees that the school's win at Lord's was most inspiriting.

He continues that he is in a quandary, as he is sure the boys will receive Fletcher's speech much more enthusiastically than they will Andrew's. Andrew understands that he is asking him to step backward and allow Fletcher the limelight. Frobisher says he feels

it is best, so that Andrew's speech doesn't come as an anti-climax, and Andrew replies that he wouldn't want to provide an anti-climax. Frobisher tries to console him by saying that there is be nothing personal in the boys applauding Fletcher for a much longer time than they would applaud Andrew. Andrew says that he understands, then Frobisher anxiously makes his exit.

As Millie comes in, Frobisher greets her, asking Andrew if he's ever been told what an attractive wife he has. Andrew replies that he has many times and he doesn't need to be told. Frobisher declines the drink that Millie offers him and says he looks forward to having them to dinner the following evening.

Once he has left, Millie asks Andrew if he has been granted a pension. When he replies that he has not, she asks why Buller received one. Andrew replies that the governors had not wanted to establish a precedent by giving him one. Millie scornfully asks what Andrew said when he was given the news, and he replies that there wasn't very much he could say. Millie asks whether they expect Andrew to live on her money, and he responds that there is no question of that and he will manage to support himself. She inquires about herself, as it is his obligation to support her as well. He replies that she is welcome to any money he manages to save. She asks what else he had said, and when Andrew tells her that he has been asked to make his speech after Fletcher's instead of before, she tells him that she knew about that two weeks earlier when he asked her for advice on the matter and she had told him to go ahead because she knew Andrew wouldn't mind.

There is a knock at the door, and a young couple come in and introduce themselves as Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert. Gilbert is the replacement for Andrew, and they would like to have a quick look at the apartment. Mrs. Gilbert asks if they are in the drawing room, and Millie responds that actually it is the living room. When Mrs. Gilbert compliments her on the decor, Millie says that it isn't as nice as she'd like to make it because, as a schoolmaster's wife, she has to contend with boys' dirty boots and her husband's leaking pens.

She says she hasn't been a schoolmaster's wife for very long, as they have only been married for two months and seventeen days. She exclaims at the garden, and Millie tells her that Andrew often works out there. While she shows Mrs. Gilbert the rest of the flat, the two men talk and Gilbert confides that he is petrified of the lower fifth because he can't even maintain discipline over eleven-year-olds. Andrew replies that he needn't worry and offers him a sherry. He tells Gilbert that the fifteen and sixteen-year-old boys are quite easy to handle – maybe a little wild and unfeeling, but not bad.

He says that the headmaster told him that Andrew ruled the boys with a rod of iron and referred to him as the Himmler of the fifth. Andrew is shocked and says he hopes the headmaster was exaggerating. He keeps repeating "the Himmler of the lower fifth" as if he can't believe what he is heard.

Feeling as if he's been tactless, Gilbert says so but Andrew begins to talk to him about his own career. He says that from the beginning of his career he realised that he didn't

know how to be likeable. He thinks Gilbert will be liked, although he says it's of no great importance to a schoolmaster whether the pupils like them or not, and that being liked too much is as dangerous as not being liked at all.

He describes the first two or three years of his career when he strived to impress on his pupils his love of great literature, and that he had failed, as Gilbert would also, nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand. But one success could cancel out all the failures, and he had achieved that success in his early years of teaching. He had also discovered during that time that although he could not get the boys to like him, he could get them to laugh at him, and that laughter was an effective way to teach. That's when he saw himself as a successful schoolmaster. Gilbert apologises for having said something that has hurt Andrew. He replies that he was only telling him something he already knew – that not only did the boys not like him, they actively disliked him and they no longer found him funny.

He believes that they can see some inner illness of his soul, and he recognises his absolute failure as a teacher, but he had not previously been aware that the boys were actually in fear of him. He apologises for unburdening himself to Gilbert, who remains silent and embarrassed. Andrew predicts that Gilbert will be a very successful teacher in the lower fifth.

The women return from their tour of the apartment, and Mrs. Gilbert tells her husband that the Crocker-Harris's first met in the Lake District. Millie tells them that Andrew was on a walking holiday when he had knocked at the door of her uncle's large house and asked for a glass of water. Gilbert says that he and his wife first met when he knocked her flat on her face with a swing door. The couples exchange a few more words, then Gilbert brusquely hurries his wife away. As they leave, Andrew apologises for embarrassing Gilbert and begs him not to divulge anything of what he has said. Gilbert assures him that he will not.

What a handsome young couple the Gilberts are, Millie remarks, and it seems a pity for a young man like that to have such a poor career as a schoolmaster. However, she says, when he eventually comes to leave the school, she expects he'll be feted with roses, tears and cheers. She asks a dreadful-looking Andrew if there is anything wrong. He replies that he's alright. Indifferently, she tells him to take his medicine if he needs it and leaves the room.

There is a knock at the door as Taplow returns. Andrew is rather sharp with him and asks what he wants, and Taplow replies that he has just come to say goodbye and wish him luck. Andrew thanks him and Taplow hands him a small book, Robert Browning's version of *The Agamemnon* that he has been reading in the chapel gardens. Andrew turns the pages of the book, obviously moved that Taplow has brought it to show him, then hands it back to Taplow, who says that it is a present for Andrew and that he has written in it.

He then reads the inscription in the fly-leaf and asks if Taplow had bought the book. He replies that he did, although it is secondhand, and apologises if he already has it. As

Andrew keeps reading and re-reading the inscription on the fly-leaf, Taplow wonders whether he has misspelled the words, but Andrew assures him that the spelling of the Greek is perfect. His hands are shaking and he takes off his spectacles, asking Taplow to get him some of his medicine and bring him a glass of water from the bathroom.

As Taplow leaves the room, Andrew begins sobbing uncontrollably. When the boy returns, he can see that Andrew has been crying. He explains to Taplow that he has been under strain, and Taplow responds that he understands. At that moment, Frank enters and Andrew tells him that Taplow has very kindly come to say goodbye. Frank is puzzled to see Taplow's startled face and Andrew's emotion. Andrew hands Frank the book and translates the Greek inscription for him: "God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master." It is a quotation from *The Agamemnon*. Frank remarks that it is a pleasant, very apt quotation. As Andrew is overcome with emotion again, Frank signals Taplow to leave, which he does as he calls out a farewell to Andrew.

He then watches Andrew with a mixture of sympathy and embarrassment, and Andrew apologises for having made a fool of himself in front of Frank and the boy. He says that although he is not an emotional person, he had been very touched by the boy's gesture, particularly after what had occurred before, when Gilbert told him that the headmaster refers to him as the Himmler of the lower fifth. He mentions that he had featured the quotation in class recently and that Taplow must have remembered it and perhaps even means it. Frank says he's sure Taplow did mean what he had written.

As Millie enters, she demands a cigarette from Frank and starts clearing things from the table. Frank tells her that Andrew has just been given a very nice present by Taplow, and Millie smiles. Andrew tells her that Taplow had bought the present for him with his pocket money and written a very charming inscription. The present is the most precious thing that he has, he says. Millie starts laughing, and ignoring Frank's warning tells Andrew that she had earlier caught Taplow making fun of him to Frank, and that he's only given the book to Andrew because he was afraid of not getting his remove.

With that, Andrew gently replaces the book on the table and leaves the room, saying he's going to his room for a moment. He takes his medicine with him, and Millie warns him not to take too much.

When Andrew has left the room, Frank asks her how she could have been so cruel, and tells her to go to Andrew and tell him what she said was a lie. She refuses, and Frank tells her that their relationship is over. She laughs and says he doesn't mean it, but Frank replies that he is sickened by her and will never forget what she has done. He tells her that he will not come to visit her in Bradford, then orders her to go to Andrew and look after him because he is a sick man who has been as badly hurt as a man can be.

Scornfully, Millie says that Andrew can't be hurt because he's already dead. When Frank asks why she hates Andrew so much, she replies that he keeps her from Frank and that he's not a proper man. She then asks why Frank is suddenly concerned about Andrew after having deceived him for six months. Frank replies that it only happened twice, and

only at her urgent invitation. She slaps his face, he thanks her and then tells her that he never loved her. She begs him not to end their relationship, and he repeats that it is over and he is not coming to Bradford.

When Andrew comes back into the room carrying the medicine bottle, Millie takes it from him and checks the contents. He tells her that she should know him well enough to know he'd never take an overdose. She leaves as Andrew offers Frank a sherry. Frank declines, saying he will not be staying for dinner, and Andrew replies that he is sorry to it. As Andrew pours himself a sherry, Frank changes his mind and decides to join him.

He tells Andrew that it was perfectly true that Taplow had been imitating him, and he apologises for encouraging the boy. When Andrew asks if it was a good imitation, Frank replies that it wasn't. He tells Andrew that Taplow said he liked Andrew very much, and the book was a genuine gift from the heart, but Andrew obviously doesn't believe him and says it's a lot of fuss about a small book that's not even very good. Frank tries to convince Andrew, who replies that he doesn't care about Taplow's opinion of him -- or Frank's.

Hopelessly, Frank tries to persuade Andrew to keep the book, and Andrew says that it will be a perpetual reminder of how Taplow will be laughingly telling his school friends that he tried to buy Andrew off with the book and that Andrew had cried. He then changes the subject, asking Frank if he likes the sherry. Frank replies that if Andrew believes that either he or Taplow would ever mention the book incident, he is greatly underestimating both of them.

They say goodbye, but before he leaves Frank urges Andrew to leave Millie. Andrew asks if that is so he and Millie can continue their affair. Frank, astonished, asks Andrew how long he has known about the affair and how he found out. Andrew replies that he has known from the beginning because Millie told him. In twenty years together, he says, Millie has never told him a lie.

Savagely, Frank asks why Andrew has never said anything or took action against him. Andrew replies that Frank is not the only lover Millie has had, but that he's only one of many. Millie is evil, Frank says, and he has never had any feelings for her other than disgust. He urges Frank to leave her before she kills him. Frank replies that if that is what she wanted to do, she succeeded long ago, and as long as she wishes to remain married to him she can do so. He says he will not add to the wrong he has already done her. He asks what wrong that would be, and Andrew tells him that by marrying Millie he had done her a great wrong. Both of them are victims of the marriage, he says, each unable to give the other the kind of love that they need and that has turned love to hatred. They are the archetypically unsatisfied wife and hen-pecked husband found all over the world. He asks Frank to leave.

He says that he'd like to visit Andrew at his new school. That is an absurd suggestion, Andrew says, but Frank persists and they eventually agree on a date. Andrew, moved, again asks Frank to leave. Ignoring Andrew's emotion, Frank writes the date for the visit in his diary and the two men shake hands. Frank says he's going to see Taplow, and

asks whether the boy has got his remove. After a moment of hesitation, Andrew says that he has – and although it is highly irregular, Frank may tell him.

As she arrives to set the table for dinner, Frank tells Millie he isn't staying. He asks Andrew for his new address and says he'll contact him for details of the trains nearer to their visit. He takes his leave of Millie and Andrew.

She laughs at the thought that Andrew has invited Frank to visit him, but Frank replies that it was his suggestion. They argue mildly over whether Frank will visit her in Bradford or Andrew in Dorset, and Andrew says that he most likely won't visit either of them. He tells Millie he will not be going to Bradford, but that he'll be staying where he is until he goes to Dorset. Millie says she doesn't care what he does and he shouldn't expect her to join him. He replies that he doesn't think either of them has the right to expect anything of the other anymore.

The phone rings, and it is the headmaster seeking some explanation about the timetable that Andrew has designed. Andrew patiently explains it to the headmaster, then adds that he has changed his mind and has decided after all that he will exercise his right to speak after Fletcher at the prize-giving the following day. He responds to the headmaster's protests by saying that his views have changed, and that an anti-climax can be surprisingly effective.

He sits down at the table, telling Millie that they should eat before the food gets cold.

Analysis

The Browning Version is a modern-day tragedy enacted in an English public school.

Not only does the décor indicate that the play is set in post-war England, but so too does the writer's mention of the fact that the small box of chocolates probably represented one month's ration for the Crocker-Harrises. Rationing of sweets and chocolate in Britain lasted from after WWII until 1953.

Once brilliant classical scholar Andrew Crocker-Harris, whose dreams of imparting his passion for his subject to his students, remains unfulfilled, and so too has his hopes of progression to housemaster and eventually headmaster. Yet he is a conscientious teacher, prepared to spend time with Taplow on the penultimate day of term and the day before he is leaving the school for good. He is courteous to everybody, including his wife's lover, and is polite to and protective of his unpleasant wife. However, his arid and repressed personality has not found favor with his pupils or with his peers. His wife is a spiteful, unfaithful snob who belittles him at every opportunity, and ill-health is forcing him to retire from the elite school and take a job teaching at a crammer. He is pitifully proud of his work arranging the school timetable, showing it to Frank with pride, but even for this he doesn't get any recognition because the timetable bears the signature of the headmaster.

The play spans a few hours of Crocker-Harris's life on a summer's day. Taplow's appointment with him is for 6.30pm, and the play ends with Crocker-Harris asking Millie to serve dinner. In that short space of time, Crocker-Harris sees the destruction of the last remnants of his dignity and the disintegration of his remaining illusions.

The headmaster, despite looking like a distinguished diplomat, either doesn't care enough about Crocker-Harris's feelings or does not possess the sufficient tact to soften the double portions of bad tidings he brings. Frobisher's announcement that Crocker-Harris has not been awarded a pension by the governors is made even more painful by his comparison with Buller, a master injured while playing rugby against the school and who had been granted a pension by the governors based on a collection of petition signatures by boys, old boys and parents. Crocker-Harris is made painfully aware that he doesn't enjoy the personal popularity and support that enabled the governors to bend the rule in Buller's favour that they will not repeat for him.

The headmaster has difficulty in remembering that Crocker-Harris was once a brilliant classical scholar, although he does congratulate him on excellent work producing the school timetable. He continues his battering-ram assault on Crocker-Harris's self-esteem by asking him to allow a younger master to make the prestigious final speech the following day, so that the event ends on a jubilant note of tumultuous applause and not the anti-climax which he feels Crocker-Harris's speech will generate.

Stoically accepting his lack of popularity, the bad news about his pension, the humiliation of being told that his speech will be an anti-climax and Millie's withering scorn at his acceptance of Frobisher's announcement and his inability to support her in the manner to which she feels she should be accustomed, he is still unprepared for the next blow, the one his replacement Gilbert delivers. Gilbert appears to share Frobisher's disregard for any sensitivity that Crocker-Harris might have, telling him that the headmaster refers to him as "the Himmler of the lower fifth." Crocker-Harris has long since accepted the fact that the boys not like him or find him funny and they actually actively dislike him, but he is shocked and deeply hurt to learn that they fear him.

In a short space of time, he has been made to see himself as somebody unliked, unloved, unwanted, unappreciated and feared. As he reels from the impact of what he has learned, Taplow arrives bearing a gift. It is not only the concept of being offered a gift, but the fact that Taplow has so carefully chosen Robert Browning's version of *The Agamemnon* and inscribed on the fly-sheet "God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master" that touches Crocker-Harris so profoundly. The boy's act of kindness breaks down what is left of Crocker-Harris' *sang froid* and allows all his pent-up feelings to overflow as his battered self-esteem is restored. The gift is a sign to him that his efforts as a schoolmaster have not been entirely in vain, and he sees the book as his most precious possession.

Millie's brutal and quite deliberate shattering of his short-lived joy is as painful for the reader as it is for Crocker-Harris himself, and the reader shares with Frank an intense loathing for Millie and a desperate desire to comfort Crocker-Harris and reassure him that Taplow's feelings were genuine. Crocker-Harris, though, has been too badly hurt to

trust anybody again. Frank ultimately redeems himself by his persistent effort to convince Crocker-Harris of his friendship, which gives Crocker-Harris the confidence to stand up to Millie as well as to assert his right to make the final speech at the prize-giving the next day. The reader is left to wonder how his speech will be received.

Millie has no redeeming features. She is a snob who uses every opportunity to impress people with her background, which is not at all as exalted as she likes people to believe. She is unfaithful and unkind to her husband, jealous of her lover, cruel and selfish. At the moment her husband tells her of Taplow's gift, the reader knows that she will ruin his pleasure. Just as Clytemnestra murdered her husband Agamemnon, Millie effectively destroys Crocker-Harris – then pays the penalty for her spite by suffering the rejection of her lover. The reader can conjecture that the only reason she has stayed with her husband is to benefit from his income, as she could only afford to support herself from her own means.

A basically weak and self-serving character, Frank tries to curry favor with the pupils by being overly friendly with them. Despite a purposely cultivated air of ruthless honesty, he cheats Crocker-Harris by having an affair with Millie, whom he admits he doesn't care about, has no qualms about standing up the Crocker-Harris's invitation to the grandstand at Lord's when he is presented a better option, and lies to them. He undermines Crocker-Harris by encouraging Taplow's mimicry; however, he is genuinely moved by Crocker-Harris' agony and wants to somehow make amends for the hurt that Crocker-Harris has suffered. He does finally redeem himself by helping restore the man's confidence.

The reader is left unsure as to whether Crocker-Harris's speech next day will be a triumph, whether Frank will keep his promise to visit, and whether or not Millie and Crocker-Harris will continue their unhappy relationship or finally break away from each other.

Characters

Andrew Crocker-Harris

Andrew is a gifted classical scholar and unpopular schoolmaster. He has worked at the same school for eighteen years and is leaving for a different, less stressful job in Dorset. It seems that a heart condition is forcing the move. In his eighteen years, Andrew has tried to reach his students by becoming something of a character, which has only increased most students and faculty dislike of him. He also has a reputation for being a strict disciplinarian.

On this, the last day of school, Andrew suffers several indignities. His wife has been having an affair with colleague, Frank Hunter, and Andrew has known about it from the beginning. He has been denied a pension by the school because he has not been there long enough. He has been asked by the headmaster to speak first at a prize-winning ceremony, when he should speak last because of his seniority.

Yet, he is moved by the gift of his pupil, John Taplow. After mentioning to the boy that he wrote his own translation of the play they are working on in Taplow's tutoring session, Taplow buys a similar version of the book and presents it to Andrew as a gift. This affects Andrew deeply until his wife, Millie, undermines his happiness over the gift.

Throughout *The Browning Version* Andrew has taken abuse from his wife without much comment. But, urged on by Frank, he reclaims some of his dignity by insisting on speaking second at the ceremony and deciding to stay there for the summer, no matter what his wife decides to do. As the play ends, Andrew is a stronger man than he was at the beginning.

Millie Crocker-Harris

Millie is the long-suffering wife of Andrew. She dislikes her husband immensely and has been having an affair with Frank Hunter. Although she does many of the household chores and social duties expected of her, she resents her husband's lack of success as a schoolmaster.

Millie knows her husband is unpopular, and she does not like it. His professional failings have meant that she has to do many of things a maid would take care of, like cook. Since she is a woman of some means, including a yearly income from her father, being associated with Andrew is a disappointment.

Millie expresses her resentment by undercutting anything Andrew says or does with a mean comment. She errs, however, when she destroys a happy moment for her husband in front of Frank. Millie's cruel attitude compels Frank to end their relationship and take Andrew's side. By the end of the play, Millie has informed Andrew that she will not go with him to his new job. He is indifferent to her decision.

Dr. Frobisher

Dr. Frobisher is the headmaster at the school where Frank Hunter and Andrew Crocker-Harris teach. He is uncomfortable with Andrew but acknowledges his intelligence. Dr. Frobisher is the official who informs Andrew that he will not be granted a pension, and he asks him to speak first, rather than second, at the ceremony.

Peter Gilbert

Peter Gilbert is a new schoolmaster at the school. He is the one who informs Andrew that he is known as "The Himmler of the lower fifth." This knowledge upsets Andrew. Gilbert looks to Andrew for advice on teaching, and Andrew responds with a bold, emotional statement on his shortcomings. Andrew's revelations embarrass Gilbert, but he remains polite.

Frank Hunter

Frank Hunter is a young schoolmaster who teaches science at the same school as Andrew. Unlike Andrew, he is quite popular with his students. Frank has been having an affair with Andrew's wife, Millie, for several months.

Although Frank does not seem to like Andrew, he does feel sorry for him and is always polite to him, unlike Millie. After Taplow gives Andrew the book and Millie tries to ruin her husband's happiness over the gift, Frank sympathizes with Andrew. He breaks off the affair with Millie and tries everything he can think of to protect and help Andrew.

John Taplow

John Taplow is one of Andrew's students. Andrew is tutoring Taplow in classical Greek, and they are translating the play *Agamemnon*. Taplow would rather play golf than be doing extra work on the last day of school and expresses his frustrations to Frank Hunter.

Despite the advice of Millie and Frank, Taplow insists on staying for his session. In a sense, he fears Andrew, because he realizes his future is in Andrew' s hands. Yet Taplow also likes Andrew, which he proves when he brings Andrew a verse version of the play they have been working on with a meaningful inscription. Taplow's kindness touches Andrew until Millie ruins it for him.

Themes

Success and Failure

Throughout *The Browning Version,* the ideas of success and failure are used to define characters. Andrew Crocker-Harris is considered a failure by everyone, including himself. Andrew's intelligence as a classics scholar is never questioned. Yet because he is unpopular, and perceived as a strict schoolmaster and a bad jokester, he is regarded as a failure.

His marriage is also a failure. Andrew has not met Millie's expectations on any front. This failure is emphasized by her flagrant affairs with other men, including her current lover, Frank Hunter. Thus, Andrew's failings have usurped his wife as well.

In *The Browning Version,* success is equated with popularity and sports. Frank Hunter is a successful schoolmaster because he relates better to the boys and teaches a less demanding subject than the classics. He lets John Taplow mock Andrew without penalty. Hunter also gives Taplow golf tips.

Similarly, one of Andrew's biggest humiliations is when the school's headmaster asks him to speak first at the ceremony the next day, instead of last. The headmaster wants that honor to go to another teacher who is leaving after only a few years. This teacher led the school's cricket team to an important victory and is popular among the students, making him more successful.

Generosity

A few moments of generosity change Andrew's life. The most important event occurs when his student, John Taplow, brings him a copy of Browning's verse translation of *Agamemnon* and inscribes the book. *Agamemnon* is the play Taplow is reading to learn Greek. Taplow's generosity touches Andrew deeply and is the catalyst for change.

Frank Hunter is similarly generous to Crocker-Harris. After initially regarding him with the same disdain as Millie, Hunter sees how deeply moved Andrew is when he receives Taplow's gift. In fact, Millie's spiteful comments prompt Hunter to break off his relationship with her. Hunter's most sincere gesture of friendship occurs when he insists on getting Andrew's address at his new school so he can visit. Hunter has completely changed from insincere lover (of Millie) to generous friend (of Andrew).

Apathy and Passivity/Death and Life

Several times in *The Browning Version,* Andrew refers to himself as dead. Millie also expresses the same opinion about him. This description is confirmed by his extreme passivity, letting Dr. Frobisher deny him a pension without argument. In addition,

Andrew barely blinks when his final honor at the school is taken away - speaking last at an important ceremony.

This passivity spills over into his relationship with Millie. With her affairs, she has humiliated him over and over. Their marriage is a war, and he refuses to participate.

This attitude changes several times in the course of *The Browning Version.* When Mr. Gilbert, who will be taking over Andrew's apartment and position at the school, informs Andrew that he is known as the "Himmler of the lower fifth," Andrew is upset. He reveals his feelings to Gilbert, which allows him greater insight into his feelings and shortcomings. This acknowledgment is one step on the way to a new life.

Andrew's reaction to Taplow's gift proves that he still does have feelings and does not need to accept his ' 'death" passively. Both of these events lead to action for Andrew. He calls Dr. Frobisher and insists that he speak last at the ceremony. He accepts Hunter's advice of staying there for the summer. He tells his wife that he no longer expects even the most superficial of marriages. By the end of the play, Andrew has been reborn.

Style

Three Classical Unities

In *The Browning Version,* Rattigan utilizes the unities for drama, as outlined by Aristotle in *Poetics*. The first unity is setting. The story is confined to one setting, the front room of the Crocker-Harris flat in 1948 at a public school in the southern part of England. The room is "gloomy," but the stage directions also indicate that it "is furnished with chintzy and genteel cheerfulness." By restricting the actions and intense emotions to this room, the confined nature of Andrew's repressed emotions and feelings and his cloying, damaged marriage are highlighted.

The second and third unities are time and action. The whole of *The Browning Version* takes place in less than one day. Indeed here, the story's timeline is only a few hours, emphasizing the story's intensity and the swiftness of change. The action is linear□there is only one very focused plot line. It concerns Andrew's imminent retirement, the truths revealed by it, and how these truths change him.

Eternal Triangle

Rattigan draws a triangle between three of the major characters in *The Browning Version*. At the head of the triangle is Millie, Andrew's wife. Although she is still married to him, she is in love with a younger man, Frank Hunter. Like Andrew, Hunter is a schoolmaster. Yet compared with the crotchety Andrew, Hunter is popular with the students and his colleagues.

The two men form the other two ends of the triangle, and form a bond, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the affair. The triangle allows Rattigan to explore two kinds of love: sexual desire (Hunter and Millie) versus a "higher love," a relationship based on social and intellectual compatibility.

Rattigan parallels this triangle with another in Aeschylus's*Agamemnon*. This text also concerns a philandering wife who takes a lover while her husband is away at war. She murders her husband upon his return. While Millie does not literally kill Andrew, she has hurt and humiliated him with cruel words and heartless behavior.

Symbolism

The course of *The Browning Version* is changed by two key symbolic acts, both of which involved the young student, Taplow. In the beginning of the play, he arrives for his tutoring session, only to find that Andrew is late. To get rid of the boy temporarily, Millie sends him to the pharmacists to pick up Andrew's heart medicine. He completes this task, which foreshadows his role as catalyst for Andrew's rebirth.

When Taplow brings Andrew a small gift, a verse translation of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon,* it reveals to the old teacher that life can be different, that he is not completely "dead." The fact that Taplow had brought him such a meaningful book, beautifully inscribed, gives Andrew a new perspective on life.

Historical Context

When World War II ended in 1945, Great Britain was in complete disarray. The country, as most of Europe, had suffered terribly during the war. Although Germany never invaded Great Britain, the country withstood severe bombings and economic turmoil, the latter of which lasted into the Postwar period. In that environment, the Labour Party was elected to power in 1945, and, for the first time, held control of Parliament. Clement R. Attlee served as Prime Minister.

The British economy was near bankruptcy and running on a deficit. The American Marshall Plan (or European Recovery program) was not enough to stimulate a full economic recovery. A budget was constructed to counteract this problem as much as possible. Under the austerity plan, taxes were increased and governmental costs were cut. The former worked better than the latter, and inflation did decrease.

However, Great Britain had problems increasing productivity, especially in essential industries. It could not meet export commitments or turn a significant profit in industries such as coal. To that end, the Labour government moved to nationalize many industries, including railroads, coal mines, and the Bank of England. The Iron and Steel Nationalization Bill took effect in 1950.

The Attlee-led Labour government took similar measures towards socialization in health care. After being in the works for nearly thirty-five years, the National Health Services Act was implemented in 1948. This act, in combination with the National Insurance Act, gave everyone access to free health care. The acts were somewhat controversial, especially among medical professionals such as doctors and dentists. A compromise was worked out, and when the service became effective, demand outstripped supply. Many people had not received decent medical attention since before the war.

Despite such measures, economic circumstances forced a continuation of rationing of certain items and several new items were added to the ration list. The manufacturing sector was slowly returning to a peacetime economy, however, and the standard of living increased. Bread and shoes were two items that actually ceased to be rationed. There were also a few labor problems, including a fourteen-day dock strike in London that temporarily hurt exports and the economy. Attlee himself had to intervene to end the strike.

Attlee and the Labour Party faced other serious issues. There were investigations into allegations of corruption among several of his ministers and public servants. Great Britain had relinquished control over India in 1947. Ireland moved to separate itself technically from the Commonwealth and became a republic the next year. Burma and Ceylon became independent in 1948. The British mandate in Palestine also came to an end, and Israel became a state. And although World War II was over, the Cold War began as Russia was constructing an Iron Curtain. In 1948, Russia blockaded Berlin, creating more international tension.

Critical Overview

When *The Browning Version* premiered in 1948, British critics were quick to praise Rattigan's achievements. Many recognized how Rattigan had matured as a playwright. A London correspondent of the *New York Times,* W. A. Darlington, asserted, "[The play] might have devolved into sentimentality on the one hand or domestic brawling on the other. It does nothing of the sort, for Rattigan has at call not only the superb craftsmanship ... but also that sure grasp of character...." When the play premiered in the United States a year later, however, critical response was mixed.

Some critics found much to praise. The anonymous critic of *Newsweek* contended: ' 'By skillful writing, Rattigan has been able to endow this stuffed figure of a scholar with genuine emotion. ..." Howard Barnes of the *New York Herald Tribune* seconded his colleague. He maintained, *"The Browning Version* is honest and eloquent. ... [H]e has composed a drama of far more depth and consequence than the subject might imply."

Many American critics applauded certain aspects of *The Browning Version* but were dismissive of others. John Mason Brown of the *Saturday Review of Literature* asserted,' 'Just why Mr. Rattigan chose to subject his theme to the almost inescapable compressions, hence artificialities, of the one-act mold is hard to understand. An absorbing long-play clearly lurks in his materials. Yet considering the elbow-room and scope he has elected to deny himself, I must admit Mr. Rattigan has down an expert and moving job."

Similarly, Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* contended "Grant *The Browning Version* the virtues of expert craftsmanship in both writing and acting, and still a playgoer may suspect that Mr. Rattigan has nothing to say. . . . [T]o me Mr. Rattigan's schoolmaster is pure sentimentality and I cannot grieve over his misfortunes. . . . The sorrow Mr. Rattigan asks us to feel over his failure is maudlin despite the expertness of the play craftsmanship."

Other American reviewers of the original Broadway production were downright hostile. The unnamed critic in *Time* maintains,' 'As playwrighting, it is not too far from double bilge; Rattigan's study of a defeated schoolmaster is only a shade less routine than his spoofing of ham actors."

In *The New Republic,* Harold Clurman claimed: ' 'I doubt that anywhere in the world but in England and among resolute Anglophiles in America are such portraits taken as probing character studies. They are really salon art with most of the attributes of mature work except reality."

Yet over time, many American critics and scholars adopted the attitude of their British counterparts. They appreciated the depth and careful craftsmanship of *The Browning Version*. Many commentators believed the play aged well. As Frank Rich of the *New York Times* explained, when reviewing a 1982 revival, "The once-tattered reputation of Terence Rattigan has risen so steadily, both in London and New York, since his death in

1977 that critics are no longer needed to plead his cause. As it's now clear, Rattigan's best plays are his best defense - they're almost foolproof." He counted *The Browning Version* amongst his best work.

Reviewing the same revival, John Simon of *New York* wrote, *"The Browning Version* if well done is boulevard drama at its very best and nothing to be ashamed of." Later in the review, Simon claimed, "Crocker-Harris is one of those figures that the theater-going memory, having once-encountered, can never quite dismiss."

Along the same lines, Walter Kerr of the *New York Times* asserted: "Mr. Richardson [the actor who played Andrew Crocker-Harris in the 1982 revival] doesn't cheat or beg for easy effect. Neither, ever does Mr. Rattigan. When it is time for a fresh discovery or psychological shift of the wind, the discovery is valid, the shift rings true."

Thus *The Browning Version,* which some critics had previously condemned as old-fashioned and dull, was soon regarded as quite the opposite. In her study, *Terence Rattigan,* Susan Rusinko contended, "Rattigan shuns sentimentality as well as theatricality, for he has kept at bay the pity one feels for a victim and gradually substitutes admiration for a contemporary middle-class antihero who lives, and eventually, if in a small way, triumphs over his life of quiet desperation. Like the failed, mediocre characters of some of Browning's dramatic monologues, the Crock belongs to a long tradition of modest, modern heroes."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Petrusso is a freelance writer and screenwriter. In this essay, she discusses how fear affects the actions of the characters in The Browning Version.

Throughout the text of Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version,* every major character is motivated by a fear. Many of these qualms are directly related to Andrew Crocker-Harris.

For instance, the students and staff of the school are intimidated by Andrew's crusty demeanor and odd ways. Yet the fears of Millie, his wife, are more indirect and complicated. She despises him and their life together and seeks any remedy to the situation, even having affairs with her husband's colleagues.

Andrew's fears are the deepest and most repressed. He hides his humanity behind a shield of stoicism, allowing a fundamental diffidence to rule his life. By examining these fears, the outcome of *The Browning Version* seems rather surprising. It is Andrew who overcomes some of his fears, through an indirect action of his own.

The most blatantly fearful characters in *The Browning Version* are Dr. Frobisher, the Headmaster, and John Taplow, Andrew's student. Throughout the conversation between Frobisher and Andrew in the middle of the play, Frobisher is ill at ease. In fact, he is so apprehensive about talking to Andrew that he consults Millie about how to approach him. (Indeed, he asks if Millie is home before relaying his news and is quite happy to see her at the end when she makes an appearance.)

The problem is who will speak last at the prize-giving ceremony the following day: Andrew, the senior retiree; or Fletcher, a schoolmaster who has only taught for five years, but is popular and heavily involved with the school's cricket team. Andrew agrees to speak first□ostensibly to avoid an anticlimax□yet this situation changes by the end of the play. Frobisher rationalizes his demand to Andrew by arguing, "it's more for your own sake than for mine or Fletcher's. ..."

Frobisher is also nervous when he has to tell Andrew that he will not be granted a pension. The stage directions read ' 'The Headmaster is regarding his nails, as he speaks, studiously avoiding Andrew's *gaze."* Frobisher blames the matter entirely on the board of governors at the school in order to deflect attention away from himself.

Taplow' s trepidation is much more personal; as his teacher and tutor, Andrew holds the boy's future in his hands. Taplow does not know yet if he will get his remove. He has come to Andrew's home for his extra work session, though it is the last day of school, because he missed a day the previous week when he was ill.

When Frank Hunter, and later Millie, suggest that Taplow leave because Andrew is late, the boy trembles in fear and does not leave until someone will take the blame for his tardiness. He tells Hunter, "Oh no, I couldn't cut. Cut the Crock□Crocker-Harris? I

shouldn't think it's ever been done the whole time he's been here. God knows what would happen if I did. He'd probably follow me home, or something□."

Taplow's fears increase when Hunter has him mimic Andrew, and Millie enters. Taplow believes she has overheard and will tell her husband, unaware of Millie's resentment toward Andrew. Later, when Andrew has returned, Millie covers for the boy.

The fear Frank Hunter feels is much different than the other two. Like them, he is attached to the school, a science teacher in the upper fifth form. He seems to have a pleasant relationship with everyone, including Andrew. But Hunter is having an affair with Millie, which makes him fear Andrew. It is not until the end of the play that Hunter learns Andrew has known about it all along; Millie always tells him about her liaisons.

For most of the play, Hunter worries about discovery. When he encourages Taplow to imitate Andrew, he is afraid when someone enters the room. He is relieved to find it is Millie. Similarly, when Millie makes him kiss her, he cuts it short in case Andrew returns home and sees them.

Although it would seem Millie might fear her husband the most of any character, her anxieties are altogether different. Because Millie despises her husband and can abuse him verbally without reprisal, she believes she has some measure of control over him.

What Millie fears is being left alone with Andrew. She needs lovers like Frank, the latest in a long line of lovers, to satisfy her in a way that Andrew cannot or will not. This is the only way she can survive, and she is desperate to keep Frank after he sees her cruelty go too far. She needs his pity desperately.

What Millie also fears, though she does not know it until the end of *The Browning Version,* is losing her control over Andrew. When she has finally lost Andrew□no matter how problematic their relationship is□she has nothing. /p>

The character that seems fearless is Andrew himself. Yet what he fears most is emotional involvement. Andrew's marriage has been on the rocks for many years. It has been easier to let Millie do and say what she will in order to avoid a confrontation. He lets each of her negative comments pass without so much as a raised eyebrow.

Similarly, he makes no effort to be popular□ and therefore emotionally involved□among his students or colleagues. While Andrew had ambitions at the beginning of his teaching career□even wanting to be a headmaster someday□his early failure to reach his students and the realization that he was disliked led to his present state. Andrew calls himself a "corpse"□he believes he can't even have emotions anymore.

Yet on the last day of classes, circumstances make Andrew confront his fear. It begins with the extra work session with Taplow. The young man's enthusiasm for Agamemnon as a play rather than a Greek text reminds Andrew that he once found pleasure in translating the play freely and in verse. He shares his memory with his student□a faint crack in Andrew's armor.

Andrew is further affected by the appearance of the Gilberts, who will be taking over Crocker-Harris's flat when Mr. Gilbert becomes a schoolmaster there. Without thought, Mr. Gilbert tells Andrew that he is known as ' 'the Himmler of the lower fifth" because his students fear his discipline. This comment wounds Andrew. Andrew confides his failures as a schoolmaster to Gilbert but quickly apologizes for his disclosures: ' 'I cannot for the life of me imagine why I should choose to unburden myself to you□a total stranger□when I have been silent to others for so long."

What caps off Andrew's emotional renaissance is Taplow's gift. The young man gives Andrew a secondhand copy of poet Robert Browning's verse translation of *Agamemnon,* inscribed with the phrase "God from afar look graciously upon a gentle master." The gift moves Andrew so deeply, he shakes and his voice trembles as he tries to speak. He directs the boy to pour him a dose of medicine so he has a moment to sob alone.

At that moment, Andrew realizes that he has made at least one success with a student and with that bond comes the emotional involvement he has denied for so long. Taplow, too, sees Andrew as more of a person. His fear is gone, and he gets his remove.

Because Millie has had nothing to fear from her husband, her attempts to undermine the meaning of Taplow's gift are quite normal for her. She tells her husband about the imitation Taplow did of him earlier and says that she believes the gift is a bribe for his remove. This forces Andrew to leave the room because he needs a moment to digest what has happened.

But Millie's actions make her fears come true. Hunter sees her vicious nature and ends their relationship. When Andrew returns and Millie leaves, Hunter learns that his fear has been pointless. Andrew has known about the affair all along.

Further, Hunter aids in Andrew's rebirth: he explains that Taplow expressed admiration of him earlier; encourages him to leave Millie; and arranges to visit him at his new position in the fall. Hunter's words cause another rush of emotion. Although Andrew may have been planning to leave Millie anyway by this time, he informs her that they will be going their separate ways, then tells Frobisher that he will speak last at the ceremony.

The three characters who confront their fears□ Andrew, Taplow, and Hunter□experience growth and understanding. They are better people for the effort. Those who do not□Millie and Frobisher□ find themselves not getting what they want. Andrew Crocker-Harris has made a Lazarus-like recovery.

Source: A. Petrusso, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In this essay, Foulkes provides an overview of Rattigan's play, including brief production histories and notes on the actors who have played the lead role.

The plot of this play focuses on Andrew Crocker-Harris, a classics master at an English public school, who is retiring prematurely because of ill-health, and who is confronted by his wife's infidelity and his failure in his chosen profession. Like much of Rattigan's work, *The Browning Version* is drawn from his own experience; in this case as a pupil at Harrow School. The prototype for Crocker-Harris was one of Rattigan's teachers, Mr. Coke Norris, and the central incident of the pupil, Taplow, presenting Crocker-Harris with a copy of Browning's translation *of the Agamemnon* of Aeschylus is based on fact (although there is some doubt as to whether Rattigan himself was the boy involved). Certainly Taplow's interest in cricket and golf reflect Rattigan's enthusiasm for those games.

The action of *The Browning Version* is set in the Crocker-Harris's sitting-room, replete with a stained-glass door leading to the garden as well as an internal door, concealed by a screen. Appropriately, in view of its classical associations, the play observes the unities of time, place, and action demonstrating Rattigan's renowned craftsmanship at its best. Although the dialogue is characteristically everyday (with Taplow's schoolboy slang) Rattigan imbues Crocker-Harris with a distinctive turn of speech (reflecting his classical education) and an articulateness, enabling him to comment upon his predicament (though not to express his feelings), which are consistent with naturalistic drama.

As the title implies, Rattigan seeks to establish parallels between his play and its classical source, thus Taplow remarks to Frank Hunter, a science master and Muriel Crocker-Harris's current lover: ' 'It's rather a good plot, really, a wife murdering her husband and having a lover and all that...." Of course, Crocker-Harris's fate is not the (literal) blood-bath which awaited Agamemnon on his return from the Trojan War, but Mrs. Crocker-Harris uses the no less deadening battery of psychological warfare as she relentlessly humiliates and degrades her husband. In terms of exploration of character and motive *The Browning Version* is closer to Euripides and his treatment of that other archetypal triangle (Theseus, Phaedra, and Hippolytus) in *Hippolytus* than to Aeschylus's bloody chain of murder and revenge.

The eternal triangle was a favourite formula for Rattigan. Although the central character, torn between two lovers, is usually a woman, it has been suggested that Rattigan on occasion depicted homosexual relationships under the guise of heterosexual ones. For Rattigan, the essence of a triangular relationship was that it enabled him to polarise the conflict between two types of love□on the one hand, the "higher love" (social and intellectual companionship and compatibility) and on the other, merely sexual gratification. Thus Muriel Crocker-Harris is caught between her 18-year-long, increasingly arid, marriage and her passionate affair (one of many) with Frank Hunter, in which she is the helpless and undignified pursuer. Crocker-Harris's classical knowledge

facilitates Rattigan's exploration of what Plato in *The Symposium* characterised as ' 'the two Aphrodites ... common love and the other Heavenly love". He does this with an erudition which makes the following speech central not only to this play but to Rattigan's work as a whole:

Two kinds of love. Hers and mine. Worlds apart, as I know now, though when I married her I didn't think they were incompatible. In those days I hadn't thought that the kind of love□the love she requires and which I was unable to give her□was so important that it's absence would drive out the other kind of love□the kind of love that I require and which I thought, in my folly, was by far the greater part of love....

Although this exploration of the two loves is the major theme of *The Browning Version,* there are others. Alongside the emotional repression of his marriage Crocker-Harris has sought the popularity of his pupils□"by pandering to their delight in his mannerisms and tricks of speech he has tried to compensate for his lack of natural ability to make himself liked" (Michael Darlow and Gillian Hodson, *Terence Rattigan,* 1979). This might be seen as a reflection of Rattigan's willingness as a dramatist to court popular success in the form of the endorsement of Aunt Edna the ' 'nice, respectable, middle-class, middle-aged, maiden lady", who made her debut as Rattigan's representative playgoer in his Preface to Volume Two of his *Complete Plays* (in which *The Browning Version* appears). Such an identification of author and character would imply a sense of failure on Rattigan's part even at this, the most commercially and critically successful period of his career.

Rattigan was taken to task for flinching from unhappy endings to his plays, preferring to send theatregoers home in a reassured state of mind. *The Deep Blue Sea* is susceptible to this criticism, but not so *The Browning Version*. Rattigan contemplated a tragic outcome (probably Crocker-Harris's death from his heart condition), but instead left his protagonist facing an uncertain future both professionally (at a crammer's) and matrimonially (will Muriel accompany him?). Crocker-Harris does, however, assert his right to make his valedictory speech at the end of the next day's prize-giving. In the film version, Rattigan's old friend Anthony Asquith prevailed upon him to open up the action of the play and to extend it to conclude with Crocker-Harris (Michael Redgrave) making his speech. The film thus finishes on a sentimental, "Mr. Chips" note which betrays the integrity of the original play.

Lasting about 80 minutes in the theatre, *The Browning Version* required a companion piece for which Rattigan provided one of his most ebullient comedies *Harlequinade,* about a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in a midland town. As a double-bill the two plays provide opportunities for the actors to demonstrate their versatility. Although John Gielgud (rather tactlessly) turned down Rattigan's invitation to create the part of Crocker-Harris it has since become one of the recognised classic roles of the modern stage, drawing fine performances from Eric Portman (1948), Nigel Stock (1976), Alec McCowan (1980), and Paul Edding-ton (1987).

Source: Richard Foulkes. *"The Browning Version"* in *The International Dictionary of Theatre,* Vol. *1: Plays,* edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St. James Press, 1992, pp. 90-92.

Critical Essay #3

Fleming offers praise for The Browning Version, *admiring both the dramatic merits of Rattigan's text and the skill of this particular production.*

Mr. Rattigan offers two longish one-act plays, sharply contrasting in mood and method, and this novel formula for an evening's entertainment is such a complete success that one wonders why nobody ever thought of it before. In *Tonight at 8.30* Mr. Coward's playbill included three short plays, but three is a team just long enough to have a tail, a litter just large enough to have a runt, and it was a virtual certainty that one of them would disappoint, however slightly. Mr. Rattigan does not run the risk of overtaxing either his own or his actors' versatility, and *Playbill* can be commended without reservations.

The first half of it, *The Browning Version,* is a psychological study of great strength and poignance. Crocker-Harris, a classical master at a minor public school, is retiring. For years he has realised that he is a failure, but it is only in his last hours at the school which he has served so long that he is shown with a terrible clarity how comprehensively and finally he has failed. A brilliant scholar, imbued as a teacher with the noblest traditions and the highest ideals of his profession, it is as a human being that he has been found wanting. The boys fear him, the other masters despise him, the total lack of regret at his departure threatens to create public embarrassment when he makes his farewell speech at the end-of-term celebrations. His lack of humour and of humanity are handicaps which would in any case have told against him; but it is the evil in his wife's character which has so maimed his soul that he has become wholly incapable of establishing a satisfactory relationship with any of his fellow human beings. Like a dog caught unluckily in a gin, he has lost the capacity to recognise or accept friendliness, to restrain himself from snapping at the hands tentatively stretched out to help him.

His wife has the flat, unemphatic malevolence of a snake. Promiscuously false to him, she makes no bones about giving to the husband who can no longer satisfy her desires full particulars of those who do. But this seems a venal fault compared with her contemptuous and unremitting cruelty, which reaches its climax when one of his pupils unexpectedly brings him a book as a farewell present. The boy's motive is really a sort of casual pity for a rather pathetic old hack whom he vaguely feels to be less objectionable than most people find him; but to the poor man, self-outlawed among his sufferings, this unforeseen and unique piece of evidence that someone has appreciated him seems of a disproportionate importance. His defences, for once, go down, he is deeply touched, he weeps. His wife cannot bear to see him enjoying even this crumb of comfort, imputes to the boy an ulterior motive and thrusts the broken man back into the limbo she has made for him. A colleague who has been her lover revolts at this and applies moral first aid to her victim, so that when the curtain falls we are aware of the embryonic stirrings of a new self-confidence in Croker harris.

Source: Peter Fleming. Review of *The Browning Version* in the *Spectator,* Vol. 181, no. 6273, September 17, 1948, p. 366.

Adaptations

The Browning Version was adapted as a film in 1951. Produced by Teddy Baird and directed by Anthony Asquith, the movie stars Michael Redgrave as Andrew, Jean Kent as Millie, and Nigel Patrick as Frank Hunter.

A made-for-television version was filmed in 1985 in Great Britain. Directed by Michael A. Simpson, it stars Ian Holm as Andrew, Judi Dench as Millie, and Michael Kitchen as Frank.

Another filmed version was released in 1994. Directed by Mike Figgis, it features Albert Finney as Andrew, Greta Scacchi as Millie, and Matthew Modine as Frank Hunter.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast Andrew Crocker-Harris with Willy Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Both characters are trapped in unhappy situations. How do they handle the problems in their lives?

How could Millie and Andrew have avoided their unhappy situation? Was the end of their marriage inevitable? Discuss how certain actions□better communication, compromise, marriage counseling□could have impacted their relationship.

Compare and contrast Andrew Crocker-Harris with Mr. Chips, the protagonist of the movie *Goodbye Mr. Chips* (1939). This movie concerns the life of a British schoolmaster, Mr. Chips. How do these characters regard their positions? How does this attitude affect those around them, including students and family?

Research the psychology of wives who cheat on their husbands. How do Millie's actions fit into your findings? Do you believe Millie and Frank really love each other?

Compare and Contrast

1948: Prince Charles is born to Princes Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Charles is second-in-line to the throne, held by King George VI, after his mother.

Today: Prince Charles is first-in-line to the throne after his mother, Queen Elizabeth II. His son, Prince William, is his successor.

1948: The Labour Party takes control of the British government. Charles Attlee is Prime Minister. It is the first time Labour has been in control of Parliament.

Today: The Labour Party is in control of the British government, for the first time in many years. Tony Blair is Prime Minister.

1948: The Labour-led government of Great Britain begins to establish a socialized welfare state, including nationally-run industry and national health insurance.

Today: Much of the legislation creating the socialized welfare state had been dismantled during the administration of Conservative Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. National health care, however, still exists.

1948: As part of the Cold War, Berlin is blockaded by Soviet Russia. Germany is separated into eastern and western sections.

Today: East and West Germany have been reunited for several years. The Soviet Union has been dissolved, and the Cold War is over.

What Do I Read Next?

Tom Brown's Schooldays, a novel by Thomas Hughes, was published in 1857. The story focuses on a young student's trials and tribulations as a public school student in England.

Rattigan's play, *The Deep Blue Sea,* was first performed in 1963. It is a thriller, concerning a love triangle similar to one found in *The Browning Version.*

Cecily, a novel by Isabelle Holland, was written in 1967. The story focuses on a proud young teacher at a British girls' school whose lack of compassion towards a misfit student brings disaster to her own romance.

Written in the fifth or sixth century B.C., *Agamemnon,* is a play written by Aeschylus. It concerns a cheating wife, her lover, and her suffering husband.

Vintage Stuff, a novel by Tom Sharpe, was published in 1982. It follows the adventure of some public school boys and their teachers on vacation in France.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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