Crimes of the Heart Study Guide

Crimes of the Heart by Beth Henley

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Introduction

Beth Henley completed *Crimes of the Heart,* her tragic comedy about three sisters surviving crisis after crisis in a small Mississippi town, in 1978. She submitted it to several regional theatres for consideration without success. Unknown to her, however, a friend had entered it in the well-known Great American Play Contest of the Actors' Theatre of Louisville. The play was chosen as co-winner for 1977-78 and performed in February, 1979, at the company's annual festival of New American Plays. The production was extremely well-received, and the play was picked up by numerous regional theatres for their 1979-81 seasons.

At the end of 1980, *Crimes of the Heart* was produced off-Broadway at the Manhattan Theatre Club for a limited, sold-out, engagement of thirty-two performances. By the time the play transferred to Broadway in November, 1981, *Crimes of the Heart* had received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. Henley was the first woman to win the Pulitzer for Drama in twenty-three years, and her play was the first ever to win before opening on Broadway. *Crimes of the Heart* went on to garner the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best New American Play, a Gugenheim Award, and a Tony nomination. The tremendously successful Broadway production ran for 535 performances, spawning regional productions in London, Chicago, Washington, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Dallas, and Houston. The success of the play and especially the prestige of the Pulitzer award assured Henley's place among the elite of the American theatre for years to come. As Henley herself put it, with typically wry humor, "winning the Pulitzer Prize means I'll never have to work in a dog-food factory again" (Haller 44).

Often compared to the work of other "Southern Gothic" writers like Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, Henley's play is widely appreciated for its compassionate look at good country people whose lives have gone wrong. Henley explores the pain of life by piling up tragedies on her characters in a manner some critics have found excessive, but she does so with a dark and penetrating sense of humor which audiences as the play's success has demonstrated found to be a fresh perspective in the American theatre.

Author Biography

Beth Henley was born May 8, 1952, in Jackson, Mississippi, the daughter of an attorney and a community theatre actress. Her southern heritage has played a large role in the setting and themes of her writing, as well as the critical response she has received she is often categorized as a writer of the "Southern Gothic" tradition. As an undergraduate at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, Texas, Henley studied acting and this training has remained important to her since her transition to playwriting. Directors and fellow playwrights have observed that Henley "approaches a play from the point of view of theater, not literature" and that "as an actress, she then knows how to make her works stageworthy" (Haller).

She wrote her first play, a one-act titled *Am I Blue*, to fulfill a play writing class assignment. When it was produced at SMU her senior year, she modestly used the pseudonym Amy Peach. The play has an adolescent perspective two insecure and lonely teenagers meet in a squalid section of New Orleans but audiences and critics (who reviewed the play when it was revived in 1981) found in it many of the themes, and much of the promise, of Henley's later work. Henley undertook graduate study at the University of Illinois, where she taught acting and voice technique. By this time, however, she was growing more interested in writing, primarily out of a frustration at the lack of good contemporary roles for southern women.

Henley completed *Crimes of the Heart* in 1978 and submitted it for production consideration, without success, to several regional theatres. The play was eventually produced in the Actors' Theatre of Louisville's 1979 Festival of New Plays. The successful production in this prestigious festival led to several regional productions, an off-Broadway production at the Manhattan Theatre Club, and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, unprecedented for a play which had not yet opened on Broadway. When it did, in November, 1981, the play was a smash success, playing for 535 performances and spawning many other successful regional productions. When *Crimes of the Heart* was made into a film in 1986 it received mixed reviews, but Henley did receive an Academy Award nomination for her screenplay adaptation.

With the prestige of the Pulitzer Prize and all the acclaim afforded *Crimes of the Heart* her first full-length play Henley was catapulted to success in the contemporary American theatre. The attention paid to her also, however, put extreme pressure on her to succeed at that level. As Henley said of the Pulitzer: "Later on they make you pay for it" (Betsko and Koenig 215). Many critics have been hard on Henley's later plays, finding none of them equal to the creativity of *Crimes of the Heart.* Her second full-length play, The Miss Firecracker Contest was, however, predominantly well-received. Similarly a dark comedy about a small Mississippi town, the play was completed in 1980, and premiered in several regional productions in 1981-82 before opening at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1984. It played off-Broadway for a total of 244 performances, moving to larger quarters in the process. *The Miss Firecracker Contest* was adapted into a film in 1988, starring Holly Hunter.

In October, 1982, *The Wake of Jamey* Foster, Henley's third full-length play, closed on Broadway after only twelve performances. Henley felt that this commercial flop (not uncommon under the severe financial pressures of Broadway production) was "part of the cost of winning" the Pulitzer Prize (Betsko and Koenig 215). Her next play, *The Debutante Ball,* was better received, and throughout the last decade Henley has remained a productive and successful writer for Broadway, the regional theatres, and film. Her major projects include the plays *The Lucky Spot, Abundance*, and *Control Freaks.* She also wrote the screenplay for Nobody's Fool (as well as screen adaptations of her own plays) and collaborated with Budge Threlkeld on the Public Broadcasting System's *Survival Guides* and with David Byrne and Stephen Tobolowsky on the screenplay for Byrne's 1986 film *True Stones.*

Plot Summary

Act I

The action opens on Lenny McGralh trying to stick a birthday candle into a cookie. Her cousin, Chick, arrives, upset about news in the paper (the content of which is not yet revealed to the audience). She wonders how she's "gonna continue holding my head up high in this community." She and Lenny discuss going to pick up Lenny's sister Babe. Chick expresses displeasure with other facets of the MaGraths' family, as she gives Lenny a birthday present a box of candy. Doc Porter, an old boyfriend of the other McGrath sister, Meg, arrives, and Chick leaves to pick up Babe. Lenny is upset at Doc's news that Billy Boy, an old childhood horse of Lenny's, was struck by lightning and killed. Doc leaves to pick up his son at the dentist.

Lenny receives a phone call with news about "Zackery" (who we learn later is Babe's husband), who is hospitalized with serious injuries, Meg arrives, and as she and Lenny talk, it is revealed that Babe has shot her husband and is being held in jail. There is an awkwardness between the two sisters as they discuss their grandfather; Lenny has been caring for him (sleeping on a cot in the kitchen to be near his room), and he has recently been hospitalized after a stroke. Lenny learns that Meg's singing career, the reason she had moved to California, is not going well as is evidenced by her return to Hazelhurst.

Chick returns to the house, accompanying Babe. Chick shows obvious displeasure for Meg, and for Babe, who "doesn't understand how serious the situation is." Lenny and Chick run out after a phone call from a neighbor having an emergency. Meg and Babe, left alone together, discuss why it was that their mother committed suicide, hanging herself along with the family cat. Babe also begins revealing to her sister more about shooting her husband. The sisters also discuss Lenny, whose self-consciousness over her shrunken ovary, (hey feel, has prevented her from pursuing relationships with men, in particular a Charlie from Memphis who Lenny dated briefly. Noticing the box of candy, Meg and Babe realize they've forgotten Lenny's birthday. They plan to order her a cake, as Babe's lawyer Barnette arrives at the house. Babe hides from him at first, as Meg and Barnette, who remembers her singing days in Biloxi, become reacquainted.

Barnette reveals that he's taken Babe's case partly because he has a personal vendetta against Zackery, Babe's husband. Barnette also reveals that medical records suggest Zackery had abused Meg leading up to the shooting. Barnette leaves and Babe reappears, confronted by Meg with the medical information. Babe admits she's protecting someone: Willie Jay, a fifteen year-old African American boy with whom Babe had been having an affair. The shooting, Babe says, was a result of her anger after Zackery threatened Willie Jay and pushed him down the porch steps. As the act ends, Babe agrees to cooperate with Barnette for the benefit of her case, and the two sisters plan a belated birthday celebration for Lenny,

Act II

Evening of the same day. Barnette is interviewing Babe about the case. Babe says after the shooting her mouth was "just as dry as a bone" so she went to the kitchen and made a pitcher of lemonade. She is afraid that this detail is "gonna look kinda bad." Zackery calls, threatening that he has evidence damaging to Babe. Barnette leaves to meet him at the hospital, after answering Babe's question about the nature of his personal vendetta against Zack: "the major thing he did was to ruin my father's life."

Lenny enters, fuming; Meg, apparently, lied "shamelessly" to their grandfather about her career in show business. Old jealousies resurface; Lenny asks Babe about Meg: "why should Old Grandmama let her sew twelve golden jingle bells on her petticoats and us only three?" Babe and Lenny discuss the hurricane which wiped out Biloxi, when Doc's leg was severely injured after his roof caved in. Many people have the perception, apparently, that Meg, refusing to evacuate, "baited Doc into staying there with her."

Meg enters, with a bottle of bourbon from which she has already been drinking. An apology for her lying to grandpa is quickly forthcoming, but she says "I just wasn't going to sit there and look at him all miserable and sick and sad!" The diree sisters look through an old photo album. Enjoying one another's company at last, they decide to play cards, when Doc phones and is invited over by Meg, Lenny begins criticizing Meg, who counters by asking Lenny about Charlie; Lenny gets angry at Babe for having revealed this secret to Meg. Meg continues to push the point, and Lenny runs upstairs, sobbing. Babe follows, to comfort her.

At this less than opportune moment, Doc arrives. He and Meg drink together, and talk about the hurricane and hard times. Meg reveals to Doc that she "went insane" in L.A. and ended up in the psychiatric ward of the country hospital. The two decide to go off together and continue to drink; there is an obvious attraction, but Doc is careful to say they're "just gonna look at the moon" and not get In over their heads. There is a knock at the back door, and Babe comes downstairs to admit Barnette. He has bad news for Babe: Zackery's sister, suspicious of Babe, had hired a detective, who produced compromising photographs of Babe with Willie Jay. Babe is devastated, and as a final blow to close the act, Lenny comes downstairs to report that the hospital has called with news that their grandfather has suffered another stroke.

Act III

The following morning. Babe enters and lies down on Lenny's cot. Lenny enters, also weary. Chick's voice is heard almost immediately; her questions reveal that grandpa is in a coma and will likely not live. Chick and Lenny divide between them a list of people they must "notify about Old Granddaddy's predicament." Chick goes off with obvious displeasure with the sisters. Lenny and Babe ruminate about when Meg might be coming home.

Meg actually returns a moment later, exuberant. Exhausted by their traumatic night, Lenny and Babe break down in hysterical laughter telling Meg the news about their grandfather. As the three sisters talk, Meg and Babe convince Lenny to call her man Charlie and restart their relationship. With her confidence up, Lenny goes upstairs to make the call. Babe shows Meg the envelope of incriminating photographs.

Barnette arrives; he states that he's been able to dig up enough scandal about Zackery to force him to settle the case out of court. In order to keep the photos of Babe and Willie Jay secret, however, he will not be able to expose Zackery openly, which had been his original hope and intention. Willie Jay, meanwhile, will be sent North to live in safety. Barnette leaves; so does Meg, to pick up Lenny's late birthday cake.

Lenny comes downstairs, frustrated at having been too self-conscious to call Charlie. Chick arrives a moment later, calling Meg a "low-class tramp" for going off with Doc. Lenny confronts Chick and tells her to leave; she does, but continues to curses the family as Lenny chases her out the door. Zackery calls, informing Babe he's going to have her committed to a mental institution. She defies him to do so and hangs up the phone, but she is clearly disturbed by the threat. Lenny re-enters, elated at her triumph over Chick, and decides to make another try at calling Charlie. Babe takes rope from a drawer and goes upstairs.

Lenny makes the call; it goes well, and she makes a date with him for that evening. Wanting to tell someone, she runs out back to find Babe. There is a thud from upstairs; Babe comes down with a broken piece of rope around her neck. She makes another attempt to commit suicide, on-stage, by sticking her head in the oven. Meg finds her there and pulls her out. Babe, feeling enlightened, says she knows why their mother killed the cat along with herself; not because she hated it but because she loved it and "was afraid of dying all alone." Meg comforts Babe by convincing her Zackery won't be able to make good on his threat. Lenny returns and is surprised by her sisters with a late birthday celebration. Despite the many troubles hanging over them, the play ends with the MaGrath sisters smiling and laughing together for a moment, in "a magical, golden, sparkling glimmer."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The play opens in the kitchen of the Magrath family home in Hazelhurst, Mississippi. It is an unusually large and cluttered kitchen. Lenny Magrath, the oldest of the three Magrath sisters, enters with a suitcase, a saxophone case and a brown paper bag from which she pulls a package of birthday candles. She tries repeatedly and unsuccessfully to stick a candle into a cookie. Finally she gets one to stand up, but as soon as it's lit, she quickly blows out the flame at the sound of her cousin Chick's voice.

Chick is aflutter with disgraceful news about Babe, the youngest Magrath sister, who is being held at the police station for shooting her husband, Zackery. The incident is even more sensational than normal because Zackery is a state senator. Chick has been waiting on Lenny to return from the store with some new panty hose, which she now struggles to put on. Her father is putting up Babe's bail, and Chick feels the need to be presentable before she picks Babe up from jail.

Lenny has sent a telegram to their other sister, Meg, who lives in Hollywood, to tell her to come home, because Babe's in trouble. Meg had a questionable reputation in high school, and Chick doesn't think that her reappearance right now will be good for Babe's situation. Before Chick leaves, almost as an afterthought, she presents Lenny with a box of chocolates for her birthday and mentions that the dress that Lenny bought for her daughter's birthday fell apart at the first washing. She doesn't want Lenny to replace it, she says. She's just alerting Lenny not to spend her hard-earned money on that brand anymore.

As Chick exits, Doc Porter comes into the kitchen, exchanges pleasantries with Lenny and gives her a bag of pecans that his wife and son picked up from their yard. He also breaks the news that her horse, which had been boarded at his farm, was struck by lightning and died yesterday. There is a tension in the air between them. When she cries, he tries to console her, but it's clear to him that she's crying over more than a horse. He makes his excuses and leaves.

Now that she's alone again, Lenny lights a birthday candle, sings *Happy Birthday* softly to herself, makes a wish and blows out the flame. She repeats the candle lighting and this time makes a different wish. She starts to do it a third time, when the phone interrupts her. It is Zackery's sister, with the news that Zackery is stable. Lenny promises to pass the information along to Babe.

Meg surprises Lenny by bursting into the room unannounced. She can't believe what she has heard about Babe shooting Zackery. What makes the story even more outrageous is that Babe says that she shot Zackery, because she couldn't stand his looks. Meg is used to drama, now that she lives in Hollywood, but this is too much for sleepy little Hazelhurst, Mississippi.

Lenny catches Meg up on other news, including the fact that their grandfather is still in the hospital. They agree to visit him this evening. They discuss what attorney should represent their sister. Zackery is the best one in town, but he is hardly in a position to defend Babe, given that she's the one who shot him. It's determined that the new young attorney in town, Barnette Lloyd, is the only other choice.

Babe finally arrives and is thrilled to see that Meg has come home. The sisters' discussion shifts from Babe's attorney to the stigma they still suffer due to their mother's suicide years ago.

Barnette arrives, but Babe refuses to see him. It falls to Meg to verify his credentials. The bottom line is that Barnette has a personal vendetta against Zackery, and that will sustain his vision to get Babe freed. He has already obtained her medical and hospital records. These show many injuries that were probably not accidental. It's clear that Barnette also has a fondness for Babe.

When he leaves, Babe tells Meg what really happened to precipitate the shooting. She had been having an affair with a 15-year-old black boy named Willie Jay, and Zackery came home early that day and found them talking on the back porch. He threatened the boy, and Babe shot him. At first, she pointed the gun at her own head. Then she thought of her mother took aim at Zackery instead.

Act 1 Analysis

The trio of Magrath sisters is a complete banquet of Southern eccentricities. Lenny is a 30-year-old spinster who takes care of their grandfather in the house where they all grew up. Her longing for a fuller life comes into view immediately in the wistful scene with the birthday candles in the cookie, as well as in her prolonged looks at Doc Porter. She is clearly the caretaker in the family and soaks up everyone else's dysfunction. Free-spirited Meg travels light, doesn't pay her phone bill or open any letters from home. There are hints she was a wild girl, and she probably left home as soon as she could to pursue a career in the performing arts. However, her reality is a bookkeeping job that's killing her, one day at a time. The youngest sister, Babe, has created a small town frenzy with the attempted murder of her husband. Her lack of concern for her actions, or even her defense, brings her sanity into question. This will probably be used as her defense at trial.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Babe and Barnette are discussing her case as Babe nonchalantly eats a bowl of oatmeal. She recounts the events of the shooting and says that afterward, she made a pitcher of lemonade and drank three glasses before asking her wounded husband if he needed anything. Finally, she called the hospital, but she was hesitant, because the authorities might think that she shot him. Barnette tries to follow her logic and steers her back to the subject of her medical files. They receive a phone call from Zackery, who tells Barnette to come to the hospital right away He has something to show Barnette, he says, that will have some bearing on his client's case.

Lenny enters the kitchen in a huff. Apparently, Meg has been telling lies to their grandfather about her so-called glamorous Hollywood career. Meg has infuriated Lenny with her high drama and special treatment since childhood. Babe reminds her that Meg is the one who found their mother after she hung herself, and they should be tender with her feelings.

Lenny is tired of indulging her sister, though, She claims it is Meg's fault that Doc Porter walks with a limp today. He and Meg were together in Biloxi when a hurricane came. Meg promised to marry Porter if he would stay and ride out the hurricane with her. How was she supposed to know that the roof would fall in and crush his leg?

Lenny reaches her limit, though, when she finds that Meg has taken a bite out of each piece of the chocolate that Chick gave her for her birthday. Meg just takes whatever she wants, whether it's men or candy! Finally, Meg returns home with a bottle of bourbon and a newspaper, so that Babe can save the article about her shooting Zackery. The girls have decided to have an evening of playing cards and eating popcorn when the phone rings. This time, it's Doc. He's coming over to see Meg. Lenny is clearly unsettled by this and reminds Meg that Doc is now a married man with two kids.

Meg and Doc catch up on each other's life. It is clear that their attraction is still mutual. When he invites her to take a ride and look at the moon, she grabs the bottle of bourbon, and they leave.

Barnette's knock brings Babe back downstairs into the kitchen. He is visibly upset and produces an envelope of photos that show her and Willie Jay in a compromising situation in the garage. Apparently, Zackery's sister had been suspicious of Babe and had her followed by a private investigator to gather any incriminating information about her. Babe's only thought is to protect Willie Jay from any controversy. While Barnette tries to console her, Lenny comes downstairs to tell Babe that the hospital called. Their grandfather has had another stroke.

Act 2 Analysis

Babe's tenuous grasp of reality becomes more evident as she recounts her story to Barnette. She quite calmly made lemonade while her husband lay bleeding on the floor, and she hesitated to call the authorities, because they might think she had done it. Barnette must be wondering if an insanity plea might be more prudent than a repeated abuse defense.

The long suffering Lenny is outraged by Meg's irresponsible behavior. It seems that, although the other two feel sorry for her sheltered life, Lenny is the most sane of all of them. They all seem to be able to go into a denial mode about the seriousness of Babe's situation when they decide to play cards and stay up all night like they used to do. Perhaps their mother's suicide forced them to adopt survival skills to shield them from any unpleasantness. What may seem like a huge departure from reality for most people has become second nature for these wounded girls.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

Lenny and Babe arrive home, having spent the whole night at the hospital. Their grandfather is in a coma, and his condition is grave. Lenny feels guilty. One of her birthday wishes yesterday was that the old man be put out of his pain, and now that has come true. Babe tells her that wishes don't count unless the candles were on a real birthday cake.

Meg comes home in a wonderful mood, having passed the night with Doc Porter. Although nothing inappropriate happened, and he never even hinted at leaving his wife, she is extremely happy. She realizes that she is still capable of caring for someone and wanting someone. Her sisters tell her about their grandfather's condition, and all three women alternate between laughter and tears.

Reality does quiet them, eventually, and Lenny wonders out loud what she will do when the old man dies. Meg tells her to start living, have parties and meet some new men. They convince her to call Charlie, a man from Memphis that she met through the Southern Lonely Hearts Club. She agrees and heads upstairs to phone in private. Babe takes the opportunity to show Meg the photos that Zackery is planning to use against her in court.

Barnette comes back this morning to retrieve the pictures and tells Babe that he has a new strategy for her defense. He has information pointing to Zackery's participation in graft, fraud, forgery and other unethical behavior. The scandal will force him to settle on Babe's terms. This pleases her, but she's sad for Barnette, because he won't have his personal vendetta against Zackery aired in court. Barnette doesn't mind, though, as long as it happens. He is particularly pleased that Babe won't be dragged through any public indignities related to the pictures. Barnette then takes Meg to the bakery to pick up Lenny's belated birthday cake.

Chick has come back, delighted to share the news that she saw Meg crawling out of Doc Porter's truck a short while ago. She is tired of the disgrace that her cousins bring down on the family, she says, with their history of hanging themselves in cellars, running around wild with all kinds of men and even shooting their own husbands. She's only too glad to tell them that the whole town knows Babe is not going to an insane asylum. They think she'll be sent to prison for manslaughter with intent to kill.

Lenny chases the obnoxious woman outside with a broom, while Babe answers the phone. It's Zackery. From her responses, it's evident that he's threatening to have her committed. She declares that she is not crazy, flies into a panic, finds a length of rope and heads upstairs. A loud thud is heard from upstairs and the phone rings insistently. Finally, Babe comes back downstairs with the rope around her neck, bemoaning the quality of rope available in that house. Then she gets another idea and turns on the gas

oven. She sticks her head in, but this time Meg, just back from the bakery, thwarts her efforts to do herself in. Meg convinces Babe that she's not crazy and that Zackery is just trying to intimidate her. Besides, there is so much to live for, Meg says, like watching Lenny make a wish on her birthday candles.

Lenny is overjoyed at the sight of the cake and the glowing candles that her two sisters have set before her. When they prompt her to reveal her wish, she finally tells them that all she wants is a moment like this, with all of them happy and laughing. They forget their troubles in the birthday cake, as the stage goes dark.

Act 3 Analysis

Most crimes of the heart begin somewhere in childhood and are evident throughout a person's life. These girls were all wounded at a very young age by their mother's suicide. Their coping mechanisms are still in place. Lenny avoids all intimacy, Meg grabs too much and Babe reaches out inappropriately. They live on the fringe of emotional stability and find security in their own little network. Each sister knows where the others' wounds are, and all are protective of each other. What happens to one of them happens to all of them, and their rallying support is their protective shield from insanity and death.

Characters

Babe

Babe is the youngest MaGrath sister. At the start of the play, she has shot her husband, Zackery, a powerful and wealthy lawyer. At first, the only explanation she gives for the act is the defiant statement: "I didn't like his looks! I just didn't like his stinking looks!" Eventually, she reveals that the shooting was the result of her anger at Zackery's cruel treatment both of her and of Willie Jay, a fifteen year-old African American boy with whom Babe had been carrying on an affair.

Babe makes two attempts to kill herself late in the play. After being rescued by Meg, Babe appears enlightened and at peace with her mother's suicide. Babe says she understands why their mother hanged the family cat along with herself; not because she hated it but because she loved it and "was afraid of dying all alone."

Becky

See Babe

Rebecca Botrelle

See Babe

Chick Boyle

The sisters' first cousin, who is twenty-nine years old. She is a very demanding relative, extremely concerned about the community's opinion of her. When news is published of Babe's shooting of Zackery, Chick's primary concern is how she's "gonna continue holding my head up high in this community." Chick is critical of all aspects of the MaGrath's family and is always bringing up past tragedies such as the mother's suicide. Chick is especially hard on Meg, whom she finds undisciplined and calls a "low-class tramp," and on Babe, who "doesn't understand how serious the situation is" after shooting Zackery. Chick seems to feel closest to Lenny, and is genuinely surprised to be ushered out of the house for her comments about Lenny's sisters.

Barnette Lloyd

Barnette is Babe's lawyer. An ambitious, talented attorney, Barnette views Babe's case as a chance to exact his personal revenge on Zackery. "The major thing he did," Barnette says, "was to ruin my father's life." Barnette also seems to have a strong attraction to Babe, whom he remembers distinctly from a chance meeting at a

Christmas bazaar. Barnette is prevented from taking on Zackery in open court by the desire to protect Babe's affair with Willie Jay from public exposure. He is willing to make this sacrifice for Babe, and the play ends with some hope that his efforts will be rewarded.

Lenny MaGrath

Lenny, at the age of thirty, is the oldest MaGrath sister. Her sisters have forgotten her birthday, only compounding her sense of rejection. Lenny is frustrated after years of carrying heavy burdens of responsibility; most recently, she has been caring for Old Granddaddy, sleeping on a cot in the kitchen to be near him. Lenny loves her sisters but is also jealous of them, especially Meg, whom she feels received preferential treatment during their upbringing. Meg has also been surrounded by men all her life, while Lenny has feared rejection from the opposite sex and become withdrawn as a result. She fears continuing the one romantic relationship, with a Charlie Hill from Memphis, which has gone well for her in recent years.

While almost continuously pushed beyond the point of frustration, Lenny nevertheless has a close bond of loyalty with her sisters. Chick is constantly criticizing the family (culminating in her calling Meg a "low-class tramp"); when Lenny is finally pushed to the point that she turns on her cousin, chasing her out of the house with a broom, this is an important turning point in the play. It demonstrates the ultimate strength of family bonds and their social value in Henley's play.

Meg MaGrath

Meg is the middle sister at twenty-seven years of age. As an eleven year-old child, Meg discovered the body of their mother (and that of the family cat) following her suicide. This traumatic experience provoked Meg to test her strength by confronting morbidity wherever she could find it, including poring over medical photographs of disease-ridden victims and staring at March of Dimes posters of crippled children. At the beginning of the play Meg returns to Mississippi from Los Angeles, where her singing career has stalled and where, she later tells Doc, she had a nervous breakdown and ended up in the psychiatric ward of the county hospital.

The other MaGrath sisters share a perception that Meg has always received preferential treatment in life. When Lenny ponders "why should Old Grandmama let her sew twelve golden jingle bells on her petticoats and us only three?" this is not a minor issue for her and Babe. The two sisters feel on some level that this special treatment has led Meg to act irresponsibly as when she abandoned Doc, for whatever reason, after he was severely injured in the hurricane. Lenny is angry with Meg for lying to Old Granddaddy in the hospital about her career, but Meg states "I just wasn't going to sit there and look at him all miserable and sick and sad!" Both Babe and Lenny are concerned when Meg disappears with Doc her first night back in Mississippi. Both sisters, however especially Lenny are also protective of Meg, especially from the attacks of their cousin Chick.

Rebecca MaGrath

See Babe

Doc Porter

Doc is Meg's old boyfriend. He is still known affectionately as "Doc" although his plans for a medical career stalled and eventually died after he was severely injured in Hurricane Camille his love for Meg (and her promise to marry him) prompted him to stay behind with her while the rest of the town evacuated the storm's path. Many people now have the perception (as Meg and Lenny discuss) that Meg "baited Doc into staying there with her." Doc, who now has his own wife and children, nevertheless remains close to the MaGrath family. Although Meg abandoned him when she left for California, Doc remains fond of her, and Meg is extremely happy to have his friendship upon her return from California.

Themes

Absurdity

Much like the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd, Henley dramatizes a vision of a disordered universe in which characters are isolated from one another and are incapable of meaningful action. With the constant frustration of their dreams and hopes, Henley's characters could easily find their lives completely meaningless and absurd (and indeed, each of the MaGrath sisters has been on the brink of giving up entirely). At the end of *Crimes of the Heart,* at least, the sisters have found a kind of unity in the face of adversity. While Lenny's vision, "something about the three of us smiling and laughing together," in no way can resolve the many conflicts that have unfolded in the course of the play, it does endow their lives with a collective sense of hope, where before each had felt acutely the absurdity, and often the hopelessness, of life.

Death

Reminders of death are everywhere in *Crimes of the Heart:* the sisters are haunted by the memory of their mother's suicide; Babe has shot and seriously wounded her husband; Lenny learns that her beloved childhood horse has been struck by lightning and killed; Old Granddaddy has a second stroke and is apparently near death; Babe attempts suicide twice near the end of the play. Perhaps even stronger than these reminders of physical death, however, are the images of emotional or spiritual death in the play. Lenny, for example, has rejected Charlie, her only suitor in recent years, because she feels worthless and fears rejection herself. Meg, meanwhile, has experienced a psychotic episode in Los Angeles and has prevented herself from loving anyone in order to avoid feeling vulnerable. Significant transitions occur near the end of the play, individual "rebirths" which preface the significant rebirth of a sense of unity among the sisters: Lenny gains the courage to call her suitor, and finds him receptive; Meg, in the course of spending a night out with Doc, is surprised to learn that she "could care about someone," and sings "all night long" out of joy; and finally, Babe has a moment of enlightenment in which she understands that their mother hanged the family cat along with herself because "she was afraid of dying all alone." This revelation allows her to put to rest finally the painful memory of the mother's suicide, and paves the way for the moment of sisterly love at the conclusion of the play.

Good and Evil

Henley challenges the audience's sense of good and evil by making them like characters who have committed crimes of passion, "I thought I'd like to write about somebody who shoots somebody else just for being mean," Henley said in *Saturday Review.* "Then I got intrigued with the idea of the audience's not finding fault with her character, finding sympathy for her." While Babe's case constitutes the primary

exploration of good and evil in the play, the conflict between Meg and her sisters is another example of Henley presenting a number of perspectives on a character's actions in order to complicate her audience's notions of good and bad behavior. Lenny and Babe find many of Meg's actions (abandoning Doc after his accident, lying to Granddaddy about her career in Hollywood) to be dishonest and selfish, but the sisters eventually learn to understand Meg's motivations and to forgive her. Through this process, Henley suggests the sheer complexity of human psychology and behavior- that often, actions cannot be easily labeled "good" or "evil" in a strict sense.

Limitations and Opportunities

Virtually all the characters, to some extent, have throughout their lives been limited in their choices, experiencing a severe lack of opportunity. Lenny, in particular, resents having had to take upon herself so much responsibility for the family (especially for Old Granddaddy). Much of Babe's difficulty in her marriage to Zackery, meanwhile, seems to have grown out the fact that she did not choose him but was pressured by her grandfather into marrying the successful lawyer. Meg, however, at least to Lenny and Babe, appears to have had endless opportunity. Lenny wonders at one point; "Why, do you remember how Meg always got to wear twelve jingle bells on her petticoats, while we were only allowed to wear three apiece? Why?!" Lenny is clearly fixating on a minor issue from childhood, but one she feels is representative of the preferential treatment Meg received. The bells are, she says to Meg later, a "specific example of how you always got what you wanted!" Meg, however, has learned a hard lesson in Hollywood about opportunity and success. Old Granddaddy has always told her: "With your talent, all you need is exposure. Then you can make your own breaks!" Contrary to this somewhat simplistic optimism, however, Meg's difficulty sustaining a singing career suggests that opportunity is actually quite rare, and not necessarily directly connected to talent or one's will to succeed.

Public vs. Private Life

When Babe reveals to Meg her affair with Willie Jay, she admits that she's "so worried about his getting public exposure." This is a necessary concern for public opinion, as Willie Jay might physically be in danger as a result of such exposure. Chick, meanwhile, has what Henley characterizes as an unhealthy concern for public perception she cares much more about what the rest of the town thinks of her than she does about any of her cousins. Immediately upon her entrance at the beginning of the play, Chick focuses not so much upon Babe's shooting of Zackery, but rather on how the event will affect her, personally: "How I'm gonna continue holding my head up high in this community, I do not know." Similarly, in criticizing Meg for abandoning Doc, Chick thinks primarily of her own public stature: "Well, his mother was going to keep me out of the Ladies' Social League because of it." Near the end of the play, Lenny becomes infuriated over Chick calling Meg "a low-class tramp," and chases her cousin out of the house. This moment of family solidarity is a significant turning point, in which Lenny clearly indicates that the

private, family unity the three sisters are able to achieve by the end of the play is far more important than the public perception of the family within the town.

Violence and Cruelty

Accompanying the exploration of good and evil in *Crimes of the Heart* are its insights into violence and cruelty. While Babe has ostensibly committed the most violent act in the play by shooting Zackery in the stomach, the audience is persuaded to side with her in the face of the violence wrought by Zackery upon both Babe (domestic violence stemming, as Babe says, from him "hating me, 'cause I couldn't laugh at his jokes"), and, in a jealous rage, on Willie Jay. There occur other, less prominent acts of cruelty in the course of the play, as well as numerous ones the audience learns about through exposition (such as Meg's abandonment of Doc following his injury). In the end, Henley encourages the audience to take a less absolute view of what constitutes cruelty, to understand some of the underlying reasons behind the actions of her characters, and to join in the sense of forgiveness and acceptance which dominates the conclusion of *Crimes of the Heart.*

Style

Set in the small southern town of Hazlehurst, Mississippi, *Crimes of the Heart* centers on three sisters who converge at the house of their grandfather after the youngest, Babe, has shot her husband following years of abuse. The other sisters have their own difficulties Meg's Hollywood singing career is a bust, and Lenny (the eldest) is frustrated and lonely after years of bearing familial responsibility (most recently, she has been sleeping on a cot in the kitchen in order to care for the sisters' ailing grandfather). Over the course of two days, the sisters endure a number of conflicts, both between themselves and with other characters. In the end, however, they manage to come together in a moment of unity and joy despite their difficulties.

Beth Henley is most often praised, especially regarding *Crimes of the Heart,* for the creative blending of different theatrical styles and moods which gives her plays a unique perspective on small-town life in the South. Her multi-faceted approach to dramatic writing is underscored by the rather eclectic group of playwrights Henley once listed for an interviewer as being her major influences: Anton Chekhov, William Shakespeare, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Beckett, David Mamet, Henrik Ibsen, Lillian Hellman, and Carson McCullers. In particular, Henley's treatment of the tragic and grotesque with humor startled audiences and critics (who were either pleasantly surprised, or unpleasantly shocked). While this macabre humor is often associated with the Southern Gothic movement in literature, Henley's dramatic technique is difficult to qualify as being strongly of one theatrical bent or another. For example, Crimes of the Heart has many of the characteristics of a naturalistic work of the "well-made play" tradition: a small cast, a single set, a three-act structure, an initial conflict which is complicated in the second act and resolved in the third. As Scott Haller observed in Saturday Review, however, Henley's purpose is not the resurrection of this tradition but the "ransacking" of it. "In effect," he wrote, "she has mated the conventions of the naturalistic play with the unconventional protagonists of absurdist comedy. It is this unlikely dramatic alliance, plus her vivid Southern vernacular, that supplies Henley's idiosyncratic voice."

The rapid accumulation of tragedies in Henley's dramatic world thus appears too absurd to be real, yet too tangibly real to be absurd, and therein lies the playwright's originality. Many critics have joined Haller in finding in Henley's work elements of the Theatre of the Absurd, which presented a vision of a disordered universe in which characters are isolated from one another and are incapable of meaningful action. There is, however, much more specificity to the plot and lives of the characters in *Crimes of the Heart* than there is, for example, in a play by absurdists like Beckett or Eugene lonesco. Nevertheless, Henley shares with these playwrights, and others of the Absurd, a need to express the dark humor inherent in the struggle to create meaning out of life.

Henley's macabre sense of humor has resulted in frequent comparisons to Southern Gothic writers such as Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. Providing a theatrical rationale for much of what appears to be impossibly eccentric behavior on the part of Henley's characters; in the *New York Times*, Walter Kerr wrote: "We do understand the

ground-rules of matter-of-fact Southern grotesquene, and we know that they're by no means altogether artificial. People do such things and, having done them, react in surprising ways." Although Henley once stated that when she began writing plays she was not familiar with O'Connor, and that she "didn't consciously " say that she "was going to be like Southern Gothic or grotesque," she has since read widely among the work of O'Connor and others, and agrees the connections are there. Of her eccentric brand of humor Henley, quoted in *Mississippi Writers Talking,* suspected that * 'I guess maybe that's just inbred in the South, You hear people tell stories, and somehow they are always more vivid and violent than the stories people tell out in Los Angeles."

While *Crimes of the Heart* does have a tightry-structured plot, with a central and several tangential conflicts, Henley's real emphasis, as Nancy Hargrove suggested in the *Southern Quarterly,* is "on character rather than on action." Jon Jory, the director of the original Louisville production, observes that what so impressed him initially about Henley's play was her "immensely sensitive and complex view of relationships-----And the comedy didn't come from one character but from between the characters. That" s very unusual for a young writer" (Haller 42). The nature of Henley's dramatic conclusion in Crimes of the Heart goes hand-in-hand with her primary focus upon characterization, and her significant break with the tradition of the "well-made play." While the plot moves to a noticeable resolution, with the sisters experiencing a moment of unity they have not thus far experienced in the play, Henley leaves all of the major conflicts primarily unresolved, Stanley Kauffmann wrote in the *Saturday Review* assessment of the Broadway production that "Crimes moves to no real resolution, but this is part of its power. It presents a condition that, in minuscule, implies much about the state of the world, as well as the state of Mississippi, and about human chaos; it says, "Resolution is not my business. Ludicrously horrifying honesty is."

Because of the distinctive balance that Henley strikes between comedy and tragedy, character and plot, conflict and resolution the playwright whose technique Henley's most resembles may be Chekhov (although her sense of humor is decidedly more macabre and expressed in more explicit ways). Henley has said of Chekhov's influence upon her that she appreciates how "he doesn't judge people as much as just shows them in the comic and tragic parts of people. Everything's done with such ease, but it hits so deep," as she stated in Mississippi Writers Talking, About a production of Chekhov's The *Cherry Orchard* which particularly moved her, Henley commented in *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* that "It was just absolutely a revelation about how alive life can be and how complicated and beautiful and horrible; to deny either of those is such a loss."

Historical Context

Vietnam

The war continued in 1974, setting off a civil war in Cambodia as well. U.S. combat troops had been removed from Vietnam in 1973, although American support of anti-Communist forces in the South of the country continued. Perhaps more important to the American social fabric, the many rifts caused by our involvement in the war in Vietnam were slow to heal. Students and others who had protested against the war remained largely disillusioned about the foreign interests of the U.S. government, and society as a whole remained traumatized by U.S. casualties and the devastation wrought by the war, which had been widely broadcast by the media; the Vietnam War was often referred to as the "living room war" due to the unprecedented level of television coverage.

Watergate

Perhaps the most significant event in American society in 1974 was the unprecedented resignation of President Richard Nixon, over accusations of his granting approval for the June 17,1972, burglary of Democratic National Committee offices at the Watergate complex in Washington, D.C. By the end of 1973, a Harris poll suggested that people believed, by a margin of 73 to 21 percent, that the president's credibility had been damaged beyond repair. Like public opinion over Vietnam, Watergate was an important symbol both of stark divisions in American society and a growing disillusionment with the integrity of our leaders. Less than two years after being re-elected in a forty-nine-state landslide and after declaring repeatedly that he would never resign under pressure, Nixon was faced with certain impeachment by Congress. Giving in to the inevitable, he resigned his office in disgrace on August 9.

World Crises: Food, Energy, Inflation

1974 was an especially trying year for the developing world, as massive famine swept through Asia, South America, and especially Africa, on the heels of drought and several major natural disasters. As they watched this tragedy unfold, citizens of industrialized nations of the West were experiencing social instability of another kind. In the fall of 1973, Arab members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) leveled an embargo on exports to the Netherlands and the U.S. The United States, with its unparalleled dependency on fuel (in 1974, the nation had six percent of the world's population but consumed thirty-three percent of the world's energy), experienced a severe economic crisis. U.S. economic output for the first quarter of 1974 dropped $10-20 billion, and 500,000 American workers lost their jobs. The U.S. government blamed the Arabs for the crisis, but American public opinion also held U.S. companies responsible for manipulating prices and supplies to corporate advantage. Related to the

energy crisis and other factors, the West experienced an inflation crisis as well; annual double-digit inflation became a reality for the first time for most industrial nations.

Civil Rights

On the twenty-year anniversary of the historic Supreme Court decision on school integration, fierce battles were still being fought on the issue, garnering national attention. The conflict centered mostly on issues of school busing, as the site of conflict largely shifted from the South to the cities of the North. In Boston, for example, police had to accompany buses transporting black children to white schools. Meanwhile, baseball player Hank Aaron's breaking of Babe Ruth's career home-run title in 1974 was a significant and uplifting achievement, but its painful post-script the numerous death threats Aaron received from racists who did not feel it was proper for a black athlete to earn such a title suggests that bigoted ideas of race in America were, sadly, slow to change.

Growing out of its roots in the 1960s, the movement to define and defend the civil rights of women also continued. 1974 marked a midpoint in the campaign to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which declared: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." The amendment was originally passed by the Senate in March, 1972, and by the end of 1974, thirty-one states had ratified it, with a total of thirty-eight needed. Support for the ERA (which eventually failed) was regionally divided: while every state in the Northeast had ratified the amendment by this time, for example, it had been already defeated in Georgia, Florida, and Louisiana. Legislative action was stalled, meanwhile, in many other southern states, including North and South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas.

In *Crimes of the Heart*, the characters seem untouched by these prominent events on the national scene. The absence of any prominent historical context to the play may reflect Henley's perspective on national politics: she has described herself as a political cynic with a "moratorium on watching the news since Reagan's been president," as she described herself in *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*. It may also be a reflection of Henley's perspective on small-town life in the South, where, she feels, people more commonly come together to talk about their own lives and tell stories rather than watch television or discuss the national events being covered in the media. *The South of Crimes of the Heart*, meanwhile, seems largely unaffected by the civil rights movement, large-scale economic development, or other factors of what has often been called an era of unprecedented change in the South.

Regarding the issue of race, for example, consider Babe's affair with Willie Jay, a fifteen-year-old African American youth: while the revelation of it would compromise any case Babe might have against her husband for domestic violence, it presents a greater threat to Willie Jay himself. Because the threat of possible retribution by Zachary or other citizens of the town, Willie Jay has no option but to leave "incognito on the midnight bus heading North." Henley has made an important observation about race

relations in Mississippi, in response to a question actually about recent trends in "colorblind" casting in the theatre. Henley stated in *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists* that "it depends on how specific you're being about the character's background as to whether that's an issue." In a play like Crimes of the Heart, "if you're writing about a specific time or place ... then obviously race is important because there is a segregated bigoted thing going on."

Critical Overview

Beth Henley did not initially have success finding a theatre willing to produce *Crimes of the Heart,* until the play's acceptance by the Actors' Theatre of Louisville. From that point onward, however, the public and critical reception was overwhelmingly positive. Few playwrights achieve such popular success, especially for their first full-length play: a Pulitzer Prize, a Broadway run of more than five hundred performances, a New York Drama Critics Award for best play, a one million dollar Hollywood contract for the screen rights. John Simon's tone is representative of many of the early reviews: writing in the *New York Times* of the off-Broadway production he stated that *Crimes of the Heart* "restores one's faith in our theatre." Simon was, however, wary of being too hopeful about Henley's future success, expressing the fear "that this clearly autobiographical play may be stocked with the riches of youthful memories that many playwrights cannot duplicate in subsequent works."

Reviews of the play on Broadway were also predominantly enthusiastic. Stanley Kauffmann, writing in the *Saturday Review,* found fault with the production itself but found Henley's play powerfully moving. "The play has to fight its way through the opening half hour or so of this production before it lets the author establish what she is getting at that, under this molasses meandering, there is madness, stark madness." While Kauffmann did identify some perceived faults in Henley's technique, he stated that overall, "she has struck a rich, if not inexhaustible, dramatic lode." Similarly, Richard Corliss, writing in Time magazine, emphasized that Henley's play, with its comedic view of the tragic and grotesque, is deceptively simple: "By the end of the evening, caricatures have been fleshed into characters, jokes into down-home truths, domestic atrocities into strategies for staying alive."

Not all the Broadway reviews, however, were positive. Walter Kerr of the *New York Times* felt that Henley had simply gone too far in her attempts to wring humor out of the tragic, falling into "a beginner's habit of never letting well enough alone, of taking a perfectly genuine bit of observation and doubling and tripling it until it's compounded itself into parody." Throughout the evening, Kerr recalled, "I also found myself, rather too often and in spite of everything, disbelieving simply and flatly disbelieving." In making his criticism, however, Kerr observed that "this is scarcely the prevailing opinion" on Henley's play. Michael Feingold of the Village Voice, meanwhile, was far more vitriolic, stating that the play "gives the impression of gossiping about its characters rather than presenting them... never at any point coming close to the truth of therr lives." Feingold's opinion, that the "tinny effect of Crimes of the Heart is happily mitigated, in the current production, by Melvin Bernhardt's staging" and by the "magical performances" of the cast, is thus diametrically opposed to Kauffmann, who praised the play but criticized the production.

Given Henley's virtually unprecedented success as a young, first-time playwright, and the gap of twenty-three years since another woman had won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, one of the concerns of critics was to place Henley in the context of other women writing for the stage in the early 1980s. Mel Gussow did so famously in his article

"Women Playwrights: New Voices in the Theatre" in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, in which he discussed Henley, Marsha Norman, Wendy Wasserstein, Wendy Kesselman, Jane Martin, Emily Mann, and other influential female playwrights. While Gussow's article marked an important transition in the contemporary American theatre, it has been widely rebutted, found by many to be "more notable for its omissions than its conclusions" according to Billy J. Harbin in the *Southern Quarterly.* In particular, critics have been interested in comparing Henley to Norman, another southern woman who won the Pulitzer for Drama (for her play 'night, Mother). Gussow wrote that among the numerous women finding success as playwrights "the most dissimilar may be Marsha Norman and Beth Henley." Lisa J. McDonnell picked up this theme several years later in an issue of the Southern Quarterly, agreeing that there are important differences between the two playwrights, but exploring them in much more depth than Gussow was able to do in his article. At the same time, however, McDonnell observed many important similarities, including "their remarkable gift for storytelling, their use of family drama as a framework, their sensitive delineation of character and relationships, their employment of bizarre Gothic humor and their use of the southern vernacular to demonstrate the poetic lyricism of the commonplace."

The failure of Henley's play *The Wake of Jamey Foster* on Broadway, and the mixed success of her later plays, would seem to lend some credence to John Simon's fear that Henley might never again be able to match the success of *Crimes of the Heart.* While many journalistic critics have been especially hard on Henley's later work, she remains an important figure in the contemporary American theatre. The many published interviews of Henley suggests that she attempts not to take negative reviews to heart: in *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists*, she observed with humor that "H. L. Mencken said that asking a playwright what he thinks of critics is like asking a lamppost what he thinks of a dog." *Crimes of the Heart,* meanwhile, has passed into the canon of great American plays, proven by the work of literary critics to be rich and complex enough to support a variety of analytical interpretations. Writing in the *Southern Quarterly,* Nancy Hargrove, for example, examined Henley's vision of human experience in several of her plays, finding it "essentially a tragicomic one, revealing ... the duality of the universe which inflicts pain and suffering on man but occasionally allows a moment of joy or grace."

Billy Harbin, writing in the *Southern Quarterly*, placed Henley's work m the context of different waves of feminism since the 1960s, exploring the importance of family relationships in her plays. While the family is often portrayed by Henley as simply another source of pain, Harbin felt that *Crimes of the Heart* differs from her other plays in that a "faith in the human spirit... can be glimpsed through the sisters' remarkable endurance of suffering and their eventual move toward familial trust and unity." Henley's later characters, according to Harbin, "possess little potential for change," limiting Henley's "success in finding fresh explorations of [her] ideas." With this nuanced view, Harbin nevertheless conforms to the prevailing critical view that Henley has yet to match either the dramatic complexity or the theatrical success of *Crimes of the Heart. Lou Thompson, in the Southern Quarterly*, similarly found a sense of unity at the end of the *Crimes of the Heart* but traced its development from of the dominant imagery of food in the play. While the characters eat compulsively throughout, foraging in an attempt "to fill

the void in the spirit a hunger of the heart mistaken for hunger of the stomach," the sisters share Lenny's birthday cake at the end of the play "to celebrate their new lives."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Busiel holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Texas. In this essay he discusses Henley's dramatic technique.

While *Crimes of the Heart* does have a tightly-structured plot, with a central and several tangential conflicts, Henley's real emphasis, as Nancy Hargrove suggested in *Southern Quarterly,* is "on character rather than on action." Her characters are basically good people who make bad choices, who act out of desperation because of the overwhelming sense of isolation, rejection, and loneliness in their lives. Speaking of Babe in particular, Henley said in *Saturday Review:* "I thought I'd like to write about somebody who shoots somebody else just for being mean. Then I got intrigued with the idea of the audience's not finding fault with her character, finding sympathy for her." This basic premise is at the center of Henley's theatrical method, which challenges the audience to like characters their morals might tell them not to like. "I like to write characters who do horrible things," Henley said in *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights,* "but whom you can still like ,.. because of their human needs and struggles.... I try to understand that ugliness is in everybody. I'm constantly in awe that we still seek love and kindness even though we are rilled with dark, bloody, primitive urges and desires." Henley's drama effectively illustrates the intimate connection between these two seemingly disparate aspects of human nature. Henley achieves a complex perspective in her writing primarily by encouraging her audience to laugh, along with the characters, at the tragic and grotesque aspects of life.

Tragic events treated with humor abound in *Crimes of the Heart,* powerful reminders of the intention behind Henley's technique. For example, when Babe finally reveals the details of her shooting of Zackery, the audience is no doubt struck by her matter-of-fact recounting of events: "Well, after I shot him, I put the gun down on the piano bench, and then I went out in the kitchen and made up a pitcher of lemonade." While Babe's story lends humor to the present moment in the play (a scene between Babe and her lawyer, Barnette), we can appreciate the human trauma behind her actions. Writing in the New York Times, Walter Kerr identified in Henley's play "the ground-rules of matter-of-fact Southern grotesquerie," which is "by no means altogether artificial. People do such things and, having done them, react in surprising ways."

As the scene continues, however, Henley may perhaps push her point too far; Babe's actions begin to seem implausible except in the context of Henley's dramatic need to achieve humor. Babe recounts. "Then I called out to Zackery. I said, 'Zackery, I've made some lemonade. Can you use a glass?'... He was looking up at me trying to speak words. I said 'What? ... Lemonade? ... You don't want it? Would you like a Coke instead'" Then I got the idea he was telling me to call on the phone for medical help." In a realistic context the audience understands that Babe is still in shock, not thinking clearly. At the same time, however, it is difficult not to find her unbelievably dense or, from a dramatic perspective, becoming more of a caricature to serve Henley's comedic ends than a fully-realized, human character. Moments like this are seized upon by Henley's harshest critics; Kerr, for example, wrote that *Crimes of the Heart* suffers from

her "beginner's habit of never letting well enough alone, of taking a perfectly genuine bit of observation and doubling and tripling it until it's compounded itself into parody." Even Kerr admitted, however, that despite moments of seeming excess, "*Crimes of the Heart* is clearly the work of a gifted writer."

Most other critics, meanwhile, have been more enthusiastic in their praise of Henley's technique. Far from finding in *Crimes of the Heart* a kind of parody, they have elucidated how *real* Henley's characters seem. Hargrove offered one possible explanation for this phenomenon, finding that one of "the real strengths of Henley' s work is her use of realistic details from everyday life, particularly in the actions of the characters. These details reinforce the idea that ordinary life is like this, a series of small defeats happening to ordinary people in ordinary family relationships. Her characters unobtrusively but constantly are doing the mundane things that go on in daily life."

The roots of our modern theatre in ancient Greece established a strict divide between comedy and tragedy (treating them as separate and distinct genres); more than two thousand years later, reactions to Henley's technique suggest the powerful legacy of this separation. Audiences and critics were either pleasantly surprised by *Crimes of the Heart* finding the dramatic interweaving of the tragic and comedic refreshingly original or, less frequently, were shocked by what appeared to be Henley's flippant perspective on life's difficulties. The scene in which the sisters learn that Old Granddaddy has suffered a second stroke in the hospital, and is near death, is another powerful example of Henley's strategy of treating the tragic with humor. Meg, feeling guilty for having lied to her grandfather about her singing career, is resolved to return to the hospital and tell him the truth: "He's just gonna have to take me like I am. And if he can't take it, if it sends him into a coma, that's just too damn bad."

Struck by the absurdity of this comment {for Meg, unlike Lenny and Babe, does not yet know that her grandfather already is in a coma), Meg's sisters break into hysterical laughter. The resulting scene depicts them swinging violently from one emotional extreme lo the other. "I'm sorry," Lenny says, momentarily gaining control. "It's it's not funny. It's sad. It's very sad. We've been up all night long." When Meg asks if Granddaddy is expected to live, however. Babe's response "They don't think so" sends the sisters, inexplicably, into another peal of laughter. While on the surface, the laughter (both that of Lenny and Babe, and that generated among the audience) seems shockingly flippant, the moment is devastatingly human. The audience sees the deepest emotions of characters who have been pushed to the brink, and with no place else to go, can only laugh at life's misfortunes.

While the mistakes her characters have made are the source of both the conflict and the humor of *Crimes of the Heart.* Henley nevertheless treats these characters with great sympathy. Jon Jory, who directed the first production of *Crimes of the heart* in Louisville, observed in the *Saturday Review* that "most American playwrights want to expose human beings. Beth Henley embraces them." With the possible exception of Chick, whose exaggerated concern for what is "proper" provides a foil to Lenny and her sisters, Henley's characters seem tangibly human despite the bizarre circumstances in which the audience sees them. "Like Flannery O'Connor," Scott Haller wrote in the *Saturday*

Review, "Henley creates ridiculous characters but doesn't ridicule them. Like Lanford Wilson, she examines ordinary people with extraordinary compassion." While in later plays Henley was to write even more exaggerated characters who border on caricatures, Crimes of the Heart remains a very balanced play in this respect. Jory noted that what struck him about the play initially was this sense of balance: "the comedy didn't come from one character but from between the characters. That's very unusual for a young writer."

While humor permeates *Crimes of the Heart,* it is often a hysterical humor, as in the scene where Meg is informed of her grandfather's impending death. Just as Lou Thompson has observed in the *Southern Quarterly* that the characters eat compulsively throughout the play, a "predominant metaphor for... pathological withdrawal," so the laughter in the play is equally compulsive, more often an expression of pain than true happiness. By the conclusion of *Crimes of the Heart,* however, hysterical laughter has been supplanted by an almost serene sense of joy however mild or fleeting, Lenny expresses a vision of the three sisters "smiling and laughing together ... it wasn't forever; it wasn't for every minute. Just this one moment and we were all laughing." In addition to drawing strength from one another, finding a unity that they had previously lacked, the sisters appear finally to have overcome much of their pain (and this despite the fact that many of the play's conflicts are left unresolved). They have perhaps found an absolution which Henley, tellingly, has described as a process of writing itself. "Writing always helps me not to feel so angry," she stated in *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights.* "I've written about ghastly, black feelings and thoughts that I've had. The hope is that if you can pin down these emotions and express them accurately, you will somehow be absolved."

Source: Christopher Busiel, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following favorable review o/Crimes of the Heart, Rich comments on Henley's ability to draw her audience into the lives and surroundings of her characters. Rich argues that Henley "builds from a foundation of wacky but consistent logic until she's constructed afunhouse of perfect-pitch language and ever-accelerating misfortune,"

Rich is an American drama critic.

Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* ends with its three heroines the MaGrath sisters of Hazelhurst, Miss. helping themselves to brick-sized hunks of a chocolate birthday cake. The cake, a "super deluxe" extravaganza from the local bakery, is as big as the kitchen table, and the sisters laugh their heads off as they dig in. The scene is the perfect capper for an evening of antic laughter yet it's by no means the sum of Crimes of the Heart. While this play overflows with infectious high spirits, it is also, unmistakably, the tale of a very troubled family. Such is Miss Henley's prodigious talent that she can serve us pain as though it were a piece of cake.

Prodigious, to say the least. This is Miss Henley's first play. Originally produced at Louisville's Actors Theater, it won the Pulitzer Prize and New York Drama Critics Circle Award after its New York production last winter at the Manhattan Theater Club. Last night that production arrived, springier than ever, at the Golden, and it's not likely to stray from Broadway soon. Melvin Bernhardt, the director, has fulfilled Miss Henley's comedy by casting young actors whose future looks every bit as exciting as the playwright's.

Crimes is set "five years after Hurricane Camille" in the MaGrath family kitchen, a sunny garden of linoleum and translucent, flowered wallpaper designed by John Lee Beatty. The action unfolds during what the youngest sister, 24-year-old Babe (Mia Dillon), calls "a bad day." Babe knows whereof she speaks: She's out on bail, having just shot her husband in the stomach. And Babe's not the only one with problems. Her 27-year-old sister Meg (Mary Beth Hurt), a would-be singing star, has retreated from Hollywood by way of a psychiatric ward. Lenny (Lizbeth Mackay), the eldest MaGrath, is facing her 30th birthday with a "shrunken ovary" and no romantic prospects. As if this weren't enough, Old Granddaddy, the family patriarch, is in the hospital with "blood vessels popping in his brain."

A comedy, you ask? Most certainly and let's not forget about the local lady with the "tumor on her bladder," about the neighbor with the "crushed leg," about the sudden death by lightning of Lenny's pet horse, Billy Boy. Miss Henley redeems these sorrows, and more, by mining a pure vein of Southern Gothic humor worthy of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor. The playwright gets her laughs not because she tells sick jokes, but because she refuses to tell jokes at all. Her characters always stick to the unvarnished truth, at any price, never holding back a single gory detail. And the truth when captured like lightning in a bottle is far funnier than any invented wisecracks.

Why did Babe shoot her husband? Because, she says, "I didn't like his looks." Why, after firing the gun, did she make a pitcher of lemonade before calling an ambulance? Because she was thirsty. Why did she carry on with a 15-year-old black boy during the months before her crime? "I was so lonely," explains Miss Dillon, "and he was *goooood*." Why has Babe's lawyer, a young, sheepish OleMiss grad (Peter MacNicol), taken on such a seemingly hopeless case? Because Babe won his heart when she sold him poundcake at a long-ago church bazaar and because he believes in "personal vendettas."

You see Miss Henley's technique. She builds from a foundation of wacky but consistent logic until she's constructed a funhouse of perfect-pitch language and ever-accelerating misfortune. By Act IH, we're so at home in the crazy geography of the MaGraths' lives that we're laughing at the slightest prick of blood. At that point Miss Henley starts kindling comic eruptions on the most unlikely lines "Old Granddaddy's in a coma!" without even trying. That's what can happen when a playwright creates a world and lets the audience inhabit it.

We're not laughing at the characters, of course, but with them. We all have bad days, when we contemplate or are victims of irrational crimes of the heart. In this play, Miss Henley shows how comedy at its best can heighten reality to illuminate the landscape of existence in all its mean absurdity. But the heightening is not achieved at the price of credibility. The MaGraths come by their suffering naturally: It's been their legacy since childhood, when their father vanished and their mother hanged herself and her pet cat in the cellar. *Crimes of the Heart* is finally the story of how its young characters escape the past to seize the future. "We've got to figure out a way to get through these bad days here," says Meg, That can't happen for any of us until the corpses of a childhood are truly laid to rest....

Source: Frank Rich, "Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart"* in the *New York Times*, November 5,1981.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Simon applauds Crimes of the Heart, asserting that the play "bursts with energy, merriment, sagacity, and, best of all, a generosity toward people and life that many good writers achieve only in their most mature offerings, if at all."

Simon is a Yugoslavian-born American film and drama critic.

From time to time a play comes along that restores one's faith in our theater, that justifies endless evenings spent, like some unfortunate Beckett character, chin-deep in trash. This time it is the Manhattan Theatre Club's *Crimes of the Heart,* by Beth Henley, a new playwright of charm, warmth, style, unpretentiousness, and authentically individual vision.

We are dealing here with the reunion in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, of the three MaGrath sisters (note that even in her names Miss Henley always hits the right ludicrous note). Lenny, the eldest, is a patient Christian sufferer: monstrously accident-prone, shuttling between gentle hopefulness and slightly comic hysteria, a martyr to her sexual insecurity and a grandfather who takes most of her energies and an unconscionable time dying. Babe Botrelle, the youngest and zaniest sister, has just shot her husband in the stomach because, as she puts it, she didn't like the way he looked. Babe (who would like to be a saxophonist) is in serious trouble: She needs the best lawyer in town, but that happens to be the husband she shot. Meg, the middle sister, has had a modest singing career that culminated in Biloxi. In Los Angeles, where she now lives, she has been reduced to a menial job. She is moody and promiscuous, and has ruined, before leaving home, the chances of "Doc" Porter to go to medical school. She made him spend a night with her in a house that lay in the path of Hurricane Camille; the roof collapsed, leaving Doc with a bad leg and, soon thereafter, no Meg.

The time of the play is "Five years after Hurricane Camille," but in Hazlehurst there are always disasters, be they ever so humble. Today, for instance, it is Lenny's thirtieth birthday, and everyone has forgotten it, except pushy and obnoxious Cousin Chick, who has brought a crummy present. God certainly forgot, because he has allowed Lenny's beloved old horse to be struck dead by lightning the night before, even though there was hardly a storm. Crazy things happen in Hazlehurst: Pa MaGrath ran out on his family; Ma MaGrath hanged her cat and then hanged herself next to it, thus earning nationwide publicity. Babe rates only local headlines. She will be defended by an eager recent graduate of Ole Miss Law School whose name is Barnette Lloyd. (Names have a way of being transsexual in Hazlehurst.) Barnette harbors an epic grudge against the crooked and beastly Botrelle as well as a nascent love for Babe. But enough of this plot-recounting though, God knows, there is so much plot here that I can't begin to give it away. And all of it is demented, funny, and, unbelievable as this may sound, totally believable.

The three sisters are wonderful creations: Lenny out of Chekhov, Babe out of Flannery O'Connor, and Meg out of Tennessee Williams in one of his more benign moods. But

"out of must not be taken to mean imitation; it is just a legitimate literary genealogy. Ultimately, the sisters belong only to Miss Henley and to themselves. Their lives are lavish with incident, their idiosyncrasies insidiously compelling, their mutual loyalty and help (though often frazzled) able to nudge heartbreak toward heart-lift And the subsidiary characters are just as good even those whom we only hear about or from (on the phone), such as the shot husband, his shocked sister, and a sexually active fifteen-year-old black.

Miss Henley is marvelous at exposition, cogently interspersing it with action, and making it just as lively and suspenseful as the actual happenings. Her dialogue is equally fine: always in character (though Babe may once or twice become too benighted), always furthering our understanding while sharpening our curiosity, always doing something to make us laugh, get lumps in the throat, care. The jokes are juicy but never gratuitous, seeming to stem from the characters rather than from the author, and seldom lacking implications of a wider sort. Thus when Meg finds Babe outlandishly trying to commit suicide because, among other things, she thinks she will be committed, Meg shouts: "You're just as perfectly sane as anyone walking the streets of Hazlehurst, Mississippi." On one level, this is an absurd lie; on another, higher level, an absurd truth. It is also a touching expression of sisterly solidarity, while deriving its true funniness from the context. Miss Henley plays, juggles, conjures with context Hazlehurst, the South, the world.

The play is in three fully packed, old-fashioned acts, each able to top its predecessor, none repetitious, dragging, predictable. But the author's most precious gift is the ability to balance characters between heady poetry and stalwart prose, between grotesque heightening and compelling recognizability between absurdism and naturalism. If she errs in any way, it is in slightly artificial resolutions, whether happy or sad....

I have only one fear that this clearly autobiographical play may be stocked with the riches of youthful memories that many playwrights cannot duplicate in subsequent works. I hope this is not the case with Beth Henley; be that as it may, *Crimes of the Heart* bursts with energy, merriment, sagacity, and, best of all, a generosity toward people and life that many good writers achieve only in their most mature offerings, if at all.

Source: John Simon, "Sisterhood is Beautiful" in *New York,* Vol. 14, No 2, January 12,1981, pp. 42,44.

Adaptations

Crimes of the Heart was adapted as a film in 1986, directed by Bruce Beresford and starring Diane Keaton, Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek, and Sam Shepard. The film adds as fully-realized characters several people who are only discussed in the play: Old Granddaddy, Zackery and Willie Jay. The film received decidedly mixed reviews but also garnered three Academy Award nominations, for Henley's screenplay and for the acting of Spacek and Tess Harper, who played the catty Chick.

In a rare example of reverse adaptation from drama to fiction, Claudia Reilly published in 1986 a novel, *Crimes of the Heart,* based on Henley's play.

Topics for Further Study

Research the destructive effects of Hurricane "Camille," which in 1969 traveled 1,800 kilometers along a broad arc from Louisiana to Virginia. Why do you think Henley chose to set *Crimes of the Heart* in the shadow, as it were, of this Hurricane? What does Camille represent for each of the major characters and thematically to the play as a whole?

Consider Babe's legal position at the end of the play. What do you think is likely to happen to her? Draw from your understanding of Barnette's case against Zackery and Zackery's case against Babe, From your own perspective, how do you think Babe will change as a result of this event and what do you fee! her future should rightly be?

Contrast Lenny's and Meg's life strategies: how do they each view responsibility, career, family, romance? How spontaneous or not is each one? What are the strongest bonds between the sisters, and what are their sources of conflict?

Research the prestige of the Pulitzer Prizes and the history of the Pulitzer for Drama you might begin with Thomas P. Adler's book *Mirror on the Stage: The Pulitzer Plays as an Approach to American Drama.* When Henley won the Pulitzer for Drama in 1981, who was the last woman who had won the prize, twenty-three years earlier? Why did winning the Pulitzer draw so much attention to Henley, as it did to Marsha Norman two years later, when she won with her play '*Night, Mother?*

What Do I Read Next?

The Miss Firecracker Contest (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1985). Henley's most successful play next to *Crimes of the Heart*. Also set in a small Mississippi town (Brookhaven), it follows the trials and tribulations of Carnelle Scott, a twenty-four-year-old woman with a bad reputation in town who seeks to redeem herself by winning the title of Miss Firecracker for the Fourth of July celebration. With a cast full of very odd characters who, like Carnelle, seek some kind of redemption from their lives, the play probes the grotesque even more so than *Crimes of the Heart.* While some critics have suggested that Henley merely reworks the same ideas from play to play, others have found *The Miss Firecracker Contest* a fresh, original expression of Henley's unique view of life in small southern towns. The play was adapted into a film in 1989, starring Holly Hunter.

Marsha Norman: *'night, Mother.* Henley and Marsha Norman are often compared and/or contrasted to one another because they each won a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in the early 1980s. Reading this play helps highlight the similarities and differences between the two playwrights.

Flannery O'Connor: *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988) and *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971). Reading some of the work of this legendary writer of the "Southern Gothic" tradition, you can judge for yourself the validity of the connections numerous critics have drawn between her work and Henley's plays.

Carol S. Manning, editor, *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993). A collection of essays both on specific writers, and on topics such as "Southern Ladies and the Southern Literary Renaissance" and "Spiritual Daughters of the Black American South." Containing extensive analysis of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, two waters of "Southern Gothic" fiction to whom Henley is often compared, the volume is also is quite useful in placing Henley within a historical continuum of southern women writers, and examining common threads of experience with other writers from whom she differs in other ways.

John B. Boles, editor, *Dixie Dateline: a Journalistic Portrait of the Contemporary South* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1983). A collection of eleven essays by eminent journalists, presenting a variety of perspectives on the South, its culture, its history, and its future

Further Study

Beaufort, John. "A Play that Proves There's No Explaining Awards" in the *Christian Science Monitor,* November 9, 1981, p. 20

A very brief review with a strongly negative opinion of *Crimes of the Heart* that is rare in assessments of Henley's play. Completely dismissing its value, Beaufort wrote that *Crimes of the Heart* is "a perversely antic stage piece that is part eccentric characterization, part Southern fried Gothic comedy, part soap opera, and part patchwork plotting "

Berkvist, Robert. "Act I. The Pulitzer, Act II: Broadway" in the *New York Times,* October 25,1981, p. D4.

An article published a week before *Crimes of the Heart's* Broadway opening, containing much of the same biographical information found in more detail in later sources Berkvist focused on the novelty of a playwright having such success with her first full-length play, and summarizes the positive reception of the play in Louisville and in its Off-Broadway run at the Manhattan Theatre Club. The article does contain some of Henley's strongest comments on the state of the American theatre, particularly Broadway.

Betsko, Kathleen, and Rachel Koenig "Beth Henley" in Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights, Beach Tree Book, 1987, pp 211-22.

An interview conducted as Henley was completing her play The Debutante Ball. Henley discussed her writing and revision process, how she responds to rehearsals and opening nights, her relationship with her own family (fragments of which turn up in all of her plays), and the different levels of opportunity for women and men in the contemporary theatre.

Corliss, Richard. "I Go with What I'm Feeling" in Time, February 8,1982, p. 80

A brief article published during the successful Broadway run of *Crimes of the Heart* to introduce Henley to a national audience. Corliss stated concisely and cleverly the complexities of Henley's work. "Sugar and spice and every known vice," the article begins; "that's what Beth Henley's plays are made of" Corliss observed that Henley's plays are "deceptively simple . By the end of the evening, caricatures have been fleshed into characters, jokes into down-home truths, domestic atrocities into strategies for staying alive " Henley is quoted in the article stating that "I'm like a child when I write, taking chances, never thinking in terms of logic or reviews I just go with what I'm feeling " The article documents a moment of new-found success for the young playwright, facing choices about the direction her career will take her.

Femgold, Michael. "Dry Roll" in the *Village Voice*, November 18-24,1981, p 104

Perhaps the most negative and vitriolic assessment of *Crimes of the Heart* in print. (The title refers to the musical *Merrily We Roll Along,* which Femgold also discussed in the review.) Feingold finds the play completely disingenuous, even insulting. He wrote that it "gives the impression of gossiping about its characters rather than presenting them never at any point coining close to the truth of their lives." Feingold gave some credit to Henley's "voice" as a playwright, "both individual and skillful," but overall found the play "hollow," something to be overcome by the "magical performances" of the cast.

Gussow, Mel. "Women Playwrights. New Voices in the Theatre" in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 1, 1983, p 22

Discusses Henley along with numerous other contemporary women playwrights, in an article written on the occasion of Marsha Norman winning the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Drama Gussow traced a history of successful women playwrights, including Lillian Hellman in a modern American context, but noted that "not until recently has there been anything approaching a movement," Among the many underlying forces which paved the way for this movement, Gussow mentioned the Actors' Theater of Louisville, where Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* premiered

Haller, Scott "Her First Play, Her First Pulitzer Prize" in the *Saturday Review,* November, 1981, p 40.

Introducing Henley to the public, this brief article was published just prior to *Crimes of the Heart* opening on Broadway Haller marveled at the success achieved by a young "29-year-old who had never before written a full-length play." Based on an interview with the playwright, the article is primarily biographical, suggesting how being raised in the South provides Henley both with material and a vernacular speech. This theatrical dialect, combined with Henley's "unlikely dramatic alliance" between "the conventions of the naturalistic play" and "the unconventional protagonists of absurdist comedy1' gives Henley what Haller called her "idiosyncratic voice," which audiences have found so refreshing

Harbin, Billy J. "Familial Bonds in the Plays of Beth Henley" in the *Southern Quarterly,* Vol. 25, no. 3, 1987, pp 80-94

Harbin begins by placing Henley's work in the context of different waves of feminism since the 1960s

Hargrove, Nancy D "The Tragicomic Vision of Beth Henley1 s Drama" in the *Southern Quarterly,* Vol 22, no 4, 1984, pp. 80-94.

Hargrove examines Henley's first three full-length plays, exploring (as the title suggests) the powerful mixture of tragedy and comedy within each,

Heilpern, John. "Great Acting, Pity about the Play" in the London *Times, Decembers,* 1981, p. 11.

A review of three Broadway productions, with brief comments on *Crimes of the Heart ' '*I regret," Heilpern wrote, "it left me mostly cold " It is interesting to consider whether, as Heilpern mused, he found the play bizarre and unsatisfying because as a British critic he suffered from "a serious culture gap " Instead of a complex, illuminating play (as so many American critics found *(Crimes of the Heart)*, Heilpern saw only "unbelievable 'characters' whose lives were a mere farce. I could see only Southern 'types', like a cartoon "

Jones, John Griffin. "Beth Henley" in *Mississippi Writers Talking,* University Press of Mississippi, 1982, pp 169-90.

A rare interview conducted before Henley won the Pulitzer Prize for *Crimes of the Heart.* As such, it focuses on many biographical details from Henley's life, which had not yet received a great deal of public attention.

Kauffmann, Stanley "Two Cheers for Two Plays" m the *Saturday Review*, Vol. 9, no. 1,1982, pp. 54-55.

A review of the Broadway production of *Crimes of the Heart* Kauffmann praised the play but says its success "is, to some extent, a victory over this production." Kauffmann identified some faults in the play (such as the amount of action which occurs offstage and is reported) but overall his review is full of praise,

Kerr, Walter. "Offbeat but a Beat Too Far" in the *New York Times,* November 15,1981, p. D3

In this review of the Broadway production of *Crimes of the Heart,* Kerr's perspective on the play is a mixed one. He offers many examples to support his opinion. Kerr is insightful about the delicate balance Henley strikes in her play between humor and tragedy, between the hurtful actions of some the characters and the positive impressions of them the audience is nevertheless expected to maintain.

McDonnell, Lisa J "Diverse Similitude: Beth Henley and Marsha Norman" in the *Southern Quarterly,* Vol. 25, no. 3, 1987, pp. 95-104.

A comparison and contrasting of the techniques of southern playwrights Henley and Norman, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama within two years of one another. The playwrights share "their remarkable gift for storytelling, their use of family drama as a framework, their sensitive delineation of character and relationships, their employment of bizarre Gothic humor and their use of the southern vernacular to demonstrate the poetic lyricism of the commonplace." Despite the similarities between them (which do go far beyond being southern women playwrights who have won the Pulitzer), McDonnell concluded that "they have already, relatively early m their playwnt-ing careers, set themselves on paths that are likely to become increasingly divergent."

Ohva, Judy Lee. "Beth Henley" in *Contemporary Dramatists,* 5th edition, St James Press, 1993.290-91.

A more recent assessment which includes Henley's *flay Abundance,* an epic play spanning 25 years in the lives of two pioneer women in the nineteenth century. Oliva examined what she calls a "unifying factor" in Henley's plays: "women who seek to define themselves outside of their relationships with men and beyond their family environment." In OUva's assessment, "it is Henley's characters who provide unique contributions to the dramaturgy." As important to Henley's plays as the characters are the stones they tell, "especially those stories in which female characters can turn to other female characters for help."

Simon, John. "Sisterhood is Beautiful" in the *New York Times,* January 12,1981, pp. 42-44.

A glowing review of the off-Broadway production of Crimes of the Heart, which "restores one's faith in our theatre."

Thompson, Lou. "Feeding the Hungry Heart: Food in Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*" in the *Southern Quarterly,* Vol 30, nos. 2-3,1992, pp 99-102.

Drawing from Nancy Hargrove's observation in an earlier article that eating and drinking are, in Henley's plays, "among the few pleasures in life, or, in certain cases, among the few consolations for life," Thompson explored in more detail the pervasive imagery of food throughout *Crimes of the Heart.*

Willer-Moul, Cynthia "Beth Henley" in The Playwright's Art: *Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists*, Rutgers University Press, 1995, pp. 102-22.

A much more recent source, this interview covers a wider range of Henley's works, but still contains detailed discussion of *Crimes of the Heart*. Henley talks extensively about her writing process, from fundamental ideas to notes and outlines, the beginnings of dialogue, revisions, and finally rehearsals and the production itself.

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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.

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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.

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