Dinner with Friends Study Guide

Dinner with Friends by Donald Margulies

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Introduction

Donald Margulies' play *Dinner with Friends* was written, he says, like all his works, "to reflect observations I'm having at that time in my life... All around us, relationships are changing, marriages are breaking up. It's those notions of impermanence, the yearning for something else that I'm tapping into." And it appears that Margulies has also tapped into audiences all over the country and now all over the world as his play enjoys international success.

Dinner with Friends began as a commissioned work for the Actors Theater of Louisville and had its world premiere at the 1998 Humana Festival of New American Plays. It then played in California's South Coast Repertory and, quite unusually, in Paris before opening off-Broadway in New York in 1999. In 2000, it won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for drama. Currently, there continue to be simultaneous productions all over the country, and a made-for-television movie is in the making. So just what is so appealing about the notion of impermanence and the yearning for something else that makes this play so universally popular? That's simple. Everyone relates to these themes. As Critic Michael Phillips noted, *Dinner with Friends* has become "a *zeitgeist* pop culture item" like the movie *The Big Chill* was in the early 1980s. Phillips says that the audience identifies so much with the characters that "watching this show in performance is like attending a mass nodding seminar." And Phillips doesn't mean that the audience is falling asleep. On the contrary, they are nodding their heads in agreement and laughing in recognition.

Whether members of the audience can relate to the forty-something couples who come of age in the radical seventies, become parents under the Reagan administration, and then either solidify or lose touch with their long-term relationships, the play exposes the same, universal insecurities that people face every time there are shattering changes in their lives. Margulies' characters are real. They are normal. They are family, friends, and the people next door. They are people facing their fears.

Author Biography

Donald Margulies was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1954. He grew up in Trump Village, a Coney Island, middle-class Jewish community. His father, who sold wallpaper in Brooklyn for a living, loved plays and movies and took his family to Broadway shows almost religiously. Margulies saw his first Broadway play at the age of nine. "Religion was show business," he said in a conversation with Elizabeth Farnsworth of PBS' *News Hour with Jim Lehrer.* "We didn't go to synagogue, but we went to see *Hello, Dolly."*

Margulies attended Pratt Art Institute and then transferred to the State University of New York at Purchase, where he attained a B.F.A. in visual arts. For a time he supported himself as a graphic designer and a comedy writer before turning his full attention to playwriting. Margulies wrote several plays, which were all produced (but with little fanfare). He was contemplating giving up playwriting right before his play *Sight Unseen* (1991) became a surprise hit of the season. This same play, about an artist who struggles to let go of his past, went on to win an Obie Award for the best new American playas well as to become a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1992.

A play that some Critics think is Margulies' best, *Collected Stories* (1996), tells the story of a young fiction writer who eventually eclipses her mentor's accomplishments by writing a story about her mentor's life. This play was awarded the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle Award for outstanding new play. It was also chosen as a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 1997. Although he did not win the prize for *Collected Stories,* three years later in 2000, his play *Dinner with Friends* did finally win Margulies the Pulitzer.

Margulies has won numerous awards and has enjoyed passing on his techniques for writing by giving seminars at the Sundance Institute Playwrights' Lab in Utah, as well as teaching classes at Yale in playwriting and screenwriting. He lives in New Haven, Connecticut, with his eight-year-old son, Miles, and his wife, Lynn Street, who is a doctor. He and his wife have been married for twenty-one years, and Margulies says that the play *Dinner with Friends* reflects the changes and the challenges of longtime relationships such as his and his wife's as well as the complications and consequences he has witnessed when friends' relationships have fallen apart.

Writing a film adaptation of *Dinner with Friends,* which Norman Jewison will direct for HBO films, is currently keeping Margulies busy. He's also writing a television adaptation of Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full,* and, in addition, he is working on the production of his new play, *God of Vengeance,* which is based on a classic Yiddish story written by Sholem Asch in 1906. It's about a Jewish father who houses a brothel in his basement while his family lives upstairs and his attempts to try to keep the two separated.

Plot Summary

Act I, Scene 1

In the opening scene of *Dinner with Friends,* Gabe and Karen have cooked a splendid dinner and dessert for their friends, Beth and Tom. However, Tom couldn't come because, as Beth tells them, he had to fly to Washington. From upstairs come the noises of four children, who are watching a video while the adults talk downstairs.

Gabe and Karen have recently come back from a vacation in Italy. They love cooking, and so they describe their trip to Beth in terms of food. Beth is noticeably distracted but grunts responses so her friends will think that she is interested. When Karen, feeling insecure, finally notices that Beth is distracted, she concludes that something must have been wrong with the dinner. Beth assures Karen that the dinner was wonderful So Karen returns to thinking about her trip, making a couple of side comments to release her guilt about traveling with out her children. She also feels a little guilty about having gone on the trip without Beth.

Minutes later, Beth breaks down in tears and confesses that her husband, Tom, has left her. Awkward phrases fly out of the mouths of Karen and Gabe. "You're kidding," says Karen. "Who?" asks Gabe, when Beth says that Tom is in love with someone else. Beth's side of the story is, of course, biased. Tom is the bad guy. Beth didn't see it coming; she "didn't have a *clue.* . ." The scene ends with all three adults solacing themselves with a rich dessert.

Act I, Scene 2

Later that same night at Beth and Tom's house, Beth is getting ready for bed, when Tom surprises her by walking into the bedroom. Beth is angry. She threatens to change the locks. She feels that Tom has no right to just walk in anymore.

They make small talk about the weather and the kids, and then Tom asks about the dinner at Karen and Gabe's. After a few words, he can tell that Beth told them about their breakup. Now Tom is angry. He wanted to be there. He wanted to tell them his side of the story. He knows that Beth has slanted the story in her favor.

Tom demands that Beth tell him all the details. He wants to know what she said; how she said it; and what Gabe and Karen' s reactions were. He is sincerely concerned. He is afraid that Beth has turned his friends against him. Both tempers are hot now. They both bring up details from the past, hurling indignities at one another. A synopsis of their history is brought forth, and when Tom steps over a personal boundary, Beth slaps him. Tom grabs her and asks, "You wanna fight?" And with this physical contact initiated, and while they continue to curse one another, a sexual energy builds between them, and they eventually fall onto the bed and consummate their argument silently, on a purely physical level.

Act I, Scene 3

Karen and Gabe are absorbed in the aftermath of learning that their closest friends have separated. They are not sure what to make of it. How will this affect them? Karen is the most bitter. She has turned Tom into the villain and Beth into the victim. But Karen is thinking not just of Beth and Tom. She is thinking about what it would be like if Gabe left her. "You do something like this:' Karen says to Gabe' "I'in telling you right now, you are outta here." She is telling Gabe that he had better not even think about it. No flings. No moments of weakness. No excuses. One mistake and it is over.

Gabe acquiesces. He puts his head in her lap, and they return to their discussion of how the breakup of their friends' marriage will affect them. And that's when they see the headlights of a car in their driveway. Tom has driven over in a snowstorm to make sure that he has not lost his friends. Karen finds it impossible to be civil to Tom. Gabe finds it impossible not to try to save him. In the end, Tom leaves, unable to explain himself, unable to gain a sense of empathy and understanding from either of his friends.

Act II, Scene 1

This is a flashback scene to over twelve years prior to the first act. Gabe and Karen are in an old family house on Martha's Vineyard. Gabe and Karen are newlyweds. They have invited both Tom and Beth to stay with them. This is Tom and Beth's initial meeting. This is also the only scene in which all four characters appear together.

Karen seems to have been the instigator in arranging this meeting between Tom and Beth. Gabe is neutral about the idea. He isn't very impressed with Beth. His friend Tom has a long history of being a player, in reference to women, and Gabe doesn't believe Tom is ready to commit to a serious relationship.

When Beth and Tom finally come face to face, Beth is aloof and sarcastic. Tom is a bit rude. He also sets up an image that will ring throughout the rest of the play when he says, "Gee, it's really generous of you guys to be setting your friends up. I guess you just want us to be as happy as you are, huh?" This sentiment is repeated later in the play during discussions between Tom and Gabe and Karen and Beth, as issues of identity are brought out.

A discussion ensues of how wonderful marriage is. Beth and Tom quite easily get drawn into the lure of what the settled comforts of marriage could bring. They use Karen and Gabe as role models and hope that they too can fit into the same mold. This scene, of course, contrasts with the opening scenes, where everything about this ill-fated union between Beth and Tom has fallen apart.

Act II, Scene 2

Back to the present, but five months have passed Since Beth and Tom have split up. Karen and Beth have not seen each other for a while. Beth is still playing for sympathy, as she complains about how awful Tom is as an absent father.

Many changes have taken place in Beth's life. These changes are hard for Karen to accept Whether she is Jealous or just can't see Beth going down a road that differs from her own, Karen continues to talk to Beth as if she made a big mistake.

It is in this scene that Beth tells Karen that she could not be like Karen. She also tells Karen that she doesn't want to play the role of Karen's dupe-"I was The Mess, The Ditz, The Comic Relief."

Act II, Scene 3

Tom and Gabe meet in a bar. The men's conversation parallels the women's Tom looks fit and energized. Gabe thinks Tom has stepped off the path and needs to be brought back in. Tom, on the other hand, thinks that Gabe is in denial, and that Gabe needs prompting to make a similar move to get out of his marriage.

Tom's view represents a general opinion of many married couples of his time. He grew up with parents who stayed together not because they were in love, but because they wanted to keep up the appearance that they were a happy family. *For the sake of the children* was a popular phrase that referred to the fact that a married couple would stay together, even if they were miserable, because they thought it was best for their children. Tom doesn't want to repeat his parents' mistakes.

Gabe represents the other side of the issue. Although it's not easy to keep a marriage alive, it is worth the effort. Gabe believes that all Tom has to do is exert more effort in order to save his marriage. The men end this scene, knowing that neither has convinced the other of his point of view.

Act II, Scene 4

Gabe and Karen are at home, getting ready for bed. They discuss their separate meetings with Torn and Beth, comparing notes on what each has learned. One of the most startling pieces of news is that Tom has insinuated that Beth had an extramarital affair ten years prior to the couple's breakup. This fact makes Beth appear less a victim than Karen had first imagined.

But it is not so much the thought of the other couple that is gnawing on Gabe and Karen's thoughts. It is the meaning of long-term relationships. What are the benefits of staying married to one person for so long? How do people keep long-term relationships alive? How do they rejuvenate themselves without finding new lovers, new identities?

Karen relates a dream she had in which she saw a split between who she and Gabe were when they were first married and who they have become since then. Gabe first reacts to the dream by thinking that the younger, more invigorated couple might have been Beth and Tom But Karen denies this. "They were us," she confirms. Gabe is reluctant to talk about her dream and what it means, but Karen insists. She wants to find a bridge back to that couple, back to their original and spontaneous feelings for one another. Gabe's response is to end the play with a little game, in winch he warns Karen that he is going to scare her. The game makes them both laugh.

Characters

Beth

Beth is Tom's wIfe and Karen's best friend. She is an artist of questionable talent. She is also the antithesis of Karen. She can't cook, is totally unor ganized, and leans more on her emotions to direct her life than on her rational thoughts. As a couple, she and her husband, Tom, stand as models directly opposed to the couple represented by Gabe and Karen Beth is not very communicative or supportive of her husband.

Beth flounders in her art and seems to lack direction in her life. She is also a bit manipulative. She leans on Karen during the initial stages of the separation between her and Tom, then she disappears once she finds someone else to lean on. In the end, the audience also discovers that Beth is not very honest or open with Karen.

It's hard to tell how serious Beth is. In a flashback to the time when Beth and Tom first meet, Beth appears to be consumed with being an artist

Her conversations are filled with images of light and color. But her conversations appear showy, and she refuses to show Tom her sketches. She is also judgmental, summing Tom up with mean-spirited statements And yet, she claims she hates labels.

"Why not just take it at face value?" she asks defensively when Tom asks her what style of art she follows.

In her last scene with Karen, Beth comes to see herself in a new light It's not the light that her friend Karen would like to see her in, but it is a light that makes Beth feel good about herself. She has shaken off an old skin, like a snake coming out of hibernation. She was so enthralled with Karen in the past that she thought she wanted to be Karen. with the Impetus of her husband leaving her, Beth has reevaluated herself and found something new inside of her. "We can't all be like you, Karen," Beth says "God knows I've tried. No matter how much *I* stir, my soup still sticks to the pot."

Gabe

Gabe, like his wife, Karen, is in his forties and writes about food for a living Tom is Gabe's best friend, and although Gabe does not seem to have much affection for Beth, he is nice to her because she is Tom's wife and Karen's best friend.

Overall, Gabe lives an orderly and structured life. Every summer he takes his wife and children to the same island home that he has been going to since he was a child. He and his wife, Karen, seem perfectly matched. They are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle They know one another so well that their conversations fit together, one pIece overlapping the other, as they finish one another's sentences. Knowing one another so

well, however, can also bring a land of boredom into their life. And it is this sheath of boredom that is exposed when Gabe listens to Tom's new outlook on life.

Gabe tries to play the role of the peacemaker. He wants to see life from all angles. He might not agree with what his friend Tom has done, but he is not as critical about the situation as his wife is. He understands that life and people are complex. Gabe is also the peacemaker because he doesn't like to rock the boat; he likes the status quo. He wants to avoid messes. Gabe often has to be prompted to speak his mind about his emotions. He is often quiet because he does not want to cause any trouble. But once he opens up, he pretty much lets It all come out.

Gabe is also somewhat child-like. He has an innocence about him One of his favorite ways to woo his wife is to playa silly little game-a game a father might play with his child to make the child laugh The game sounds trivial when it first appears in act 2. But at the end of the play, when Gabe begins playing the game again in the heat of a serious talk with Karen, his intention behind the game is a little more obvious Gabe is using the game to try to rekindle the romance in their relationship-to take them back to a time when the mundane things of life were not such a huge factor in their lives. The game and the play end on Gabe's line: "A man's got to do what a man's got to do "

Karen

Karen, a woman in her forties, is Gabe's wife. She has been married to Gabe for more than twelve years. Karen and Gabe are international food writ ers. She also considers herself close friends first With Beth and then With Tom. She manages two houses and a couple of kids; she travels all over the world and maintains a profession. She is, as Los Angeles critic Michael Phillips puts it, living "a life ruled by cuisine and color-coded domesticity." But there are edges about her that make the audience realize that she is not very confident. She questions her abilities and is rigid and unforgiving when someone violates her high principles Her orderly life indicates an attempt to control her world, something that someone suffering from insecurities would do.

Karen likes to have her friends Beth and Gabe over for dinner. She wants them to like her for her culinary flair and her exciting travel experiences. She elaborates details of food and travel to her friend Beth, unaware of Beth's lack of interest in both areas. Karen is so involved in proving that she is someone whom Beth should hke that she is totally caught off guard when Beth announces that her husband, Tom, has left her. Karen had no clue that her best friend's marriage was in trouble. And later in the play, Karen worries that maybe she is the cause of Beth's problems. Karen, after all, was the one who introduced Beth to Tom.

Karen immediately sides with Beth once she is told Beth's version of how the marriage fell apart, and she refuses to consider Tom's side She is somewhat blinded by Beth. She thinks that Beth is a great artist, an accolade that no one else (even Beth, eventually) confers on Beth's work. Not until later, after Beth has almost miraculously recovered from her separation from her husband, does Karen even consider that Beth

might be at least partially responsible for the demise of her marriage. At this point in the play, Karen is also a little jealous of Beth. She notes how thin and pretty Beth looks, rejuvenated by her newfound love.

In the end, Karen faces her husband's insinuation that Beth might have had sex with a man other than her husband during the course of her marriage. In other words, maybe Beth is not as innocent as Karen portrays her. Although Karen feels distanced from Beth, the changes in her friend make Karen reflect on the condition of her own marriage. She might disagree with how Beth has changed her life, but she envies Beth's new energy. This makes Karen have a dream in which she sees a wide gap between who she was when she first married (when she was in the infatuation stage of a romantic relationship, as Beth currently *is)* and who she has become. She senses that she may have lost a part of herself by settling into a mundane, middle-aged contentedness. "How do we not get lost?" she asks Gabe at the end of the play.

Tom

Tom is a lawyer and a college friend of Gabe' s. He's also the estranged husband of Beth. It's easy to classify him as a ladies' man, which he admits was a role he played in his youth. But it's a role that he tries to deny when he explains why he has left Beth for another woman. In a review for the *Los Angeles Times,* Michael Phillips calls Tom an "ambiguous creation, a carelessly sensual jock with an insecure streak."

Tom's introduction in the play comes when he rushes over to his friends' house in the middle of a snowstorm so he can explain his side of the story of why he has left his wife But as distraught as he wants to appear, in the middle of his explanation he stops not only to eat some food that has been offered but also to comment on it quite lavishly Tom and Gabe's relationship goes back even further than Gabe and Karen's. Tom used to steal Gabe's girlfriends in college-a fact that makes it hard to think of him as being a victim in this breakup. It's also hard to think of him as having deep emotions, since he has sex with his wife in the middle of a big argument, after he has already left her for another woman. These are the elements that make him appear ambiguous.

In the flashback to the time when Tom first meets Beth, Tom accuses Gabe and Karen of trying to set him up with Beth. Karen tells him it's not a setup at all and that he shouldn't think of it in that way because that sounds so cheap and scheming. Tom's reply is, "That's okay with me. I have no problem with cheap and scheming." But this is a statement that Tom would like to recant later in the play, when he is describing his relationship with the new woman in his life. He's more sincere in this scene. He doesn't say the things that his friend Gabe wants to hear, but what he does say is said with a new exhilaration. Tom has come to a point in his life when he has stopped being who he thinks other people want him to be. Whether his best friend likes it or not, Tom is reclaiming life He does not want the life that Gabe wants. He does not want the life that his father wants. He no longer wants to live an "inauthentic" life.

Themes

Marriage and Courtship

One of the major themes of the play is the different levels of relationship both inside and outside of marriage. There is the initial phase of marriage as portrayed in the flashback scene; Gabe and Karen are depicted as a newlywed couple, still infatuated with one another to the point of distraction. They are more inwardly-focused as a couple than they are in other scenes that depict them as a long-married couple.

There is also the portrayal of courtship as seen in the same flashback; Tom and Beth first meet one another and learn to maneuver themselves into a couple. Later, when Tom leaves Beth because he has found another woman, the stage of courtship is revisited. Beth also begins a courtship with the new man in her life.

In contrast are the scenes that involve the long-term marriage relationship. In the case of Gabe and Karen, marriage seems to have aged well, as their Identities melt into one another. They complete one another's thoughts, one finishing a sentence for the other. They write together, cook together, and travel together. Their duties as parents appear well divided. For Beth and Tom, marriage has not fared as well. They are closed off from one another; they no longer communicate. In place of communication are long silences, misunderstandings, or fights. They look to sources outside of their relationship to help them out of the abyss of silence that they have created not only between themselves, but inside of themselves.

Permanence and Impermanence

Despite the fact that a long-term relationship looks permanent, successful marriage partners know that life is about change. The challenge in relationships is to figure out how to foster that change without destroying the relationship.

Gabe and Karen have successfully managed the changes in their lives, or at least they think they have. It's not until the breakup of Torn and Beth's marriage that Gabe and Karen face the ways in which they have allowed the changes to occur. It's almost as if Gabe and Karen have managed their marriage intuitively. They have changed when the changes were required, possibly without fully conscious thought. They did what they had to do, because they were both committed to making their marriage work.

Tom and Beth, however, were not so successful. Their marriage started off on faulty ground. They wanted to emulate their friends' happiness, and they thought that marriage would hand over to them the success that Gabe and Karen worked hard to obtain. Gabe and Karen were committed to one another. Tom and Beth, however, were committed to trying to be like Gabe and Karen. Therefore when the situation and the times called for change, Tom and Beth maintained rigid stances. Since they were trying so hard to be other people, they lost their natural and intuitive abilities to figure out what

changes were necessary and how to make the necessary transitions. Beth, unable to deal with the changes that Tom needed, hid inside her studio. Tom dealt with change by flying away, finding changes in the scenery and in the people that surrounded him in the new locations Not until Tom breaks up the marriage does he (and later Beth) find avenues to refresh himself, to allow all the pent-up changes inside to emerge.

Alienation

There are several layers of alienation. The most obvious is the alienation between Beth and Tom. After many years of concealing their alienation, it causes an emption one night during an argument about the family dog. But there is another level of alienation going on here. It is the alienation from oneself. Beth has dismissed her own self-worth when she tries to compete with Karen, a challenge that Beth finds insurmountable but nonetheless continues until she is forced to come face-to-face with a better definition of herself.

Tom is also alienated from himself. He wants to show all of his feelings, but he uses the excuse that Beth will not listen to him Whether he really was in tune with his feelings is unclear, as the play does not present any examples of his attempts. But Tom does tell Gabe that he felt that he was dying. In other words, he became so alienated from himself that there was little of his life force going into his self-image.

There is also the feeling of alienation that Gabe and Karen feel when they realize that it will be very difficult to continue a relationship with Tom and Beth. Gabe and Karen have known Tom and Beth and grown used to them as a couple Gabe and Karen are not sure if they can reinvent their relationship with Tom and Beth and their new spouses. Gabe and Karen also feel alienated from Tom and Beth because they do not relate to their new life choices. Gabe and Karen are struggling to keep the life in their relationship. They look at Tom and Beth's choices as unavailable to them.

And there is the alienation that Gabe and Karen feel between who they have become and who they once were. As displayed in Karen's dream, there is a bridge missing between the two Images. Beth and Tom's new choices make Karen and Gabe face this alienation in themselves.

Style

Flashback

Margulies begins his play in what he terms the present. Time progresses throughout the first act. In order to fill in background information, showing the play's characters in the light of first love, he then changes the time, moving backwards to twelve and one half years prior to the opening scene. The flashback scene also shows both couples together and gives more emotional weight to the consequences of Tom and Beth's divorce.

The flashback allows characters to act out their history rather than have the playwright squeeze details from the past into their current dialogues. A sense of depth is added to the characters as the audience witnesses the changes in the characters' lives rather than just hearing about them. This also brings the audience into the playas active, rather than passive, members. The playwright has the option of leaving spaces, unanswered questions, and silences in the dialogues and in the actions, which then require the audience to fill them in, coming up with answers of their own.

Comedy Drama

Margulies' play, although the topic is serious, is not without its humor, which begins in the first lines and continues through the end. The humor is subtle. Considering that the play revolves around divorce and the challenges of staying in love, anything more than subtle humor would distract from the more serious elements of the play.

The soft touches of humor allow a release of the tensions that build up. An example of this use of humor is seen in the final scene of the play, when Gabe and Karen play their little game, in winch Gabe pretends to scare Karen Tension has built up around them because, in some ways, they envy their friends. The envy frightens them. To release that tension, Gabe makes Karen laugh.

Mood

The mood, or prevailing emotion, of the play changes from scene to scene. But one thing is consistent each scene has more than one strong emotion.

The play begins in a mood of excitement. Karen and Gabe are bubbling over with the details of their recent trip to Europe. Even the food they are eating is exciting-a gourmet menu But Beth, their friend, is entirely in an opposite realm. She is drained, headachy, and suffering from loss.

Margulies presents these types of opposing moods throughout his play, pitting anger against frustration and sincerity against sarcasm. And then he flips the characters

moods around and the play turns on itself. Where once there was sorrow, now there is excitement. Where once there was security, now there is doubt. It is through Ins use of mood that Margulies shows the complexities of life. Emotions change

Point of View

If there is a point of view in this play, it is an omniscient one (one that sees everything) Margulies has made a point of not favoring one character over another, one couple over another He presents all equally, allowing the audience to come to their own conclusions about whom they Identify with, who they think is making the right conclusions and decisions, and who is making the most sense He shows each character in different situations. He also combines the characters in different ways: Tom with Gabe, Beth with Karen, and so on. In so doing, he shows different aspects of each character's personality. He shows their weaknesses and their strengths. This gives the play its sense of balance.

Historical Context

Browse the shelves of any bookstore, and it's easy to see one hot topic on the mind of Americans: it's divorce. There are over three thousand published titles out there dealing with subjects such as how to survive divorce, how to be creative with divorce, how to enjoy divorce, how to help children through divorce, and what to do when the person who asked for the divorce wants to come back. There are also videos, websites, and songs about divorce. According to the *Monthly Vital Statistics* report, in 1994 alone, there were over one million divorces in America. And although there have been slight, overall declines in these rates in the past few years on a national level, in New York City the number is rising. So the subject of Margulies' play is very current, especially in terms of sheer numbers-both in the numbers of divorces and in the numbers of people (especially the baby boomers) who relate to the characters in the play.

In the United States, between the end of World War II in 1945 and 1964, seventy-eight million baby boomers were born. So in the light of the present day, this means that four out of ten heads of households are between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-four, winch puts Margulies' characters right smack in the middle of the baby boom.

Baby boomers cut their teeth, went through puberty, fell in love, and married in a time of change so far unparalleled in the United States. These were years of social upheaval, political unrest, economic depression, and general chaos. This era saw the worst unemployment and economic recession since the Great Depression in the thirties and forties. This was the time of the Cold War, winch led to an awareness of the possibility of worldwide ecological disasters and of nuclear obliteration While their parents' generation had idyllic dreams for the future (with the GI Bill paying for their education, cheap suburban housing giving many of them the power to own their first home, and modern conveniences such as automatic washing machines alleviating some of the drudgery of life), baby boomers lived in fear that tomorrow might never come. This caused a widening in the typical and predictable gap between the generations to the point that many baby boomers tended to define themselves in the negative' We are NOT our parents.

Throw into these factors a midlife crisis (a period of psychological stress occurring in middle age, which is thought to be triggered by a physical or domestic event and characterized by a strong desire for change), and you've got a pretty definitive description of the life and circumstances that embody Margulies' play.

Critical Overview

Margulies' *Dinner with Friends* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in the year 2000. This would make one think that it was greeted with critical applause in every published account. Although most critics praised the play, mostly because they like Margulies' writing, they do not all think that it is his best work.

Los Angeles Times Critic Michael Phillips says that although *Dinner with Friends* might not be as distinctive as some of Margulies' past work, it is "a lively, witty and finally bittersweet question in the form of a two-act comedy-drama." The question that Phillips is referring to is, "How do any two people keep it together?"

This question (and its subsequent answer, if any) could be viewed, as some Critics have viewed it, as a mundane topic for a play. But John Simon in the *New York Magazine* believes that' "Margulies is a master of observing what might seem old hat with fresh eyes, hearing it with fresh ears." Simon describes some of the lines in the play as "funny...with an underscoring of wistfulness." Critic David Sheward in *Back Stage* seems to agree, as he calls the playa "sharply Written comedy-drama." Sheward continues by defining Margulies as a playwright who "refuses to go for easy answers...By unstintingly presenting all sides of this domestic explosion...he goes beyond sitcom and soap opera to true theatrical insight into how marriage and friendship really work." On the other side, critic Frank Scheck in *Hollywood Reporter* slightly disagrees. The play doesn't dig deep enough, says Scheck. However, Scheck does qualify his criticism by continuing that the play does contain "moments that resonate with humor and poignancy."

At the website "NYtheatre.com," critic Martin Denton. believes that Margulies "has written the play of his generation, a drama that taps into the collective psyches of those of us who came of age in the '70s." Although Denton also agrees that the material that Margulies covers in this play is "scary territory...because it is so familiar," he praises Margulies' writing for its bluntness and honesty. "This is the world," Denton continues, "Margulies exposes...and he lets it fester before our eyes like an uncauterized wound. He is showing us the rampant destructiveness that is our age's central tragedy. It's not pretty."

Continuing with a similar suggestion that the play has a familiar theme (a suggestion made by most of the reviewers), Michael Feingold is the *Village Voice* writes, "even when he [Margulies] tackles an old familiar tale, you can count on him to tell it differently.. .. Even at the end, where Margulies arranges his ironies a little too tidily, they aren't the usual ironies, and some of lus omissions are as striking as the points he emphasizes in drawing what's almost too complex to be called his moral." And finally, there is Critic Donald Lyons from the *New York Post,* who sums It all up. Lyons states, "The critic Enc Bentley once accused Paddy Chayefsky of 'writing his audience,' telling people what they want to hear. Margulies, with all his talent, does that, also.. . [T]here's a sense of Issues being sliced up too schematically and comfortably. But it's churlish to complain about a play and a production so full of life, warmth, laughs and wisdom."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in *English literature and in creative writing. She* is *a freelance editor and published writer In this essay, she looks at what Margulies has done in* Dinner with Friends *to help articulate issues in people's lives that have remained unexpressed.*

Margulies' *Dinner with Friends* is about what happens to couples and relationships when the illusion of solidity comes face to face with abrupt and shattering change. The experience can be as devastating as an earthquake: the sudden realization that the earth, which at one moment feels rock-hard underfoot, suddenly feels, at best, as insubstantial as a great pool of rolling waves. Then there are the aftershocks. That's where the point of Margulies' play is focused, on the aftershocks, the reflections on the meanings of the initial jolts of change.

When Margulies says, in an interview with Theron Albis, that his intention with this play is to "enlighten theatergoers...let them see aspects of their own lives that they might not otherwise consider, or they maybe never articulated before," he is referring to the aftershocks-not to the actual circumstances or details of divorce but to the consequences of that earthshaking event. How does divorce affect Beth and Tom? How does divorce affect their children? And more importantly, how does this divorce affect the lives of their friends, Karen and Gabe? Added to these questions is the focus of this essay: How does Margulies present these aspects, and how does he articulate them?

Margulies' presentation is evenhanded. He portrays all sides of an issue. He begins his play with a threesome, Beth with Karen and Gabe. This sets up the premise of the absent partner; a component of one couple is missing. He next shows the separating couple, Beth and Tom, and then returns to the couple that is still intact. Karen and Gabe. He ends the first act with another threesome; this time it is Tom with Karen and Gabe, rounding the picture with another version of the absent partner. This first act is an introduction to how Margulies is going to look at the topic of divorce throughout the rest of the play, both evenhandedly and from all different points of view. "One of the things that I try to do. " says Margulies in the Albis interview, "is to give voice and credence to all sides of an argument.' He does this, he says, so that "people leave the theater really grappling with what they've just seen."

So what does the audience see, and how does Margulies articulate the consequences of that all pervasive social construct of divorce that still sweeps through the lives of so many American families? And what is he articulating that according to Margulies' belief, may normally remain mute? What do many people have trouble talking about? Well, the answer might very well be found in fear, or better yet, anxiety. What could be harder to talk about than something that causes anxiety, which in many cases is suppressed by the person who is experiencing it? According to current psychological definitions, fear is a realistic reaction to actual danger, whereas anxiety can be a reaction to an unconscious threat. So how does Margulies articulate these anxieties through his characters, first Tom and Beth and then Karen and Gabe? Well. Margulies does it very subtly, with empty space, or silence, rather than with words. He combines

evenhandedness with empty space and comes up with an effective and alluring way to draw in his audience.

Beth is probably the most transparent character of the play. First of all, she is well aware of her fear of being left alone. "What's so great about being alone?" she asks, when Karen (in act 2. scene 2) thinks that Beth is running too fast into a new marriage so soon after her divorce. Beth obviously does not like being alone, does not want to indulge herself, does not want to "get to know" herself better by taking time off between relationships to heal her wounds, to make herself whole again. She feels whole only with a man in her life. Without a man she is flighty, erratic, a "mess." And although Beth thinks that she has put her finger on what her anxieties are and thus has found a solution to her problems, she is still a bit confused.

In this dialogue with Karen, Beth first defines her former self (while married to Tom) as being "artsy and incompetent." She says that she tried and failed to compete with Karen in this former state. Then in her next breath, she states that in finding a new man and contemplating a new marriage, she is showing "signs of being on an equal footing" with Karen. Unfortunately, Beth is still trying to be like Karen. Margulies presents this scene selling up Karen and Beth neither as positive nor negative models but rather depicting two women who define their identities both within and outside of a relationship in two different ways.

Beth's husband, Tom, also may be a bit confused about his identity, for Margulies appears to set Tom up as the most vulnerable of the characters; he is suffering from the symptoms of a mid life crisis, which tends to cause people to make dramatic changes in their lives, usually under a lot of psychological stress. Again. Margulies does not make a judgment on this character, but one of the questions that the audience has to answer is this: Is Tom making responsible decisions? "Look what you've *done* to me!" Tom exclaims in the midst of a bitter argument with Beth. Reading into this proclamation, the audience hears the following: I am not responsible for my own actions.

A little later in the same act, Tom comes over to Karen and Gabe's house to talk about his plans for divorce. But before he begins to explain himself, when the subject of food is brought up, Tom asks if there is any cake left. Karen is astonished that Tom even knew about the cake. "You talk about *cake?"* she asks. "Yeah," Tom replies. "Why not?" What is implied here is rather obvious. Here is a couple (Tom and Beth) in the throes of a life-altering crisis. Behind Karen's question are several other layers of questions, as she tries to imagine the conversation that Beth and Tom had. One of Karen's questions might be, what is the level of your emotions if you have room inside your mind to discuss dessert? Dessert is frivolous. It is not a need. Of course, Margulies knows that some people in the audience are also wondering about this, questioning Tom's maturity, his commitment to his family; while on the other hand, others may see it as quite natural for Tom to be thinking about food to help curb the stress he is experiencing.

Of all the characters, Karen is the most vocal. She is very opinionated and does not hold back any of her feelings. But even Karen has her silences, and her biggest silence is caused by her fear that one day Gabe might leave her. "I'in telling you," Karen says to

Beth (in act 2), and then goes on to describe men who hold all their feelings inside until one day they finally explode. "It's like men get by for years without really talking to you," Karen says. Then Beth says, "You and *Gabe* talk . ." And this is one of the only places in the whole play where Karen is at a loss for words and at a loss of conviction. In an ambivalent voice, she answers, "Yeah..." Of course, the audience knows that the only times that Karen and Gabe do attempt a deep conversation, Karen has to pull the words from Gabe's mouth. The audience also knows that Karen complains about Gabe not talking. What Karen is exposing in her silence are her doubts, her questions. Will she end up just like Beth one day?

If Gabe' s silences are not immediately obvious to the audience, Karen, his wife, does not hesitate to point them out. When Karen does point them out, Gabe becomes somewhat defensive. He tries to deny that there is any significance behind his Silence, and then he turns on Karen, stating that she's Just trying to pick a fight. "What do you want me to say, that this whole thing [the divorce of their friends] scares the sh-t out of me?" he asks. Although he sometimes surrenders his silence upon Karen's insistence, Gabe returns to it as soon as he can. At the end of the play, there is a big silence.

Karen asks a very significant question. "How do we not get lost?" she asks. How does Margulies have Gabe respond? Gabe resorts to playing a game.

It seems fitting to end with a question hanging in the air, ending with a charged silence If Margulies' aim is to have the audience leave grappling With what they have just seen, what better way to end the play than with a question. And it's not just any question. It is the question that moves the whole play. By having Karen ask, "How do we not get lost?" Margulies turns over to the audience the real ending of his play. This is a play about commitment and long-term relationships. And maybe Margulies doesn't have an answer for Karen's question. Maybe the answer to this question is Margulies' silence.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *Dinner with Friends,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001

Critical Essay #2

Petruso is a freelance author and screenwriter in Austin, Texas. In the following essay, she discusses how the concept of food is used in Dinner with Friends.

The title of playwright Donald Margulies' work suggests the central, if subtle, role that food and cooking play in *Dinner with Friends* At the heart of the relationship between the two couples, Karen and Gabe and Beth and Tom, have been the meals they have shared together over the years. *Dinner with Friends* explores what happens when this bond is broken. Margulies uses food and related concepts in several ways. Primarily, food is employed as a symbol of stability, comfort, friendship, family, and closeness. The use of this symbol shows the differences between Beth and Tom, individually and as a couple, compared to Karen and Gabe. This essay explores the complex ways in which food is used.

In the play, Gabe and Karen are the stable couple. They remain together at the beginning, middle, and end of the play. Gabe and Karen's relationship, indeed their very life, is defined by food. They are food writers who have recently traveled to Italy for their work. Their every experience on their trip hinged on food and cooking. Though it was a work-related trip, they discuss nothing else but driving to and from food The only places they visited were related to food and work. No mention is made of any tourist or historical sites, Just markets, produce, and cooks. Even as they have Beth in their home for dinner and to hear about their trip, present food concerns creep into the conversation. In this and every other scene they have together, they constantly insert critiques about the food they have prepared in the midst of other conversations. Early in act 1, scene 1, when Karen senses that something is wrong, she asks Beth, "Was dinner...?" as if food is the only potential problem. While food keeps Gabe and Karen together, it also weighs them down. As Patti Hartigan of the *Boston Globe* points out, "Karen and Gabe are only passionate when they discuss gourmet food.. ."

Because food plays a central role in Gabe and Karen's lives, it also is important in their friendships as well. Food has been the foundation of their relationship with Beth and Tom. They have cooked often for their friends, and this relationship will become significantly altered when they can no longer cook for them as a couple. The flashback in act 2, scene 1, shows how food was the basis of the relationship from the beginning in the 1960s. There, Beth and Tom first met at a dinner set up by Karen and Gabe while on vacation at Martha's Vineyard. The latter couple is already married by this time. While Karen cooks and Gabe brings in the groceries, the conversation is much more varied than later in their marriage. Cooking is not everything at this time. The four discuss topics such as the Vineyard and its terrain and how they know each other. While food symbolizes the already established bond between Karen and Gabe, it does not yet define them.

In that flashback scene, Beth tries to assist in making the meal when the situation becomes slightly awkward, but she cuts herself in the process. This moment symbolizes her problematic relationship with food and cooking, which in turn underscores her

problematic marriage. Beth is the first to admit she cannot cook. She was once an artist who did design work for books Beth had greater aspirations but felt no encouragement from her husband and currently has no career but raising her children. She finds nothing wrong with this, but It puts her and her marriage in negative contrast to Gabe and Karen and their marriage.

Early in the play, Gabe teasingly says to Beth, when describing the potential consequences of Karen's reckless driving in Italy, "you and Tom would become the boys' guardians, raise them on processed foods...." The stage directions then read, "Beth swipes at him affectionately for his affectionate dig." Though in fun, this statement implies the superiority of Gabe and Karen's handmade, gourmet cooking and related lifestyle. In act 1, scene 2, when Tom appears in Beth's bedroom, he sees the placemats that Gabe and Karen gave them as a present. Beth admits to him, "Karen and Gabe, God love 'em, they know what a disaster I am in the kitchen so they're always giving me things like trivets and cookbooks." The implication is that Beth's lack of culinary abilities somehow makes her inferior, and, by extension, her and Tom's marriage is inferior.

As is revealed over the course of the play, Beth's marriage is indeed a failure. The pressure of the dinner with Gabe and Karen, the facade of stability, becomes too much for her to bear. In act 1, scene 1, she has to tell them what has happened. Yet Gabe and Karen's food also comforts her in her time of need. At the end of act 1, scene 1, the couple uses dessert, lemon-almond polenta, to console Beth. They turn the subject back to food to make her feel better and them more comfortable. Karen and Gabe also sort of believe that time eating with them might have helped Tom and Beth's marriage. Karen tells Beth at one point in act 1, scene 1, "God, I wish you guys had come with us to Italy!" This implies that Karen believes the recent food-oriented trip might have helped save the marriage, though she knows Tom's affair had already been going on for several months.

Tom, Beth's estranged husband and a lawyer, also has a tenuous relationship with food. Though the issue is not directly addressed, it is implied that he does not cook, only eats. He always wants to be served. In act 1, scene 2, when he learns that Beth has told Gabe and Karen, without him, about their marriage being over, he asks detailed questions about their conversation, wanting "the whole picture"-inc1uding the food. What they ate is nearly as important as what was said. Tom is also annoyed that Beth did not bring any food home with her. Food is something he expects to be there no matter what.

When Tom goes to Gabe and Karen's house that same night in act 1, scene 3, the difference in his evolving values becomes more obvious. Though Gabe and, especially, Karen are mad at him, Tom wants the Same food and the same desert-Le., the same comfort and understanding-as Beth. This also allows Tom the time to tell his side of the story in the security of Gabe and Karen's kitchen. Though Karen will have no part of it, Tom plays on their food sympathies by telling Gabe that his only meal was "Just a crappy sandwich at the airport." Gabe fixes him leftovers, but Tom does not ask him to warm them up. Further, Tom asks about how Gabe cooked the meal, knowing, at least

subconsciously, how important that subject is to Gabe But much of Tom's conversation is about his own life, primarily related to sex He defines marriage and happiness in terms of sex, not food. Gabe tries to understand, but their values are now very different. It is already obvious that Tom is diverging from the power of food as Gabe and Karen know it, though Tom is not prepared to give it up completely

Yet without much mention of food, Tom and Beth meet other people. When Beth and Karen meet in act 2, scene 2, and Tom and Gabe in scene 3, the importance of food has diminished for the estranged couple in the former scene, Beth and Karen talk over lunch at Karen and Gabe's home. Beth remains part of the domestic scene, though she has a new man in her life. Beth talks about how she has moved forward with her life and abandoned painting. She had known her new boyfriend for some years and met up with him again over a drink (not a meal) because they were both in failing marriages. Beth describes how she is enjoying life, but there is no discussion of food.

The women end up arguing because Beth believes that Karen does not want her to change. Beth invokes food at least twice to show how Karen relishes her culinary, and therefore life, superiority. Beth refuses to let Karen's food prowess be used in that way anymore At one point in the scene, Beth says, "You got to be Miss Perfect. Everything just right. Just the right wine, just the right spice, just the right husband. How was I supposed to compete with that?" Later in the same exchange, Beth emphasizes, "We can't all be like you, Karen God knows I've tried. No matter how much *I* stir, my soup still sticks to the pot." Though Karen and Beth manage to remain friends and continue to eat together, their relationship has been forever altered.

The relationship between Gabe and Tom has even less of a future. In act 2, scene 3, the men meet for drinks at a bar in Manhattan. Gabe is described as a bit uncomfortable. No wonder: there is no food, no sustenance. There is nothing homemade or handmade It is not a comfortable kitchen or even an intimate restaurant they meet in a bar. As in their earlier conversation, Tom mostly talks about his love life, with little mention of food. Further, Tom tells Gabe that his previous life was a fake and completely wrong, which Gabe finds hard to believe. Gabe defends the idea of the stability of marriage and thus his own life. Yet one way Tom tries to sell Nancy, his new love, to Gabe, so that they can remain friends and Tom can still be part of the life he once had, is with food Tom claims that Nancy "knows a lot about food" and wants to pursue a career as a nutritionist. This faint relationship to food is not enough. The stage directions read, as the pair parts, "Gabe's smile fades as he watches Tom walk away; he knows It is the last time they will see each other.. ."

The final scene of *Dinner with Friends* shows Karen and Gabe making sense of what has happened to their friends. They are confused and saddened by the way these intimate friends, whom they have fed numerous times, have changed However, food remains part of their conversation because it is their life. They know where their meals will come from, even if Tom and Beth do not. Margulies Implies that while variety may be the spice of life, the power and intimacy of food and stable living has something going for it as well. Lovingly prepared food is always good, but it is not the only way to live

Source: A Petruso, Critical Essay on *Dinner with Friends,* in *Drama for Students.* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review of Dinner with Friends, *Brustein praises Margulies for creating "a mood of bittersweet nostalgia"*

Dinner with Friends (Variety Arts) is a new play by Donald Margulies that is also about a broken contract, this time between a husband and a wife The play follows two couples-Gabe and Karen, Beth and Tom-during a twelve year period. Over a dinner of red wine, grilled lamb, pumpkin risotto, and polenta (food is the central metaphor of the play), Beth tells her hosts that Tom is leaving her for another woman. Their sex life has been deteriorating and, as Tom later reveals to the same friends, Beth has killed his self-confidence as a man.

What Margulies proceeds to anatomize is the impact of this mental crisis on the other couple. The four friends had spent many happy summers and eaten many gourmet meals together on Martha's Vineyard, and now their relationship has splintered beyond repair. Although there is considerable analysis of character in the play-Tom is a narcissistic lawyer, Beth is a self-involved artist-the playwright is more interested in the fragile nature of marriage. What happens to couples "when practical matters begin to outweigh abandon"? Should people follow their impulses regardless of the children? How do we respond to the need for change without hurting others? Can Gabe's friendship for Tom survive the breakup? Tune in tomorrow.

I don't mean to make the play sound like a soap. Domestic though it is, the plot is more sophisticated than Jack loves Jill and Jill loves Bill and Bill has the hots for Phil. By cutting back and forth in time, Margulies creates a mood of bittersweet nostalgia, touching on an extremely topical subject: the breakdown in sexual relationships. He also writes nice scenes for actors, and, under Daniel Sullivan's smooth direction, Matthew Arkin, Lisa Emery, Carolyn McCormick and Kevin Kilner (reminding us a lot of his anagrammatic namesake, Kevin Kline) give sprightly performances.

Dinner with Friends appeals to audiences by turning a mirror on those audiences, prosperous baby-boomers in the throes of broken marriages and fractured friendships. Yet Margulies provides no context or explanation for the condition he observes. Since the breakdown seems to occur in a social vacuum, we end up feeling less like engaged participants than like detached voyeurs Eugene O'Neill gives us characters harrowed by family Circumstances, breaking under the weight of a discarded religious inheritance. Arthur Miller gives us characters trapped and floundering in a heartless social mechanism. David Mamet gives us characters molded by a world of avarice and greed. But Donald Margulies just gives us characters, with nothing more at stake than personal satisfaction.

Source: Robert Brustein, Review of *Dinner with Friends,* in *New Republic,* Vol. 222, No. 16&17, April 17 & 24, 2000, P 66.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review, Simon calls Margulies a leading playwright and says Dinner with Friends *"is entertainment as succulent as it is sobering.* "

Slowly but surely, Donald Margulies is establishing himself as one of our leading playwrights Four of his plays are of prime importance: *The Loman Family Picnic, Sight Unseen, Collected Stories,* and now the wonderful *Dinner With Friends.*

Two married couples have been best friends for years. In their Connecticut home, Karen and Gabe, international food writers, are giving a dinner for Beth and Tom, which he doesn't attend. It emerges from the heartbroken Beth that he has left her for another woman, Nancy. Gabe and Karen are almost as crushed, having expected "to grow old and fat together, the four of us." When Tom shows up at his home in the next scene, late at night, he is enraged that Beth broke the news of their breakup in his absence. Late as it is, he rushes over to his friends in the next scene to present his side of the story.

Act Two begins with another dinner, twelve and a half years earlier, in a summer-house on Martha's Vineyard, where Karen and Gabe are introducing Beth to Tom. Then we skip to five months after the events of Act One, as Beth reveals to Karen, on the summer-house patio, that she has fallen in love with an old friend whom she intends to marry. Rather than share in Beth's happiness, a shocked-and envious-Karen does everything to dissuade Beth, who justifiably resents her meddling. Later that day, in a Manhattan bar, Tom, a lawyer, tells Gabe about his happiness with Nancy, to which Gabe reacts sourly.

Still later that night, Gabe and Karen are going to bed in the Vineyard house, and discuss the Tom-and-Beth situation, as well as their own by-now uneventful marriage, in which they soldier on without much passion and with some misgivings, clinging to it like the shipwrecked to their raft.

From this already you can gather that there is skillful construction here, as well as keen psychological insight. Thus Tom and Beth end their aforementioned angry confrontation by hungrily enacting the beast with two backs. Thus Tom's racing over to his friends to justify himself has an additional motive: Karen's fabulous lemon-almond polenta cake that Beth tells him was a comfort to her and whose leftovers he's dying to taste. Thus the strength and weakness of a stagnant marriage are emblematized in the ritual of folding a bedspread in perfect harmony but with robotic emotional detachment.

Margulies is a master of observing what might seem old hat with fresh eyes, hearing It with fresh ears. When the Jealousy-racked Karen wonders about Beth's long-standing infidelity, "We saw them practically every weekend in those days, when would she have had time for an affair?" Gabe answers, "I don't know, during the week?" This is funny, especially as Matthew Arkin delivers it, but with an underscoring of wistfulness Throughout, this ostensibly contented pair give off an aroma of envy as their opposite numbers cut loose from the time "when practical matters begin to outweigh abandon. "

Take Beth's confession that during some stupid action movie she refused to fondle Tom's crotch:

Karen: "Was this before or after the girlfriend?"
Beth. "Must've been after"
Karen. "That's right, one more nail In the old coffin" Beth. "You got it "
Gabe. "See that? One lousy hand Job, you could've saved your marriage. "
Karen. "Gabel"

You can feel that Karen's exclamation is only partly concern for Beth's feelings. Daniel Sullivan's inventive direction helps immeasurably, as does Neil Patel's perfect-pitch set design, Matthew Arkin superbly lets Gabe's doubts peek through his certainties; Lisa Emery does Karen's edginess on the threshold of hysteria splendidly. As Beth, Julie White again proves herself a complete comedienne down to those little inchoate noises that convey seismic tremors, as Tom, Kevin Kilner goes from likable to ludicrous without skipping a beat. *Dinner With Friends* is entertainment as succulent as it is sobering.

Source: John Simon, "Friends?," In *New York Magazine,* November 22, 1999, pp. 89-90

Adaptations

Margulies wrote a film adaptation of *Dinner with Friends,* which Norman Jewison directed for HBO, released in 2001.

Topics for Further Study

In Margulies' play, *Dinner with Friends,* the following lines make commercial references: "DAD' WE WANT TO WATCH *THE ARISTOCATS"* and "You want some Motrin?" In order to make more money, producers of plays and movies often put subtle commercials into their productions. These are two examples. Write an opinion piece about this practice of commercialization. What are the benefits? Do they outweigh any cons you can see in this practice?

The movie *American Beauty,* which won the Academy Award for best picture in 1999, covers themes that are in some ways similar to, as well as in contrast with, the themes in *Dinner with Friends.* Watch the movie (now on video) and then write a paper on how the two works approach similar topics, stressing both their similarities and dissimilarities.

In act 1, scene 1, of *Dinner with Friends* the dialogue between Karen and Gabe overlaps. Find a partner and practice this first scene (End at the place where the children's voices are heard.) Work on the rhythm until it is smooth, and then present it to your class.

The couples in Margulies' *Dinner with Friends* were probably raised in the late 1950s, were married in the late 1970s, and were divorced in the 1990s. Research statistics of divorce in Amer ica during those three decades. How have divorce rates changed?

What Do I Read Next?

Margulies' *Collected Stones* (1996) was a 1997 Pulitzer Prize finalist for drama. The play concerns the developing relationship between a young writer and her mentor. The plot turns when the mentor feels betrayed because the young writer publishes a book that closely resembles details in the mentor's life.

Sight Unseen (1991), by Margulies, was an Obie award winner and tells the story, in numerous flashback scenes, of a young artist and his struggle to let go of his past, specifically his relationship with a former lover and one-tune muse.

Plays from South Coast Repertory (1993) is a collection of plays that have been performed at one of Donald Margulies' favorite theaters. This collection includes six plays, which include *Prelude to a Kiss,* by Craig Lucas, as well as *Sight Unseen,* by Margulies.

The Real Thing (1982) is a play by Tom Stoppard, and it deals with themes similar to those in Margulies' *Dinner with Friends.*

Jhumpa Lahiri won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Her collection of stones *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) includes "A Temporary Matter," which tells the story of a marriage in trouble after the stillborn birth of a child

Three Days of Rain (1999), by Richard Greenberg, the recipient of the Oppenheimer Award for the best new American playwright, was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. His plays concern the same kind of basic human longings that Margulies has captured in his work.

Further Study

Janich, Kathy. "Margulies Sees Pulitzer as Career-Affirming Prize," in *Atlantic Journal and Constitution,* October 1, 2000, p L3.

Janich presents an interview with Donald Margulies in which he discusses his play *Dinner with Friends* as well as his opinions about American theater.

Margulies, Donald. "Theater; A Playwright Has His Dinner and Diner, Too," in *New York Times,* January 16, 2000.

Margulies discusses his reactions to the French version of his play *Dinner with Friends* that opened a few months before it opened in New York, off Broadway.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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