Calm Down Mother Study Guide

Calm Down Mother by Megan Terry

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Introduction

Megan Terry's *Calm Down Mother* (referred to as a transformation play) demonstrates various aspects of relationships between women, first espousing the most optimal situations that a woman can strive for and then showing how women, as well as their society, place restraints on their achievement of their most favorable growth. The work is considered one of Terry's most popular one-act plays and was first produced by Open Theatre on a double bill with Terry's play *Keep Tightly Closed* (a transformation play for men) on March 29, 1965, at the Sheridan Square Playhouse in New York City.

Terry uses only three women and minimum props for *Calm Down Mother* despite the fact that there are, in essence, multiple characters and blocs that make up this play. Over the course of the production, the three women take on different relationships to one another as they change from middle-aged shop owners to old women in a nursing home, to young prostitutes, sisters, friends, and mothers and daughters. In each section of the play, the characters explore what it means to be female, how society views them, and what tools they have to improve themselves.

Although the play was written and produced at the height of the feminist movement in the 1960s, it discusses topics that remain relevant to contemporary women as they pursue answers to their relationships with other women and society. Terry's play, popular in experimental theater in the middle of the century, continues to be staged in college and small theater productions across the United States today.

Author Biography

Megan Terry, an internationally recognized playwright and prolific writer who has created over sixty plays, is often referred to as the Mother of American Feminist Drama. She has been involved in the theater since childhood and has so devoted herself to her art that in 1994 she was elected to lifetime membership in the College of Fellows of the American Theatre for her distinguished service to the profession on a national scope.

Terry, who was born in Seattle, Washington, on July 22, 1932, as Marguerite Duffy, fell in love with the stage at the early age of seven. Her parents, Marguerite and Harold Duffy, often took their daughter to local theatrical productions; and when she was not witnessing a live professional performance, Terry was known, throughout her childhood, to produce many of her own backyard plays. As a teen, she wrote, created the sets for, and acted in school plays. When her parents divorced in her senior year of high school, she moved in with her grandparents who lived only a few blocks from the Seattle Repertory Playhouse, where she would eventually spend most of her time. While enrolled at the University of Washington, Terry continued her activities at the Playhouse, where she wrote plays and built sets until 1951, when, in the throes of McCarthyism, a state committee accused the theatrical group of un-American activities and closed them down. This event made Terry realize the power of theater, and it ignited her passions further.

For her sophomore year, Terry transferred to the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, where she discovered that of all her experiences in theater, from acting to building sets, it was writing that most inspired her. The following year, she returned to Seattle and the University of Washington and became involved with the Cornish School of Allied Arts, where she established a community playhouse and premiered several of her first published plays.

Feeling somewhat stymied by the cultural acceptance of her plays in the Pacific Northwest, Terry moved to New York City in the late 1950s. It was also around this time that she changed her name. By the early 1960s, she had written several more plays but was discontent with the direction of commercial theater in New York. In 1963, together with several other producers, writers, and actors, she helped establish the Open Theater, where a series of her plays, including *Calm Down Mother* (1966), premiered. The techniques that Terry employed in some of her plays of this period would define experimental theater. A couple of her innovations were including rock music in musical comedies and involving the audience in the performance, something that had never been done before. Her anti-war musical *Viet Rock* (1966) remains one of the classic pieces from that era and is enjoying a contemporary revival.

Terry's works have been translated and performed in many different countries. She has earned an Obie Award (for *Approaching Simone* in 1970), the Dramatists Guild Annual Award, the ATA Silver Medal, and several fellowships, including a Guggenheim, a National Endowment for the Arts, and a grant from Yale. She has lived in Omaha, Nebraska, since 1974, where she is involved in the Magic Theater, a company of artists

dedicated to creating new American musical plays, and where she continues to write and to conduct writing workshops.

Plot Summary

Section 1

Megan Terry's play *Calm Down Mother* consists of only one act, but it is separated by different sections, during which the three female characters change roles. In the first section, the three woman are clustered, so as "to suggest a plant form," the stage directions dictate. They are listening to a tape, which recounts the beginning of life outside of the oceans. Woman One states that she is Margaret Fuller (1810-1850), a nineteenth-century transcendentalist who has been credited with beginning the feminist movement in the United States. Woman One declares that she accepts the universe.

The two remaining women respond that she had better for "Carlyle said that you had better," making a reference possibly, to Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), a Scottish historian and critic who promoted a strict and authoritarian form of government. Woman One declares that her father supported her "not as a living plaything, but as a mind"; and the other two women remind her that she had better "grab the universe" while she can. This section then ends with the women going into a "*brief freeze.*"

Section 2

In the next section, the three women are in a store setting. Woman One becomes Sophie and Woman Three becomes Esther. They are sisters, and both of them work at the store. Woman Two is a young female customer, who is trying to buy a six-pack of beer. Sophie becomes entranced with the young girl's hair, which reminds her of her mother's hair. Sophie wants to touch it and tells the young woman about how she used to comb her mother's hair. She also recounts that she too used to have hair like that, but she has had so many surgeries that her hair has changed. Esther complains that her sister Sophie had become obsessed with her hair when they were younger.

Sophie asks if she can comb the young woman's hair. She also admires the young woman's skin. As she continues, Sophie laments the loss of her mother and of her own youth while Esther and the young girl "*begin a mournful hum.*" Sophie eventually joins them, and the hum builds to a crescendo, at which point the young girl "*flings the other Two Women away.*"

The young woman tells the audience that she wants to learn how to throw away the depression and anger that other people try to impose on her. She goes up to Woman One and throws her feelings on her. Then Woman One begins a monologue in which she states that she feels like she wants to hit someone; but these feelings are only coming from one side of her, as if she has suffered a stroke and that side is consumed with rage. Then there is another freeze.

Section 3

Woman Three tells the audience that everyone must write the details of their lives with the "absurd conviction they are talking to or will contact someone." The two other women approach her and beat her down to the ground, where she remains throughout the third section.

One of the women becomes Nancy, who has just arrived at her sister Sally's newly rented New York apartment. Sally has just recently divorced an abusive husband. Nancy tells Sally that she is falling apart, to which Sally reacts by calling her "Stella Dallas," a reference to a 1937 Barbara Stanwyck movie in which a mother sacrifices everything for her daughter. In Nancy's case, however, she has sacrificed a lot for everyone, including her mother, who has just been diagnosed with cancer, a circumstance that Nancy can do nothing about except wait for her mother's imminent death. Nancy is also angry with her father, who is an alcoholic. Nancy believes that her father is faking a heart attack in order to grab attention away from his wife. The women embrace and freeze.

Section 4

Woman Three, who has been lying on the stage floor throughout the preceding section, rises. She is in a nursing home. Women One and Two are residents there. Their names become Mrs. Tweed and Mrs. Watermellon. They discuss the passing of time; and Mrs. Watermellon declares that the sunrise begins in the heart, but no one ever believes her. She then explains time by making reference to her menstrual cycle, which Mrs. Tweed believes is absurd. The two women call one another names, and Mrs. Tweed threatens to call Mrs. Watermellon's family and have her committed. Mrs. Watermellon reminds her that she already is.

The third woman is now a nurse, and she approaches them with food, which the other two refuse to eat. The nurse is very mechanical in her responses to the women. The two patients make fun of her, calling the food worms, then calling the nurse a worm. When the nurse tries to get away from them, the two patients turn into subway doors, chanting "Please keep your hands off the doors." When the woman finally breaks through, all three women become "*call-girls,*" or prostitutes, preparing to begin their night. Their names are now Momo, Felicia, and Inez.

Section 5

Momo and Felicia are arguing, trying to upstage one another. Inez tells them to "shut up," or they will be late for the party. The women are preparing themselves for what appears to be an orgy. The women talk to one another in very combative tones, threatening to cause harm, calling one another offensive names. In the middle of the argument, Felicia pulls out a "roll of bills," which reportedly belongs to Momo, who has apparently not been giving her share to Ricky, the madam of the house. Momo is the

newest one of the group, and Inez tells her she has a lot to learn. Felicia refers to Inez as "mommie," asks her forgiveness for all the arguing and suggests that Inez spank her. Momo does the same. Then the three women huddle and chant: "Have confidence. You've been found."

Section 6

The women continue to repeat their chant, but, instead of statements, they begin questioning themselves: "You've been found? . . . No, I've been found." The women are now living in a tenement, washing dishes. Their names are Sue, Sak, and Ma.

Sue begins by talking about birth control. She is angry about a magazine article that states that it is wrong to use contraceptives. Sak goes along with Ma, who does not believe in birth control. Sue points out that, technically, she could create a baby every month for the next thirty years of her life. To prove her point, she states that every woman who does not create a baby out of every one of her eggs is, in some way, practicing some kind of birth control. She then criticizes her sister and mother for sitting in church every week and listening to the men preaching about birth control, a subject they do not even fully understand.

Sak, who is a true believer, warns that Sue will burn in hell for what she has just said. Sue responds, "They'll make me a saint! A thousand years from now they'll award me a medal for not contributing to the population!" Ma tells Sue to pack her things and move out of their home. Sue tries to tell her that she has "been born out of my time." She calls her mother and sister "empty bottles of holy water," then says she does not need to pack. "I've got everything I need right here in my belly."

The three women then face the audience and end the play with a chant about their bellies and their "eggies" being enough. The last line is a question: "Are they?"

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Calm Down Mother is a one act play about the phases and ultimate value of women's lives, exhibited through different characterizations and roles. The various characters are represented by only three women, who change roles during the different sections. When the play opens, the three women are huddled together to suggest some plant life form and remain that way during a reading by another woman who is not in view.

The reading speaks of three primal, one-celled creatures, which float and are propelled by the force of the water in which they live, until, at one point, they take root at the shore line instead of being washed out to sea again. It is then that one part breaks away and stretches bravely toward the sun.

The woman, who represents the part that has broken away, steps forward and announces that she is Margaret Fuller, a fact validated by her father, many years ago. With passion, the woman states that she has a brain and she accepts the entire universe. The other two women now chant in the words of Fuller's father that she should grab the universe while she can.

The women freeze momentarily, and then transition into the characters of Sophie, an old woman, Esther, her daughter, and another girl. The scene is now apparently inside a store, and the girl has asked for two six packs of ale. Sophie comments on the girl's beautiful hair and reminisces on the time when her own was just as lustrous, before time and illness changed it.

The girl's hair and skin also remind Sophie of her own mother, for whom she had cared until her death. The three women are combing each other's hair. Finally, the girl cannot bear the pallor of grief that has arisen and pushes the other two women away.

The women are no specific characters now. One woman is furious about disassociating from the disapproval of other people. Pacing the stage, she throws symbolic anger toward another of the women. This next woman declares a desire to hit. The rage continues, leaving her in a stroke-like stage, needing to sit on her hands in order to avoid further violent behavior.

The mood changes again and the third woman steps forward with a monologue about the futility of all the facts that add up to make a woman's life. Perhaps if she were to write everything down and make a list of everything she wouldn't seem so small. At least then she could review the listing of her life when she feels insignificant and maybe not feel so alienated. The other two women laugh hysterically and push her down to the floor, where she remains, while the other two women transition into Nancy and Sally, two sisters in a New York apartment.

Recovering from an abusive divorce, Sally has moved into an apartment in Greenwich Village and Nancy has come to visit and lend support even though she is herself in a volatile emotional state. Nancy has always been the stalwart of the family but seems to be on the verge of emotional collapse, having just learned of their mother's terminal bone cancer. To Nancy's way of thinking, her petulant father had a heart attack just so his illness will surpass his wife's diagnosis, and he can be admitted into the hospital, securing all the family's attention for himself. Devastated by the news of their mother's illness, the two women embrace for comfort, and then freeze in the moment.

The woman who has been lying on the floor rises and recites a small poem about girlhood. Turning her back, she can no longer see the other two women, who assume the characters of Mrs. Tweed and Mrs. Watermellon, two friends in a nursing home. Lamenting the passing of time, Mrs. Watermellon reveals that the secret of life is really simple; it starts in a woman's heart and moves lower to her belly and bursts forth once a month, but now there is nothing. Mrs. Tweed chides her on letting go of such thinking, but Mrs. Watermellon still resists old age, and her anger exhibits in foul language at her friend and especially at the nurse who has brought the daily hot cereal. Their refusal to eat prompts the nurse to coerce them, as though they are children. Standing to face her, the two women bar the nurse from leaving by creating a barrier, like the doors on a subway car.

Finally, the nurse is able to emerge and all three women are now prostitutes named Momo, Felicia, and Inez, who are dressing and putting on makeup for the upcoming night. Momo and Felicia argue over their own money making skills, and finally, Inez, who is a bit older, yells at them to save their energy for their work and not waste it on each other. "Calm down, mother," Felicia tells her, knowing that she can put an end to Momo by telling Ricky, their pimp, about Momo's hiding tips from him. Momo's secret behavior could jeopardize all of them with Ricky, so Inez, who is responsible for them, vows to give Momo one more chance to improve, and she promises that she will.

Frozen in a tender moment for a few seconds, the women again break apart; this time becoming a woman and her two daughters, Sue and Sak, who are washing dishes in the kitchen of a tenement house. The daughters are discussing the furor around birth control when Mother Nature is a form of birth control every month and no one challenges that method of avoiding pregnancy.

Pleading for them to stop arguing, their mother asks the daughters to consider that the Bible says not to spill your seed on the ground. Sue, who is more forthright in her opinions, challenges her mother to think about God's master plan. God has planted all the viable seeds in men and women and His own plan for bodily functions wastes most of them, so why should priests and politicians argue with it.

At twenty years of age, Sue argues that she has thirty more years of egg production, which adds up to the possibility of 360 babies. Of course, that is a physical impossibility, but she wonders about her obligation to save those eggs, because of their potential value. If they are not saved, logically, that too is a sin. She tries to get her sister and mother to understand that, obviously, God knows that each egg will not reach a higher

purpose, so why do the religious zealots challenge the idea of birth control, when God has already built it into a woman's bodily functions.

This form of rebellious thinking will not be tolerated and Sue is kicked out of the house. Amid accusations of their being naïve and archaic in their thinking, Sue affirms that she has everything she needs for the next thirty years right in her own belly.

For the last time, the three women break character and assume the roles of Woman One, Woman Two, and Woman Three. They alternately rub their stomachs and the sides of their bodies while chanting about their bellies, bodies, and eggs declaring that they are enough. Turning in unison, the question is raised and hangs in the air as to whether these things really are enough, and the stage goes dark.

Analysis

When this play was written in the mid 1960s the topics of women's rights and birth control were especially fresh in American society, but the issues are still relevant, to some degree, for women, even today. The use of the three women, who transform into the different characters, implies that these women represent all women, and while each is different, each is also a part of the sum total of all womanhood.

Huddled together at the beginning of the play, the women represent some sort of plant and the accompanying audio related to their life as part of the sea hints at the origins of life extending from the ocean. The author suggests that women are the source of that origin, the source of all life-giving efforts since the beginning of time.

Moving back and forth between social and political issues, the play also brings forward issues of very personal natures, indicating the need for women to balance all levels of inward and outward behaviors.

Having an overarching theme, the issue of women's rights is introduced with the mention of Margaret Fuller, the transcendentalist who was very active in the beginning of the women's rights movement in the 1800s. Throughout the play, the issues of financial control, nurturing, birth control, and aging all exhibit restrictions to women's lives throughout all their life stages.

Anger is also a prominent theme throughout, while the women come to grips with the realities of the inability to gain momentum in the struggle for their own bodies, as well as their social and political positions. Whether they are prostitutes or women bound by religious doctrine, their bodies are at the mercy of men who control their destinies. Any amount of rationalization and justice has been futile until this point, when the women's passions are enraged to a point to affect change.

Overall, no matter the phase of life, the women are bound together in their shared struggles, with an unswerving loyalty to each other and to womanhood in general. Forty years after the play's introduction, there is some clarity and justice related to the issues

presented in the piece, but it is a valid work for showcasing the destiny of women in such a stark reality.

Characters

Esther

Esther appears in the grocery store section. She is the sister of Sophie. She is a middle-aged woman who tends to criticize her sister for being obsessed with her looks. She joins with the young girl in a mournful hum to lament the passage of time and the onslaught of old age.

Felicia

Felicia is a prostitute who continually argues with Momo. She is the one who says "Calm down, mother," referring to Inez, an older prostitute. Felicia discovers money that Momo has stashed away and threatens to tell the madam of the house. She also tells Inez to spank her for being bad.

Girl

Girl is the young woman who tries to buy a six-pack of beer in the grocery store section. Her hair reminds Sophie of her mother's hair. She allows Sophie to touch her hair and suggests that maybe Sophie was allergic to the anesthetic the doctors gave her. She joins with Esther in a mournful hum until she cannot stand it any more and pushes Sophie and Esther away.

Inez

Inez is an older prostitute who is responsible for Felicia and Momo. Felicia refers to her as "mother," but it is unclear if there really is a blood relationship between them.

Ma

Ma is the mother of Sue and Sak in the last section of the play. She is conservative and a true believer in her faith, which disallows the use of contraception. She sides with her daughter Sak when Sue makes known that she is on the pill, then she tells Sue to leave.

Momo

Momo is the least experienced of the three prostitutes. She argues with Felicia. She also has stashed away money without paying the "house" because she says she needs a vacation. In the end, she joins Felicia in telling Inez to spank her for being bad.

Nancy

Nancy is a Midwestern woman who arrives at her sister's New York apartment to help her celebrate her new independence. Nancy has previously helped Sally get out of a bad marriage. Nancy refers to herself as the "old bulwark of the family." She is the calm one in the midst of family crises, but with her mother's imminent death, Nancy fears that she is falling apart.

Nurse

Nurse appears in the section with Mrs. Tweed and Mrs. Watermellon, two patients at a nursing home. Nurse is very mechanical in her care of the two elderly women and is made fun of because of her lack of compassion.

Sak

Sak appears in the last section of the play. She is Sue's sister. She is conservative like her mother and a bit naïve about sexuality. She tells her mother that Sue has been having sex and is thus responsible for Sue being told to leave the house.

Sally

Sally has just moved into a new apartment after having left an abusive husband. She is Nancy's sister and acknowledges that she could not have gained her freedom without her sister's help. Nancy describes Sally as soft. She often gives in to men, even if they have hurt her. Sally also gives her father the benefit of the doubt when her sister states that their father has faked a heart attack.

Sophie

Sophie works at a grocery store and is stunned by a customer who comes in to buy some beer. The young woman has hair just like Sophie's mother, and Sophie laments the loss not only of her mother but also of her own youthful beauty. Sophie's sister, Esther, refers to her as having been previously arrogant about her looks.

Sue

Sue claims that she has been born out of her time, in contrast to her mother and her sister Sak, whom she says are three hundred years behind the times. Sue practices birth control despite the dictates of her church and magazine articles she reads written by men. She is sexually active and does not want to have any children. She claims that every woman practices birth control in one form or another because no woman gives birth to every egg that she carries in her ovaries.

Mrs. Tweed

Mrs. Tweed is a patient in a nursing home. When Mrs. Watermellon refers to her menstrual cycle, Mrs. Tweed tells her that she should not talk of such things and threatens to call her family and have her committed. She also ridicules the nurse, referring to the cereal she is eating as consisting of worms.

Mrs. Watermellon

Mrs. Watermellon is an outspoken elderly woman who lives in a nursing home. She tells Mrs. Tweed that she knows the secret of the beginning of each day, a secret that exists in her heart. When Mrs. Tweed says she is going to call her family and have Mrs. Watermellon committed, Mrs. Watermellon reminds her that she already is committed.

Woman One

Woman One plays various roles, taking on other named characters at times. She is only specifically pointed out in the beginning when she announces that she is Margaret Fuller, a reference to an early pioneer of the feminist movement; and again, later in the play, when she tells the audience that she wants to hit something; and, intermittently, as part of a chorus.

Woman Two

Like the other nondescript women, Woman Two plays many different roles. Under the title of Woman Two, she makes a reference to Carlyle in the opening of the play, announcing that Woman One had better accept the universe. Later, she talks to the audience and tells them that she wants to get to the point where she can throw negative emotions back to the people who try to put them on her. She often joins the other two women in chorus.

Woman Three

Woman Three also plays various roles and is only identified as Woman Three when she tells the audience that they should list every detail of their lives in the hope that they will eventually make contact with someone. She is then knocked down on the floor and remains there through one of the sections, then rises and chants about her girlhood being all flowers. She often takes part in chorus with the other two women.

Themes

Birth Control

When *Calm Down Mother* was written and first produced in the 1960s, birth control devices, other than prophylactics, were just beginning to be mass-produced. A hormonal birth control pill had been introduced in the 1950s, but it was used as a regulator of the menstrual cycle, not as a way of preventing birth. Such was the social, political, and religious environment at the time of the original staging of the play. Thus, in choosing to develop a theme of birth control in her play, Terry was stepping on very controversial territory.

Although there is a reference in the scene between the three prostitutes when Felicia tells Momo that she will "stick holes in your diaphragm," Terry elaborates on birth control fully only at the end of her play and brings it up mainly in relationship to the opposition of the religious beliefs of her family. In the 1960s, many of the Christian churches preached that if a woman did not want to conceive, she should practice abstinence from sex. In the Catholic Church, women were told to monitor their menstrual cycles so they would know when they were ovulating. This practice was referred to as the rhythm method. Sue, in the final scene of the play, points out that rhythm was just as much a form of birth control as taking a pill. According to Sue, unless every woman brought to fruition every egg in her ovaries, she was practicing birth control.

Women's Relationship with Men

Terry brings out the topic of men only obliquely in her play. When she does mention them, they often are referred to in a not-so-positive light. First, she mentions Carlyle, which one can assume is Thomas Carlyle, a philosopher who believed in strict patriarchal control of society. Then, she refers to the abusive husband of Sally, a naive woman who was too soft with men. She let them take advantage of her. Terry also brings up the fact that Sally's father, an alcoholic, has faked a heart attack in order to compete with the attention that Sally's mother is receiving because she has cancer. She relegates men to customers in the scene with the prostitutes; and, in the final scene, she condemns male authors of magazine articles and male priests for preaching against birth control, a serious matter that does not concern men because they do not know what they are talking about. "Who the hell are all these guys on platforms to say you can't take pills, you can't use rubbers, down with vaseline, out with diaphragms, who the hell then are they?" In other words, men are one of women's biggest hindrances in their struggle to liberate themselves.

Aging

The topic of aging first appears in the scene in the grocery store when Sophie becomes enthralled with the young female customer's hair. Sophie reminisces about her mother's

hair and how Sophie used to comb it. Then, she slips into memories of her youth and laments the fact that her hair no longer contains the luster and health that it did in her youth, a part of her appearance that used to make her proud. She also regrets that her skin no longer is soft and smooth and white. High blood pressure and several surgeries brought on by old age have robbed her of her youth, Sophie states.

Age is also an apparent topic in the scene in the nursing home, where Mrs. Tweed and Mrs. Watermellon have been left to the care of a cold-hearted nurse. Mrs. Watermellon points out to Mrs. Tweed that they have been committed to the place as one might be committed to an asylum for misfits.

Motherhood

Since the word *mother* is included in the title of Terry's play, one must suspect that motherhood plays a dominant role. However, this role weaves its way through Terry's work rather subtly. The figures that represent motherhood are varied, and the message delivered is a bit confusing.

Motherhood figures prominently in Terry's discussion of birth control, in that with its use, a woman can more fully choose when and if she wants to become a mother. There is also the oblique reference to motherhood albeit mockingly, in the scene of the prostitutes in which Inez, an older, more experienced call girl is referred to as *mother* because she is responsible for the other two younger women. It is actually from a line of dialogue in this scene that gives the play its title.

Motherhood is also discussed in the beginning of the play when Sophie recalls having brushed her mother's hair and helped her with her bath. In the next scene with Nancy and Sally, Nancy refers to her mother as the "fighter," the strength of the family. Nancy's mother is also her role model. In the scene in the nursing home, it is implied that Mrs. Watermellon is a mother when Mrs. Tweed tells her that she is going to call her son and have her committed. A mother figure is also included in the final scene with Sue and Sak.

The definition of motherhood, however, varies quite widely throughout the play. Sophie remembers her mother with love and longs to touch the young girl's hair in order to stir her memories of having cared for her mother. In the following scene, Nancy also speaks about her mother with love as she mourns her mother's imminent death to cancer. The image changes, though, in the nursing home scene, during which motherhood is depicted in a quite different attitude. The fact that Mrs. Watermellon refers to herself as having been committed, as well as the non-nurturing service of the nurse who is responsible for her care, suggests that the mother

(Mrs. Watermellon) has been abandoned. The prostitute scene mocks motherhood as well. The three women (including the mother figure) are, after all, preparing themselves for an orgy. Finally, in the last scene, the mother is pictured as having few thoughts of her own, and her daughter tells her that she is three-hundred years behind the times.

Style

There are only three characters on stage at all times during this play. Three women are first introduced only as Woman One, Woman Two, and Woman Three. However, throughout the play the women take on different roles and different names as they work through various mini-scenes. Sometimes the women are sisters; sometimes they are mother and child. At one point, one of the women spends the entire scene on the floor.

The actresses often change and move in and out of the play through their dialogue. There are moments when they say their lines to one another. There are also times when they speak directly to the audience. There are various monologues by an individual; and there are also group chants.

To help define the ambiguity that might surround the play because of the constant changing of roles, stage directions suggest that the actresses "*freeze*" in between the different sections of the play. This marker warns the audience that the actresses are stepping out of their previous characters and moving on to new ones.

With each new scenario, the women's names change, not only on the program but also in the dialogue, providing yet another marker for the audience. "She wants ale, Sophie," Esther announces, cueing the audience into the new identities.

Since there are few props provided, Terry has one of the women describe the scene in the bloc in which Nancy visits her sister Sally's new apartment. "Why it's very . . . it's really very charming. It really is. Downright Greenwich Village, the clean West Side, that is." In the scene with the prostitutes, Felicia states, "I can't see in that mirror," to explain that the women are dressing for a party, trying to apply their makeup.

Historical Context

The cultural revolution of the 1960s influenced many aspects of American society, as well as the American theater. The revolution sparked a keen interest in innovative drama, and that innovation, in turn, had a strong and penetrating affect on American culture as a whole.

Although cultural revolutions were taking place all over the entire Western world, the changes in theater were mostly an American invention. Theatrical groups such as Living Theatre, Bread and Puppet, as well as the group that Megan Terry belonged to, Open Theatre, sprung up in the early 1960s. Most of these troupes included young people—actors, playwrights, directors, and set designers—who were interested in critiquing their society, whether the focus was a statement on the overall values of society, on civil rights, on sexual relationships, on the Vietnam War, or on the burgeoning struggle to create new definitions for women's roles in society.

Among some of the more influential theater people during this time was Joseph Papp (1921-1991), who used commercially successful plays and musicals (one of his later and most famous ones was *Chorus Line* in 1974) to help support experimental off-Broadway productions. Other names included Tom O'Horgan (originally a producer with the experimental theater group La Mama), who went on to create the successful rock musical *Hair* (1968); and Amiri Baraka, also known as LeRoi Jones, who founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem and wrote the critically acclaimed play *Dutchman* (1964).

Experimental theater, however, was not limited to off-Broadway productions. Experimental plays were performed all over the country. A common thread that ran through most of the plays was that most were very revolutionary and therefore very shocking. Nudity and sexuality that had never been displayed on stage (such as homosexual acts), vilification of high-ranking officials and American foreign policies, and the denigration of established religions were some of the major themes. The most interesting factor, though, was not just that these plays were being written and performed but that the people who were buying the tickets and watching the performances came from the middle and upper classes of the population. It was the first time, during the birth and heyday of experimental theater, that the so-called counterculture, or alternative culture, had such a heavy influence on the general populace. Cutting-edge ideas became the topic of conversation out in the suburbs as well as in the heart of the city; revolutionary concepts were discussed at cocktail parties as well as after rock concerts because experimental theater was getting its message out and making people from all walks of life question the status quo of their society.

Experimental theater with a bent toward feminist theory was even more successful. Two major feminists groups, Women's Experimental Theatre and the Wilma Theatre, were established, but works by feminists were not restricted to these venues. Not only were plays with feminist messages popular but women suddenly found that the roles of playwright and director were also open to them.

One of the more successful small theaters during this time was La Mama Experimental Theatre, which began as a small basement theater in 1961 under the direction of playwright Ellen Stewart. It was typical of like-minded theaters throughout the country with a mission to nurture and present new, original works by people from a wide range of backgrounds. The work presented by La Mama was experimental not only in the writing but also in the collaboration that they fostered by incorporating music into their dramas. Many of the best playwrights of the 1960s had one or more of their plays produced at La Mama, including Terry, who saw her *Magic Realists*, *Three Clowns*, and *Viet Rock* all staged there in 1966, and *People v. Ranchman* (1967), *Changes* and *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool, Dark Place* both in 1968, as well as her most successful play *Approaching Simone*, which was presented at La Mama in 1970. Other well-known playwrights who had their early plays produced at La Mama include Sam Sheppard, Bruce Kessler, Tom Eyen, and Lanford Wilson.

Critical Overview

Although Terry is credited with being one of the first American feminist playwrights, and her plays have inspired many other dramatists to broaden their imaginations and to create dynamic and innovative experimental works, there is little critical analysis of her play *Calm Down Mother*. It was produced off-off-Broadway in a small but eventually influential theater group called Open Theatre to small audiences and few critical write-ups. However, in the inner circle of playwrights and academics who study drama, there are many tributes to her creations. Helene Keyssar, for instance, points out in *Feminist Theatre* that Terry's writing is revolutionary but subtly so. It is not radical in itself and does not demand sweeping reforms, but rather calls attention to possibilities that Terry perceives in women's nature. Her plays encourage women to transform themselves by demonstrating the changes that Terry herself envisions. She also inspires other writers and her audiences, it is suggested, because she shows how women can create enormous amounts of energy by working together instead of competing with one another.

Terry herself reinforced this concept in an interview published in Kathleen Betsko's *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights.* Terry stated that one of the main reasons that she writes is to present the potential she perceives in women in dealing with life and all its challenges. She encourages women, through her writing, to take action as she herself takes action through her creative endeavors. She loves pushing herself, she says, to the edges of what is possible.

Many critics agree that Terry's plays expose hypocrisy in American culture, but she does so not by merely pointing her fingers at particular institutions or by accusing any one group of people; rather, she does so by showing her audiences what they can do to break free of the confinements that society often places on people, or, specifically, on women. In her essay "Megan Terry," which appeared in *Speaking on Stage,* Felicia Hardiwon Londre recalled seeing Terry's early plays in the 1960s and feeling privileged to have done so. The experience left a strong impression on her that has lasted over the years. She believes that there will soon be a reevaluation of Terry's work that will honor the impact it has made. June Schlueter, in her *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon,* probably would agree with this assessment, as she defined Terry's work by referring to it as an "experience of discovery."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and focuses her published writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart explores the suggested transformation of the three women in Terry's play in an attempt to discover the deeper meaning behind the brief scenarios.

The subtitle to Megan Terry's play is *A Transformation for Three Women*. If Terry is true to her title, then there must be a pattern to each short scenario, each change of character, and each relationship that she demonstrates in this play. In order to find the pattern, readers must ask questions such as why did Terry start her play with a tape recording of the first signs of life outside the great oceans? How does she use sisterhood? Why is the title of her play contained in the scene with the prostitutes? Although answers to these questions are subjective and, at the most, speculative, they can add depth to this brief play in which characters change identities, scenes appear random, and no obvious (at least at first sight) answers are provided. By digging into possible motives for creating such an arbitrary play, readers become more active in the process. Terry does not hand out her philosophy as a college professor might offer in a lecture. She is one of the pioneers in feminist experimental theater, and one of her main goals was to engage her audience in the process. She offers a scheme or an outline. It is up to the audience to fill in the missing pieces.

Terry begins her play with a curious tape recording that recounts the beginning of life on land. There are three one-celled creatures, giving the reader a hint that Terry is setting up a theme for the play since there are also three female actresses throughout. As these three one-celled creatures make their way to the shore, they are constantly being washed toward the beach and then drawn back into the ocean. Not until they join forces are they eventually pushed far enough up the beach that they are able to avoid the action of the next wave. Their challenge is not yet over, however, as two are torn away by a tornado. Only one remains, and it "stretches toward the sun."

Following this opening, Terry writes various scenarios that include three women. Each of the situations that she presents could be likened to the attempts of the three one-celled creatures as they attempt to reach shore. First, there are the sisters Sophie and Esther, the shop owners, and their young customer who has come in to buy some beer. The connections between these three women are tenuous at best. Sophie wants to touch the young woman's hair, a very personal experience. She admires the young woman, but not so much for the woman's sake but rather for her own. The young woman reminds her first of her mother and then of herself; and it is in that longing for her youth that Sophie reaches out and touches the young woman. Her gestures are personal, but her motives for touching are anything but personal. The young woman is an object, a phantom of Sophie's youth. The young woman might just as well have been a mannequin. Sophie asks nothing about the young girl's life or her feelings. All Sophie does is tell the young girl of her troubles, her fears, her sorrows. Esther does not share Sophie's feelings; as a matter of fact, she tends to make fun of them. She remembers Sophie's youth in contempt, recounting how she used to spend so much time combing

her hair and admiring herself in the mirror. Esther and the young woman join in a mournful lament at the end, mocking Sophie's pain.

At this point, the women lose their identities. The young girl returns to being Woman Two, and she admits that she hates it when people try to bring her down. She wants to throw off their emotions rather than absorb them. Sophie goes back to being Woman One, and she displays her anger by stating that she wants to hit something. Woman Three, trying to make sense of it all, tells the audience that everyone needs to write down the details of their lives so they will not feel so small. "A lot of people must start writing with the absurd conviction they are talking to or will contact someone," she tells them. In comparison with the opening section of this play, this scene points out that these women are not connected. It was only when the three one-celled creatures came together in the opening scene, that they finally were pushed high enough on the beach that the waves could not recall them to the sea. In the above scenario, Sophie is hurting, yet neither of the women can or want to empathize with her. Despite her family connection, Esther displays jealousy toward her sister. The young girl cannot relate to Sophie's loss of youth. Each woman lives in a separate and isolated unit. They cannot see beyond their own needs and therefore cannot find the soil upon which they must sink their roots in order to grow.

Woman One and Woman Two then beat Woman Three down to the ground while she is talking to the audience about "contacting" someone. Woman Three remains in her prone position throughout the next scene, in which Women One and Two are transformed into a new sisterhood, that of Nancy and Sally. These women are much more supportive of one another. As a matter of fact, all their relationships with women are positive. It is the men in their lives who bring them down. Sally has just divorced an abusive husband, and Nancy has issues with her father who, in her mind, is attempting to upstage her mother who is dying of cancer. This part of Terry's work reenacts the wave motion of the ocean. The three one-celled organisms were constantly washed ashore only to be pulled back by the waves. The scene between Nancy and Sally defines how a healthy relationship between sisters can help create benefit for both. However, Nancy and Sally are not yet secured on the beach. The wave that pulls them off the soil is their relationship with men. Nancy states that her sister Sally is soft when it comes to dealing with men, implying that she allows them to take advantage of her. Nancy in turn, is suspicious of men even to the point of accusing her father of faking a heart attack. Terry appears to be implying that a good relationship with women is a step toward growth, but women must also resolve their conflicts with men.

Whereas in this scene, Nancy honors her mother by referring to her as a good role model, in the next section of the play, two elderly women (one of whom is a mother) have been "committed" to a nursing home. They are taken care of by a nurse who tends to them mechanically. Although they appear to be companions for one another, Mrs. Tweed and Mrs. Watermellon do not get along very well. Mrs. Tweed tells Mrs. Watermellon that she should not be thinking of herself as a woman anymore when the latter refers to her menses: "You shouldn't think of such things. Woman a' yore age." The two women then lambaste one another with insults, demonstrating the shallowness of their friendship. This scene is reflective of the one that Sophie and Esther played out,

in which none of the women exhibited compassion toward one another. This scene is also a statement of how society treats old people, in particular old women. Not only society at large but families in general tend to want to shut them away, as exhibited with the refrain at the end of this scene: "Please keep your hands off the doors."

The scenario that follows the nursing home section involves three prostitutes, and it is a bit puzzling. Prostitution, of course, represents another kind of relationship with men; not one, readers can assume, that Terry promotes because she portrays the three women as being constantly at one another's throats. Right from the opening lines, Momo and Felicia are harshly criticizing one another. Terry also sets up this scene to make it look as if Momo and Felicia are the children of Inez, the third character. It is Felicia who states: "Calm down, Mother," the title of the play. It is possible that Terry thought the relationships in this scene were the worst depictions that she could think of for women, as they prepare themselves for a forthcoming orgy. Everything in this scene is either upside down or totally wrong. For one thing, Inez, more than likely, is not really the mother of Momo and Felicia; for another, the women constantly bicker among themselves as they compete for the attention of men and their money; and to top it off, Momo is a cheat. To further extend the absurdity of this scene, Terry has Momo and Felicia asking Inez to spank them for being "bad girls." The three women represent the epitome of commercialized womanhood—a bad mixture of sexuality and cash. They have become objects without a soul. They are the one-celled organisms that are torn out of the sand, unable to set their roots.

The play ends with a discussion of birth control, an issue that remains as controversial in contemporary times as it was at mid-century when Terry's play was staged. In the previous scene, the prostitutes' bodies did not belong to the women, as they sold their sexuality as a commodity in order to earn a living. Sexuality, in their case, had nothing to do with sensuality, let alone the idea of creating a child. However, to stay in their profession, the prostitutes had to be careful to avoid getting pregnant. In the 1960s, most religious organizations not only preached against having sex before marriage, but some, such as the Catholic Church, taught that it was a sin to think about sex. Sex was a biological drive meant only to procreate. Pleasure in sex was never discussed. Some women, therefore, believed that it was their duty to have sex with their husbands without considering any pleasure in the act. Understanding this mentality helps to enlighten the final scene of Terry's play. The mother of Sue is shocked that her daughter would go against the church and practice birth control. First of all, Sue was not even supposed to be having sex since she was not married. Secondly, why would any woman want to have sex except to get pregnant? Thus, Sue's mother is horrified.

Sue counters, however, with the fact that every woman practices some form of birth control because it is impossible for all of her eggs to be fertilized in her lifetime. Some of those eggs will be cast "upon the ground," which, according to Sue's mother, is contrary to biblical teachings. In this scene, Sue not only stands up for her rights to enjoy sex, to control the number of babies that she brings into the world, to control what happens to her body, and to the old conservative notions of her mother's generation, she also stands up to men. She shouts back at the priests and the male magazine writers who condemn birth control. She is the only female in the play who makes a stand, who is

strong enough to fight for her rights despite the pressures that are applied against her. Sue is the one-celled organism who, in the beginning of the play "stretches toward the sun." She is the character who "*walks toward the audience and smiles at them in joyous wonder.*" She is Margaret Fuller, as mentioned in the first scene, one of the first American feminists, who states, "'From the time I could speak and go alone, my father addressed me not as a plaything, but as a living mind.'" It would seem more logical, then, that Sue should have been the one to quote the title of the play. Her final words, as well as the final statement of the play, might have been: "Calm down, mother. Times are changing."

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *Calm Down Mother,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Schlueter discusses how Terry's transformational drama acknowledges the extent to which the self is shaped by modern culture.

> In order "to make it," we need to make images of ourselves. We compose ourselves from the cultural models around us. We are programmed into a status hunger. Once we have masked ourselves with the social image suitable to a type, we enter the masquerade of the setup. Even the masquerade of our ethnic and sex roles permeates our life so thoroughly that many of us are afraid to give them up. In giving them up we fear we would be giving up our identity, and even life itself.
>
> (Chaikin 13)

Joseph Chaikin's comment represents part of his response to what he and others involved in the Open Theatre of the 1960s called the "setup." In advertising for an "ingenue," a "leading lady," a "character actress," a "male juvenile character," and so on, trade papers reflected a disturbing coincidence between theatre and society: both based their vocabulary of character on the stereotype. Both assumed there were "fixed ways of telling one person from another" and found security in institutionalizing that assumption. As a consequence, Chaikin points out, "Each element of the societal [or theatrical] disguise, the acceptable image, can be assessed on an almost absolute and exploitative scale of values: 'It is better to be Caucasian'; 'it is better to be heterosexual and male'; 'it is better to be rich'; 'it is better to be Protestant.'" Megan Terry's early transformation plays— *Eat at Joe's*, *Calm Down Mother*, *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, *Comings and Goings*, and *Viet Rock*—represent further response of the Open to the "setup." Abjuring the rigidity of appointed and anointed roles, the Open made transformational drama a staple of its early repertory, creating theatrical exercises and plays in which actors shifted freely and suddenly from one character, situation, time, or objective to another. As Terry's colleague Peter Feldman put it, "Whatever realities are established at the beginning are destroyed after a few minutes and replaced by others. Then these are in turn destroyed and replaced." From the perspective of two decades of subsequent theatre, it should now be clear that Terry's work with transformation challenged more than the individual actor seeking versatility and range. In freeing the actor from the prescriptiveness of the assigned role, transformational drama challenged the prevailing character of realistic theatre, which reinforced social and theatrical expectations. Terry's work in neutralizing fixed assumptions, dismantling the stereotype, and reevaluating the institutional hierarchy proved seminal in forming emerging principle and modes of New York's alternative theatre.

Chief among these emerging principles was Off-Broadway's conception of character. Until Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* startled Broadway in 1956; until Joseph Cino opened the Cafe Cino in 1958; until the Becks went public with the Living Theatre in 1959, with Jack Gelber's *The Connection*; until Edward Albee turned to playwriting, staging *The Zoo Story* in New York in 1960; until Ellen Stewart opened La Mama in 1962; and until the Open Theatre became a presence in 1963, the prevailing mode of American drama was realism. The principle of construction was the cause-and-effect relationship, the plot proceeding neatly through units of action that raised a dramatic question, satisfied that question, and raised another, even as a dominant dramatic question sustained itself throughout the play. Character became clear through motive, often discovered in a past event that justified a character's present perversions. The social-psychological-moral paradigm pursued by Ibsen in *A Doll House* and *Ghosts* remained the model for serious postwar American drama, which placed its faith in causality and its attendant claims.

Modern American drama took little notice of Pirandello's radical assault on the theatre in 1923, when *Six Characters in Search of an Author* rocked its Paris audience and changed Europe's theatrical vocabulary. In his 1953 study of *"Modernism" in Modern Drama,* Joseph Wood Krutch needed only to append a brief chapter on American drama, asking how modern it was, even while he was expressing moral outrage over Pirandello. The Italian playwright, he argued, of all the moderns, made "the most inclusive denial of all, namely, the denial that the persistent and more or less consistent character or personality which we attribute to each individual human being and especially to ourselves, really exists at all." For Krutch, the "dissolution of the ego" that Pirandello's plays present obviated all moral systems, "since obviously no one can be good or bad, guilty or innocent, unless he exists as some sort of continuous unity."

Krutch's reaction might well be justified if one assumes the moral function of theatre, in which case consistency, plausibility, and growth are all essential elements of the continuous self. But a play, as Megan Terry and others have shown, might also be designed to play with the epistemological question of how the self takes form, without identifying a self that is morally accountable, psychologically consistent, or socially defined.

Transformational drama acknowledges the multiple and shifting selves that at any moment or collection of moments constitute a developing self, placing that composite in a context that is itself shifting. The consequence is a drama of perception analogous to a Picasso painting of a woman's profile seen in the same canvas as the woman's frontal view. Neither has priority, neither negates the other, both suggest the complexity of the dynamic process that we can only tentatively call the self. Moreover transformational drama acknowledges the extent to which the modern self is shaped by popular culture —advertising, movies, fictional heroes, romanticized history, TV commercials—the stereotypes provided by the media that steal into ordinary lives and shape expectations. In its involvement with media propaganda as the living artifacts of our culture, transformational drama becomes a kind of found art, a collage of the objects that incipiently form, reform, and transform models of self. And, finally, though transformational drama of necessity negates Krutch's concept of an identifiable and continuous self, it curiously affirms the relationships between self and others that

Krutch's more traditional analysis of character would also assert. As Feldman points out in his "Notes for the Open Theatre Production," rehearsals for *Keep Tightly Closed* began with improvisations dealing with "dependency, enclosure and isolation." And as Bonnie Marranca notes in her study of *American Playwrights, Keep Tightly Closed* explores "confinement, dependency, domination-submission, ritual, friendship deprivation, and loneliness." Terry's approach to these relationships is, of course different from Ibsen's, but, like realistic drama, it affirms the invariables of human experience. Unlike the dominant paradigm, however, transformational drama accommodates and affirms the variables as well.

Any of Terry's transformation plays might serve to illustrate the Open's contribution to redefining dramatic character, though her technique is not always the same. In *Comings and Goings*, randomly selected actors replace other actors, often in mid-sentence, and are themselves replaced, continually subverting the identification of actor and character or of audience and character. In *Calm Down Mother*, three actresses assume changing roles, becoming first one character and then another. In *Viet Rock*, the technique, as Richard Schechner describes it, is variously employed: "In the opening scene the actors become, in rapid sequence, a human, primordial flower, mothers and infants, army doctors and inductees, inductees and mothers. In the Senat Hearing scene actors replace other actors within the framework of a single scene."

In *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, not only do the three inmates change into other characters as the play progresses, but the situation being dramatized changes as well. Schechner sees Terry's techniques in *Keep Tightly Closed* as accomplishing three functions: "They explode a routine situation into a set of exciting theatrical images; they reinforce, expand, and explore the varieties of relationships among the three men; they make concrete the fantasies of the prisoners." It is this play, mounted at the Open Theatre in 1965 in a double bill with *Calm Down Mother*, that I find most diverse, most fascinating, and most representative of the potential and the impact that Terry's work with transformational drama has had on the American theatre. I would like to look at the transformations in that play more closely and then offer some comments on Terry's contribution to off-Broadway's redefinition of the definition of self. . . .

Source: June Schlueter, "*Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place:* Megan Terry's Transformational Drama and the Possibilities of Self," in *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present,* Vol. 2, 1987, pp. 59-69.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Keyssar explores Terry's impact on feminist theater, and discusses the transference of motif from one scene to the next in Calm Down Mother.

Since the early sixties Megan Terry has been a sustaining force in feminist drama, nurturing other American women playwrights and continually extending the reaches of her own plays. Captivated by theatre from the age of fourteen, Terry, now in her early fifties, has written more than fifty dramas most of which have been both produced an published. Reviewers whose attention is fixed on New York commercial successes tend to ignore Terry's work, but she has received public recognition and support over the last twenty years from numerous foundations and government offices. As playwright in residence of the Omaha Magic Theatre since 1970, she has, with the Magic Theatre's artistic director and founder Jo Ann Schmidman, been able to sustain one of America's most innovative theatres for more than fourteen years.

Terry's own definitions of feminist drama are deliberately broad: 'anything that gives women confidence, shows themselves to themselves, helps them to begin to analyze whether it's a positive or negative image, it's nourishing'. Her plays, however, consistently reveal a precise criticism of stereotyped gender roles, an affirmation of women's strength, and a challenge to women to better use their own power. In Terry's plays we witness a sustained yet never repetitive development of transformation as the central convention of feminist drama. 'Transformation', she asserts, 'reveals to us an efficient universe. Nothing is lost—it's just transformed.'

Born in Seattle, Washington, on 22 July 1932, Terry 'hung around' a community theatre until its director, Florence Bean James, took her in and she began to work on set construction and design. For Terry, the concept of transformation and its development as a key technique of her dramaturgy began with this early training in design and collage; she still thinks of what she does as a kind of architectural process in which she 'builds' plays.

Despite her father's refusal to pay for her education because she would not join a sorority, she took a BA in education at the University of Washington. Her studies included creative dramatics, taught by her cousin Geraldine Siks. Growing up, she had loved cartoon characters and impersonators; working with young children who naturally used role transformation in their daily play led her to think that adult plays could be written that used the same process.

Terry left Seattle in 1956 when a double bill of one of her first plays and a play by Eugene O'Neill was lambasted by local critics. She promised her father on her departure that if she had not made it in the theatre by the time she was thirty-five, she would give up and become a teacher. For the next ten years, she endured the struggles of a young, unknown playwright in New York, a life enriched and complicated in the early sixties by her association with Joseph Chaikin, Peter Feldman, Maria Irene Fornes, Barbara Vann, and more than a dozen other young actors, writers and director

who were rejecting the stylistically and commercially 'closed' theatre of Broadway to create what they soon called the Open Theatre. Many of the original Open Theatre company members had been trained by Nola Chilton, whose teaching emphasised the freeing of the individual actor's body and voice through exercises that focused on imagined objects and sensations. Even more important to the development of Megan Terry's work, however, was the structure given to daily workshops by transformation exercises originally created by a Chicago artist and teacher, Viola Spolin. Spolin's theatre games meshed perfectly with Terry's vision of a theatre in which actors create and altered the world in front of the audience, relying on their own resources of body, voice and imagination.

The first few years, from 1963 until 1966, the Open Theatre was a set of workshops, led by different members of the company, including Terry. By the spring of 1964, Terry had drafted a new one-act play, *Calm Down Mother,* inspired by her Open Theatre Workshops. That summer, on a month's Rockefeller Foundation Grant at the Office for Advanced Drama Research in Minneapolis, she revised this as well as an earlier, full-length drama, *Hothouse,* and another one-act play, *Ex-Miss Copper Queen on a Set of Pills,* written when she first arrived in New York. In that one moment of Minneapolis heat, she also wrote another one-act play, *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place.* The three one-act plays became part of the Open Theatre's repertory and were first performed by the company in 1965 at the Sheridan Square Playhouse which the company rented for public performances. . . .

Source: Helene Keyssar, "Megan Terry: Mother of American Feminist Drama," in *Feminist Theatre,* Macmillan Press, 1984, pp. 53-76.

Topics for Further Study

Contraception is a topic that is discussed in the last section of Terry's play *Calm Down Mother*. Research the history of contraception, explaining the various types of devices used over time as well as the general acceptance of these items. Remark on the reactions to these developments as viewed by women, men, religious organizations, government, and various ethnic groups.

Create a scene between two obviously disparate characters from Terry's play, such as Sak, the naive sister in the last part of the play, and the young prostitute Inez. Focus on a particular issue such as religion or sexuality, then write a dialogue that might ensue between the two characters. Find a partner and act out the scene in front of the class.

Write a paper about Margaret Fuller. What was her role in the feminist movement? Find reviews of her books. Research the political climate of her times. Are her beliefs still relevant today?

Read Terry's play *Keep Tightly Closed*, which was often staged in a double billing with *Calm Down Mother*. Find three women and three men to take on the roles of these plays, only transpose Terry's original concepts. Have the men read the lines of *Calm Down Mother* and the women read *Keep Tightly Closed*. Then direct a discussion at the end of the readings. Were there any significant contradictions in switching gender roles? What were the issues in either of the plays that could not be transposed?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Experimental theater is born in the United States, influencing the mass culture with its productions that shock middle-class Americans who are concerned about the war in Vietnam, civil rights, and the feminist movement.

Today: Experimental theater remains alive and thriving all over the United States and has broadened its scope to include international themes of multiculturalism and gay rights.

1960s: Large and loud demonstrations against the war in Vietnam gain the attention of the media and U.S. politicians as thousands of young men are drafted into the military services.

Today: Demonstrations and protests opposing the U.S. and British war in Iraq are held around the world.

1960s: A so-called second wave of feminism sweeps the country as women march in the streets. They have the right to vote, but now they are demanding the right to work outside the home and to choose whether or not they want to sustain pregnancies.

Today: The third wave of feminism is gaining momentum as young women grow dissatisfied with their role in society. They have gained access to education and jobs, but now they want equal pay and advancement in relation to their male counterparts.

1960s: Broadway entices people with a burst of successful musicals: *Hello Dolly* (1964), *Funny Girl* (1964), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), *Man of LaMancha* (1965), *Mame* (1966), and *Cabaret* (1966). With the introduction of rock music, however, these types of musicals are quickly classified as old-fashioned and are replaced with rock and roll ventures such as *Hair* (1968) and *Oh, Calcutta*! (1969).

Today: At the turn of the century, Broadway is heavily influenced by what are referred to as corporate musicals, hugely profitable productions such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1994) and *The Lion King* (1997), but the trend is changing as Broadway experiences a revival of the standard musical with the productions of *Urinetown* (2001) and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002).

1960s: U.S. Food and Drug Administration approves the sale of oral pills for contraception. By the late 1960s, it is estimated that 13 million women around the world use the pill. Pope Paul IV reissues a statement reinforcing the Catholic Church's position against practicing birth control.

Today: U.S. Food and Drug Administration approves the sale of a pill that causes an abortion. Planned Parenthood facilities are threatened with protests and bombings; and President George W. Bush reimposes a "global gag rule" which restricts funding of

international family planning programs. It is estimated that 96 percent of Catholic women in the U.S. practice birth control.

What Do I Read Next?

Megan Terry's hit play *Viet Rock* (1966) came about after an exploration of emotions about the Vietnam War that Terry conducted with some of the participants in an improvisational workshop she created. It is considered the first rock musical produced in the United States and the first play on the topic of the bloodshed in Vietnam.

Playwright Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988) relates the story of Heidi Holland from her childhood in the 1960s through the 1980s, illustrating the influence of feminism on her life and the lives of her friends. Both men and women congregate in consciousness-raising sessions to discuss what women need to do to truly be empowered in the future.

Actress Lily Tomlin starred in the one-woman play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1985) written by Jane Wagner. The play examines the relationships between many different women. One of the more powerful scenes has Tomlin's character reflecting on an old journal she finds, one that she wrote during the 1970s when she was involved in the women's movement.

Jane Martin's *Keely and Du* (1993) involves the issue of abortion. Keely is pregnant and must confront a segment of the religious right that tries to keep her from getting the abortion. In the process, she is befriended by Du, who supports her decision despite her own philosophical reasoning.

The relationships between mothers and daughters are examined in Charlotte Keatley's play *My Mother Said I Never Should* (1988). Four different generations are represented in this four-woman play, which explores four historical definitions of family. During several breaks in the normal time frames, the four women are transformed into children. It is in these scenes that they are able to break through the barriers that separate them and find the common ground that binds them.

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) investigates the sisterhood that many women share. The play revolves around two housewives, who discuss the case of a woman who has been accused of murdering her husband.

Women are unable to solve their problems in Pam Gems's play *Dusa, Fish, Stas, and Vi* (1972), and one of the four characters ends up committing suicide. The four women are overwhelmed by the effects of divorce, anorexia, the loss of children, and other debilitating challenges that they must face.

Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls* (1982) contrasts the lives of professional women who have found success in business with those who have not.

Further Study

Aronson, Arnold, *American Avant Garde Theatre,* Routledge, 2000.

Aronson, who teaches theater at Columbia University, explores some of the more popular and more successful avant-garde theaters (such as Living Theatre, The Wooster Group, and Open Theatre) in an attempt to discover why, at the turn of the century, these theaters have declined.

Heywood, Leslie, and Jennifer Drake, eds., *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism,* University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Heywood and Drake have collected essays written by women born between 1964 and 1973 who discuss feminism and what it means to them.

Kershaw, Baz, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention,* Routledge, 1992.

Kershaw presents a detailed analysis of radical theater and its effect on political and cultural practices.

Roose Evans, James, *Experimental Theatre: From Stani-slavsky to Peter Brook,* Routledge, 1997.

Roose Evans, one of Britain's most innovative directors, explores the history of avant-garde theater in search of its influence on social and political history.

Thompson, Denise, *Radical Feminism Today,* Sage, 2001.

Thompson reexamines feminism by looking at the definitions that feminism has previously offered women and questioning the limitations that they have imposed.

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Betsko, Kathleen, and Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights,* Beech Tree Books, 1987.

Keyssar, Helene, *Feminist Theatre,* Macmillan Publishers, 1984.

Londre, Felicia Hardison, "Megan Terry," in *Speaking on Stage,* University of Alabama Press, 1996.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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