Burn This Study Guide

Burn This by Lanford Wilson

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Introduction

Burn This opened in Los Angeles, California, on January 22,1987. Wilson's play is a contemporary romantic drama, but it is not a happy romance, and even the resolution cannot be described as entirely happy. The two romantic leads, Anna and Pale, do not find love easy, and it is not easy for the audience to witness. Early reviews of the play were mixed. Although reviewers commended Joan Allen and John Malkovich' s performances, some critics questioned the credibility of an attraction between Anna and Pale. Nevertheless, the play has been generally well-received because the characters are interesting, particularly Larry, Anna's homosexual roommate, who is funny and endearing. In a 1986 interview with David Savron, Wilson explained that *Burn This* is a love story different from any other love story because the characters do not say, "I love you"; they say, "I don't want this." This conflict, argued Wilson, makes the love story contemporary. Wilson spent time studying modern dance so that he could incorporate the atmosphere and style into his character of Anna. *Burn This* is Wilson's thirty-eighth play, and he was willing to wait for nearly a year to put it on stage because he wanted John Malkovich to play Pale. He has stated that with this play he wanted to recapture the convoluted plotting of his earliest plays. Wilson relies upon dialogue to reveal the plot, and thus, the audience must pay close attention in order to follow the action. *Burn This* was not as commercially or critically successful as were Wilson's *Talley's Folly* or *Hot I Baltimore,* but it has been widely discussed as a depiction of a contemporary love story.

Author Biography

Lanford Wilson was born in Lebanon, Missouri, on April 13, 1937. He was five when his parents divorced. His father moved to California, and Wilson lived with his mother until 1956. Wilson attended Southwest Missouri State College from 1955 to 1956 and San Diego State College from 1956 to 1957; he planned on being an artist, although he had done some acting in high school. When he was nineteen, Wilson moved to Chicago, where he was employed as an illustrator at an advertising agency. He had been writing stories on his lunch hours and gathering rejection slips, when he suddenly realized that the story he was writing was not a story but a play. He has considered himself a playwright ever since.

Since he had no real knowledge about the writing of plays, Wilson enrolled at the University of Chicago to learn about plays and playwriting. After he moved to New York in 1962, Wilson became an active participant in the Off-Off Broadway theatre community. Several of his early plays were produced at the Caffe Cino or at La Mama Experimental Theatre, including *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964) and *Home Free* (1964). These early one-act plays were followed by a succession of full-length works, beginning with *Balm in Gilead* (1965). In 1968, Wilson was a co-founder of the Circle Repertory Company, where most of his works have since premiered. Strong character development has become a hallmark of Wilson's work. His characters often exist on the fringes of society, but as the play progresses, they demonstrate that they are capable of growth and change.

Burn This (1987) is Wilson's thirty-eighth play. In a December, 1986, interview, Wilson stated that he considers *Burn This* to be the best work he has ever done. But he also explained that it is difficult to decide on a favorite, as his opinion sometimes changes when new productions of his works are staged. Wilson has been the recipient of several awards, including the New York Drama Critics' Circle award in 1973 for *Hot I Baltimore* and in 1980 for *The Migrants.* Wilson also received the American institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1974, and in 1980, he received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Theatre Club, Inc. Medal, and the

Brandeis University Creative Arts Award for *Talley's Folly,* Wilson has received Tony Award nominations for *Fifth of July* (1979), *Talley's Folly* (1980), and *Angels Fall* (1983). *The Migrants* (a collaboration with Tennessee Williams), *Fifth of July, Lemon Sky, The Rimers of Eldritch, The Sand Castle, Wandering,* and *The Mound Builders* have all been produced on television. Wilson has also written two original television plays, *Stoop: A Turn* and *Taxi. Hot I Baltimore* was adapted as a television series in 1975. Wilson received a Ph.D. m 1985 from University of Missouri.

Plot Summary

Act I, scene 1

Burn This opens just after the death and funeral of Robbie, Anna and Larry's roommate. The action takes place in the roommates' loft, and as the play begins Anna is huddled on the sofa smoking, a drink in her hand. Burton arrives at the loft and is admitted. In the conversation that follows, the audience learns that Robbie and his partner, both of whom were gay, were killed recently in a boating accident. Anna was unable to reach Burton, who was out of town, and he has come to the apartment upon returning to New York and hearing the news. When Larry enters with groceries, the audience learns even more about the events of the past few days. The audience also learns about the nature of Anna and Burton's relationship. Although he is supposed to be her boyfriend, he could not be reached by phone when she needed him, and his initial interaction with Anna seems distant. Both Larry and Anna take turns describing Robbie's funeral and his family's reaction to his death. The audience learns that Robbie and Anna worked closely together and that she had recently changed careers from dancer to choreographer. Robbie was an integral part of Anna's new career, and his dancing was also a part of her choreography work. Thus, she has not only lost a friend and roommate, she has lost an artistic partner. Anna tells Burton that Robbie's family, none of whom had never seen him dance, did not acknowledge that he was gay. Instead, they assigned Anna the role of Robbie's girlfriend and treated her as his grieving widow. Both Larry and Anna are upset at this treatment by Robbie's family, and the dialogue serves an important purpose of establishing this family's background before the arrival of Pale, Robbie's older brother, who appears at the loft later in Act I. Anna, Larry, and Burton also talk about Burton's recent trip, the purpose of which was to help him rind sources and inspiration for his next screenplay. Burton makes a great deal of money for the sale of his scripts, but apparently feels no great loss at their sale and would just as soon not know how Hollywood uses his material.

Act I, scene 2

The scene opens with a pounding on the door; it is the middle of the night. Pale, enters the loft; he is loud and obnoxious. His speech makes little sense to Anna and is filled with obscenities. It is revealed that Pale is twelve years older than Robbie and that it has been a month since the funeral. Pale creates so much noise that Larry is awakened but returns to bed. The conversation between Pale and Anna is confrontational and unpleasant. At times neither seems to be listening to the other person and the speech becomes almost a monologue. As he has been speaking, Pale has also been undressing. When he breaks down, Anna tries to comfort him. Pale lies down on the sofa; his conversation is peppered with sexual innuendo, and the lights fade. When the stage lights come back up in a few moments, it is morning. The conversation between Anna and Larry reveals that Pale slept in Anna's bed. Anna states that Pale was like a

bird with a broken wing that needed healing. Pale is anxious to leave and almost bolts from the loft, but first he tells Anna that he has a wife and children.

Act II, scene I

It is almost two months later, New Year's Eve. Anna and Burton are together. They are discussing their recent work when Larry returns early from a trip, interrupting what was obviously planned intimacy between Anna and Burton. The three begin talking and Burton tells a story about an anonymous quasi-homosexual experience he once had during a snow storm. The conversation ends when Larry opens the door and a very drunk Pale falls into the room. Pale is as rude as he was during his first visit to the loft, and a confrontation erupts between Pale and Burton, which escalates into a fight. Anna throws Burton out; she would like to throw Pale out, but he is too drunk. Anna and Larry leave the stage as each goes to bed; a sleeping Pale is left lying to the side of the stage. But before the lights fade, the audience sees Pale walking toward Anna's bedroom. When the lights come back up, Larry is preparing coffee. Pale emerges and begins making tea, and finally Anna comes out of her bedroom. Anna states that she and Pale are like apples and oranges that do not belong together. Pale makes an effort to convince her that they do belong together, but she is determined to have him leave. Anna reveals that she is frightened of a serious emotional commitment. The scene ends with Pale leaving the loft and Anna leaving to be alone.

Act II, scene 2

Burton and Larry are alone on stage. Burton appears dejected and is holding his new script. It has been a month since the confrontation on New Year's Eve. Larry reveals that Anna has been working on a new dance, but that she has not seen Pale. Burton says that he has never had to deal with loss before; he had a privileged childhood and has always had what he wants. Burton cannot understand why Anna has thrown Pale out and then created a dance about him. Burton leaves his new screenplay with Larry to read and then leaves. The stage fades to black and when the lights come up in a few moments it is night and Pale is waiting as Anna enters and turns on the lights. Pale reveals that Larry invited him to see Anna's new dance and that Larry gave Pale a key and a note asking him to come to the loft. Larry also gave Anna a note asking her to meet Larry there. Both Anna and Pale understand that Larry has set them up, and although Anna says that she does not want this, the play ends with the burning of Larry's notes and Anna and Pale's embrace.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Burn This opens on a mid-October evening in a converted factory-loft in lower Manhattan. In the loft, Anna, a dancer, sits on the couch alone. The buzzer sounds repeatedly until Anna goes to the door. Burton, a writer, enters having just heard the news that Anna's dance partner and roommate Robbie and his lover Dominic were killed in a boating accident.

Anna has just returned from the wake at the home of Robbie's parents in Houston. She is visibly upset about the family's lack of knowledge about Robbie's homosexuality. Burton has just returned from a trip in Canada.

Anna's other roommate Larry arrives with groceries wondering why he has not been able to reach Anna all day. She has been alone with the phone turned off and has turned to vodka for solace.

Anna tells Burton about Robbie's family. Out of the entire family, no one has seen Robbie dance – his true passion. The company that Robbie danced with is in Sacramento and many of his friends and colleagues were unable to attend the funeral services. The priest who eulogized Robbie had not seen him in six years; Robbie's parents had not seen him in five. Despite Robbie's openness about his sexuality, the family is not aware (or chooses not to believe) and labels Anna his *girlfriend*.

Burton is a screenwriter who specializes in science fiction. Having just returned from vacation Anna asks him about his travels to Canada. He begins to relay how fickle the weather is – 70 degrees one day; ten degrees with snow the next – and as he talks about the climate and the experience, he starts to talk about an idea he got for a new script, but this time he's steering away from science fiction. The new script is a love story and Burton is not entirely comfortable with it. Anna encourages him, noting his excitement in explaining the story. Yet the further Burton goes into his story, the more he starts to realize that he does not think the idea is viable.

Burton explains that the story is about the wives of sailors and the longing they experience waiting on the widow's walks. Larry returns and chides Burton about whether they will be robots in the story. Burton responds, "No robots. I love the space stuff, but on this one, I'm looking for passions, faith, myths, love, derring-do, for god-sake. Heroes and heroines" (Act 1, pg. 14).

Larry equates this to the legend of *The Flying Dutchman*, which Burton is unfamiliar with. Larry explains the myth. It is about a cursed sailor who must find a girl who will truly love him, but his tale is complicated by his being able to come on shore only once in seven years. The sailor goes to Norway where he meets Senta. She falls in love with him, but she has a boyfriend. The sailor leaves and Senta throws herself into the sea,

essentially freeing the Dutchman of the curse because he found someone who truly loved him.

Burton and Larry carry on about the state of movies. When Larry asks how Burton feels about the treatment Hollywood gives to his scripts, Burton tells him that seeing the money in his bank account softens the blow. Larry reminds Burton that he does not need the money. Even though Burton has family money, he still needs money. Therefore, he continues writing screenplays. Burton describes Hollywood as whores, but Larry rejects this sentiment, stating that his work in advertising makes him ever bit as much a whore as Hollywood does Burton.

Burton finally leaves, going home to type up his ideas for the new script before a dinner meeting. Larry and Anna are left together. Larry chides Anna by asking why she does not just go ahead and marry Burton for the money. Anna is pleased that Burton is making headway on a new idea.

Since she has not been able to exercise in a couple days, Anna is feeling stiff and out of sorts. She will be traveling to teach Charlie's dance to other companies, explaining that she has to leave the next day, but will be back the following. She will be in New York for a week and then she's off to Seattle for six weeks. Anna confesses that she has been working with Charlie's dance so long that she feels like his moves are all her muscles know. She tells Larry that she signed up for a dance class just to purge her body of Charlie's movements.

Anna continues with more details about the wake: eating and drinking and talking with extended family members, all the while she was trying to figure out how to get away. Adding to the experience is Anna's nearly immediate revelation that the family is completely clueless with regard to Robbie's sexuality and that they had never heard of Dominic. She makes up stories to tell the family and learns that the family had never seen Robbie dance.

The men in the family all resemble Robbie with the primary difference being that they have more of a blue-collar look to them. They all start drinking and before she realizes it, it is midnight and the last bus has left two hours earlier. Anna must stay at the house and is put up in one of the nephew's bedrooms. The boy, identified as the little redhead, has spent the afternoon collecting butterflies and has subsequently pinned them to his walls – a pin in each wing. By two a.m., Anna wakes up to a strange fluttering sound. It turns out that the boy had put the butterflies in alcohol; instead of killing them, they had just passed out and were now coming to on the walls.

Anna starts screaming and, wrapped only in a sheet, she runs downstairs. One of the older brothers goes into the room to get her clothes and unpin the butterflies. After she is dressed, a sister takes her and drops her off at the bus station, clearly happy to be rid of her. Larry is horrified by the story and can only imagine Anna's horror at waking up to the butterflies.

Larry asks her what they should do with Robbie's mail and Anna says that they should save it along with his other belongings because someone from the family is coming to get them. Robbie did not have much, as his focus was on work, Anna and Dominic.

Anna decides that it is too early to go to bed. Larry tells her that if she goes to bed now she will be up in the middle of the night. She asks him how work is going and he tells her about coming up with the company Christmas card at Chrysler. There cannot be anything religious on the card, and since only half of the religions in the country recognize Santa Claus, even Santa is out of the question for the design. No reindeer, no evergreens, mistletoe, etc. The company informs him, "The only thing everyone believes in is the family and children. I [Larry] said that was only going to offend homosexuals" (Act 1, pg. 23). The company takes his remark as a joke and considers using an automobile on the card instead.

Larry rambles about the card and starts thinking out loud about ordering in food, and then he pointedly tells Anna that he cannot keep from thinking about what happened to Robbie. Anna admits that she is angry: at Robbie and Dominic for getting killed and at Robbie's family for not knowing him. Larry tells her that she does not have a reason to mad at Robbie's family, but she cannot help it. Ultimately she is angry because, in the midst of all the family chaos, she did not have the opportunity to properly say goodbye to Robbie.

The lights fade and a brief period of darkness marks the passage of time. Finally, loud pounding is heard. Pale hollers for Anna from the hallway. She slips on her Hapi coat and checks through the peephole. She opens the door and Pale barges in. He is described as well-built and sexy in his mid-thirties. He wears a nice suit.

He rants about how anyone can live in the city; racial epithets and curse words fly as he continues about trying to find a parking space. As he pulled in another car honked at him. He threatened the other driver, telling him to back off before he ends up sleeping in his car.

Anna asks if she knows him, admitting that he is the spitting image of Robbie, so she must, but she cannot place him. He separates himself from Robbie by identifying the difference in their noses. Pale says that she knows him because he is the one who saved her from the butterflies.

He says his name is Jimmy and she remembers that he is Robbie's older brother. Pale makes note that he was twelve years older and what difference could that make. He continues ranting about the neighborhood that she lives in, complaining about the potholes and that the city would be better off just burning this part of the city to the ground. He finally asks if she has Robbie's belongings.

Anna is surprised that he has finally come for Robbie's belongings as it has been over a month. She tells him that she tried calling his mother and that she gave her a couple numbers where she could reach him. Pale informs her that he does not want her bothering his family. He does not like messages and every time she leaves one he feels

like he heard her the first time; he does not need the barrage of messages. He hates little pieces of paper because they get stuffed in pockets and forgotten and after awhile there are several pieces of paper stuffed in pockets ruining the garment.

His feet suddenly distract him. His shoes are new and his feet have gotten hot. He pulls off his shoes and continues complaining about the neighborhood. Anna tells him that they like the neighborhood. Pale dismisses her and the fact that the neighborhood is considered arty.

Larry appears in the doorway wearing a t-shirt and shorts. Pale looks over and asks whom he is. Looking at Pale, Larry quotes *Lust in the Dust* as he did earlier in the act: "Where did you come from? What do you want? It's me, isn't it? You've always wanted me. You want to have your filthy way with me in the hot desert sun. Ravage me like I've never been ravaged before" (Act 1, pg. 28). Larry turns to Anna and asks if she is okay. She says she's fine and introduces Pale as Robbie's brother and, in turn, introduces Larry as her other roommate. Pale thinks that Larry is Robbie's replacement, but Larry corrects him by stating that he, Robbie and Anna all got the place together. When Pale says that he did not see Larry at the wake, Larry informs him that he was not invited and exits.

Robbie's things are in the basement and if they go down there now they will wake up the whole building. Anna tells Pale that she has called the Salvation Army. He does not understand what the rush is all about, but is distracted by a loud noise from the radiator.

She explains the noise is the heat coming on and he complains that the room is already like an oven. He strips off his tie and pulls out his shirttail. He goes off about how hot it is in the room and finally asks how long Robbie lived in this apartment. She says three years and that he was a lot of fun. Pale compares him to other guys by claiming that most guys are dark, but Robbie was light. Anna offers him coffee, though he clearly would prefer alcohol. Finally, Anna identifies him as Pale. He further explains: V.S.O. Pale (Act 1, pg. 30). She says that Robbie used to mention him. Pale insists that he is quite mentionable. Apparently, Pale was the one family member Robbie actually liked.

Pale surveys the view from the window. He is critical of the view of the bay and the tugboats. Anna asks if he is high; she knows he has been drinking, but wants to know if he is on anything else. He admits that he may have done a few lines of cocaine earlier in the evening.

Larry returns only in his shorts. Pale asks if he is doing a slow striptease; Larry turns around and leaves. Pale continues looking out the window. Anna explains that a building is being constructed that will block a lot of the view, but Pale is more interested in trying to find where he parked his car.

He starts talking about his friend Ray who is a bartender, which Anna is clearly disinterested in. He gives up on the topic and asks Anna about dancing in the apartment, figuring that because of the lack of furniture, they must have used the space to dance.

Pale locates a bottle of brandy and pours a drink. Anna taunts him that the brandy is not "V.S.O.P." He knows this because his area of expertise is food and drink. He asks about her dancing and she tells him that she is taking a break; his response suggests that she could not handle the pressure of it. Anna retorts that it was the prospect of finding a personal life, but in truth, Robbie thought she would make a good choreographer. She admits she likes it.

Finally, she tells Pale that he should come back around 7:30am, and then they can go down to the basement. He says no because he has to work in the morning. She asks what he does and he tells her anything – deliver water, put out fires, whatever. She turns the focus to his hand and asks what happened to it and he explains a situation that came up with Ray at the bar earlier that night. A man at the bar talked non-stop and Pale threatened him. This caused the guy to talk even more and Pale busted the guy's lip open.

Pale redirects by asking more about Anna's choreography and she apologizes, clearly distracted by the sudden change of topic. The apology sets him off as well. Pale goes on about how he hates the social niceties of apologies and the like. He compares apologies to toilet paper and how people should consider the tree that could have one day been something like music paper, but instead becomes toilet paper. Again, he abruptly changes the subject and asks how long Robbie lived in the apartment.

Anna answers three years. She inquires as to whether Pale knows that Robbie was studying dance. Pale responds that he did not really know Robbie because Robbie was seven when Pale moved out of the house. Anna admits that she was thinking that Pale did not know Robbie and this sets Pale off. They argue about knowing Robbie and Anna finally gives in and tells him that she is going to bed because if Pale does not want to talk about Robbie, she certainly does not.

Pale is defensive, thinking she means he does not have any feelings or does not care about his brother. She apologizes, saying she is tired and that, not only does she miss Robbie, but Pale reminds her of him. As she tells him that she needs to get up early for her class he begins to sob faintly, trying to keep it at bay, but then starts sobbing profusely. She tries to comfort him, but he pushes her away and says this is not something he does. He even entertains the possibility that he is having a heart attack. Finally, he tries to pull himself together and imagine his brother in the apartment. She tells him that his room was in the loft. He asks if they cooked and she explains that they did sometimes and that Robbie was working his way through a cookbook that Dominic had given to him for Christmas. Pale says he hates Christmas and Anna asks him if he likes anything. He explains that he likes the ocean and going through a hurricane, getting laid, and taking a hot shower.

He starts rambling about the music his father played in the house when he was young – classical mostly. He claims to compose "tone poems" (Act 1, pg. 39) and she asks if he reads music. He claims that no one reads music anymore. He looks at her and asks what she is wearing. She explains that it is a Hapi coat from Japan. He responds by

stating that Japanese people are shorter and the coat would probably cover them better than it does her.

Pale asks again about the living arrangements. He criticizes Anna for how she handled the family at the wake because she let on like she was Robbie's girlfriend. She explains that it was not her place to tell them that Robbie was gay, and Pale assures that they knew; they just did not want to admit it. He starts criticizing Robbie's sexuality and his relationship with Dominic. He asks if Dominic also lived with them. Anna says he spent a lot of time at the apartment and that they were trying to get him to move in with them. He continues rambling about what it must have been like seeing Robbie and Dominic together and he starts sobbing again, but suddenly he's worried about wrinkling his pants because he has to wear the suit the next day. He takes off his pants and presses them out on the table. He crawls onto the couch, pulls a blanket over his head and cries heavily.

Anna tries to console him, but her grief is strong. She finishes her coffee and then finishes his brandy as well. She confesses that she thinks she sees him ten times a day, or someone who dresses like him, and then, when she remembers that he is dead, it is almost like she has lost him all over again.

He peeks out from under the blanket, wondering where his drink is. Anna tells him that she drank it and she goes to get them both new drinks. She continues to call him Jimmy, whom he likes; he says no one calls him Jimmy. Their conversation stalls, both emotionally exhausted. She confesses that she feels blue; Pale notes that she has no tits. She starts to dismiss him, but he continues on, telling her that breasts are deceiving and provocative. He starts to sing and then begins rambling about how screwed up he is, his body aching, his grief, and the fact that he is aroused by Anna. He tells her he is going to cry on her hair and he does. She tells him to stop.

Anna starts talking about how angry she was at the funeral because she had not gotten a proper good-bye. A couple days later, she and Larry went to the cemetery and cried the entire day. She kisses Pale and he asks her about going back to the cemetery. He kisses her, talking about how he feels like he is falling out of an airplane, and then he comments on how she smells; she dismisses the scent as shampoo. He tells her his shampoo does not make him smell like that. Lights fade to black.

Lights rise on morning and Larry enters from outside having just loaded Robbie's belongings into Pale's car; he is not pleased about having done manual labor. Anna tells Larry that he got tied up on the phone and that he is in taking a shower now. Larry taunts her about having had sex the night before. He looks at Pale's jacket and pants on the couch, and he finds a pistol. Anna tells him not to touch it, she knows about it. He tells her that when he was putting Robbie's stuff in Pale's car he found Robbie's address book and tells Anna's Pale's address. She offers to make him an omelet.

Pale enters with a fresh shirt and tie; he puts on his pants and shoes, dialing the phone. He talks with Joe and tells him that he is leaving in fifteen minutes; exasperated he says he is more trouble than his old lady. Larry is caught off guard and Pale explains that he

is married with two kids and shows Anna his wallet – a boy and girl. Anna asks what his wife will think about his spending the night. He says she trusts him and that he has not cheated on her. Anna returns the wallet and tells him that the children are beautiful. She offers to make him breakfast, but he declines, grabs his keys, and leaves.

Larry calls the number listed in Robbie's address book and asks for Pale. Of course, Pale isn't there, but he learns that Pale is the manager of a restaurant called Da Signate Ristorante. Larry claims to have eaten there and that it's full of celebrities. He also figures that Pale hurried out because he had to get to the fish market early. He still questions the gun, but Anna suggests that he may have it if he deposits the money at night.

The phone rings and Larry answers; it is Burton. Larry makes a few innuendos about Anna's late-night activities, suggesting that she might not being feeling well because she looks exhausted. Anna takes the phone from him and assures Burton that she is feeling fine. She arranges to meet Burton at 7 o'clock that evening while Larry sings the same song Pale was singing the night before. She hangs up and Larry calls her a slut. Burton wants to go out that evening and Anna says yes, mostly out of guilt.

She starts for the bathroom to take a shower and Larry offers to make her a waffle; she declines and disappears into the bathroom singing.

Act 1 Analysis

Burn This is a play about love, grief, control and self-discovery. The story involves four main characters: Anna, a dancer; Burton, her lover; Larry, her roommate; and Pale, the brother of her recently deceased dance partner, Robbie. At the center of the characters is Robbie. Having been killed in a boating accident prior to the play's beginning, Robbie is the catalyst that unites the characters and, in the case of Pale and Anna, brings two people together who may not have otherwise met.

At the start of the play, Anna, Burton and Larry are all returning: Anna from the wake; Larry from running errands; and Burton from a trip to Canada. This meeting point suggests how these characters lives must intersect in order to move the story forward.

When Anna is with Robbie's family for the wake and funeral, Anna does not feel it is her place to tell the family that Robbie was gay. She indicates that the family regarded her as Robbie's girlfriend. In one respect, this helps the family cope with an aspect of Robbie's life that they would prefer to ignore. Later in the play, Pale admits that the family was aware of Robbie's sexuality, which presents the question of whether or not it was Anna who gave herself the label of girlfriend. Anna is attracted to Robbie, but her attraction was forbidden because of his sexuality, thus her feelings for Robbie were repressed. The family frustrates Anna, but she's mainly angry because she was unable to properly say goodbye to Robbie. Anna could have taken the initiative for her goodbye, but opted not to. Anna cannot commit to what she wants, in part because she has not figured that out for herself. Perhaps it is because she has been living with half-

truths. Anna readily admits to making up stories for the family, which frustrates her, but not to the point where she stops doing so. Instead, on some level, Anna enjoys living vicariously through the stories she makes up about Robbie. This allows her to explore an intimacy that Robbie's sexuality prevented.

When Burton talks about the fickle nature of Canadian weather, it symbolizes what cannot be expected. People are at the mercy of weather, just as the characters are at the mercy of fate. No one can really predict what will happen next. Anna knows that someone is coming to collect Robbie's belongings, but no one has yet arrived. Essentially, it's a forecast without a storm, but the storm, in the form of Pale, is on its way.

Burton confides in Anna about his thoughts on a new movie script. The script is a love story, not the science fiction that he typically writes. Burton is not comfortable with the subject matter, much as he is not comfortable with his relationship with Anna. Of course, part of the reason why Burton is uncomfortable is because of Anna's discomfort, or rather her unease at admitting what she wants.

While discussing the script, Larry compares Burton's idea to the legend of *The Flying Dutchman*. This legend foreshadows the relationship that will happen between Anna and Pale. The cursed sailor represents Pale and the woman who falls in love with him is Anna. The relationship between the sailor and Senta is complicated by the sacrifices each makes for the other. This mirrors what occurs between Pale and Anna at the conclusion of Act 2.

A major motif throughout *Burn This* is fire, which is most evident in the title of the play. Fire resonates throughout. It symbolizes life, health and body-heat, but it also represents control. Anna is very much a controlled fire, whereas Pale burns wildly.

Building on the idea of body-heat, Anna is a dancer and a dancer must be in tune with her body. Anna refers to feeling out of touch with her body. A dancer should be able to recognize the physicality of pain and pleasure, control and release. At this point, Anna's grief is bottled up inside her and she physically does not know how to respond. She also talks about working with Charlie's dance for so long that she feels as though she moves as Charlie would, not herself. Not only does Anna not know how to respond to her grief, but also she is lost within herself.

The image of butterflies pinned to walls and trying to be free is disturbing. The butterfly symbolizes rebirth. The caterpillar must undergo a metamorphosis in order to emerge as its true self: Anna is the same way. The butterflies awaken while Anna is sleeping in the room. She comments on how, wrapped in only a sheet, naked she felt when she went for help. Anna is very much like the butterflies on the wall and throughout the first act, she struggles to be free, but she needs help. Though she does not remember at first, Pale goes into the room to free the butterflies, and it will later be Pale who also frees her. The butterfly also symbolizes the attraction to light, or, more specifically, fire. Just as a butterfly is attracted to the flame, Anna is attracted to Pale.

When Larry tells Anna about the company Christmas card he has been asked to design, he details the overt political correctness the company tries to achieve. This sets the stage for the dichotomy of Pale and his outlook on life. He is brutally honest, without any regard for who he may offend. He possesses complete freedom in discourse.

Pale's arrival is signified by a loud pounding, which can be paralleled to sound the butterflies made while pinned to the wall. For all of Anna's repression, Pale is too free. Together they balance each other, but it is a difficult balance to maintain because they struggle against each other. The friction between Pale and Anna burns hot. When she tries to take control of the situation by criticizing Pale for not responding to her messages, he counters by detailing his loathing of messages. Neither seems able to get the upper hand; they continually work against one another.

During their first scene together, heat is a constant undercurrent. Pale takes his shoes off because his feet are suddenly hot. When Pale questions what the rush is about regarding picking up Robbie's belongings, he is distracted by a sound from the radiator. He later complains of the loft being hot as an oven. Pale talks about his knowledge of liquor, suggesting the burn of alcohol as it is consumed. When he asks Anna about her dancing and she tells him that she is taking a break, he suggests that she could not handle the pressure. Pale and Anna are surrounded by heat, figuratively and literally; they are combustible.

Anna asks Pale whether he knew that Robbie was a dancer. In turn, Pale criticizes Anna for the way she handled the family. Pale tells her that the family knew about Robbie's sexuality, even if they did not want to admit it. Anna's decision to play the part of the girlfriend continues to indicate Anna's repressed desires toward Robbie.

As Anna and Pale discuss Robbie, Pale becomes increasingly more emotional. In fact, Pale gets to a point where he cannot control his emotions and is reduced to sobbing on the couch. Anna tries to console him, but in one respect, Anna is actually trying to control Pale's emotions, just as she controls her own. Anna does not know how to *feel* what she is feeling; therefore, she cannot handle someone else expressing the feelings that she cannot.

On the couch, Pale and Anna share an intimate moment. Their bodies are close together and Pale tells her that he is going to cry on her hair. Anna tells him to stop, though when this happens in Act 2, she will not. Together these two are beginning to share physically, but not emotionally. Ironically, the physicality of their relationship is born out of emotion, but they are not yet ready to connect emotionally.

For all the fighting between Anna and Pale, Anna ultimately submits to Pale. Anna has difficulty saying no. This is further illustrated the following day when Burton calls and asks Anna to go out. She cannot tell him no and agrees. Anna has yet to embrace what she wants; instead, she submits to what others want.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act 2 opens on New Year's Eve at 2:00am in the loft. Anna is dressed in a gown and Burton wears a tux. Anna finishes reading Burton's script and she tells him that she likes it, but it is sad. This catches him off guard since he thought the characters were having fun She explains that she knows, deep down, that the characters are lonely. He goes on to tell her that he wanted the characters to be larger than life, but now he views them as smaller. She reassures him that the characters are real and exciting, but Burton remains dissatisfied.

They start to catch up, as they had not seen each other in some time. She asks about his family and he asks her about her work; she confesses that she has been working almost non-stop. Anna likens her work to having "burst from my chrysalis after thirty years of incubation" (Act 2, pg. 52). Burton corrects her by offering the word metamorphosis. She continues about Fred having hired her to choreograph a piece for a company that he is put together and she is excited about it.

Burton asks about her schedule for the next day and she tells him she is free. Anna takes a bottle of champagne from the refrigerator and shows him the new flutes she purchased. He asks her what is the difference between a glass and a flute and she retorts: fifty bucks. She tells him that she is going to go change into something comfortable. He helps her undo her dress and comments that he misses zippers along the back of a woman's back. She tells him that she will keep that in mind as she slips into the bedroom.

While she is offstage, Burton continues talking, asking her if she wants to move out of the loft and into his place. She tells him that she will never leave and that if he wants to live with her he will have to move into the loft. He considers the idea, even mentions the prospect of having children. Anna does not know what to think about her biological clock. Either she is too busy to recognize it or if her body chemistry is changing.

Burton tells her that he is thinking about working on another sci-fi script and Anna tells him to stick with the love story. He tells her that the sci-fi is more fun and Anna returns to the stage in a dressing gown. He holds her and they share a toast. There is a noise is at the door.

Larry clamors in with three suitcases and collapses on the sofa. Dramatically he tells how he rang in the New Year – circling Queens in a plane for two hours. Anna wishes him a Happy New Year and he tells both of them to fuck off, then he immediately wants to know why they aren't out partying. She explains that they are back from a party in SoHo.

Larry lights a cigarette and Anna asks when he started smoking. He tells her since he has been gone. She tries to lighten his mood by reminding him of all the parties he was invited to and could still go to. He says that the suicide rate at gay New Year's Eve parties is higher than all of Scandinavia. She tells him to go out and meet someone, but Larry insists that he is beyond being turned on at this point. He wishes Anna Happy New Year and lightly kisses her lips. He then turns to Burton, kisses him lightly on the lips, and wishes him a Happy New Year. He asks them when was the last time they had seen a grown man cry. Anna indicates Pale, but suggests that he was a friend of Larry's or close to Robbie, and that it was after Robbie's death. Burton asks who it was and Larry responds that it was "Just a Pale page from my checkered past" (Act 2, pg. 59).

Larry asks Burton is he knows that Anna is working on a dance for Fred; Burton says yes. Anna details Larry finding her dancing around the apartment and makes a comment about getting too personal. Burton explains that the point is to get too personal – to take what is personal, make it the truth, and write *Burn this* on it.

Anna tells Larry that Burton is working on something real and Burton dismisses it by claiming that he does not even know why he is writing it. Anna insists that Burton let Larry read it, but Burton remains reluctant. Distracted by Anna's new flutes, Larry asks where they came from and Anna confesses that she blew her savings on them; suddenly in love, Larry claims he's going to sleep with them. They laugh and all toast the New Year.

A bell rings in the distance. Burton reminisces about a messenger job he had when he was eighteen because he felt needed work experience, even though he did not need the money. He made a delivery to a poet's house and they ended up having a drink and sharing a joint. Larry chides that the poet was probably trying to get into Burton's pants, and Burton is annoyed. Essentially Larry tells him to get over it because that is just the way it is.

While Burton was at the poet's house, they heard church bells and the poet tells Burton that the bells are in the bell tower that inspired Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells." Burton tells Larry that while he did know that the poet was gay, he truly did not think he was trying to make a move. Larry admits it is possible, but not likely. Burton continues with another memory. This time he recalls being about twenty and was walking home drunk. He urinated on the wall and a man approached him. Burton felt that, since he was a writer and that he should know about such things, Burton let the man go down on him. When it was over, Burton never thought about it again and did not feel sorry that it happened.

A noise is heard outside the door. Larry and Anna figure it is their neighbor, but then they think they hear a knock. Larry opens the door and Pale falls in drunk. Pale barely makes his way to the bathroom and Anna is mortified, telling Pale no. Burton asks who he is and Larry and Anna share a repartee about the restaurant that Pale manages. Finally, Larry identifies Pale as Robbie's brother.

Pale vomits in the bathroom offstage. Larry asks if he's okay and Pale slams the door in his face. Anna goes over and tries to get Pale's attention. Pale comes out of the bathroom wiping his mouth with a towel and kisses her. Anna pushes him away and Burton starts to confront him. Pale asks if Burton is a dancer; Anna explains that he is a writer. When Burton calls Pale Jimmy after hearing Anna call him so, he objects and insists he be called Pale.

Burton insists that Pale leave, but Pale is in no shape to go. They exchange words and Anna tries to explain to Pale that he cannot get drunk and show up on her doorstep. Pale lunges at Burton, and Burton throws Pale into a wall.

Larry starts smoking again and tells Burton that Pale carries a gun, so what Burton has just done may not have been the best solution. Anna informs Pale that Burton teaches aikido at the "Y." Pale keeps insisting that there wasn't an accident and Anna tells him that they've already been through this and she's not going to do it again. Pale thinks that somehow the mob was involved in killing Robbie and Dominic and that their deaths were not accidents. Annoyed, Larry comments that there were not any mobster types in the restaurant when he was there. Pale accuses him of not being with it, because everyone knows that restaurants have some connection to the mob. He then gets up to leave because associating with them will ruin his reputation. Burton suggests that, if Pale knows something about the deaths, but is cut-off by Pale who punches him, knocking him to the ground.

Back on his feet, Burton circles around Pale and it looks like they are about to go at it. Pale lunges at him, and Burton knocks him to the floor. Anna jumps between them, trying to stop the fight before it gets any worse. She sends Burton away, but Burton does not want to leave Anna with Pale. Anna insists that Burton leave. Burton argues with Anna about leaving until Pale finally asks if Anna is sleeping with Burton as well. Burton grabs his coat and starts to leave, telling Anna that he has to rethink their entire relationship in light of what has just transpired.

Pale puts one arm around Anna and the other under her robe. She pulls away, telling him that she is not his whore for when he shows up drunk and throws him out. Pale tells her that he lost his gun and he stretches out on the couch and passes out.

Larry and Anna talk and she tells Larry that she had made up her mind that, if Burton had proposed again, she was ready to accept. Larry asks what Pale meant earlier by suggesting that Robbie and Dominic's deaths were not accidents. Anna explains that Pale and his father were out drinking and someone said that they had seen Robbie on television with his lover and that someone ought to off him.

Larry gets his bags and goes to his room. Anna turns off the lights and the living room goes dark. She is now in her room and both Anna and Larry can be heard talking: Larry about being in his own bed and Anna about whether or not she should set an alarm for Pale. Anna goes into the bathroom. Pale sits up and goes to the window to have a cigarette. Anna comes out of the bathroom and then goes into her bedroom. A moment later, Pale follows her into the room. The lights fade.

The next morning Larry is in the kitchen and Pale comes out of Anna's room wearing one of her robes. Larry chides him about the robe and offers him tea. Larry lists off a wide variety of teas, but all Pale wants is ordinary orange pekoe. Larry finds some and starts to make a cup; Pale criticizes him and begins making a proper pot of tea. Pale tells him about cooking at the restaurant when the normal cook does not show up for work.

While Pale tends to the teakettle, Larry tells him that he thinks it is highly unlikely that Robbie's death was anything but an accident. Pale does not want to discuss it. He changes the subject to Anna and mentions that Anna does not remember seeing Pale's wife at the funeral. Pale tells him that his wife was not there. His wife and kids are in Coral Gables because she could not handle Pale's lifestyle and the hours he kept at the restaurant. Larry asks if they are divorced and Pale is annoyed by all the questions. Pale reveals that his wife would not give him a divorce and that she has become very religious since she left him.

The phone rings and the machine picks up. Burton leaves a message for Anna, explaining that he had probably done too much cocaine the night before and then the message cuts off. Anna picks up in the other room.

After a moment, Anna, dressed for the day, enters. She is instantly perturbed by Pale. He sits next to her and offers her tea and to make her breakfast. She tells him that she does not want him to think that they are beginning a relationship, because she does not think they have anything in common; plus, they are both very busy with work. He accuses her of being a different person than she is in bed. She admits that she is, but that both are who she is.

He tells her that he has vacation time coming up and that maybe they should try and go away together. She does not buy it and tells him no. After an awkward moment, Larry suggests that he will go to his room, but Pale does not let him leave. He knows that Anna wants Larry to stay.

Pale disappears into Anna's room. Anna asks if it is okay if she locks herself in Larry's room and Larry gives her permission. Just then, Pale returns with his pants on and nothing else and starts talking about his relationship with his wife and how he never felt anything for her. Anna questions how he could marry someone he felt nothing for and he responds that he has never felt anything for anyone. Anna tells him that what has transpired between them never should have happened. Pale asks her if she is scared of him. Anna goes to Larry's door and Larry tells her to go on in, but if the door gets broken down, someone else is paying for it. Pale insists he would never break down a door.

Anna attempts to explain to Pale about her relationship with Burton. Pale continues to try and make Anna understand that their relationship could work. She tells him that she does not want to see him, know him or see him ever again. Finally, she admits that he does scare her.

Pale goes into Anna's room and gets the rest of his clothes. He finishes his tea and puts on his shoes. Before he leaves, he kisses Anna and exits. Anna is near tears.

Anna asks Larry to check to see if he is really leaving and Larry informs her that he is. Anna goes into the bedroom and returns with the sheets balled up. She stops cold, nearly crying, shoulders shaking, and Larry tells her that if she did not want Pale to leave, she fooled him. She drops the sheets on the floor and gets her coat from the closet. Larry asks where she is going and she says Fred's studio so that she can get some work done, but she really just wants to be alone.

She leaves and the stage blacks out.

It is the evening of the opening of Fred's show. As the lights rise, Burton stands with a script in hand. Larry comes in putting on a sweatshirt. Burton asks if Anna is home and Larry tells her no and that she has been working quite a lot lately. Anna has not been returning any of Burton's messages. Burton has finished his script and wants Anna to read it. Larry asks to read it and the two of them have a drink. Finally, Burton asks if Anna has been seeing Pale. Larry explains that she has been working, effectively not answering the question. When Burton calls him on this, Larry wonders why Burton cannot be content with Anna working. Larry tells him that the dance she has been working on is "Pale and Anna" (Act 2, pg. 92), but she has not seen him and Pale has not been over. Larry attempts to describe the dance and how it involves a man, dancing the way men dance, who is attempting to dance with the woman dancer. He cannot quite articulate what the dance is and compares it to trying to explain what a piece of music is.

Burton gets what Larry is trying to say. He begins talking about his defense mechanisms and how he is trying to protect himself from really feeling one way or the other about Anna. He puts his drink down and asks Larry to hit him, which catches Larry off guard. Larry finally understands him to mean that Burton wants another drink.

Larry tells Burton that Anna threw Pale out. Burton senses the irony of her doing so after all that transpired. Larry reminds him of how sheltered Anna's life has been. Burton agrees and admits that he wishes things could have been different. He goes to leave and tells Larry to have a good life.

The lights go down.

It is after midnight and Anna is coming home. She is wearing a party dress and coat. She crosses the room without turning on the lights. Pale speaks from the shadows, telling her not to be scared and that he is sober. She wants to know how he got into the apartment and he tells her that Larry gave him a key, a note and a ticket for the performance when he stopped by the bar. He tells her that Robbie should have been the man who danced in the performance. Anna confesses that in her mind Robbie did.

Pale tells her that he felt embarrassed watching someone on stage that was supposed to be him and Anna. She asks him if he took the night off so that he could see the performance. He tells her he quit and that he's tending bar at a place called Danny's.

After a long silence, Anna tells him pointedly that she does not want a relationship and Pale tells her the same. She asks what Larry wrote in the note. He gives her the note, but she cannot read it through tears. He reads it to her: Larry writes about the performance and leaving the keys. He says, "Anna is in pretty bad shape. This isn't opera; this is life, why should love always be tragic? Burn this" (Act 2, pg. 98). Pale tells her that in his life he has never felt the way he does toward Anna and she confesses the same.

Anna lights a match and they watch it burn. Pale goes to her and she tells him she is scared. As they move together on the couch, he tells her he is going to cry all over her hair.

Act 2 Analysis

At the beginning of Act 2, Anna has just finished reading pages from Burton's script. She admits that she likes what he has written, but comments that it is sad. This catches Burton off-guard, considering he regarded the pages as happy. Burton and Anna are viewing the love story through very different eyes. Perhaps, at the beginning of Act 1, Anna would have regarded the relationship in the script as happy, but because of what has transpired in her life, most notably what happened with Pale, Anna cannot see the happiness. Burton does not know about Pale and is now coming to realize what he wants from his relationship with Anna; he is happy about what is to come. But like the fickle Canadian weather Burton referenced in Act 1, he cannot predict what the next day will bring.

The butterfly imagery returns with Anna's comments about bursting from a chrysalis. Anna's transformation is underway and she begins to recognize it. As she works at choreographing a new dance, she begins to develop and certainly, Pale has had some influence on this, even if it is on a subconscious level.

After Larry returns from his trip, he asks Anna and Burton about the last time they had seen a grown man cry. Though she is not free to speak his name directly, Anna indicates Pale. In doing so, she recognizes Pale's ability to show real emotion without fear. In understanding this quality in Pale, she is better able to understand that quality in herself. As she breaks out of her cocoon, she will embrace her own emotions and express them through dance. When Larry talks to Burton about Anna's dance and Anna alludes at the amount of personal expression in her dance, Burton embraces the idea. He wants to get too personal, in part because he wants to further his relationship with Anna. During this discourse, that Burton introduces the idea of burning something that is too personal. Little does he know that in doing so he will be able to free Anna to explore her relationship with Pale.

Pale returns staggeringly drunk. This altered state contributes the explosion of emotions that takes place during the remainder of the scene. Pale lacks any true boundaries. He falls in, barges across the stage to the bathroom only to return and kiss Anna in front of Burton and Larry.

Burton cannot control Pale; Pale is beyond control. Anna steps in and attempts to control Pale, but soon realizes that the only one she can control is Burton. Though Anna holds some control over Burton, he is not yet ready to give up the fight. Pale is willing to take a beating and he continually instigates Burton despite getting knocked down. As the two men fight, Anna shifts from trying to control Pale to protecting him. She has, at this point, chosen her man without realizing it. Burton leaves and Pale stays.

The following day, Pale accuses Anna of being two different people. She admits that she is, but that she is both. Anna is in the process of her metamorphosis: being two people is natural for her, as she is leaving one part of herself behind to become who she needs to be. Yet, the process frightens her. As Pale persists about making a go of their relationship, she finally tells him that he scares her, but Anna is not truly frightened of Pale; she's scared of herself.

Anna sends Pale away, instantly regretting having done so. Her own self-doubt prohibits her from accepting her decision. Larry witnesses this, which will lead to his intervention that will bring them back together.

When Larry and Burton discuss Anna and her relationship with Pale, Larry is responsible for telling the truth about how Anna feels. Though Anna has come a long way in her transformation, she has not fully reached her destination. While the audience is privy to Larry telling Burton, Larry's intervention with Pale occurs off-stage.

In the final scene between Pale and Anna, the two finally come to understand that they belong together, regardless of how that scares or confuses them. When Anna burns Larry's note, she watches it burn with Pale. When Pale tells her that he is going to cry all over her hair, she does not stop him. The acceptance of his tears will put out the fire.

Characters

Anna

Anna is a thirty-two-year-old dancer and aspiring choreographer. She is beautiful, tall, and strong. When the play begins she is grief-stricken at the recent death of her gay roommate, Robbie, who has just died in a boating accident. At the funeral, Anna is mistaken for Robbie's girlfriend, since his family either did not know or refused to acknowledge that he was gay. In the opening scene, she is exhausted from the experience, is drinking, and has resumed smoking. When Pale appears in the middle of the night a month later, Anna comforts him, and after an initially rocky start the two share her bed. After Pale leaves, it is clear that Anna has not been left unaffected by his visit. The next act takes place two months later, with Anna, who has been thinking about marriage and motherhood, celebrating New Year's Eve with Burton. After Pale once again spends the night, Anna asks him to leave and admits that she is frightened. For the next weeks she escapes into work, but what she creates is a dance about Pale. In the last scene of the play, Anna and Pale are reunited and both admit their feelings.

Burton

Burton is tall, athletic, and good-looking, He is a successful screenwriter and Anna's boyfriend. In the opening scene, Burton is consoling Anna, but since she could not reached him earlier (he was in Canada), Anna attended the funeral without him. He is very focused on his work and appears to view screenwriting as a way of making a great deal of money rather than as an artistic pursuit. When a screenplay is sold, Burton never concerns himself with how it is produced. In the second act, when Pale's sudden arrival interrupts Anna and Burton's celebration of New Year's Eve, he and Pale fight, and Burton learns that Pale and Anna were intimate. During the confrontation that follows, Burton is rejected by Anna and asked to leave the apartment. The next morning, Burton calls Anna, but when Pale interrupts the conversation, Burton hangs up. He reappears at the beginning of the next scene, and tells Larry that Anna has not returned any of his calls or responded to his messages. Burton admits he was a privileged child and that he has never lost anything important before. His loss of Anna is difficult for him to accept or to understand.

Jimmy

See Pale

Larry

Larry is another of Anna's roommates. He is twenty-seven, very intelligent, and gay. Larry works in advertising. He is Anna's good friend and confidant, and is aware of

Anna's love for Pale long before she is ready to admit it. Larry provides some light comedy that helps dispel the tension of the play. He also recognizes that Anna loves Pale, and so Larry arranges for Pale to see the premier of a dance she has choreographed. Larry finally uses a note as a means of bringing the two lovers together.

Pale

Pale is Robbie's older brother who appears in the second scene to collect Robbie's belongings. He manages a restaurant, but is vague and misleading about his life. He is separated from his wife and children, but does not admit it until later in the play. Pale is thirty-six and is described as very sexy in a blue-collar working-class kind of way; his language is filled with obscenities. He admits that he knew that Robbie was gay but is initially contemptuous and sarcastic about his brother's lifestyle. Pale initially appears loud, rude, and obnoxious, but Anna thinks he is trying to disguise his pain at his brother's loss. When he breaks down finally, Anna invites him into her bed. After spending the night with Anna, Pale rushes out the next morning. He returns two months later to interrupt Anna's date with Burton. After the two men fight, Burton is forced to leave, and Pale spends the night. The next morning, Anna asks Pale to leave, and he does so reluctantly. Following his attendance of Anna's dance premier, during which he realizes that the dance is about himself and Anna, Pale returns to Anna's apartment after Larry provides him with the keys. In the final scene he admits to Anna his feelings for her.

Themes

Art

Three of the characters in *Burn This* have artistic careers. Anna has been a dancer, and as the play begins, she is trying to draw upon her experience as a dancer in a new career as a choreographer. Anna uses art as the creative outlet of her emotions and experiences. The new dance she creates in the last act is based on her relationship with Pale. For Burton, art leads to financial reward; he is not willing to take risks for art. He uses his experiences and the environment around him to create screenplays, but Burton's attachment to his art is less personal than Anna's. He easily sells his work and dismisses his creative attachment to it once the sale is completed. Larry is a graphic artist for an advertising firm. He acknowledges that he sells his creative talents and that the intended purpose of his art is to make money and sell products. All of these characters in *Burn This* find a use for art, but art means something different to each one.

Death

It is Robbie's death that leads Pale to Anna. Wilson asks the audience to believe that Pale's rude and socially inept behavior is camouflage for his grief at his brother's death. In a very real sense, it is death that leads these two characters to re-evaluate their respective lives. Without Robbie's death, the audience is led to believe that Anna, who is feeling the desire to marry and have children, would have chosen Burton. Pale's emergence in her life forces her to confront her fear of emotional intimacy.

Friendship

The friendship between Anna and Larry is the anchor in her life. It is Larry's line, "Now you show up," that reveals to the audience that Burton was not available to comfort Anna when she needed him, and so Larry creates the first questions about the nature of Anna and Burton's relationship. It is Larry who helps Anna deal with Robbie's death, and it is Larry who appears when he thinks that Anna needs rescuing from Pale. Most importantly, Larry seems to recognize, even before Anna, the growing importance of Pale in her life. And it is Larry who finally resolves the impasse, by using notes to bring Pale and Anna together.

Human Condition

Larry represents humanity's attempt to confront modern life. One of the first examples of this is revealed in the story he tells about designing a Christmas card for Chrysler that must be so politically correct that the only thing that everyone can believe in is a car. Larry is cynical about bis nieces and nephews, and he sees all these children as a

result of a woman's need to become a "baby machine." Larry notes mat all the wrong people reproduce, as has been the case throughout history. Anna represents humanity's effort to confront prejudice. Her outrage at how Robbie's family had removed themselves from his life establishes Anna's sensitivity to her friend's pain. But she is also trying to prevent more pain by distancing herself from any serious emotional involvement. Anna says she is sick of the age she is living in, that she is feeling ripped off and scared. While Pale can only curse at the indignities of urban life, both Anna and Larry are trying to find a deeper understanding of life and love and the demands of modern existence, which make uninvolvement more desirable.

Prejudice and Tolerance

An important theme is that of prejudice. Robbie's family cannot acknowledge his homosexuality and so they negate his existence. They must create a fantasy life for him that is different from the one he actually led. Robbie is assigned Anna as a girlfriend and his career as a dancer is ignored. No member of Robbie's family had ever seen him dance. Pale is concerned that Robbie's death might be a criminal mob punishment for Robbie's sexuality. Later in the play, Larry relates an experience from his recent plane trip in which a seat-mate lectured him on the sanctity of the American home and family. Burton, who is heterosexual, relates an experience he had with another man while crouched in the a doorway. Burton's story is meant to establish that he is open-minded and tolerant. That he must attach a disclaimer to the story to assert that the experience did not mean anything also establishes the influence of social prejudice.

Style

Act

In Greek plays the sections of the drama were signified by the appearance of the chorus and were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama from the Greeks to the Romans, and for Elizabethan playwrights like William Shakespeare. The five acts denote the structure of dramatic action. They are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five act structure was followed until the nineteenth century when Henrik Ibsen combined some of the acts. *Burn This* is a two-act play. The exposition occurs in the first act when the audience learns of Robbie's death and the family history. The complication also occurs in this act when it becomes clear that Anna cares about Pale. The climax occurs at the beginning of the second act when Burton and Pale fight, and Anna throws Burton out and chooses Pale. The falling action, which is the result of the climax, occurs later in act two when Anna admits that she is frightened of emotional involvement. In the catastrophe, an old word for conclusion, Larry unites the two lovers.

Characters

The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multi-faceted ones. Characters may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress. "Characterization" is the process of creating a life-like person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation. *Burn This* provides characters whose dialogue reveals their temperament and identity. For example, Larry uses comedy to confront life. It is a means of easing life's pain.

Plot

Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they may also sometimes be a series of episodes connected together. Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. Thus the plot of *Burn This* is the story of Anna and Pale's romance.

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for Wilson's play is a loft in New York City.

Historical Context

Sexuality and Disease

When Lanford Wilson was writing *Burn This,* the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) epidemic was a major issue for homosexuals. But Wilson never refers to AIDS; instead the play is a heterosexual love story. But AIDS was not far from the news in 1987; AZT, a drug to treat AIDS, was approved by the FDA. Although AZT was expensive, predicted to cost at least $10,000 per year per patient, it was the first treatment that offered hope for AIDS victims. Another effort to halt the AIDS epidemic was suggested by the United States Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, who argued that condom commercials should be permitted to air on television. Koop's suggestion was greeted with shock by those groups who argued that condom advertisements would encourage more illicit sexual activity. Some religious groups, who interpreted AIDS as God's punishment of homosexuals, wanted total abstinence to be the official government position in terms of public service campaigns about the disease. Attempts to raise government spending on AIDS research created controversy, although homosexuals did demonstrate in Washington to demand that the federal government increase funding for AIDS. But President Ronald Reagan failed to act until he was forced to recognize that AIDS presented a risk to the heterosexual population as well as to gays. The sexual revolution that had begun in the mid- to late-1960s, and which had continued through the 1970s and into the early 1980s, finally peaked when it became clear that AIDS was more than a rare, "gay man's disease." By the end of the 1980s, fear of AIDS was making more people cautious about sexual relationships. Consequently, when Anna and Pale, who barely know one another, engage in a sexual relationship, the play's 1987 audience was likely considering the risk involved in their behavior.

Art

In many cases art was imitating life in 1987. Theatre and film releases echoed newspaper headlines. Racial and sexual intolerance and the growing perception that big business was uncaring and dishonest provided ample subject matter for entertainment. Although *Burn This* does not deal overtly with prejudice, one of its primary themes is intolerance. Wilson devotes a significant part of the text to establishing the intolerance of Robbie's family. Later, Larry relates the story of his plane trip and the intolerant attitude of a seat-mate who expounds upon the importance of the American family. In the years just before 1987, prejudice against homosexuality had become more visual, fed in part because of the increase m the number of people afflicted with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and AIDS. Fear motivated much of this intolerance, but the effect was an increase in hate crimes against homosexuals. When *Burn This* debuted, two other plays that dealt with discrimination were also first presented. August Wilson's drama *Fences* looked at how discrimination could destroy a man's hopes and dreams, and Alfred Uhry's *Driving Miss Daisy* demonstrated that people could nse

above the social constraints placed upon them based on their class, race, and religion. On Wall Street, a rash of insider trading scandals provided material for both the front pages of newspapers and the entertainment page as *Wallstreet* became a hit Hollywood film. The film's star, Michael Douglas, won an academy award for his portrayal of a cold-hearted businessman who is willing to sacrifice the American worker to increase personal wealth. 1987 brought inflation and depression as American farmers lost their livelihood. With the perception that life was out of control, that inflation, depression, business, and disease were eroding the American dream, all of these plays and this film end with the promise of justice and the hope of a better life. This was a period in which entertainment provided escape with films such as *Moonstruck, Babette's Feast,* and *The Untouchables.* In 1987, American audiences were in desperate need of hope, either real or perceived.

Critical Overview

Reviews for *Burn This* have been mixed: most have noted strong performances by actors appearing in the productions, but they have also faulted the play as weak in elements of plot and character development. Wilson has stated in interviews that he waited to premier *Burn This* until John Malkovich was available to play the role of Pale, and in reviews of the play it was Malkovich's performance that was cited as one of the play's strengths. Frank Rich, writing for *The New York Times,* assessed Malkovich as a "combustive figure on stage, threatening to incinerate everyone and everything around him with his throbbing vocal riffs, bruising posture and savage, unfocused eyes." Rich continued to describe Malkovich, whom he declared,"delivers the firepower .. while he is equally busy tossing a mane of long dark hair, hoping to arouse the carnal interest of the very pretty young woman." But Rich was not complimenting Wilson's character development; he was complimenting Malkovich's performance. And after he devoted an entire column to celebrating the actor, Rich admitted that Malkovich's performance "yanks us through this always intriguing, finally undernourishing three-hour play ... more muddled than pointed." One of the problems with the play, according to Rich, is that there is no real reason for Anna to choose Pale over Burton. The script offers little reason for her shift in interest from Burton to Pale, and since any sexual charge between Joan Allen and John Malkovich was missing, the audience remained unconvinced. Instead, Rich suggested that the almost happy ending was more a result of Anna's biological clock forcing her to choose Pale. Rich did note that Larry gets to speak Wilson's funniest lines and that the character is played with "warmth and wry intelligence." Larry's job is to comment upon the actions and lives of the other three characters. This character's voyeurism and disconnectedness, asserted Rich, "seem to say more about the playwright's feelings of loss and longing than the showier romance at center stage." Finally, Rich pronounced Wilson's play as self-indulgent with excisable blind alleys and containing small details that substitute for plot contrivances.

Edwin Wilson, who reviewed *Bum This* for *The Wall Street Journal,* focused less on Malkovich's performance and more on the plot; he also found fault with the playwright Wilson's plotting of the romance. One of the major difficulties, explained critic Wilson, "is the shaky premise that Pale, underneath his rough exterior, is really a tender, caring man who has a healthy effect on others." Anna is able to create her first successful dance after she spends two nights with Pale. Yet, "Pale's behavior is so brutish that Anna discredits herself by taking to him." Wilson noted in his review that Pale's purpose may be to shake up people, especially Anna and Larry, who have a "basic grudge against the philistine, insensitive, materialistic straight world that rejects artists and homosexuals." By having Anna choose Pale, Wilson suggested, the playwright may be suggesting that "art is not enough, that homosexuality is incomplete, that a woman like Anna is really hiding from her true nature with homosexual roommates, that a macho creature like Pale is, underneath it all, a real man and just what Anna needs." Wilson concluded his review by citing the play's direction, the witty dialogue, and Malkovich's performance as the play's strong points.

Newsweek reviewer Jack Kroll commended the play's "voracious vitality and an almost manic determination to drive right into the highest voltage that life can register," but also pointed to errors in logic and false leads as a problematic. In a mostly favorable evaluation of *Burn This,* Daniel Watermeier focused on the characters, whom he stated, are grounded against particular archetypes. Although he acknowledged that the ending is only "tentatively happy," Watermeier characterized the romance as more satisfying than had Rich or Wilson, declaring: *"Burn This* explores the nature of *eros* in contemporary American culture, its relationship to death and to renewal and creativity in both life and art." Watermeier considered *Burn This* to be Wilson's "most complex, sophisticated, and daring play." Finally, Martin Jacobi declared that Wilson is really only pointing out that sometimes men and women can only achieve limited happiness. Jacobi's interpretation of the play allows for a more generous evaluation of the romance between Anna and Pale, and it makes the perceived inconsistencies of plot less important.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is an adjunct professor at Embry-Riddle University. In this essay she examines the question of whether it is believable that Anna would choose to be with Pale rather than Burton.

In Lanford Wilson's *Burn This,* the feminine hero, Anna, chooses Pale as her lover/partner rather than Burton. Setting aside the argument that love can sometimes make little sense of emotion, audiences, and especially women, are left wondering why she would make such a choice. Indeed, some of the play's male reviewers noted the unlikeliness of this choice as well. In his review of *Burn This,* Prank Rich noted that Anna and Pale lack the depth of passion of other great romantic theatrical pairings. Wilson's lovers "don't fight to the death," instead they "slowly settle down to make the choices facing those New York couples who inhabit the slick magazines," Rich remarked. "What begins as ago-for-broke sexual struggle trails off into sentimental conflicts between love and career, unbridled passion and intellectual detachment, a loft life style and the biological clock."

The question implied by Rich's comments is why Anna would choose Pale. In their first meetings, he is rude, obnoxious, confrontational, emotionally unstable, and drunk. If her desire to have children is a factor, as Rich asserted, would not Burton make the better choice? He is wealthy, steadily employed in an artistic profession that compliments Anna's own, emotionally stable, and in love with her. In recent years, biological anthropologists have insisted that women's reproductive choices focus on a male's ability to support a family, as well as physical attractiveness. If Anna's concern is her biological clock, and the text bears this out, then Burton appears the more likely choice.

Pale is unemployed by the play's end and his emotional instability should make him a less attractive choice. So why does Anna make this unlikely selection? In the stage directions for *Burn This,* Burton is described as tall, athletic, and good-looking. Pale is described as well-built and sexy. Clearly, Wilson intended that Anna's choice should reflect a grand passion, a sexual intensity that she cannot resist; but, the dialogue of the play fails to supply the necessary ingredients. Rich described Anna and Pale's relationship as "mechanical" and defined by "predictable conventions of breezy romantic comedies." However, the problem is that *Burn This* is not a breezy romantic comedy. It is a drama that Wilson intends be taken seriously, but its center is a romance that simply is not believable.

Rich is not the only reviewer to question the believability of Anna and Pale's romance. In a review written for *The Wall Street Journal,* Edwin Wilson also pointed out the inconsistency of the romantic plot. E. Wilson declared that "[o]ne problem with *Burn This* is the shaky premise that Pale, underneath his rough exterior, is really a tender, caring man." It is a significant problem, since there is absolutely no reason for Anna to think that Pale is anything other than what he initially seems to be.

The few moments in Act I in which Pale seems to break down are inconsistent with the rest of his dialogue. Rather than mourning Robbie, Pale's tears appear to be more an act of feeling sorry for himself. Most of his comments about his brother are unfeeling and derisive. There is nothing to indicate that Pale is anything more than a drunk engaged in a crying jag. After she sleeps with him, Anna admits her attraction to Pale is a symptom of the "bird-with-the-broken-wing-syndrome."

When Pale appears a second time, he is just as rude, just as drunk, and just as confrontational. And yet Anna throws Burton out and chooses Pale. Wilson noted that "Anna discredits herself in taking to him [Pale]." That assessment appears accurate, especially in the absence of any dialogue that would support Anna's decision. Why Anna should love Pale remains one of the biggest problems in Lanford Wilson's play.

In a critical essay on *Burn This,* Daniel J. Watermeier maintained that Wilson's play is "concerned with how and why an unlikely pair 'fall in love'; an ironic, sometimes uncomfortable, love story with a resolution that is only tentatively happy. " It is clear from his essay that Watermeier is an enthusiastic supporter who finds it difficult to offer negative criticism of Wilson, and yet he cannot ignore the difficult romantic story that lies at the heart of the play. This love story is not only uncomfortable for Anna and Pale, it is uncomfortable for the audience as well. And since, as Watermeier acknowledges, the play is about how and why these two fall in love, problems with that "how and why" cannot be ignored.

If the unlikeliness of Anna and Pale's romance is a problem for the audience, Anna's depiction of a modern woman trying to confront issues and make choices that plague her contemporaries presents special issues for women theatre-goers. In writing about the problems of gender in telling a woman's story, Carolyn G. Heilbrun argued that women live the stories they read, that women use literature as a model for behavior. Thus, if as Heilbrun asserted, "What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that," then women who view *Burn This* take something away that is cause for concern.

When Lanford Wilson has Anna choose Pale, he appears to be embracing the fiction that women don't want nice or good men, that they are looking for "bad" boys to save. Heilbrun contended that " [i]t is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts." But if women live by the stories they hear or read, is the image of Anna the story that women want as a model for their own lives? Anna is a woman who functions by emotion. Perhaps Wilson is making a statement about the artistic temperament, but he may also be embracing a dogma as old as man, which is essentially that women are emotionally-based creatures who do not make decisions based upon reason.

Mary Anne Ferguson echoed Heilbrun's argument. Ferguson contended that "[l]iterature both reflects and helps to create reality. It is through their preservation in works of art that we know what the stereotypes and archetypes have been and are; in turn, knowing the images influences our view of reality and even our behavior." Is Wilson reflecting real women in Anna? Male reviewers admit that there is no logic to explain her behavior

and this, again, reinforces old debates (going back nearly two thousand years to early theology), that seek to restrict women's choices by arguing that women are without logic.

The problem with depictions of feminine heroes such as Anna is, as Ferguson interpreted it, that "the popularization of literary images has increased their influence so that the distinction between imaginary characters and real people has become blurred in the minds of many readers." This is, of course, a common phenomenon for movie and television stars, who find their audience unable to separate the real from the imaginary. But it can also be applied to literature and theatre. If educators are concerned with the development of self-image in young girls, and they claim to be, then *Burn This* might be accompanied by a disclaimer that young women should in no way find Anna's choice to be a reflection of reality or appropriateness.

Women readers and audience members who question the romance between Anna and Pale should ask themselves, "Is this how a woman would speak' Is this what she would say and do? Does Wilson write a credible woman?" The answer would seem to be no. Julie Brown asserted that in reading the texts of women creative writing students, she has observed that readers too rarely question the authenticity of voice. Does a character's voice reflect reality? Once again, the answer with Anna is no. Instead, Anna may reflect how Wilson thinks women behave, how he thinks they react. Anna may reflect what Wilson thinks women want from life.

My intent is not to question Wilson's right to claim that he can create romantic fiction. Instead the question is whether he can create a real, credible woman, a woman other women would acknowledge as a model. He has failed to do this with Anna. As Brown noted, feminism is not concerned with challenging an author's right to create a story, only with his or her ability to tell the story correctly. Brown's concern is with her female writing students: the problem with male-generated texts is in their influence on the next generation of women writers, who have only the male text as models. Brown echoes the observations of Heilbrun and Ferguson that women use literary texts as models of behavior, and Lanford Wilson's Anna fails as a realistic model for women.

Source: Sheri Metzger, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Hornby offers a mixed review of Wilson 'splay, finding much to like about the cast and production and less to favor in the playwright's actual words.

Lanford Wilson's *Burn This* concerns three young people—two dancers and a copywriter—who share a Soho loft. The male dancer, a homosexual, has just died in a boating accident, and it becomes clear, in their grief, that the two remaining roommates were in love with him. The female dancer has a boyfriend, a successful screenwriter, whom she likes but does not really love; when the dead roommate's brother arrives, a bizarre, drunk, long-haired, foul-mouthed individual, she falls into a passionate affair with him, despite their obvious differences in temperament and basic dislike for each other. In the end, the woman's remaining roommate (the advertising writer) has moved out, leaving a scornful note ending with the words, "Bum this"; her ex-boyfriend has gone to Hollywood; her new lover has lost his job as maitre d'hotel in a New Jersey restaurant and separated from his wife and family; and the two mismatched sweethearts are left alone with each other in dismay and despair.

Burn This displays the narrowness of scope and looseness of structure so typical of realistic American playwriting today. What elevates Wilson above similar writers like David Mamet, Marsha Norman, Michael Weller, or Tina Howe is his surer literary sense; behind the apparently shapeless slices of life in his plays are traditional literary devices that invigorate what would otherwise be tame pieces of reportage. The brother in *Burn This* is a traditional intruder figure going back to Aristophanic comedy, an *alazoru* or boaster and spoilsport, who tries to gain access to the feast; in *Bum This* he even interrupts a champagne supper between the young woman and the screenwriter. The love triangle, and the general movement from death and separation to a new union, are typical of Western comedy over the past two millennia.

Furthermore, Wilson gives all the traditional archetypes a sardonic twist. The intruder, who seems so bohemian, actually has a very middle-class job plus a wife and family, just as the dancers and writers, whom we would expect to have an unconventional lifestyle, seem very staid and bourgeois. The "happy" ending, with the couple united, is so bitter that it does not seem comic at all except in the ironic sense. Other white American playwrights today—whether commercial, serious, or avantgarde—are either all surface or all depth; Wilson's plays have both an engaging surface and intriguing depths- He is not a great writer; he usually shrinks from even indirect treatment of major existential or social themes, and his dialogue lacks the distinction found, for example, in our black playwrights like August Wilson, whose *Fences* I reviewed here last fall. But he is a good minor playwright, which is about all he seems to want to be.

John Malkovich is so explosive as the brother that he has been compared to the young Marlon Brando in A *Streetcar Named Desire.* Like Brando, he comes on so strong that he threatens to overwhelm the play. In this case, however, the rest of the cast balances him beautifully. Joan Allen is sensitive, intelligent, and emotionally powerful; she also has the bodily control to convince you that she is a professional dancer. Jonathan

Hogan gives a superbly detailed yet spontaneous performance as the screenwriter, and Lou Liberatore, as the third roommate, knows how to play a background role with skill and insight without ever calling undue attention to himself. Marshall W. Mason, one of our best directors of original plays, directed with his usual skill and care; John Lee Beatty's magnificent setting of the loft with its cast-iron columns, set against a backdrop of windows showing a huge trompe 1'oeil of a hazy skyline, deserves all the awards it will probably win.

Source: Richard Hornby, review *of Burn This* in the *Hudson Review,* Volume XLI, no. 1, Spring, 1988, pp 187-88.

Critical Essay #3

Weales reviews Wilson's play, praising it for its off-kilter performances and dark humor. While he appreciated the play text, Weales's greatest plaudits went to the cast, particularly Joan Allen as Anna.

There is another darkly happy ending in Lanford Wilson's *Burn This,* and another closed, self-protective heroine who must be pried open by a relentless and relentlessly vocal male. Anna is a modern dancer, who was taking her first steps toward becoming a choreographer when the death of her friend, her mentor, her roommate brought her to a mourning standstill. Her grief and her apartment are invaded by Pale, the dead man's brother, eloquently foul-mouthed in his denunciation of New York City and the world at large, as outraged - on the surface, at least - by the absence of parking space as by the death of his brother. Pale, who is about as artificial as grand grotesques tend to be, is some kind of natural force, simply riding over the other characters in the play - Anna's more conventional boyfriend, her other homosexual roommate - and carrying the protesting Anna off to bed every time he (or the drink) bring him to her door At the end, having agreed to separate, they are brought back together through the good offices of the roommate, a gay Mary Worth, and they accept what both suspect will be a union as disastrous and painful as it is necessary. Beneath this meeting of contraries, there is a sub-theme about love, loss, and art. The dance that Anna creates out of the loss of her partner and the sexual energy of her nights with Pale is said to be forceful, commanding, a work of genius alongside the tepid exercises of the other choreographers on the same program, poor would-be professionals who presumably are unlost and underlaid. At the same time, Anna's less vital boyfriend, a screenwriter who thinks that all movies are bad, writes the serious script he has always wanted to do, a contemporary love story (presumably *Burn This)* which the pain of his loss of Anna makes possible.

This recycled romantic myth of creativity need not be taken too seriously, for the heart of the play beats in Pale and Anna, less as characters than as roles for John Malkovich and Joan Allen. Malkovich is outrageous and totally fascinating. He roars, rages, and flutes his way through his part, modulating only to demonstrate how to make a proper pot of tea or to suggest that his hurricane temperament can calm into tenderness. Walter Kerr in a recent column *(New York Times,* November 15) suggested that Malkovich is wrecking Wilson's play, and a playwright who shall remain nameless asked me the other day if I thought Malkovich would ever make his performance mesh with the rest of the cast. I think that Malkovich is the Pale that Wilson wanted, that his unmeshed excess is realizing not trashing the playwright's intention. I miss only the note of vulnerability in the character, for the chinks in Pale's armor, as Malkovich shows them, seem as calculated as most of the rest of the performance. That calculation, however, belongs as much to the character as the actor, for Pale is a self-created figure, always conscious of his costume, his gestures, his rhetoric. For me, the odd thing about Malkovich's performance, which has received so much praise and blame, is that my attention regularly moved from him to Joan Allen. Not all that odd perhaps, because I watched her instead of Kathleen Turner whenever they were on screen together in

Peggy Sue Got Married and I was startled at what a substantial character she made of Ann in the recent television production of *All My Sons.* Her Anna in *Burn This* often sits silently, her sentences broken off by Pale's verbal avalanche. The play of reactions across her face is a joy to behold. It is her amusement, her impatience, her disbelief that gives force to Pale's fury of words. Less is more in *Burn This,* as it is in *Frankie and Johnny,* and Joan Allen, like Kathy Bates, makes her play particularly worth seeing.

Source: Gerald Weales, "Send in the Clowns" m the *Commonweal,* Volume CXIV, no 22, December 18, 1987, pp. 749-50

Adaptations

There are no media adaptations of *Burn This.* A few of Lanford Wilson's plays have been produced for television. These include: *Stoop: A Turn* (New York Television Theatre, 1969), *Fifth of July* (Showtime, 1982), and *The Migrants* (with Tennessee Williams; CBS, 1973).

Topics for Further Study

Wilson's play relies upon his carefully crafted dialogue to carry the performance. Since there is little action on stage to define the characters, the audience is forced to listen to the words very closely. What does the dialogue in *Burn This* reveal about each character's life, dreams, and fears?

Anna, Pale, and Burton each change and grow during the three months during which the play is set. Their relationships evolve and alter in several ways. What do you think these characters learn about themselves? About each other?

Research what it means to be a choreographer. What is required? Is schooling enough, or is experience as a dancer more important? Is this a difficult career choice requiring much sacrifice? What are the rewards?

It used to be argued that small towns were disappearing from the map because people were moving to the big cities. In recent years this trend is being reversed. How does living in the city differ from living in the country? Note the references to the small town in which Robbie grew up. What are those references meant to signify if Wilson is also lamenting the lack of humanity in a modern world?

Explore Wilson's references to an alienating modern civilization. Are people required to fight progress so that they can preserve their humanity? Exactly what does technology mean to humanity?

Compare and Contrast

1987: Homosexuals protest in Washington, D.C., to demand an end to discrimination and to demand more federal funding for research of AIDS.

Today: Homosexuality remains a basis for discrimination in many areas of life. In the military, homosexuality is a leading reason for general discharges, in spite of President Clinton's "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

1987: AZT wins FDA approval for the treatment of AIDS. The treatment will cost $10,000 a year, but it is not a cure and its side effects mean that many AIDS victims will not be able to take the drug.

Today: The most recent AIDS treatment, a protease inhibitor, though initially promising, still fails to provide a cure. And, as has been the case with so many other treatments, newer drug combinations fail to help some patients while proving to be prohibitively expensive for many.

1987: U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop asks that commercials for condoms be shown on television.

Today: Although they are boycotted in some areas, a few condom commercials have aired on national television. However, there still re-mams a great deal of public resistance to the commercials.

1987: India and Sri Lanka sign a treaty designed to end the ethnic violence that has persisted for four years. But the violence continues even with the treaty.

Today: Ethnic violence in Bosnia continues to draw American troops to the area. Atrocities, especially against women, have been an central part of the Croatian-Serb War.

1987: *Beloved,* a novel by Toni Morrison which details the story of a slave girl, is published

Today: Television host and actress Oprah Winfrey is scheduled to release the film adaptation of *Beloved.*

What Do I Read Next?

Talley's Folly, one of Wilson's most successful plays, was first performed in 1979. Set in 1944, this play is about the romance between a thirty-one-year-old Midwestern spinster and a forty-two-year-old Jewish tax accountant.

Wilson's *Gingham Dog,* written in 1969, is the story about the end of a marriage. Vincent and Gloria are an interracial couple and the end of their marriage focuses on issues of social change.

Serenading Louie, Wilson's 1976 play, is about alienation, estrangement, and death. The focus is on two couples, neighbors who are enduring a crisis in each couple's lives

August Wilson's *Fences,* written in 1987 but set in 1957, examines the effects of discrimination on a family. Although the discrimination that takes place in *Fences* is based on race, the idea of

how love can survive in a world filled with pain and death is similar to the subject *of Burn This.*

Mordaunt Shairp's *The Green Bay Tree,* written in 1933, was one of the first plays to deal with homosexuality. The play focuses on the relationship between a wealthy older man who adopts an attractive, working-class youth and seduces him with a life of luxury.

Harvey Fierstein's 1978 play *Torch Song Trilogy,* is about a gay man who wants to be loved. The play, which won several awards, was later made into a successful film.

Fierstein's *On Tidy Endings* (1987) is a short play about relationships. The play is not about AIDS, but it does focus on the loss that results from ADDS.

Further Study

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
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Beverly Jendrowski

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535