Dirty Blonde Study Guide

Dirty Blonde by Claudia Shear

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Introduction

Dirty Blonde, a play by Claudia Shear, was first performed off-Broadway, at the New York Theater Workshop, in January 2000. It was a box-office success and moved to the Helen Hayes Theater on Broadway later that year. The play was published in 2002 by Samuel French, Inc., and as of 2006 was in print.

Dirty Blonde is at once a contemporary love story and a re-creation of key incidents in the life of Mae West, the legendary stage and screen star famous for her uninhibited sexuality, provocative double entendres, and lines such as “Why don't ya come up sometime and see me.” As the play interweaves the growing romance between Jo and Charlie, two Mae West fans in New York—Charlie met Mae West in her old age—with scenes from West's career, the audience gets to see how carefully and confidently Mae West developed the extravagant, sexy, taboo-breaking public persona that was the hallmark of her fame. *Dirty Blonde* also hints at the personal price Mae West paid for her need to constantly maintain her public image and explores issues related to cross-dressing, homosexuality, and the need for self-discovery and self-acceptance.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1963

Though her exact birth date is not provided in online sources that give biographical information, it is believed that playwright and actress Claudia Shear was born about 1963. She is the daughter of a deputy chief of the New York City Fire Department and an Italian mother who worked for a cosmetics company. Shear's father left her mother soon after Shear was born. Shear grew up in Brooklyn, where she hung out with a crowd of tough girls: □We broke bottles and made out in alleyways and hid our cigarettes in bushes near our houses only to retrieve them the next day, crushing leaves between our fingers to mask the smell of smoke,□ she wrote in *Blown Sideways Through Life* (1995). When she was twelve she got her first job, working in a hardware store in the Bronx, New York, in the 1970s. She also spent time working on a dairy farm in upstate New York. Shear was a voracious reader, devouring everything from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to the Book-of-the-Month Selections. □I read anything I could get my hands on,□ she wrote.

As a young woman, Shear moved from one low-status, menial job to the next. By 1995, as she writes in *Blown Sideways Through Life*, she had held sixty-five jobs. She had been a makeup artist for Helena Rubenstein at Bloomingdale's, a bartender, a proofreader at a law firm, a takeout cook, a □fake secretary for a guy pulling a con involving pens,□ a room service waitress in a hotel, a phone girl in a whorehouse on New York's East Forty-ninth Street, and a nude model for a painter. The best job she ever had, she wrote, was when, as a teenager, she worked in a variety of positions at Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival.

While she worked these jobs, she was also developing her talent as an actress and writer. *Blown Sideways Through Life* made its first appearance as a play staged at the New York Theater Workshop in 1993. It received a favorable review from Frank Rich in the *New York Times* and ran for eighty-nine performances before transferring to the Cherry Lane Theater, where it ran from January to July 1994. The play won the 1993-1994 OBIE Award, with Special Citation for Claudia Shear.

Shear then wrote *Dirty Blonde*, a musical play which explores the life of the twentieth-century American cultural icon, Mae West, through the eyes of two of her devoted fans. *Dirty Blonde*, with Shear in the starring role, opened at the New York Theater Workshop on January 10, 2000, moved to Broadway later in the same year, and was also produced in London's West End. The play was nominated for five Tony awards and was also nominated for Drama Desk awards. It received the Drama League Award for Best Play.

Shear's credits as an actress include *The One with the Fake Monica*. Her film credits include *The Opportunists*, *Earthly Possessions*, and *It Could Happen to You*.

Plot Summary

Dirty Blonde begins with Jo, a young would-be actress and her friend Charlie, both Mae West fans, enthusiastically talking about how they admire a □tough girl,□ a girl □who doesn't care if you're shocked,□ and who says and does exactly what she wants. (Tough girl was a phrase in vogue in the 1910s and 1920s. It was used to describe raucous, assertive women like Mae West.)

Charlie recalls the dull conformity of his upbringing in the Midwest, while Jo remembers when she first heard the Mae West song, □I'm No Angel,□ sung by a Catholic high school friend of hers named Darla, who then promptly gave a full-blown impersonation of West. Charlie recalls when he first saw the Mae West film, *I'm No Angel*, when he was still in high school. He was so captivated he went to see the film every day for a week.

The next scene takes place in Poli's Theater, in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1912. Jo, now dressed as nineteen-year-old Mae West, is arguing with Harry (the same actor who plays Charlie), her partner in her traveling vaudeville act. (Vaudeville was a variety stage show made up of songs, dances, dramatic sketches, pantomime, juggling, and the like.) Harry is worried that Mr. Poli, the theater owner, will object to the sexual suggestiveness of Mae's act.

They do their act together. Mae addresses the young men in the audience (□you Yale boys□) and then sings □Cuddle Up and Cling to Me.□ She moves vigorously to the music as Harry accompanies her on the piano. Her dress strap breaks, revealing a bare breast. She looks down, cups her breast, and the curtain falls. (This was a deliberate, well-established routine that Mae West went through in her early days in vaudeville.)

Harry then stands by the piano and explains to the *Dirty Blonde* audience that every week it was a different stunt, with Mae doing outrageous, sexy things on stage. He toured with Mae for thirty-two weeks. Finally he had sex with her, after which she fired him.

Jo enters and tells how in August of the current year she went to visit Mae West's grave. She enters the Cypress Hills Mausoleum in Brooklyn and on the second floor finds the West family. Mae is buried next to her mother.

The lights then go up on Charlie, who tells of a trip he made to Los Angeles to meet Mae when he was seventeen. He hung around in the lobby of the apartment house, until a man named Joe Frisco, a former vaudeville comedian famous for his jazz dance, arranged for him to go up to Mae's apartment.

The scene switches to Ravenswood, Mae's apartment. Part of the scene is a reenactment of Charlie's first meeting with Mae, and part of it is Charlie's later recollection of the event. He shows her the scrapbook he has been keeping of her, and they look at it together, page by page. Mae invites him to go to dinner with her and Joe

Frisco at a Chinese restaurant. At the dinner, Mae tells Charlie how to stay healthy with regular enemas. He is embarrassed. He then makes the mistake of noticing another movie star in the restaurant. Mae glares at him; she does not like competition. She continues to talk frankly, this time about her sexual experiences as a young girl. She is interested in what Charlie says only if it is about her.

Charlie says he never forgot his week in Los Angeles. After her death, he visited her grave every year.

Jo and Charlie meet for the first time, at Mae's grave. It is August 17, Mae's birthday. Charlie says Jo looks like Mae. As they leave the mausoleum, they get sandwiches and sit on a park bench, where they share their enthusiasm for Mae. Jo reveals that her ambition is to succeed as an actress, and Mae is her inspiration. Charlie reveals that he works in the film archives at the public library; he invites her to stop by some time. A tentative feeling of friendship grows between them.

At the Variety Vaudeville House in New York in January 1911, Mae confidently informs vaudeville star Frank Wallace that she is to be his partner. A month later, at Rehearsal Hall, they are seen rehearsing a dance step, and then in March of the same year they dance together at a theater in Chicago. At a theater in Milwaukee in April, Frank worries that they may be fired because they are not married. He persuades her to marry him, but soon Mae tires of their joint act, arranges for Frank to tour somewhere else, and strikes out on her own again. The audience boos her, and she gets poor reviews.

Jo visits the film archives, where Charlie shows her some photos of Mae and her family and associates. They briefly discuss their own families—Charlie's parents are both dead—and there is a brief moment of intimacy when they look at each other.

Frank Wallace recalls how he encountered Mae and her new lover, Jim Timony, on Broadway in 1920. Timony says he will be sending Frank divorce papers to sign. Frank goes home and cries.

In the film archives, Charlie recalls again his trip to Los Angeles. On his second day he returns to her apartment and they look at his scrapbook again, as Mae talks about incidents in her life and gives her opinions about some of the famous names of the day. Then she compliments Charlie on his physique and makes a sexual overture to him, but he does not respond. She then shows him some of her expensive gowns and even gives one of them to him.

Back at the archives, Charlie tells Jo that he took the gown back to his motel and tried it on.

In the next scene, Mae meets Edward Elsner, a successful theater director. Elsner has a formal manner and is sexually repressed. He is rather disconcerted but also entranced by Mae as she tells him about the play she has written, titled *Sex*, which she wants him to direct. He agrees.

At Daly's Theater, Mae is rehearsing her role as the prostitute, Margy Lamont, with a character named Lt. Gregg. Elsner interrupts and tells Mae she is acting too much. She does not need to act at all; rather, since she is naturally sexy, she should just be herself. They play the sexually suggestive scene again, with more instruction from Elsner. Elsner is delighted with the result and is turned on by the whole scene.

The scene switches to a courtroom, where Mae is appearing on a charge of public indecency because of the lewd content of the play. Mae spars with the judge, who fines her and sentences her to ten days in prison.

Jo and Charlie are smoking marijuana in Charlie's apartment and watching Mae's final movie, *Sextette*, made when she was eighty-five years old. Jo does not like the movie, but Charlie defends it. He also comments that the sad thing about Mae was that she never let herself love anyone other than herself.

As they talk, Charlie mentions that he was a wrestler in high school and was once district champion. Jo seems to be impressed and asks him to wrestle her. He refuses at first but after she shoves him, he agrees to show her a few moves. He soon pins her, and she says he is very strong.

They exit, and Ed Hearn enters. Ed was a female impersonator in vaudeville. Mae gave him a job backstage when her play *Sex* was running. In a reenactment, the two of them are shown talking at her dressing table. Mae learns from Ed that one of her admirers, a man named DuPont, is a homosexual. She had not realized this before, and it gives her an idea for a play called *The Drag*, which she envisions as a homosexual comedy. The Duchess, another female impersonator, enters, and he and Ed together sing a song, “*Oh My! How We Pose*.” They sashay around, showing Mae all the right moves and then move downstage together and continue singing. Ed and the Duchess then report how when they appeared in *The Drag*, they were arrested for indecency.

Jo enters and admits that men frighten her, but she likes being with Charlie. She knows he likes her. Charlie, who has entered during Jo's speech, recalls how he always loved to get dressed up as a vampire for Halloween. He hints that that is how “it started out,” but he gives no details.

In the next scene, which takes place in mid-October, Jo and Charlie are sitting in the film archives. As they both eat candy bars, Jo talks about how she loves dressing up. Charlie tells her there will be a Halloween costume party at the archives the following week. He encourages her to go as Mae West but says he will not dress up. He refuses to tell her why.

At Charlie's apartment, Jo finds a large white satin skirt in a box in the bedroom. She assumes that it is intended for her, but when she shows it to him, he freezes. She assumes then that Charlie is not only gay, he also likes to dress up in women's clothes.

Charlie speaks directly to the audience, reproaching himself for letting his secret be found out.

As Jo goes behind a dressing screen and undresses, Ed Hearn enters, explaining how Mae's mother had insisted that he dress Mae like “a real woman,” not in the fashionable style of the time. Ed and Charlie then assist Mae (Jo) to put on the whole Mae West outfit and to walk with the right swagger. Jo is thrilled. The crowning moment occurs when Charlie hands her the dirty blonde wig. Then Ed hands her a hat made out of willow, a few feathers and a diamond bracelet. Ed recalls that he attended the opening night of Mae's play, *Diamond Lil*, and this time the critics loved it. Jo, as Mae, sings a song, “A GUY WHAT TAKES HIS TIME.” With Jo still in her Mae outfit, she and Charlie go to a club and dance. They also get drunk and have a wonderful time. In a taxi after they leave the club, Charlie tries to kiss her, but she rejects him, thinking that he is only doing it because he is drunk.

After Charlie gets out of the taxi, Jo wonders whether he may not be gay after all. But she is not ready to become involved with him. She does not even care for men who wear cologne, let alone—she implies—those who dress up as women.

She calls Charlie later on to tell him she had a great time. Charlie knows she is hesitant regarding him but convinces himself that the problem is hers, not his.

Ed Hearn enters, recalling Mae's first appearance in a movie, which was such a success that a movie was then made of *Diamond Lil*. He also recalls Mae's first meeting with Cary Grant and her first years of fame and success. He says she did not hang around with the Hollywood crowd, but with gays, blacks, and boxers. One boxer, Kid Moreno, recalls how Mae used to enjoy watching a bloody fight and how she would befriend the boxers.

The next scene is of a film set. Ed recalls how Mae would give him a part in all her movies. Mae is shown rehearsing Kid Moreno for the one line he has to say, but he still manages to get it wrong. Mae does a witty ad lib to save the day.

Ed recalls how Mae's movies declined in quality, and she had trouble with censors. But Ed also says that part of the decline was Mae's fault because she would not listen to good advice. She always had to be in charge. Ed mentions her disastrous collaboration with W. C. Fields in the Universal movie, *My Little Chickadee*. After Paramount dropped her in the late 1930s, Mae changed, says Ed.

The scene switches to Ravenswood in the late 1940s. Mae, now in her mid-fifties, refuses a part in Billy Wilder's film, *Sunset Boulevard*, because she does not want to play a has-been.

Charlie visits Jo at eleven o'clock at night. He confesses to her that he dresses up as Mae and only Mae. Jo says that is fine, but Charlie senses it is not. It is not even fine with him. She asks him to dress up for her, but he refuses.

Frank Wallace enters, talking about his divorce from Mae. He recalls that he last saw Mae in Las Vegas, on stage, surrounded by young musclemen, and singing full out.

The next scene is set in Las Vegas. Mae, seated on a chair as two musclemen pose, sings “Dirty Blonde.”

After the lights change, Charlie recalls when he saw Mae's final movie, *Sextette*, which was made in 1978, when Mae was eighty-five years old. He was in Los Angeles at the time, so he went to see her. Mae remembers him and tells him how her fans wait on the corner of the street, hoping to get a glimpse of her. But she is too old to oblige them now. Instead, she says, her friends help her out sometimes. She and Joe Frisco persuade Charlie to dress up like her and go outside so the fans can get a glimpse of her in the shadow of a hedge. Charlie puts on gown, lipstick and eyelashes, diamond necklace, wig, hat, and boa. When a tour bus comes, Charlie steps out of the house and walks up and down in the shadow of the hedge, to the delight of the tourists.

In Charlie's apartment at Halloween, Charlie is dressed as Mae. Then Jo enters, also dressed as Mae. After her initial surprise, Jo says he makes a good Mae. As the music, “Closing Rant,” plays, Jo and Charlie exchange a series of Mae West one-liners, after which Charlie grabs her and they kiss.

Characters

Armando

Armando is an Italian man who drives Jo to the cemetery where Mae West is buried.

Charlie

Charlie is rather lonely and isolated. He works in the film archives at the public library. He is a film buff and a huge Mae West fan; he even visits her grave every year on her birthday. When he was seventeen and "very geeky and serious," he traveled to Los Angeles to meet Mae and spent some time with her in her apartment and at a restaurant. No date is given for this encounter, but Mae was well advanced in years at the time.

Charlie was raised in what sounds like a rather repressive, conformist manner in the Midwest: "You wore khaki trousers, blue oxford button-down shirts, Bass Weejuns, white socks. Your Daddy dressed like that and that's what your Momma dressed *you* like." He has been a Mae West fan since he was in high school, when he saw her film *I'm No Angel* for the first time.

As Charlie strikes up a tentative friendship with Jo, she thinks at first he is gay. This turns out to incorrect, but Charlie does like to dress up as Mae West. He first experienced the thrill of dressing up at Halloween when he was a child, but he insists to Jo that he is not like the normal cross-dresser who simply likes wearing women's clothes. He only dresses up as Mae West. That is all. Partly through his friendship with Jo, he learns to accept himself and his quirky habit without self-reproach.

Duchess

Duchess is a female impersonator. He says to Mae, "I'm just the type that men crave." Duchess sings and dances with Ed Hearn and Mae. He also appears in Mae's play, *The Drag*, and is arrested along with Mae.

Edward Elsner

Edward Elsner, a well-known director, producer, performer, and writer, directed many plays on Broadway between 1912 and 1929, including Mae West's *Sex*. In the play, he is presented as cerebral and repressed, but fascinated by Mae's sexual allure. He speaks formally to her but is clearly excited by the sexual suggestiveness of the scene she rehearses with Lt. Gregg.

W. C. Fields

W. C. Fields was a famous comedian of the early and mid-twentieth century. Mae West starred with him in the film *My Little Chickadee*, but the two of them did not get along well. Ed Hearn says that was because Mae always thought she had to run the show, but in this case, W. C. Fields was also an established star who was used to being in charge.

Joe Frisco

Joe Frisco was a former vaudeville comedian famous in his day for his jazz dancing. He became a friend of Mae West and knew her well. In the play, it is Joe who invites young Charlie up to Mae's apartment to meet her.

Lt. Gregg

Lt. Gregg is a character in the play *The Drag*. He rehearses a scene with Mae that takes place in a brothel. Edward Elsner tells him to remember that he has come to see a whore, “not to play bridge with [his] maiden auntie.”

Harry

Harry is a piano player who is Mae West's vaudeville partner. He toured with her for thirty-two weeks in 1912. Everyone urged him not to sleep with Mae because then she would fire him, but in the end he succumbed to her sexual allure. Sure enough, a week later, in Pittsburgh, Mae fired him.

Ed Hearn

Ed Hearn is a female impersonator in vaudeville. He met Mae West when they were on the same bill together. Later, when he was broke, Mae took pity on him and gave him a job.

Jo

Jo is an enthusiastic, talkative young woman who works as an office temp but aspires to being an actress. She identifies strongly with Mae West because West was also from Brooklyn and succeeded in her career against all the odds. Jo is inspired to emulate her. “The first time I saw Mae West, a door opened up in my life,” she says. When this happened she was filled with a sense of new possibilities and tried out for a part in the school play, even though she was the type of person who would normally be expected to occupy a more low-key position such as stage manager rather than being the star.

Jo is conscious of the fact that she does not really fit in her own family. No one else shares her interest in the arts. She has two married sisters, but she is unmarried. In the eyes of her family, she is □the weirdo,□ she says, and she seems very aware of her mother's disapproval of her lifestyle, including that fact that she does not keep her apartment tidy. Jo is also, until she meets Charlie, uncomfortable with men. Her father left home when she was little, she had no brothers, and she went to a Catholic girls' school. She explains, □Men were like foreign creatures to me□they frightened me. They frighten me now.□

Judge

The judge presides over the City Magistrates Court, Tenth District, when Mae appears on a charge of public indecency after she performs in her play, *The Drag*. He speaks to Mae in an officious tone, fines her, and sentences her to ten days in prison.

Kid Moreno

Kid Moreno was a boxer, one of many who were befriended by Mae. She gave him a part in one of her movies, but he managed to fluff his one line.

Jim Timony

Jim Timony is Mae West's manager in 1920. He is a big Irishman. Frank Wallace describes him as □Face like a plate with a big derby stuck on top of his head.□

Frank Wallace

Frank Wallace was a vaudeville performer who became Mae West's partner. In the play they are shown dancing together as they tour New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee in 1911. They secretly get married, although no one is sure about when or where. But in 1920, Mae leaves Frank and takes up with Jim Timony. Frank is distressed by his loss.

Mae West

Mae West was an actress, playwright, and film star during the first half of the twentieth century, famous for her brazen sexual allure and her risqué, bawdy wit. □When caught between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before,□ is one of her well-known lines, which is quoted by Jo. In the play, Mae is seen at various stages in her career as a magnetic, forceful, but self-centered figure. Charlie, who observed her at firsthand, says, □she never let herself really learn how to love□anyone other than herself.□ It is as if Mae West is always playing the part of Mae West. She is also a woman who knows what she wants and persists until she gets it. In the scenes presented in the play, she dominates the men around her (with the single exception of W. C. Fields). She fires

Harry, her accompanist, when she feels like it. She casts Frank Wallace, her husband, aside when he is no longer useful to her. Men like Joe Frisco are hangers-on. She does not bow to authority, and she makes her own rules. However, she can also be kind, as when she gives Ed Hearn a job when he is down and out and later sets him up in business.

Themes

The Price of Stardom

Mae West worked long and hard to achieve success and to perfect the persona by which the world remembers her. She had some early failures, as shown in the play when she is booed off the vaudeville stage at the Albee Theater in Milwaukee in 1911, and the reviewer for *Variety* has this to say about her: □her new single act is the same old rough stuff, an act too coarse for this two dollar audience.□ But the play also shows that Mae refused to allow such setbacks to affect her self-confidence. When *Diamond Lil* was an immediate success, she was not surprised, as Ed Hearn reports that Mae said: □I just never thought it would take this long.□

However, the play also shows that West paid a price for her stardom. Having others admire, adore, and even worship her fed her vanity and narcissism. She could relate to others only when she herself was the subject. This is shown early in the play, in the scene in which young Charlie, visiting the aged Mae in her Ravenswood apartment, ventures the remark that he studies film and plans to work in a museum. The stage directions indicate that Mae immediately stops listening to him□they had previously been discussing one of her plays□turns to Joe Frisco and tells him what she wants for dessert. The point is clearly made: anything that is not about Mae West bores Mae West.

When she and Joe take Charlie to lunch, Mae sits alone in the back of the car, and Charlie observes her sink back into her seat, □staring straight ahead, like a doll on a pillow.□ This depiction shows how Mae always needed an audience; left to herself, it appears that she would simply disengage from life. She surrounded herself with people who did not question the fact that she was in control and set the terms of their relationship. She could not tolerate equals, as shone in the scene with W. C. Fields. Joe Frisco is a trusted companion because he is content to let Mae be in charge.

The Mae West of the play is a woman who refuses to grow and change. □She found what worked, what she was supposed to be, and she froze it, never let it go,□ says Charlie. This statement means that Mae tries as hard as she can to defy the passage of time. When Billy Wilder approaches her about a film role as a has-been, she refuses, claiming that she looks like a woman of twenty-six. (At the time, she was in her mid-fifties.) She calls to her maid to pull down the shades because the sun is too strong and she has to take care of her skin. This is a visual demonstration of Mae's need to deflect the real world and live only in the world she has constructed for herself.

Self-Discovery, Self-Acceptance, and Love

Jo and Charlie are oddballs, two people who feel, at the beginning of the play, that they do not really fit into ordinary life. Jo feels like the odd one out in her family. Her two

sisters are married but she is not, and no one in the family understands her interest in the arts. She is working as an office temp, but she really wants to be an actress. Jo is a person who is not yet fully formed, but she is very clear that she owes a lot to Mae West. It is through Mae that she first awakens to the possibilities for her life□what she might be able to do that would most perfectly express who she is. Jo is never happier or more excited than when she is dressed up as Mae, as when she and Charlie go to the disco together. Allowing herself to dress up liberates something inside her, and she becomes more herself as a result.

Charlie is somewhat of a loner, a quiet man, a film-lover who has an abiding interest in, one might even say obsession with, Mae West. Like Jo, Charlie is not close to his family. Both his parents are dead, and he relates a story about how, on one occasion when he arranged a special screening of a Mae West film for his cousins, one cousin, Shirley, did not like Mae's act. Shirley says, □I don't get her at *all*.□

As the friendship between Jo and Charlie grows, they learn together about self-discovery and self-acceptance. Charlie is timid at first, but it is clear that he likes Jo and feels that they might become friends. Jo has her doubts at first. She thinks Charlie is gay, and she learns about his cross-dressing habit. She says to herself about Charlie, □The longer I'm alone the more I know what I don't want.□ But eventually, when she knows more about Charlie, she realizes she has found someone with whom she can share a deep, authentic side of herself.

Charlie has some personal growth to do as well. He is troubled by his habit of dressing as Mae, but at first he is unwilling to admit it. He tries to convince himself that Jo's resistance to his attempts to kiss her after the dance reveals her problem rather than his. He assures himself: □'Cause you know what's wrong with you, Charlie? *Nothing*.□ But later, something inside tells him that this new relationship with Jo is important and that he must be authentic in it; he must share himself more fully, especially as they both have such an interest in Mae West. When he goes to Jo's apartment late at night, determined to tell Jo the truth, he half-expects her scorn and rejection. When instead he finds acceptance, he is not sure how to react. At first he does not really believe what he is hearing (□You'll pretend everything is okay□), but then he finally admits being uncomfortable with his habit of dressing up as Mae: □It's not '*fine*' with me and *I'm the one who does it!* He also admits that he wants change in his life and is ready to take action to achieve it. That is part of why he has turned up at Jo's apartment late at night and uninvited. He says, □It wasn't easy for me to come here□but I did it because I want my life to be different.□ Part of that change is to be more authentic about who he is, and the last scene shows that he has succeeded. It is Halloween, and Charlie is dressed up as Mae. When he modestly says that he does not make a good Mae, Jo reassures him by saying, □But you make a very good you.□ This sets up the conclusion, in which it is clear as they kiss that love is growing between them. By learning about and accepting each other they have also learned to be themselves, and in this acceptance love can find a way in.

Style

Although it contains many characters, performance of the play requires only one actress and two actors. The actress plays Jo and Mae; the first actor plays Charlie, Harry, Jim Timony, Lt. Gregg, Judge, Duchess, Kid Moreno, W. C. Fields, and a Muscleman. The second actor plays Armando, Joe Frisco, Frank Wallace, Edward Elsner, Ed Hearn, and a second Muscleman. The fact that so few actors can create so many characters is in keeping with the theme of impersonation.

The play is also notable for its rapid changes of scene and period, from the present-day encounters between Jo and Charlie to scenes set in the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and probably 1970s. There are a total of twenty-eight short scenes. But in spite of these many changes, when the play was produced in New York, the set remained simple throughout. The scene changes were created mostly by period costumes and artful use of lighting. In the original production at the New York Theater Workshop, for example, the director used what Ben Brantley in the *New York Times* for January 11, 2000, called the film-noir-style Venetian blind effect . . . for the scenes of Charlie's encounters with the ancient Mae. Lighting was also used to good effect in creating other scenes, enabling, for example, a pair of chairs to be transformed into a taxicab.

Historical Context

Mae West was born on August 17, 1893, in Brooklyn, New York. Her father was a prizefighter and her mother a former fashion model (for corsets). Her mother had a major influence on Mae's career, taking her as a child to the theater, encouraging her to practice, and supporting her emerging ambitions in every way she could. Mae West first performed in vaudeville at the age of about eight. She also spent much of her childhood closely observing the great vaudeville acts, including the biggest star of the day, Eva Tanguay, and the many female impersonators. West learned from vaudeville how to develop her own stage and later screen personality, complete with suggestive lyrics and double meanings and glamorous, often outrageous costumes.

Known throughout her life for her sexual bravado, West had her first lover at the age of thirteen, when she willingly allowed her twenty-one-year-old music teacher to seduce her. Over the years, West made no secret of the fact that she had many lovers. In an age in which sex was not discussed as openly as it is in the early 2000s, she completely accepted her sexuality as natural, not something that she should deny or be ashamed of. For West, sex was as natural as eating.

West met song-and-dance man Frank Wallace on tour in 1909, and they teamed up. Urged by a friend to marry in order to protect herself from scandal, West secretly married Wallace in Milwaukee in April 1911. However, she did not like the constraints marriage imposed and separated from her husband within months with the excuse that her mother wanted her to do a single rather than a double act. Wallace kept their marriage a secret until 1935.

In an act Mae West put on in 1912 in New Haven, Connecticut, her dancing was so erotic that it almost provoked a riot. Six years later, in 1918, she played the lead in the musical *Sometimes*, in which she introduced the famous and sexy shimmy dance, which she had learned in a nightclub in Chicago frequented by African Americans. As Charlie in *Dirty Blonde* puts it, □she would plant herself in one spot and just *shake*□stopped the show.□

In 1922, West hired Harry Richman, who was then an unknown piano player, as an accompanist. Their partnership was highly successful; between them they generated an exciting atmosphere on stage as they went through their routine of songs and skits, much of it written by West. However, Richman ignored a warning not to have an affair with West because it would cost him his job, and West subsequently fired him. After this, from 1923 to 1925, West's career slumped. Her decline was caused by poor decisions, a need always to be in charge, and some bad luck. Back on the vaudeville traveling circuit, she could no longer command top-of-the-bill status or the high salaries to which she had grown accustomed.

But in 1926, success returned when she starred in *Sex*, a play that she wrote herself. *Sex*, in which West plays a prostitute named Margy Lamont, ran at Daly's Theater on Broadway for three hundred and eighty-three performances. Critics disliked it, but that

did not matter to West. However, the play also aroused the moral ire of the police, who raided the theater in February 1927 and arrested West and her fellow actors. West treated the trial as another role, wearing a different outfit in court every day. She was convicted of producing an immoral play, fined, and sentenced to ten days in prison. She served eight days and was given preferential treatment, even lunching with the warden in his home. When she was released, she donated some money to the prison library.

Her next play, *The Drag*, was about homosexuality, at the time an even more controversial subject than prostitution. West always had a sympathetic view of male homosexuals, although she disliked lesbians. The play opened in Bridgeport, Connecticut, in January 1927, but was banned from New York.

After appearing in another play, *The Wicked Age* (1927), West starred in *Diamond Lil*, which opened at the Royale Theater on Broadway in April 1928. Based on stories West heard about a woman in the 1890s who had captured the heart of every man in her neighborhood but who valued only the diamonds they gave her, the play was a huge box-office success, running for almost a year. Many critics were won over by West's magnetic performance.

In the 1930s, West conquered Hollywood. For her first movie with Paramount, *Night after Night*, starring George Raft, she was given only a small role, but she enhanced it by writing the line that became famous. This was her response, quoted in *Dirty Blonde*, to the hatcheck girl's remark, □Goodness, what beautiful diamonds!□: □Goodness had nothing to do with it dearie.□

The following year, West selected Cary Grant for his first leading role, in *She Done Him Wrong*, a screen version of *Diamond Lil*. The film was an outstanding success, and West became Hollywood's biggest star. *I'm No Angel*, released by Paramount the same year and in which West was again paired with Grant, enhanced her new status. From 1934 to 1938, West starred in five more Paramount films, but then Paramount dropped her. The reasons appear to have been many: her stock with critics had fallen, she made enemies with her licentious sexual behavior, and she was generally regarded as a low-class outsider in Hollywood.

In 1940, West co-starred in Universal's *My Little Chickadee*, but she disliked the role she was given and did not get along with W. C. Fields. Universal offered her two more pictures with Fields, but she declined.

In 1944, West played the title role in *Catherine Was Great* on Broadway, and in the 1950s, she developed her own stage show in Las Vegas, in which she was flanked on stage by eight musclemen, dressed only in loincloths. In the late-1960s, West, then in her seventies but still remarkably youthful in appearance, recorded two rock-and-roll albums, *Way Out West* and *Wild Christmas*. In 1970, West appeared in the movie, *Myra Breckinridge*, with John Huston, Raquel Welch, Rex Reed, Farrah Fawcett, and Tom Selleck. The movie sparked a new wave of interest in West. She made her final movie appearance eight years later, in *Sextette* (1978).

West died of a stroke in 1980, at the age of eighty-seven.

Critical Overview

Dirty Blonde received mixed reviews from critics. Ben Brantley, in the *New York Times*, was enthusiastic. In his January 11, 2000, review, he wrote after the play's opening night off-Broadway that *Dirty Blonde* was a □wonderfully warmblooded . . . smart, tough and tenderhearted comedy,□ which makes a □persuasive and entertaining case for stargazing as healthy exercise.□

Brantley points out that the characters Jo and Charlie use their obsessions not to take them away from reality but to understand themselves and to connect with each other. Jo and Charlie also understand the nature of their idol. They are not merely star-struck; they see the □woman, both monstrous and human, behind the gloriously vulgar screen siren.□ According to Brantley, it is this double focus□on Mae West and on her two twenty-first century fans□that gives the play its strength and raises it above the usual theater fare about a dead celebrity.

Brantley concludes that the play □demonstrates that this immortal sinner, who started life with little traditional beauty or classic talent, is a worthy saint for those seeking the divinity in their own mortal clay.□

However, John Simon, in *New York*, was not quite so convinced of the play's merits, although he acknowledges that it is amusing: □If you like low camp, you'll find much of this highly amusing. If you don't, you'll still get some chuckles.□ Simon notes that Shear, who played Mae West, does not look like the screen idol and is also a □poor actress,□ although □a droll writer.□ Simon's conclusion points to what he feels is the play's superficiality; it is □a silly-sweet confection that will be enshrined in the annals of fluff.□

When *Dirty Blonde* opened on Broadway on May 1, 2000, at the Helen Hayes Theater, *Time* magazine's Richard Zoglin was not overly impressed. He writes:

Cleverly interweaving an odd-couple romance with a recap of West's career, the play rises above typical stage biodrama□but not far enough. Shear's nifty West impression aside, this sentimental trifle seems a pretty self-indulgent way to justify a playwright's old-movie obsessions.

Charles Isherwood, in *Variety* is more charitable, describing the play as a □genial, funny, crowd-pleasing riff on the life of Mae West and the inspiration it provides for a pair of square pegs in contemporary New York.□ Although like Zoglin he regards the play as □small potatoes,□ he pays tribute to the charm it exerted on the audience. He also comments that as an actress, Claudia Shear was more effective when she portrayed the aged Mae rather than her youthful self.

Brantley revisited the play in January 2001, when Kathy Najimy took over the leading role from Claudia Shear. This was a challenge for Najimy, Brantley notes, because Shear wrote the play with herself in mind, and the character of Jo is □clearly only a small fraction away from the author's real self.□ But Brantley was full of praise for

Najimy's very different interpretation of the role. If the change of cast resulted in the play losing some of its “brassier highlights,” it had, according to Brantley, gained “a new, gentler shimmer.” He writes:

> Ms. Najimy doesn't have Ms. Shear's forthrightness or her shining armor of confidence. Where Ms. Shear's Jo seemed always to leap—eyes closed—before she looked, Ms. Najimy's version of the same character is more self-conscious and reflective, questioning events as they happen rather than after the fact.

Although many critics argued that the play was a slight offering, there was also some comment that it had brought the legend of Mae West to life again for a new generation born after her death.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many essays on drama. In the following essay, he discusses the themes of female impersonation and homosexuality in Dirty Blonde *and shows how they contributed to the development of Mae West's own performances.*

Female impersonation and homosexuality are prominent themes in *Dirty Blonde*: Charlie loves to dress up as Mae West; one of the most spectacular scenes in the play involves the female impersonators Duchess and Ed Hearn; West's play, *The Drag* is about homosexuals, and act 2 of that play contains a drag party. Both themes occur in period settings (the 1910s and 1920s) and in the present. When these themes are understood in context they help to explain the success and appeal of Mae West as an enduring cultural icon.

As far as the present-day setting is concerned, these two themes underlie the emerging relationship between Jo and Charlie. Soon after they meet, they walk to the subway together. After Charlie exits, Jo remarks to the audience that Charlie seems interested in her. But she quickly dismisses any notion that they might have a romance together: □Well, never mind. I mean the whole Mae West thing was a tip-off.□ She is referring to the fact that many of Mae West's fans, both during her lifetime and in the early 2000s were and are gay men, and she makes the assumption that Charlie is gay. This possibility is hinted at again a short while later, when seventeen-year-old Charlie is visiting Mae at her Ravenswood apartment, and Mae, who has found out that Charlie is a wrestler and has been feeling his arm, puts her hand between his legs. Charlie does not respond sexually, merely looking down at his scrapbook and then making an innocuous comment about Mae's gown. (More likely, Charlie is embarrassed and simply does not know what to do after being approached in this manner, but the playwright uses the opportunity to reinforce the notion already planted in the audience's mind that Charlie may be gay.)

Later, when Jo discovers the skirt in Charlie's apartment, she sees it as confirmation that Charlie is gay: □So, he's not just gay *as* a handbag, he's gay *with* a handbag.□ By the end of the play, though, she discovers that Charlie is not gay at all, but he likes to dress up as Mae West. Jo's assumptions about a man who cross-dresses turn out to be false. Although Jo does not know it, the understanding she reaches is in line with modern studies of the phenomenon of cross-dressing by males in contemporary Western society. It appears that those who indulge in this practice, also known as transvestitism, are not necessarily homosexual. They simply find that dressing in women's clothes nourishes or gives expression to another side of their personality, and they feel more complete and whole as a result. The attraction to cross-dressing usually makes itself known in childhood; it is rarer for this desire and behavior to appear for the first time in adulthood. Charlie in *Dirty Blonde* appears to bear out this point, when he confesses to Jo that the first time he felt the attraction of cross-dressing was as a child at Halloween, when he dressed up as a vampire. The key part of the process, the part that conveyed the thrill for him, was a purely female aspect. As he puts it, he was

□shivering with excitement as my mother leaned over me with her golden tube of lipstick, me looking at her, her looking at me, her mouth pouting a little, mirroring mine.□

Charlie's small moment of insight about the origin of his unusual interest is a link to the theme of female impersonation in the parts of *Dirty Blonde* that are set in the 1910s and 1920s. In those decades, female impersonators were far more popular, and their acts far more mainstream, than they are in the early 2000s. There were many female impersonators on the vaudeville circuit, and as Marybeth Hamilton notes in *When I'm Bad, I'm Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment*, some of the best had national reputations. Their acts were considered entirely respectable, good wholesome entertainment suitable for middle-class families, including women and children. Such performances upheld cultural ideas about the ideal of womanhood, that women were graceful, delicate, and refined. One famous female impersonator of the period, Julian Eltinge, was reportedly so convincing on stage as a woman that it seemed almost impossible to audiences that he was really a man. As Hamilton explains, such entertainers were □lauded as magicians, able to conjure themselves across gender boundaries that their audience believed to be fixed and immutable.□

Although there was no overt association in vaudeville between female impersonation and homosexuality, Hamilton notes that there were also female impersonators, largely confined to the less reputable saloons in New York City, who were quite open about being homosexual. Known as fairies, they deliberately □adopted female dress and mannerisms to suggest an illicit sexual identity.□ One of these was a man named Bert Savoy, who is mentioned by Ed Hearn in the play as being the favorite among all the other female impersonators. Savoy, according to Hamilton, was □an overt fairy who specialized in raunchy female mimicry that delighted a cult following of urban sophisticates.□ Savoy's career, as Hearn relates, came to a sudden end when in 1923 he was killed by lightning while walking during a thunderstorm.

Hamilton also reports that during the first decades of the twentieth century, this link between female impersonation and homosexuality was beginning to be felt at the margins of vaudeville respectability. Middle-class people were becoming aware of it. Part of this new awareness, Hamilton suggests, may have been due to the increasing visibility of the gay subculture in New York, fueled by police raids, press exposés, and the like. Another factor was that the medical profession at the time believed that cross-dressing was one of the symptoms of homosexuality, and homosexuality was regarded as a medical disorder. Yet this did not stop the enthusiasm in New York during the 1920s for openly gay performers and female impersonators. Observers even declared that Manhattan was □in the grip of a 'pansy craze'□ during this time (as Jill Watts notes in her book, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White*).

It was into this social climate that Mae West stepped in the late 1920s, when her plays *The Drag* (1927) and *Pleasure Man* (1928) were performed. In *The Drag*, the character Clair is unhappily married to Rolly, a gay man, although Clair is unaware of his sexual orientation. Rolly falls in love with Allen, a business associate who turns out to be in love with Clair. In the end, Rolly is murdered by David, his gay former lover who had sought help from Clair's physician father. David had expressed to the doctor his anguish over

his condition, pleading that society should understand he was born homosexual and that he should not be called a degenerate or a leper because of it. David also alludes to the societal pressures on gay men to hide their true natures and marry, only to live in a loveless situation. The compassionate physician understands David, telling him he must learn self-acceptance; there should be no need for self-hatred or self-rejection. It is this aspect of the play, in which sympathetic understanding of gay people is shown, that prompts the comment from Ed Hearn in *Dirty Blonde*, who says, “Mae was a real pioneer,” meaning that she accepted gay men when it was not fashionable to do so and brought their case to the theater-going public.

However, West's attitude toward homosexuality was more complex than that. She was sympathetic to gay men, but she also believed that homosexuality was a threat to the social system. Prefiguring a debate that continues in the twenty-first century, she also divided homosexuals into two categories, those who were born with a biological predisposition to homosexuality and, therefore, could not be otherwise, and those who made a choice to indulge in same-sex practices. West believed the latter were, as Watts puts it, “secretive degenerates driven by acquired urges for unnatural sexual thrills.” Indeed, some interpreters have seen in *The Drag* an anti-homosexual message, since the gay men are presented as unhappy misfits. Others claim that West's motivation in writing such a play was largely commercial; she saw an opportunity to cash in on an issue that was becoming lively in the public consciousness. In *Dirty Blonde*, this point of view is expressed by the female impersonator, Duchess, who scoffs at Ed Hearn's more idealistic view of West's purpose, saying, “She just wanted to be famous.” Pointedly, Ed responds, “Well, that too.” In other words, West's motivations were probably mixed.

Whatever her personal attitude toward homosexuality may have been, *The Drag* was notable for the fact that the gay characters were played by gay actors, which was not common at the time. Also, West made a point of consulting gay community leaders in connection with the play. The Duchess, for example, was a drag queen and activist for gay causes who taught other drag queens how to dress, speak, and carry themselves in their acts. Although it is not clear from the dialogue in *Dirty Blonde*, Duchess is in fact quoting from *The Drag* when he says: “I'm just the type that men crave. The type that burns them up. Why, when I just walk up Tenth Avenue, you can smell the meat sizzling in Hell's Kitchen.”

This piece of dialogue gives a clue to the kind of language and attitude, ripe with double meanings, that typified the performances of drag queens and “fairies” that would appear again in West's play *Pleasure Man*, which made an explicit connection between female impersonators and homosexuality. Mae West herself adopted elements of this “fairy” style, also known as camp, in her own carefully cultivated stage and later film persona, the tough-talking, street-wise, seductive temptress Diamond Lil, a character who remained visible in all West's later guises. The camp element in West's performance helps to explain her enduring mystery and subtle appeal, since her act worked at several different levels. She was herself a female impersonator. Hamilton explains:

She performed an impersonation at several removes: an authentic tough girl mimicking fairy impersonators mimicking the flamboyance of working-class women. What resulted was a baffling hall of mirrors that fascinated and bewildered nearly all who saw it, providing West with an enduring foundation on which she would build her career.

It is that enduring element of Mae West, the personification of camp, that is captured and celebrated in *Dirty Blonde*. It is heard throughout the play, but never more so than in the barrage of West one-liners with which it closes, including the immortal observation, “When I'm good, I'm very good, and when I'm bad I'm better.”

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *Dirty Blonde*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a freelance writer and published author. In the following essay, she examines the play's definitions of what makes a girl tough and how Mae West does or does not fulfill those descriptions and how the characters Jo and Charlie try to emulate that toughness.

In Claudia Shear's *Dirty Blonde*, the characters Jo and Charlie open the play with statements of what they believe makes a girl tough. A tough girl is someone who does not care what other people think about what she does, how she talks, where she goes, they say. She does what she wants to do. She doesn't sit like a lady or laugh like a little girl, Charlie says. Rather, she wants to dress up and *go out*. And when she goes out, she wants to dance, but not just stepping to the music, she wants to dance close and tight and hot. This is the introduction, in the play, to Mae West, the actress with whom Jo and Charlie are obsessed. Their shared attraction to Mae West brings Jo and Charlie together, keeps them interested in one another, and helps them to get to know and love each other. It is only appropriate that the life and personality of Mae West is developed in Shear's play, so the audience comes to appreciate the actress's life and rise to stardom and so the strange relationship between Jo and Charlie is better understood.

After describing some of the personality traits that Jo and Charlie believe Mae West had, they then relate some of those characteristics to their own lives. Charlie's version is that he wore a Madras shirt when he was young. This seems like a fairly mild form of rebellion or an attempt to stand out in a crowd, especially compared to some of the antics that Mae West pulled off to get attention, but for Charlie, a young Midwestern boy, it was a defiant stance of being tough. While everyone else was dressing in shades of white and khaki, he wore a plaid shirt of deep blues, purples, and red, colors that were so unsettled that when the shirt got wet, its colors bled. Although Charlie's connection to Mae West seems rather tenuous, Jo's in many ways is even more tangential. She has no claim to rebellion. Rather she lived through someone else who rebelled. She had a school friend who stood up in front of her study hall one day and belted out a song with sexual overtones. That was enough for Jo. When she found out that this song had been performed by Mae West, Jo was hooked on the actress. From these mild beginnings, both Jo's and Charlie's obsessions with Mae West developed, or at least that is what they claim. These were their early samplings of being tough.

The scene then switches to the historical Mae West and her early start in show business, which was almost as innocent as Jo and Charlie's beginnings. One of Mae West's first stage shows is filled with sexual innuendoes but not much else, especially in comparison to what she would do in the future. For example, she talks about her partner Harry's piano playing as a woman might talk about a lover. And she wiggles a lot across the stage. Then she ends the act with a risqué move: the strap of her dress accidentally breaks revealing a breast. According to the stage directions, Mae West does not immediately cover herself as any other woman might have done were it truly an accident. Instead she pauses, looks down at her chest, says what will become a

definitive exclamation of hers��Oh!��and then �slowly� covers herself. Jo and Charlie are right. Mae West is tough. She does exactly what she wants to do.

Charlie then describes something he did that was rather gutsy, showing that as he grew older he became a little more intense in his toughness. He travels to Los Angeles to fulfill his dream to meet Mae West. She is an old woman by now, but Charlie has brought an album of pictures taken when West was at the top of her career. This is a gentle touch by someone who wants to be tough, but it turns out to be just what Charlie needs to get to meet the aging actress. Charlie is persistent; he waits for several days outside Mae West's apartment. He has no clue that the odds are against his seeing her. He does not care. Like Mae West in this respect, he is going to do what he wants to do, even if it means lying to his parents. Charlie is not standing on stage and provocatively arousing his audience, but he is taking a chance. He has not resigned himself, as most other fans have, to sitting in an air-conditioned bus, driving by Mae West's apartment and hoping to gain a small glimpse of the actress. No, Charlie is much more daring than that. Because of both his innocence and his enterprise, Charlie achieves his wish, proving that Charlie is tough too, in his own way.

Mae West may be tough, just like Jo and Charlie believe, but even Mae West has her soft spots. When Charlie first meets her, he realizes that Mae West is not the immortal beauty that he had imagined. Even in his youth, or maybe especially because of his youth, and in his innocence, he realizes that the well-known actress is old enough to be his grandmother. For a grandmother, Mae West looks good. But Charlie stumbles in trying to say this to the actress, and Mae West proves she is incapable of accepting the fact that she has aged. When Charlie refers to a marble statue as an antique, Mae West is visibly hurt. �It's *me*, can't you tell, it looks just like me!� she says. The strength that Mae West once found in her youthful body is disappearing with age. Unlike the marble statue, her body is subject to a much more rapid rate of decay, and Mae West cannot face this fact. On this topic, she is far from tough. If she were truly a tough woman, she would have developed an inner strength that would have carried her into old age, a toughness that goes beyond the physical. If Mae West truly does not care what other people think, then why does she worry about her appearance? Joe Frisco, a boxer friend of hers, the guy who takes young Charlie up to meet Mae West, gives a more realistic impression of who the actress really is. Joe tells Charlie that what makes Mae West feel good is a really loyal fan, especially if that fan is a young man, and a bunch of flattering photographs of her. She thrives on a young man's adoration, but she also tears up pictures that do not make her look good. Joe paints a less flattering picture of Mae West. In his eyes, the audience sees an insecure woman. Joe knows that Mae West needs to be bolstered by a young, good-looking stranger who is enamored of her. She needs to see herself either through the young fan's eyes or through the softening lens of a camera. She wants to be told how good she is, how pretty she is, how adored she is. She even asks Charlie to dress up in her clothes so that tourists who drive by will think they have caught a glimpse of her. Well, not really her, but a hint of her, through Charlie's younger body. Even from a distance and through the branches of her hedge, Mae West does not want her public to see who and what she has become. She wants the myth of everlasting youth to continue.

When the play switches back to Mae West's younger days, the audiences sees the tough side of the actress again, such as when Mae West walks up to Frank Wallace and tells him she is his new partner, even though Wallace does not even know who she is. At this point, Mae West is still pushing to be recognized. She figures that she has nothing to lose. So she is confident in herself. Even after she marries Frank, Mae West does not change. That is a sign of toughness, too, especially back in her day. Neither her audiences nor the newspaper reviewers approve of her being too tough, such as when she pushes Wallace off the stage and tries to perform solo. But her audience's boos do not stop Mae West. Shortly after, she files for divorce. She truly did not care what people thought of her. She ignored boos from the audience and found other audiences that appreciated her more. That kind of toughness made her a hit.

When Charlie receives one of Mae West's dresses, it is his turn to demonstrate how tough he is, how he does not care what anyone thinks of him. He tries the dress on in the privacy of his home. But at least he does it and admits to the audience how good it felt. □When I slid it over my head, it was so heavy and smooth that I just closed my eyes,□ he confesses. Then he adds: □I imagined myself blonde, of course, blonde and tough and ready for sex.□ Despite the fact that Charlie is obviously a male, something inside of him wants to feel what it was like to be Mae West, as much as he possibly can, that is. He wants to know what that kind of toughness is all about. He believes that if he makes himself up to look like her, he will find out. He does not share this information with Jo, at least not at first. He actually tries to hide it from her. He states that he hides the clothes in the closet so that no one will know. However, when Jo comes to visit, she finds a skirt, one that she first thinks Charlie has bought for her. But the skirt is way too big for her, and she is insulted that he thinks she looks that big. It takes a while for her to realize that the skirt belongs to Charlie. Jo, who professes to admire Mae West for not being afraid of who she is, is not quite as enthusiastic about Charlie's quirks. Although Charlie is strong enough to face himself, Jo is not ready to face this new aspect of Charlie.

As the play continues and switches back to Mae West, the actress once again proves her strength when she confronts Edward Elsner, a man she has heard about but has never met. She walks up to him and asks him to produce a movie she has written. At first, Elsner is not impressed with this request. This does not stop Mae West. She knows she is on a path that leads to success. She can feel it in her blood. Sure enough, not too much later, she stars in her own movie. Elsner tells her, □You have an unusual quality, Miss West,□ just before he decides to make her a movie star. One could argue that by this line, Elsner is referring to the quality that Jo and Charlie like in the actress□her toughness. That toughness works a little longer for Mae West, even when it lands her in court. As Charlie points out: □A tough girl knows that to be bad news is good business.□ And Jo responds: □The hotter the scandal . . . the hotter the ticket.□ As long as she is young, the tougher Mae West gets, the more her audience seems to like it. It is almost as if they like her in spite of themselves. □Tough girls go to Broadway anyway. And they watch as the limos line up,□ Jo stays. Charlie adds: □She knows that what they say afterwards doesn't count.□ Then Jo and Charlie say in unison: □What counts is that they came.□ It seems fans are stuck on the actress not so much because they like everything that Mae West does but because she does them.

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But as she ages, Mae West's toughness changes. Even Jo and Charlie have to face this fact. They watch one of the actress's late-in-life movies and think that she is weird. □She's eight-five years old and she's wearing a wedding gown,□ Jo says. Charlie tends to agree with Jo, although he still holds out some reservations. He gives Mae West credit for continuing to be so tough that she tries her best to play young roles even in her old age. But even Charlie has to concede in the end. He thinks about Mae West and wonders if maybe all that toughness kept everyone out of the actress's life. Maybe she was too tough for her own good. □That's the sad thing,□ Charlie says. □She never let herself really learn how to love□anyone other than herself.□

With this thought stirring inside of him, Charlie makes his move on Jo. It is as if Charlie wants to make sure that he does not make the same mistake. He tells Jo that he loves her, but Jo cannot handle it. She tells him that he really just loves her skirts, thus putting him down by making fun of his feelings. When Jo is alone, she admits that she does not know where to put Charlie or what to do with the feelings he wants to share with her. She has an image of what a man should be, and Charlie does not fit it. Jo gives no credit to Charlie for being strong enough to admit who he truly is. So this makes Charlie appear to be tougher than Jo.

Charlie further demonstrates his strength when he is alone, talking to his image in the mirror. Dressed as Mae West, he speaks about Jo's denouncement of him. He bolsters his confidence by stating that Jo does not know what is good for her and that her rejection of him is her problem, not his. But the play does not end here. Jo is given one more chance, and she rises to the occasion. She is tough enough to admit that she is not comfortable with Charlie dressed up in women's clothing, but she surprises him by asking Charlie to let her see him like that. Charlie might not meet her preconceptions of an ideal mate, at least not on the superficial level. However, Jo does live up to her definition of a tough woman. She sees past the superficial and in the end does not care what anyone else thinks. Deep down, she loves Charlie for what he is, because deep down Jo loves, and is comfortable with, herself. As strange as it might appear to the audience, the play ends with Mae West kissing Mae West. One of them is Jo and the other is Charlie□tough woman to tough man.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *Dirty Blonde*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Explain what scholars mean when they stress the difference between sex and gender. To what extent are gender roles determined by culture and to what extent are they rooted in biology? Describe how gender roles have changed since Mae West's heyday in the 1920s and 1930s. Write an essay in which you report on your findings.

Examine the issue of gay rights. Trace the origins and growth of the gay rights movement since the Stonewall riots in 1969. Make a chart with the main points laid out clearly, and use it as part of a class presentation. Consider whether gays are still discriminated against in the United States and whether gay people should be allowed to marry.

Compare Mae West to other screen legends of the period, such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Jean Harlow. What was the distinctive appeal of each? Read some authoritative accounts of these stars, watch any of their movies you can obtain, and then write an essay which combines your own subjective opinions with objective research.

Watch Mae West in any movie available to you. Watch her closely and analyze her style, how she delivers her lines, how she walks and her general demeanor. Make a class presentation, using the DVD or VHS tape, in which you examine her performance and the nature of her appeal. Does she appeal to you or are you mystified by the allure she held for so many?

Compare Mae West to Madonna or any other female cultural icon today. Do such performers succeed because of talent and ability or through their gift for self-promotion combined with their desire to shock their audiences, to stretch the boundaries of what is considered acceptable? Make a class presentation with video clips to illustrate your points.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Mae West challenges conventional notions about decency in women's dress by sometimes revealing her breasts or legs on stage. In her thirties, West becomes full-figured and curvy and helps to set the fashion for the type of female body that is considered attractive.

Today: The type of female body held up as the ideal is slim rather than full-figured. Thin models adorn the front pages of women's magazines and fashion magazines. Athletic, toned bodies are also considered attractive, and there are few restrictions about how little clothing women may wear in public or on stage.

1920s: Growing affluence, methods of mass production, and the emergence of chain stores (known as dime stores) ensure that a range of cosmetics for women become generally available for the first time. These include face powder, lipstick, rouge, eyebrow pencil, eye shadow, and various creams, tonics, and lotions. Helena Rubenstein develops creams to protect the face from the sun. In 1927, permanent waving is invented, enabling women with straight hair to have wavy hair.

Today: The U.S. cosmetics and beauty industry accounts for over twenty billion dollars in sales per year. It is dominated by hair and skin care products. Women also turn to new methods of enhancing their youthful appearances, including facelifts and other types of cosmetic surgery, such as liposuction.

1920s: Movies become a popular mass form of entertainment. Silent movies feature such stars as Rudolph Valentino. The first talking picture is made in 1926, and the first Oscars are given in 1927. Theater on Broadway reaches its peak. In 1927, two hundred and sixty-eight plays are offered in New York City.

Today: In the United States, movies are the primary form of mass entertainment. It is estimated that over 70 percent of the U.S. population rents or goes to movies regularly. Revenue from a single hit feature film can be over one billion dollars.

What Do I Read Next?

Three Plays by Mae West (1997 edition), edited by Lillian Schlissel, contains three of the plays West wrote in the 1920s: *Sex* (1926), *The Drag* (1927), and *Pleasure Man* (1928). Schlissel's introduction discusses West's career and the theater of her day.

Master Class (1995), a play by Terrence McNally, is about Maria Callas, the legendary twentieth-century opera diva. Like Mae West, Callas was adored by her fans worldwide and subject to constant media attention and gossip. The play is based on a series of master classes given by Callas in New York in the early 1970s and reveals the full range of her restless and tempestuous personality.

Marlene Dietrich (1901-1992), a blond, German-born Hollywood actress and sex symbol during the 1930s and 1940s, was one of Mae West's rivals. Glamorous and mysterious, she became almost a legend in her own time. Dietrich's daughter, Maria Riva, wrote *Marlene Dietrich* (1994), a biography of her mother. Riva was Dietrich's close companion and confidant, and with much use of diaries and letters, she gives a unique portrait of the movie star at all stages of her long life.

Desperately Seeking Madonna: In Search of the Meaning of the World's Most Famous Woman (1992), edited by Adam Sexton, includes a wide range of articles about the star who fills a role in contemporary popular culture not unlike the one played by Mae West in her day.

Further Study

Baker, Roger, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts*, New York University Press, 1995.

This well-documented book, written in a lively, engaging style by a British journalist, describes female impersonation in the performing arts, going back to Elizabethan times when women were not allowed on the stage and all female parts were played by men and boys. The book includes a chapter on Japanese and Chinese female impersonators.

Bullough, Vern L., and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

In this culmination of thirty years of research, the authors survey cross dressing and gender impersonation throughout history and in a variety of cultures. They also examine the medical, biological, psychological, and sociological findings that have been presented in modern scientific literature.

Leider, Emily Wortis, *Becoming Mae West*, Farrar, Straus Giroux, 1997.

This biography emphasizes how West developed her distinctive persona. Leider argues that of all the stage and screen stars of the early twentieth century, West is the most enduring and the most relevant for today because of her interest in stretching and crossing rigid boundaries of gender.

Ward, Carol M., *Mae West: A Bio-Bibliography*, Greenwood Press, 1989.

In separate chapters, Ward includes an objective biography of West and an examination of how West created the myth about herself that is the core of her enduring appeal. Ward also analyzes many of the interviews West gave, and reprints two of them in their entirety. She surveys works by and about West and includes a bibliographical checklist of sources.

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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:

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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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