Eleemosynary Study Guide

Eleemosynary by Lee Blessing

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Lee Blessing often focuses on family dynamics in his plays. *Eleemosynary*, one of his most acclaimed works, is no exception. The play was first performed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1985 and published by the Dramatists Play Service in 1987; it forms part of the collection *Four Plays*, published by Heinemann in 1991. *Eleemosynary* won the prestigious Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award in 1997 for its penetrating study of the interactions among three members of the Wesbrook family. In his examination of their relationships with one another, Blessing illustrates the tensions that can stress a family to its breaking point.

Eleemosynary focuses on the lives of three Wesbrook women: seventy-five-year-old Dorothea; her middle-aged daughter, Artie; and Artie's sixteen-year-old daughter, Echo. Dorothea, an admitted New Age eccentric, has complicated the lives of the two other Wesbrook women by imposing her thwarted dreams on them, which has alienated Artie not only from Dorothea but from Echo as well. As the play begins, Echo is caring for Dorothea, who has just had a stroke. During the course of the play, Echo tries to bring the three women together. Blessing presents fragmented vignettes of the lives of the three women as they struggle to define themselves both as individuals and as part of a family unit. In this poignant and mature study of familial relationships, Blessing highlights the human need for connection and forgiveness.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1949

Lee Blessing was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on October 4, 1949. He grew up in a conventional midwestern family, where, ironically, there was little attention paid to the arts. Despite his parents' lack of interest in drama, they were very supportive of Blessing's chosen career and always attended his plays. Blessing wrote his first play while he was still in high school, which was prompted by his desire to avoid a thirty-page writing assignment on a topic that held little interest for him. After graduation, he attended the University of Minnesota for two years and then transferred to Reed College in Portland, Oregon. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in English, with an emphasis on poetry. Blessing then headed back to the Midwest to attend the University of Iowa from 1974 to 1979. He obtained a master of fine arts in English in his first years; then, while working on his MFA in speech and theater, he taught playwriting. He went on to teach playwriting at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis from 1986 to 1988. In 1986, Blessing married Jeanne Blake and became stepfather to her two children.

Blessing's style and subject matter are often eclectic, as he focuses on public and private politics and the intricacies of human relationships. One of his most noted plays, *A Walk in the Woods* (1988), which deals with the differences between American idealism and Russian common sense, received Tony Award, Olivier Award, and Pulitzer Prize nominations. *A Walk in the Woods* also ran on Broadway, in Moscow, and in London, starring the late British actor Sir Alec Guinness, and was aired on the Public Broadcasting System's *American Playhouse*. Another of Blessing's celebrated plays, *Eleemosynary* (1987), which explores the nature of familial relationships, earned Blessing a 1997 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Writing and garnered three others for production, direction, and lead performance. The play appears in a collection titled *Four Plays* (1991), along with *Independence* (1985), *Nice People Dancing to Good Country Music* (1990), and *Riches* (1991).

Blessing has written other works for stage, film, and television and has earned numerous awards and much acclaim. He has received the American Theatre Critics Award, the Great American Play Award, and the George and Elisabeth Marton Award, among others. Three of his plays have also been cited in *Time* magazine's list of the year's ten best. Blessing has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim, Bush, McKnight, and Jerome foundations. His plays have been performed at the Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference. His script *Cooperstown* was made into a film that aired on Turner Network Television and, in 1993, won Blessing the Humanitas Prize and three nominations for Cable Ace Awards. Blessing's work has been produced at the Yale Repertory Theatre, the Guthrie Theater, Arena Stage, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Old Globe, and the Alliance Theatre Company. He moved to Manhattan in 2001 and later became head of the graduate playwriting program at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

Plot Summary

Scenes 1 and 2

In the first scene of *Eleemosynary*, sixteen-year-old Echo spells the word □eleemosynary,□ explaining that it is her favorite word and that she once won a spelling bee by spelling it correctly. She defines it as □of or pertaining to alms; charitable.□ She introduces her seventy-five-year-old grandmother, Dorothea, to the audience and explains that Dorothea has suffered a stroke. Echo says that her grandmother cannot speak, but she claims that she can hear the elderly woman, as can the audience.

The first of several flashbacks begins, as Artie, Echo's mother, appears, wearing a pair of homemade wings and looking miserable. Echo explains that her grandmother believed that one could fly with the proper wings and once filmed her mother's failed attempt to do so. Dorothea says that she would like to be flying herself. During the flashback, Echo continues to speak to the audience, explaining her love of words.

As the scene shifts, Dorothea and Artie argue about the ability to fly. Echo is studying for the spelling bee, prompted by her mother, who drills her over the phone. The scene moves back to the flight film, as Echo explains that the Wesbrook women have a desire to be □extraordinary.□ She discusses her own outstanding scholarly aptitude, which was encouraged by her grandmother, who imparted to her a love of words. A flashback shows, however, that after she had won the spelling bee, she panicked and wondered, □What'll I do next year?□ The film ends with Dorothea, embarrassed, admitting that her daughter has failed to fly, which prompts Artie's insistence that her mother is □nuts.□ Echo closes the scene by saying that she feels both her mother and her grandmother within her.

In scene 2, Artie admits that she has trouble touching people, including her daughter, which worries her. She notes that Dorothea, who raised Echo, was a better mother. In flashbacks, Dorothea teaches Echo the letters of the alphabet. Artie says that she never forgets anything, suggesting that there are some things she would like to forget. As Artie recalls her life, Dorothea keeps interrupting. Artie notes the irony in the fact that she became pregnant when she was eighteen: while she learned all kinds of other information, no one ever taught her about sex.

Artie and her mother argued about her future, Artie asserting that she was going to be a mother and Dorothy insisting that she get an abortion so that she could go to college and be more than □just something a child needs.□ Artie finally agreed to the abortion and then ran away from home. Eventually, though, Dorothea tracked her down. On the trip back home, Artie escaped and ran again, □very far away,□ and □stayed hidden.□

Scenes 3, 4, and 5

Back in present time, Echo gives her grandmother physical therapy as she imagines what her grandmother is thinking. Dorothea recalls her childhood and her father's rejection of her, which made her feel worthless. Artie feels worthless as well. Dorothea notes her own arranged marriage and her husband's refusal to allow her to go to college, which followed her father's denial of her desire to gain an education. One day, she discovered that becoming an eccentric would allow her the freedom to do what she wanted, which, she claims, saved her life.

In scene 4, Artie visits Echo and Dorothea, curious about what the two do together. Echo notes in an aside to the audience that her mother left her when she was young. In a flashback, Dorothea says to Echo, "We all need forgiveness." Artie notes that she was on the run constantly, trying to elude her mother's reach. One day, when Artie called Dorothea and told her that she was married and pregnant, Dorothea was adamant about coming to help her. A month after Echo was born, Artie's husband died in a car accident, and Dorothea informed her daughter that the two of them, mother and grandmother, would raise Echo together.

In scene 5, Echo puts on the wings and notes that when she was a year old, the three of them moved back east to Dorothea's house. Soon after, Artie announced that she had a job offer in Europe that could be permanent if she wanted it. She wanted Dorothea to keep Echo "for good." Echo notes that, as she was growing up, she and her grandmother did not talk much about Artie.

Artie tells of an incident that took place one night when she was a child. Her mother awoke her and cut off a lock of her hair, telling Artie that she would keep it in a safe place. Artie, who, her mother claims, had "a terrible desire to want to know everything," conducted a desperate search to find it. When Dorothea came home, she discovered Artie in the middle of a scattered house and gave her the lock of hair that had been hidden in the light switch.

When Echo was seven years old, Artie came back home but told her mother that she did not want Echo back. Eventually, Artie began to call Dorothea and Echo but did not see them again for another six years, except once by accident. They bumped into each other in a bookstore, and as soon as Artie saw Echo, she ran out. Artie says to the audience, "I think a woman has a right to be irrational about her children." At night, when she thinks about her abortion, she imagines herself taking care of the child that she lost and determines that if Echo could envision this as well, she would not think that Artie is a bad mother.

Scenes 6 and 7

Soon after the incident in the bookstore, Artie suggested that Echo participate in spelling bees, "her way to apologize" for her ill treatment of her daughter. Artie spent a lot of time helping Echo practice. Echo insisted that Artie come to the spelling bee and greet

Dorothea there. During the spelling bee, Echo became fiercely competitive, desperate to gain her mother and grandmother's approval. After Echo won the bee, Artie quickly greeted Dorothea and then left as Echo pleaded for her to stay.

At the start of scene 7, the action returns to the beginning of the play, when Echo notes that she won the spelling bee with the word □eleemosynary.□ She explains that although the word means □charitable,□ she □used it as a weapon□ against her opponents. She admits that she is just like her mother and grandmother, no □less cruel.□ She says that after Dorothea had had a stroke, Artie came home. The action then jumps to the future as Echo notes that she and her mother were both asleep when Dorothea died. The next morning, they had their first fight, when Artie began to burn all evidence of Dorothea's eccentricity. Artie then suggests that Echo live with her Uncle Bill and his family, claiming that she would be □bad□ for her daughter. After Echo asks why her mother keeps leaving her, Artie finally admits that she was angry that Echo seemed to prefer Dorothea over her. When Echo asks whether Artie loved her and loves her now, she replies, □Yes and no.□

Within a few weeks, Echo ran away from Uncle Bill's, maintaining that she would persuade her mother to love her more of the time. She recognizes that her mother thinks that she has failed Echo, but she refuses to believe it. Echo explains that she will tend to her mother like a garden because she □need[s] work.□

Dorothea admits that it is fascinating being dead and that she is beginning a project on eternal life. Artie notes that Echo persuaded her to promise that she would never leave her. As the two view Dorothea's movie of Artie's attempt to fly, Echo says that she loves watching the two of them together. The audience hears Dorothea's voice one more time, claiming that she will prove that humans can fly. The play closes with Echo's declaration that all of the Wesbrook women are in their own way, □completely . . . eleemosynary.□

Scene 1

Scene 1 Summary

Eleemosynary follows three generations of Westbrook women as they attempt to define their relationships with one another. Dorothea, her daughter Artie, and Artie's daughter Echo have great love for each other, but this familial love is very often tainted by bitterness, resentment, the need of Dorothea to control Artie, and the inability of Artie to show affection toward Echo.

Eleemosynary opens with Echo, the teenaged granddaughter of Dorothea, spelling out the title of the play. This foreshadows how significant the word and its meaning will ultimately become. This also reveals Echo's obsession with spelling words, which foreshadows the relationship between Echo and her mother.

At this point, Dorothea has had a stroke and been rendered mute, though sixteen-year-old Echo insists that she can still hear her grandmother speak. Dorothea's daughter and Echo's mother, Artie, enters wearing a pair of crudely fashioned wings. These wings represent one of Dorothea's most eccentric undertakings; and to Artie, they are nothing more than a symbolic reminder of the difficulty of growing up as Dorothea's experimental guinea pig. Dorothea expected Artie literally to fly with these handcrafted wings. Of course, she failed in her attempt.

Interspersed with both Dorothea's and Artie's memories of the flight experiment is a scene between Echo and her mother in which, over the phone, Artie chooses words from the dictionary for the girl to spell, which she does unerringly. More than once, Echo tries to break through the bloodless dialogue in order to attract some genuine attention from her mother. She fails abysmally.

The telephone conversation ends and Echo explains that she has been brought up almost entirely by her grandmother-the woman who first taught her to love words. She then foreshadows an idea that, although it will not be stated again explicitly, will run like a thread through the entire play.

Scene 1 Analysis

Given her eccentricities and her belief in the power of words, it is perhaps not surprising that Dorothea names her only daughter "Artemis". Artemis is the Greco-Roman huntress; the sister of Apollo, Artemis is also famously virginal-so much so that she becomes almost a symbol of frigidity-and notably ruthless. In one myth, she sets a hunter's own hounds on him to tear him to shreds after he accidentally catches sight of the goddess bathing.

However, given her professed passion for knowledge and learning, it seems odd that Dorothea did not name her daughter "Athena", a name symbolizing the goddess of wisdom.

In a way, Artie's true name is a self-fulfilling prophecy. She grows up to be cold and ruthless and, except for her brief marriage, apparently very much solitary. Maybe this can account for the disconnect between her and her daughter. Her namesake was a virgin with no ties whatsoever. In a play in which words are given such potency, such a thesis-outlandish as it may at first sound-becomes reasonable within that theatrical space.

Scene 2

Scene 2 Summary

Artie admits that she has trouble in physically touching not only her daughter, but people in general. By her own admission, however, she is not worried about her neurosis; she is worried about her daughter.

There follows a short episode concerning Echo's infancy. Echo, who was named "Barbara" by her mother, then re-named by her grandmother, is only three months old, but already Dorothea insists on teaching her the Latin and Greek alphabets. Artie recalls that these paper alphabet banners are the same ones her mother used with her when she was a baby.

As the scene between Dorothea and Echo fades to black, the audience is again called to focus on Artie. She laments that she is unable to forget anything-she remembers everything she reads, hears, etc. and, though she claims to be against total recall, she quizzes her daughter mercilessly on spelling words.

Similarly, Dorothea had hired tutors for Artie from the time the girl was five years old, despite the objections expressed by Artie's father that a smart girl would never be able to be properly married. All of her mother's hopes for Artie end, however, when she becomes pregnant at eighteen years old. Though Artie is vehemently against it, Dorothea manages to coerce her daughter into aborting the child so that Artie might still go to college as planned.

Immediately following the abortion, Artie runs away and takes a job teaching at a private school. With the help of a private detective, Dorothea finds Artie and takes her home. On the way home, however, Artie escapes through a bathroom window in a restaurant and remains out of sight for some time.

Scene 2 Analysis

The scene begins and ends with Artie, suggesting that her respective speeches are somehow significant in relation to one another. Artie begins by explaining her problem with intimacy, especially with her own daughter. She ends by telling the story of the abortion forced upon her by her mother.

The abortion is deeply traumatic for Artie and it marks the very first time she tries to escape her mother's domination. Naturally, her mother finds her and attempts to bring her back home. Artie runs away again, but by this time the emotional damage has been done.

By effectively taking away her first "baby", Dorothea not only takes from Artie the first thing that might truly be hers, but she once again forces her values-education over

motherhood-on Artie. Dorothea furthers the injury by seeking Artie out when it is clear that her daughter does not want to be found. She wants to establish her own life. Therefore, when she runs away the second time, she does so more skillfully, ensuring that her mother will not be able to track her down and steal her life one more time.

Therefore, when Artie does establish a normal life with a husband and expecting a baby, Dorothea's bullish entrance into that life causes destruction. Artie must on some level believe that at any moment her mother can take this all away. When fate eventually destroys her normal domestic life, Artie is left at the mercy of her supremely overbearing mother. It is at this point that Artie begins to lose touch-literally and figuratively-with the world and with her daughter. Why become attached to something only to have it snatched away? Instead, Artie surrenders her child and goes off to live her solitary life.

Scene 3

Scene 3 Summary

Dorothea begins to recount some of her own early years. Immediately after graduating from high school, she is forced into an arranged marriage by her father. Although the man she marries at first makes vague promises that she might go to college one day, he instead treats her as a wife and nothing more. With this man, she has two boys and Artie. When her husband suddenly dies, Dorothea is surprised to find that she feels little or no grief at his passing.

Dorothea's speech is interspersed with the sound of Echo's spelling.

Artie re-enters the main space and recites a recurring dream she has in which her mother throws all of Artie's belongings, her books in particular, into an all-consuming bonfire.

Dorothea, who admits she felt worthless and guilty as a girl growing up, further discusses her marriage, but segues into a far happier scene. At a picnic, she meets a self-proclaimed eccentric. After speaking with him for some time, Dorothea has a revelation: eccentricity can be an escape from the mendacity of her life as well as an outlet for her creativity and intelligence. As an eccentric, she need not be answerable to anyone. From then on she begins devoting herself to projects such as teaching her infant daughter the alphabet and, later, her teenage daughter to fly.

Scene 3 Analysis

Dorothea garners a certain amount of sympathy in this middle scene. She is stuck in a marriage she did not want and forced into a role that effectively kills her true personality. Then a revelation occurs. Dorothea can become an "eccentric" -a person completely unbound by the ordinary rules and responsibilities the rest of society must accept. At this point, the audience is glad for the woman who has finally found a way to make herself feel free. However, then she begins her experiments. Attempting to teach her daughter the alphabet at such a young age seems harmless enough, but sets up in the child's mind a conglomerate of extraordinary expectations. If Artie must know the alphabet at three months and calculus at age nine, what must she know by adulthood? What freedom is to be had for the child as the mother is practicing "eccentricity"?

Then comes the flying experiment. There is no possible way Artie could ever fly on a pair of homemade wings. Not only is Dorothea subjecting Artie to unnecessary stress, she is actually putting her in danger of physical harm. One loses all sympathy for Dorothea when it becomes clear that "eccentricity" for her means exploiting her child.

Scene 4

Scene 4 Summary

The scene switches abruptly to the hospital bed where Dorothea lies, insensate, following her stroke. Both Artie and Echo are at her bedside, but the two are arguing as to whether there is any point in trying to interact with Dorothea with her in a coma. Echo thinks there is. Artie, predictably, thinks there is not. Echo continues to see her grandmother as a person, while Artie sees her as a vegetable. Artie finally leaves in frustration.

With Artie gone, Echo explains that since her grandmother raised her from infancy, there was a time when she wondered if she had ever had a mother at all. Following an unexpected phone call from Artie-whom Echo tells Dorothea is only a dead person-Dorothea explains to her granddaughter why she gave her such an unusual name. Her goal was to make Echo recall the best things in people-people past and present. She wants Echo to hear the good and forgiving things people say and to return those things, especially those of forgiveness.

On the tail end of Dorothea's and Echo's conversation, Artie explains how, after running away the second time, she moved eight times under four different names until she decided she was ready to contact her mother. When Dorothea admits, however, that she is no longer looking for her daughter, Artie unceremoniously hangs up the phone.

Artie puts herself through college and eventually phones her mother again to announce that she is married to a professor, is about to finish her graduate degree in BioChem, and is pregnant (with Echo). Despite Artie's objections, Dorothea insists that, if she is going to have a baby, Artie will need her mother. A week later, Dorothea shows up on Artie's doorstep. She buys a house near her daughter's and quickly makes friends with her son-in-law. For Artie, however, the return of her mother brings back the trauma she had to cope with in her childhood. Somehow, with only her husband and her work, she had managed to forget.

Dorothea is with Artie when Echo is born. A month later, Artie's husband is killed in a car accident. With this, Dorothea moves into Artie's house to help with the baby.

Scene 4 Analysis

Again, given Dorothea's faith in language, for her to name her granddaughter "Echo" is a double-edged sword. Dorothea's own theory is that she wants Echo to reflect back the best things in people, especially forgiveness. She may well say this, as she herself requires a great deal of forgiveness, mainly from her daughter. It is a pretty story, but it also sets Echo up as a kind of martyr, forever forgiving, forever blinding herself to all but the good.

Then there is the mythological Echo (as well as the literal echo). Echo is a mythological character who, upon seeing a beautiful young man-beauty is his only "good" -is so taken with him that for the rest of her life she is able only to repeat what he says. She can speak nothing of her own invention. Both the mythological and the theatrical Echo are doomed to an even greater oppression than the one that Dorothea initially caused to seek out an alternate lifestyle.

This conversation between Echo and Dorothea about the origin of her name foreshadows Echo's final speech as well as the pathos hidden within it.

Scene 5

Scene 5 Summary

Echo now puts on her grandmother's wings and, though she has no delusions that she will fly with them, she wishes that she could. She explains that, after her father's death, she, her mother, and her grandmother drive cross-country to live in her grandmother's house back east. Because she was still just a baby, Echo remembers nothing of the trip; nevertheless, Dorothea insisted on making educational stops, showing the child certain landmarks and so broadening her education. Dorothea recalls stopping at an Indian burial ground, a convention of faith healers, Edgar Cayce's birthplace, Edgar Cayce's grave, and Edgar Cayce's wife's grave. What stands out for Artie, however, is the voodoo cult, the landing strip for UFOs, and a visit to a man who claimed to have been to the moon and back in 1956.

Dorothea and Artie watch a two-year-old Echo as she plays with the ubiquitous wings. Her grandmother is pleased, commenting on how bright a child Echo is and how she is already learning to say a few Greek words. Artie scoffs at the whole business.

Artie then announces that she has been given an open-ended job offer in Europe. After a few sly inquiries from her mother, Artie states unashamedly that she intends to leave her daughter with Dorothea.

Though an older Echo admits that she and Dorothea rarely discuss Artie, her grandmother does sometimes show the young girl pictures of her mother. Dorothea further tells Echo the story of when she took her daughter to see a "vortex" -a space in which the natural laws of physics are inverted. Artie is interested only so far as the idea of fundamental rules being broken disturbs her. She does not like to see rules broken.

Artie breaks in to tell a story in which her mother wakes her in the middle of the night and cuts a lock of her daughter's hair under the full moon. Dorothea explains that, no matter what happens between them, she will have that lock of hair-that piece of her daughter-until the day she dies.

Though Dorothea hides the lock of hair and refuses to tell her daughter where she has hidden it, Artie-quite against her mother's wishes-tears apart the entire house while her mother is out as she searches feverishly for the lock of hair. When Dorothea returns home, she immediately knows what Artie has been doing and, in an action of great poignancy, she takes the hair from its hiding place and gives it to her daughter, saying with resigned disappointment that she does not want it back. When this occurs, Artie is a mere seven years old.

When Echo is seven years old, out of the blue, Artie calls to say that she has been offered a job in the state, only fifty miles from where her mother and daughter live. Artie

plans to take the job, but she neither wants her job back nor intends to visit her family. She does, however, begin periodically calling Echo.

Once, by accident, Artie sees Echo at a book fair. In a panic, Artie literally runs away. Nevertheless, Echo has seen her mother as well and purchases the book that Artie had been examining-*Robinson Crusoe*. She reads it seventeen times.

Scene 5 Analysis

Dominating the fifth scene is the story of Dorothea cutting a lock of Artie's hair under the full moon and then returning the hair to the little girl after Dorothea finds her frantically searching for it. The incident itself recalls a pagan ritual-one a child could not possibly appreciate. Dorothea also foreshadows her split with Artie when she says that, no matter what happens between the two of them, she will always have that hair as a reminder of her daughter.

When Dorothea finds Artie searching for the hair, her disappointment is palpable. She hands it back with resigned and carefully controlled anger. Because Dorothea tells this part of the story, it is perhaps instinctive to blame Artie for her unbecoming curiosity. However, the facts, as they are known, tell a different story- one of culpability and carelessness. At this point, Dorothea is obviously an adult. Artie is seven. She cannot understand the symbolism of the lock of hair or why it is of such great consequence to her mother. Perhaps she would even like to share the secret with her mother and this is why she seeks out the apparently very important object. She, after all, in this ceremony, was left with nothing she could see or hold and, at seven years old, it is natural that she would want these things. Instead of being included or simply understood, however, she is rebuffed-a seven-year-old child rejected by an adult who should know better and take more responsibility for her actions.

Scene 6

Scene 6 Summary

Soon after Artie's quasi run-in with Echo, she suggests (over the phone) that her daughter begin to prepare for the National Spelling Bee. It gives Artie an excuse to call her daughter more often, even if it is only to rehearse spelling words. Echo turns out to be a supremely gifted speller and makes her way easily to the national competition.

Echo's secret plan is to coax both her mother and her grandmother to attend the finals. Perhaps then she can reunite her family, however temporarily. Though Artie at first insists that she cannot leave her research long enough to make an appearance, she does show up, but is sitting so far from her mother that neither can see the other.

Echo stands onstage, spelling each word correctly and with absolute confidence. Finally, she is given the word that will decide her fate in the competition: "eleemosynary". Naturally, she spells her favorite word correctly and is declared the winner. The little boy-her final opponent-simply crumbles, but Echo does not notice. She is far too caught up in her own victory.

Dorothea and Artie meet up after the contest and Artie informs her mother that they must give each other a familial kiss in order to fake affection for the sake of Echo. Her duty done, Artie races from the auditorium, despite her daughter's desperate pleas that she stay.

Scene 6 Analysis

Neither Dorothea nor Artie are overjoyed at Echo's victory at the National Spelling Bee. Instead, both are fixed on the little boy beaten by Echo. He is destroyed, as far as such a situation can merit. However, while he is simply up against the prospect of losing, Echo truly believes that her winning or losing means the difference between reuniting her family and seeing them remain fractured. Therefore, while Echo's ruthlessness to the little boy is obnoxious to say the least, it is necessary to remember what is seemingly at stake for her.

Of course, Echo never had a chance of reuniting Artie and Dorothea and so she goes up on stage shooting out words like a Howitzer for nothing.

Scene 7

Scene 7 Summary

Echo recalls her performance at the National Spelling Bee with no illusions about the ruthlessness with which she competed. She wanted to destroy that little boy and was pleased when she did so. Though she is called on to spell a word meaning "charity", she does so with the sole purpose of not just overcoming, but of humiliating her competitor. She succeeds.

For two years following the Spelling Bee, Echo and Artie barely speak. Only Dorothea's sudden stroke and physical decline can bring Artie back to her family. Artie and Echo bicker back and forth about living arrangements and so forth, but a ghostly Dorothea calmly narrates the last healthy years of her life. She admits with bemusement that, in those final years, her thoughts were with Artie, her estranged daughter, and not Echo, her very present granddaughter.

Eventually, Artie and Echo have to put Dorothea in a nursing home where, Artie says, she will receive the best possible care. It is here that the matriarch of eccentricity quietly dies.

The day following Dorothea's death, the two remaining Westbrook women have what Echo calls their "first fight". Echo catches Artie burning Dorothea's possessions, an act Artie commits because she says she does not want her mother ridiculed for her somewhat idiosyncratic books and other belongings. Echo is angry with this, but when Artie prepares to throw the wings onto the fire, Echo draws the line. Furthermore, as Echo tries to convince her mother to move Dorothea's personal effects into the garage instead of destroying them, Artie begins describing her brother Bill and his family, particularly his two daughters who are approximately Echo's age. Artie's plan is for Echo to live with Bill and his family. Artie explains that she would be bad for her daughter's upbringing.

Echo asks her mother whether she loves her; Artie can only give the ambivalent response, "yes and no".

Echo agrees to stay with her aunt, uncle, and cousins, but soon runs away-back to her mother.

Scene 7 Analysis

Echo's final speech recalls the speech her grandmother gives her when she explains why she gave the little girl such an unusual name. Therein lies the sorrow of this entire play. Echo is simply echoing what she has been told. There is no reason to believe that the Westbrook women-the two oldest, at least-are charitable in any sense. Except for

Echo, they have ridiculed each other, used each other, hurt each other, and made little or no effort to reconcile, even for the child whose future depended on it.

There is maybe hope for the future in Echo. She herself appears to be moving toward a life of charity, but to say that her mother and grandmother are charitable people is merely spitting out what her grandmother fed her so early on. She is seeing the best in people where there is no "best".

Characters

Artie Wesbrook

Artie, Dorothea's daughter and Echo's mother, has always had a troubled relationship with both women. She was unable to find a sense of independence from her often overbearing mother and, as a result, has withdrawn into herself. In an effort to establish her own identity, she focused her studies on hard science rather than on her mother's New Age philosophy, but she was not strong enough to hold her own ground. She admits she has trouble touching others, especially Echo. This upsets her, yet she cannot bring herself to establish true communication with her daughter.

Artie remembers everything, which, she complains, makes her mind like a memorial □with all the names of the dead etched in. No way to erase.□ Her inability to forget and forgive her mother caused her to move away from Dorothea and give Echo to her, who, she insisted, would be a better mother. But Artie could not stay away. She returned but was able to establish only a tentative relationship with Echo. As soon as her daughter tried to get too close, Artie withdrew into herself. The first time Artie accidentally ran into Echo, at a bookstore, Artie fled the scene without speaking to her daughter. Later, when she began to call Echo, she refused to talk about anything personal, using the spelling drills to maintain contact, but only on a limited basis. By the end of the play, she still is conflicted about her relationship with Echo, but she listens when her daughter declares that she will take care of her mother, tending her like a garden.

Dorothea Wesbrook

Dorothea is a self-proclaimed eccentric who has inadvertently made life difficult for her daughter and granddaughter. Her eccentricity became an escape from the oppressive life she led growing up in America during the 1940s and 1950s. Initially, she was not strong enough to refuse the conventional roles of wife and mother, but eventually she was able to find a way to express her individuality by embracing eccentricity.

She believed that all human beings have the ability to find a real connection with the universe if they are persistent and brave enough to try. She had complete faith in her daughter and granddaughter's abilities and encouraged their success. While Dorothea was able to forge a strong relationship with Echo, Dorothea's eccentricity and need to control alienated Artie to the point where she abandoned her own daughter.

Dorothea forced her beliefs on both Echo and Artie. She coerced Artie into dangerous activities, such as flying, to prove her theories on the connection between humans and nature. She also imposed her vision of a woman's potential on Artie when she insisted that her daughter have an abortion, explaining that Artie would be nothing more than a mother if she were to keep the baby. When Echo was born, she determined that □Barbara□ was too conventional a name for her grandchild and so named the baby

herself. Echo later suggests that, when she was young, she was teased because of her name.

Along with this overwhelming desire for control and insistence that her views should take precedence, Dorothea has a generous and charitable side. Believing that all of the women in her family are □extraordinary,□ she spent hours with both Artie and Echo when they were children, to ensure that they could have the best education possible and so be able to fight against gender-based oppression. When Echo hangs up on Artie, informing her grandmother that □a dead person□ was on the phone, Dorothea stresses that □we all need forgiveness.□

Echo Wesbrook

Echo, Artie's daughter and Dorothea's granddaughter, determines that all of her troubles started in 1958, when Dorothea forced her fifteen-year-old daughter to try to fly with homemade wings. She understands that her grandmother's eccentricity, coupled with her need for control, drove her mother away from home. Her generous soul will not let her condemn her grandmother, though. Her goal throughout the play is to reunite the three.

She did not always want reconciliation with her mother, however. After she came to understand that Artie had abandoned her and saw her run away at the bookstore, Echo determined that her mother was dead to her. Artie's rejection of her, coupled with her grandmother's encouragement of her education, inspired Echo to focus on the study of words, for which she developed a great love, an ironic emotion, considering the lack of communication she experienced with her mother. Still, suppressed anger toward her mother emerged in her almost monomaniacal devotion to words, to the point where she became a vicious competitor at the spelling bee. After her joyful response to her opponent's defeat and subsequent humiliation, Echo realized that she was not □any less cruel□ than her mother and grandmother had been.

Ultimately, it is Echo who best becomes a reflection of the definition of □eleemosynary.□ She has continually tried to reconcile her mother and grandmother, insisting, for example, that the two attend the spelling bee and embrace when she won. After Dorothea has a stroke, Echo cares for her, imagining what she is thinking and moving her legs and arms to encourage circulation. When Dorothea dies, she determines that she will strengthen her relationship with her mother even though her mother gives her little encouragement.

Objects/Places

The Picnic

At a picnic when she is young and newly married, Dorothea meets a spiritualist who convinces her to become an "eccentric" and shed all social responsibility and live whatever flights of fancy enter her mind.

The Wings

Dorothea fashions a pair of wings with which she expects her daughter Artie to use to literally fly. These wings-which Artie cannot seem to escape-become a major point of contention between mother and daughter and then daughter and granddaughter.

The Tape

When Dorothea attempts to make Artie fly, she has the experiment professionally taped. Artie hates that there is such hard evidence of such a disgrace; but later, when Artie and Echo are living together-after Dorothea's passing-Echo forces her mother to watch the tape and see all of the good that is in it.

Alphabet Banners

The alphabet banners-one the Greek alphabet, the other Latin-are teaching aids used by Dorothea on both her infant daughter and her infant granddaughter.

Europe

Artie is offered a job in Europe, which she accepts, leaving her daughter with Dorothea and ensuring that she will not see her own child for many years.

The Dictionary

For a long time the dictionary is the only point of connection between Echo and her mother. Her mother calls on the telephone to fire words at Artie from the dictionary and Echo, obediently, spells them back to her, though, in fact, she would rather have a genuine conversation with her mother.

The Book Fair

The book fair is where Artie, for the first time in many years, gets a glimpse of her daughter. Rather than approach Echo, however, Artie turns and runs to her car.

Robinson Crusoe

Robinson Crusoe is the book Artie is examining at the book fair when she sees Echo. When she leaves the book behind, Echo-who clearly has seen her mother, as well-buys the book. She reads it seventeen times.

National Spelling Bee

The National Spelling Bee is the contest for which Artie helps Echo prepare-in her first bid toward a relationship with her estranged daughter. It is also where Echo learns that she has a dangerously spiteful streak within her, a streak that shows itself during the competition.

Dorothea's Room

After her stroke, Dorothea must be taken to a nursing home, leaving her bedroom unoccupied. Though Artie, who has just moved back home, intends to move into that room, Echo, unreasonably but with understandable emotion, insists that it remain just as it is.

The Nursing Home

The nursing home is the seemingly uncharacteristic location where Dorothea passes with uncharacteristic quiet. Echo and Artie are asleep in chairs when Dorothea dies and Echo remarks that it must have looked like a mass suicide.

Dorothea's Estate

Much of Dorothea's estate consists of books and other objects that Artie finds embarrassing and, in reaction to that, she begins burning them with a fury until Echo finally stops her, unable to believe that even Artie would do such a thing.

Themes

Loss

Each of the characters feels a sense of loss at different points in her life. Dorothea and Artie suffer from a loss of independence. Dorothea was never allowed to make choices about her future, growing up in America during the 1940s and 1950s. Her father controlled her life when she lived under his roof, refusing to let her go to college and arranging a marriage for her. When she married, she became just □a wife,□ since her husband limited her to that role. The only way in which she could gain a measure of independence was through her adoption of eccentricity, which, she claims, saved her life.

Ironically, this woman, who suffered so much as a result of her loss of independence, caused her daughter to experience a similar loss. Dorothea felt compelled to provide for her child the opportunities that had not been available to her. Unfortunately, that necessitated a loss of independence for Artie, since she was not allowed to make her own choices. Dorothea forced her daughter to perform tasks that would prove that she was an exceptional and freethinking woman. One, however, put her in physical danger, when she tried to fly with homemade wings. Another caused emotional turmoil when Dorothea persuaded Artie to get an abortion. The only way Artie could establish some type of independent identity was to get as far away from her mother as possible, which caused a devastating sense of loss for her daughter, Echo.

Abandonment

Artie also experienced a loss of control over her own daughter, which led to her abandonment of her. After Artie's husband had died in an accident, Dorothea moved in and took total control of Echo, even to the point of rejecting Artie's choice of names for her. Artie's own conflicted feelings for her mother, along with her need to escape Dorothea's control, prompted her to leave Echo in her mother's care. Artie admits that she has trouble touching people, including her daughter, which appears to be a result of the disconnection she feels from her own mother. Echo's overwhelming need to establish a relationship with Artie, however, compels her to forgive her mother and insist that she will tend and cultivate her to the point that the two can establish a close and loving relationship.

Good Mother/Bad Mother

When Echo is only a few months old, Dorothea begins teaching her the Greek and Latin alphabets, as well as some Greek words. Living with Echo and Dorothea for this brief period, Artie does her level best to sabotage the lessons given to her infant daughter by her eccentric mother. Artie, for instance, convinces baby Echo that "up" is actually

"down" and the floor is the ceiling. She is apparently at least as good a teacher as her mother because, eventually, Dorothea notices that Echo's world is upside down.

Artie tells Echo about this once Dorothea has passed, using it as rock-solid proof of what a bad mother she is and would be to Echo. Seen from another angle, however, Artie is clandestinely trying to do a good thing for her growing child. She is trying to preserve Echo from the oppressive nature of Dorothea's brand of education and her ultimately all-controlling ways-the controlling ways that caused Artie so much pain and warped her personality. Ironically, Artie's actions with young Echo are, in effect, much like Dorothea's attempts to save her young daughter from the restrictions of societal norms and the tyranny of a male-dominated society that Dorothea herself had to battle.

Artie admits that she is trying to "retard" her daughter by undermining her education. However, her intentions are pure and not malicious, as she seems to have convinced herself. Artie wants Echo to lead a normal life, unlike the one she has only seen glimpses of. Though Artie believes she has sinned against Echo, she is really only thinking of her child's happiness.

Motherhood

Despite the extreme difficulties Artie shows after Echo is born and her ultimate abdication of long-term motherhood, she has a moment-while still a teenager-of true tenderness and humanity. She becomes unexpectedly pregnant just before she is to leave for college. Without hesitation, her mother insists she have an abortion. Artie offers the most simple and eloquent argument she possesses as an argument against the abortion of this child. "It's a life". It is impossible to imagine middle-aged Artie so eager to sacrifice education and independence for maternity. However, middle-aged Artie had not yet dealt with her mother's endemic ruthlessness. Artie's later hardness of spirit-as well as her inability to connect with Echo-is due to one factor: Dorothea. It is the matriarch herself, in her paranoia about male oppression and typical familial responsibility, who began this cycle of selfishness.

In some ways, though Dorothea herself would never admit such a possibility, Echo is an "echo" of her unborn sibling and, when her mother looks at her, she sees her past failure. Her failure, if nothing else, was to stand up to her mother when their principles clashed on such a significant issue.

Fortunately, it seems that Echo has learned a lesson of humanity and selflessness missed by the two preceding generations. Perhaps the fourth generation of Westbrook women can learn to live in something like peace.

Charity

Appropriately, as the last of the Westbrook women and the "echo" of all that has gone before, Echo gets the last word. She asserts, in keeping with the work's title, that, no

matter what else they may do, the three generations of Westbrook women are ultimately, essentially charitable.

By the end, this is clear enough about Echo herself. Not only has she cared for her aged grandmother, she also plans to care for her emotionally wounded mother. Artie has never been a mother to her, but Echo has learned charity-or, perhaps more accurately, mercy-and gives even when nothing has been given previously.

The question of whether or not Dorothea and Artie are charitable is equally clear: No. Whatever well-meaning Echo seems to think, they are not charitable people. In fact, the extent of her own charity and forgiveness blinds Echo to the fact that, Dorothea-though she loved both daughter and granddaughter in her way-used them as props in her own little intellectual theatre as can be seen in the names she bestows upon them: Artemis and Echo. She sets these two people up as figures long before she acknowledges them as people. Moreover, whether it can be blamed on her overbearing mother or the sudden death of her husband, Artie can neither show affection nor give charity to anyone. Much like the pitiless, virgin goddess her name symbolizes, Artie is simply cold.

Style

Narrative Fragmentation

The play consists of a series of sketchy plots constructed around the three women's recollections of past incidents. Blessing continually cuts back and forth from past to present as the women examine the effect that the past has had on their lives. There is little action in the play, as it juxtaposes characters' monologues spoken to the audience and short conversations with each other. The lack of action reflects the inability of the characters to move forward in their relationships with one another until the end, when Artie and Echo are forced to deal with Dorothea's death and its effect on them.

Symbolic Language

Language is used symbolically in the play, ironically pinpointing a lack of communication among the characters. Echo loves the sound of words and claims that there are some she would □give her life for.□ Her devotion to words becomes an escape from the reality of her unstable relationship with her mother. Still, attention to words also provides the only link between the two.

After a long absence, Artie begins to communicate over the phone with her daughter, coaching her for the spelling bee. Echo suggests that □it was probably her way to apologize□ for running away from her at the bookstore. Still, Artie will go only so far in her attempts to establish a relationship with her daughter. Whenever Echo tries to make a personal connection with her, Artie returns to the spelling words, rebuffing her daughter's attempts to forge a relationship. For example, when Echo suggests they talk, instead of study, Artie ignores her request and gives her a new word to spell. By the end of the play, Echo uses the word □eleemosynary□ to describe the Wesbrook women. The word becomes most appropriate for Echo, who has decided to be charitable and forgive her mother for her past mistakes.

Points of View

Because *Eleemosynary* is a theatrical production, instead of a novel or other form of static literature, its point of view is elusive. However, because Blessing has given all of her characters multiple soliloquies, it becomes a problem of three points of view, instead of none.

Dorothea's point of view is generally cheerful, optimistic, and oblivious. Her falling out with Artie after Echo is born does not seem to perturb her at all-neither for herself nor for her now motherless granddaughter. Artie's point of view is exclusively negative, exasperated, and nervous. She blames her mother for the state of her life and gives endless excuses why she shuns her daughter.

The symbolism of Echo's name becomes a little clearer when examining her point of view as one caught between Artie and Dorothea-the woman who gave birth to her and the woman who raised her. She recalls her grandmother's love for the eccentric; but, perhaps due to the influence of her mother, she tempers that love with reason-for example, she preserves the wings, but never attempts to fly with them. Also, she makes a real effort to be charitable to both mother and grandmother, though they themselves do nothing but fight.

Setting

Like any play, *Eleemosynary* possesses two settings: physical and metaphysical. The physical space-the stage-is meant to be bare, with as few props as possible.

The metaphysical space-or dramatic space-is more complex, just as the characters are more complex than the things they employ. There are clearly separate theatrical places in *Eleemosynary* that often break into and overlap each other. In Scene 1, for example, the scene is in Dorothea's house during a period of time that follows the stroke that will eventually cause her death, but then rapidly shifts to twenty years previous when Dorothea and Artie are in an unspecified location-the place where Dorothea tried to make Artie fly. Therefore, both time and place fracture, while Echo simultaneously speaks of both continuums from the narrator's space-a space outside of place and time. As like so many other characteristics of the play, the setting, as such, acts as a metaphor for the peculiarly confused nature of this family.

Language and Meaning

The language of the play is straightforward modern American English. The language in the play is a little obscure, however. In other words, while the audience will take in the dialogue finding little or nothing alien in it, the characters within the play, especially Echo, employ a vocabulary that is less than common.

The constant spelling of words, as well, the breaking down of language into its constituent parts not only offers the audience consternation, it symbolizes the fractured nature of this family, as well as the theme of misunderstanding. If a word has been taken apart, it is useless for communication.

Both Dorothea and Artie use language as a way to educate and form a relationship with Echo-Artie uses language almost exclusively as a form of bonding with her daughter. Dorothea teaches the infant, Echo, her first word: the Greek word for "grandmother". Ironically, Artie's scorn for these early lessons between granddaughter and grandmother foreshadows the considerably less successful manner she will use to forge a relationship with Echo. Perhaps forcing her daughter to take words apart-to divide them by spelling-symbolizes her partially unconscious need to remain apart from her daughter.

Structure

Eleemosynary consists of seven scenes that come one after the other in rapid succession with one character generally picking up on a theme the other has left off. Blessing is able to write at such breakneck speed because she employs "scenes" and not "acts". An act would denote a more radical change in setting or theatrical direction on which a scene does not insist. The play, however, constantly bounces around between narrator, time, character, and, to a lesser and more elusive degree, space.

The play's temporal movement between the overlapping lives of the three Westbrook women reinforces the idea that their lives-though undeniably chaotic and emotionally broken-make up a tapestry so tightly and permanently interwoven that the pull of any thread effects the overall picture.

Historical Context

The Conservative 1980s

One of the strongest influences on American culture in the 1980s was brought about by the election to the presidency of the Republican Ronald Reagan. Reagan ushered in a return to American conservatism during his two terms in office. His political ideology rejected many of the liberal attitudes that had dominated the years of the 1930s, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president, through the 1960s and the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson. Roosevelt faced the Depression and put in place a social and economic agenda called the New Deal. Johnson likewise helped pass progressive social programs and civil rights bills. Republicans of the 1980s proclaimed that they would undo the □welfare state□ and cut the power of the central government. The result, they argued, would be a strengthening of America's capitalist economy.

An anti-Communist fervor, promoted by the Republicans, harkened back to the cold-war ideology of the 1950s. Reagan and his followers also tried to return the country to the traditional values of the 1950s, stressing middle-class family ideals and rejecting the liberal permissiveness of the counterculture 1960s. Many Americans, among them some of the □baby boomers□ who had grown up in the 1950s, welcomed a return to their nostalgic view of the past, a time that appeared much simpler than the 1980s.

In the 1980s, the celebration of the ideals of the 1950s had a destructive impact on many of the gains of the social and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Conservative Republicans felt that these movements had gone too far, negatively affecting the social fabric of the country. One of their main targets was the women's movement and the gains it had made in women's rights in the previous two decades. Republicans blocked the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1982, which contributed to the disruption of the movement's organizational structure. They also supported antiabortion groups that helped pass legislation that restricted state and federal abortion laws. Minority groups suffered as well when the Reagan administration tried to overturn affirmative action regulations and cut social programs.

Feminism

In the 1970s, the women's movement gained two important victories: the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* to protect a woman's right to have an abortion and congressional approval of the ERA in 1972. After Reagan's election, however, these rights were threatened by the conservative Right, who promoted a return to traditional female roles. The ERA stated, □Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.□ The ratification deadline for the ERA was June 1982.

Supporters, including the National Organization for Women, insisted that this right needed to be guaranteed by law, since discrimination against women still existed throughout America. Opponents, however, voiced fears that the amendment would cause further rifts in the fabric of American society, especially within the family. The Republican administration supported the latter view; as a result, the ERA failed to gain ratification. This failure dealt a severe blow to the feminist movement, opening the door to such critics as Phyllis Schlafly, who called for women to return to more traditional roles.

The controversy over the role of women prompted Betty Friedan, one of the leaders of the feminist movement, to argue that feminists needed to find a balance between traditional and modern concerns regarding a woman's place. Even as the voices of dissent continued to be raised, women's numbers grew in the workforce during the 1980s. For some, the extra income was a necessity□especially for single mothers, whose problems were compounded by federal spending cuts for childcare.

New Age Movement

The New Age movement was less a new religion than a mixture of several Eastern philosophies brought into the modern age and the Western world. Initially a fringe organization, the movement slowly began to make its impact on mainstream American society by the beginning of the 1980s. New Age followers acknowledged the power of American consumerism and so used its forums□publishing, music, and charismatic speakers who spoke through media outlets and at seminars□to spread their philosophy and influence. Often, however, the consumer-driven aspects of the movement clashed with its teachings, which championed individuality, simplified lifestyles, communion with nature, and a counterculture sensibility.

New Age followers rejected strict adherence to religious dogma but did embrace some specific philosophical tenets, including a belief in reincarnation, spiritual healing, and astrology and in the value of practicing yoga and meditation and eating □natural□ foods. Many of these beliefs were taken from Native American spiritual customs and Eastern religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism, and given a modern spin. The Gospels, along with the writings of Buddha, the Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu, and the Indian yogi Gopi Krishna, became spiritual guideposts for New Agers, especially those works that promoted a sense of unity with the universe.

One of the movement's founders, Marilyn Ferguson, explained the New Age philosophy in her 1980 book *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, which became a popular hit, especially among the baby-boom generation, some of whom rejected stricter religious practices. In the latter part of the decade, the movement grew in strength, owing in some part to the national attention given to it by the actress Shirley MacLaine, who related her personal experiences with past lives in the press, on television, and in several books.

The New Age movement, along with other self-help groups in the 1980s, gained popularity because it called for its followers to take control of their own lives, recognizing

their individual capacity for spiritual and physical renewal. In this sense, the movement echoed pantheism, which taught that every human being is directly connected to the universe and to God, without the need to follow restrictive, traditional religious doctrine or to rely on spiritual mediators. The New Age movement also had an impact on American politics, helping to promote more liberal views. New Agers opposed nuclear proliferation, nationalism (excessive devotion to a nation), and environmental destruction.

Critical Overview

Eleemosynary began a two-week run at the Philadelphia Festival Theatre for New Plays on April 29, 1986. Since then it has been successfully produced off Broadway and in other theaters, most notably on the West Coast. Reviews for the play have been mixed, but most have been praiseworthy. Todd Everett, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, says it is □a strong, interesting show,□ nicely written. In a *Time* article, William A. Henry III writes that the play is □haunting□ and □displays wit and charm.□ He claims that it presents an □intriguing narrative□ that helps □this complex material [stay] clear.□

Nancy Churnin, in her *Los Angeles Times* review, considers it □a quiet and thoughtful play that is sometimes funny and sometimes sad.□ She finds that □the weakest part of the show may well be the ending□ and says that □it trails off more than it stops; the final words don't ring true.□ Still, in her closing statement, she argues that □as in so many Blessing plays, the journey is more important than the destination. This production makes it a journey well worth taking.□

Some reviewers, however, find the plot contrived. Laurie Winer writes in the *Wall Street Journal* that □the controlling hand of Mr. Blessing is constantly apparent, an intrusive presence.□ She claims that the play □is itself like a correctly spelled word that hasn't been properly incorporated into a sentence. It doesn't add up.□ Winer cites instances in the play when, she argues, □Mr. Blessing lets us see him laying out his hand.□ In a particularly harsh review in the *New York Times*, Alvin Klein insists that the play covers □obvious, hackneyed sentimental terrain.□ He finds it □a pretentious, annoying play□ made up of □a series of disconnected backstories, grandiloquent statements . . . and forced imagery.□ Henry, however, echoes most critics' assessment that the play is □Blessing's finest work, an enriching tale of sin, regret and forgiveness.□

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, she examines the effects that limited roles for women can have on a family, as reflected in the play.

Echo Wesbrook, the main character in Blessing's play *Eleemosynary*, determines that all of her problems began in 1958. That is the year that her grandmother, Dorothea, forced her mother, Artie, to test her theory that humans can fly with □the proper classical training.□ As the reminiscence plays out, Artie, with a pair of homemade wings strapped to her back, first tries running down a steep hill. When that fails to make her airborne, her mother instructs her to jump off a water tower. Dorothea insists that Artie will be safe, since she has piled up leaves at the base of the tower. After Artie scales the tower and looks over the edge, she refuses to jump, all of which is caught on film by Dorothea. When her mother suggests that they try again the next day, Artie responds, □You are nuts! And now you're nuts on film!□

Many people who know Dorothea consider her □nuts.□ Echo notes that her grandmother was continually involved in projects: □communication with the dead, spontaneous combustion, astral projection.□ When she took walks, she claimed that she met famous people, like President James Monroe. Dorothea has embraced eccentricity as a response to gender restrictions placed on her throughout her life. As she puts it, □Eccentricity saved my life. It became my life.□ Yet her alternative behavior had a damaging effect on her family. Her unreasonable demands on her daughter caused Artie to become emotionally stunted, which resulted in a deep divide between Artie and Echo.

Dorothea recalls the oppressive conditions under which she lived, growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, which eventually drove her to embrace eccentricity. She remembers that □the only sentence of genuine interest□ regarding her that her father ever spoke was □Is it a boy?□ This gave her □such a feeling of worthlessness.□ She explains, □It was like an asthma of the soul. I could never take a deep breath of who I was.□ Noting her limited opportunities, Dorothea declares, □Girls really *weren't* worth much then.□

After her father told her that he had arranged a marriage for her, she declared that she would rather go to college than get married, but her father only laughed at her suggestion. Her future husband made a vague promise that she could get an education after they were married, but he later refused to allow her. She explains that her husband □didn't really know what to make of [her], except a wife.□ Dorothea fell into a grudging acceptance of the role that had been thrust upon her until she met a spiritualist at a party, who claimed to have made □eccentric journeys,□ during which he enjoyed □the possibility of an entirely different world within our reach.□ After he told her that □*no one holds an eccentric responsible*,□ she breathed □a great breath of happiness□ that gave her a tremendous sense of relief. She remembers, □From that day on, I never felt the need to listen to a thing my husband said□or anyone else.□ Finally able to break the

gender-related bonds that had entrapped her, she claims, □Eccentricity solved so many problems. I could stay a wife and mother, and still converse with the souls of animals.□

Dorothea insists that □the world is filled with an inner conviction. A cord of truth and power which needs only to be unsnarled and drawn taut between its center and our own.□ Ironically, though, as she strove to make connections between herself and the universe, she neglected the needs of her daughter, who, in turn, neglected those of her own daughter. William A. Henry III, in his review of the play for *Time*, concludes that Dorothea, □a New Age visionary,□ propels her daughter and granddaughter toward freedom, seeing them □as a chance to fulfill [her] own thwarted dreams.□ Yet the freedom she forced on them added further irony to their lives as it frustrated their own desires in much the same way that Dorothea's father had frustrated hers.

Reflecting on her relationships with her mother and her daughter, Artie warns the audience, □Never have a daughter. Never have a child, for that matter, but *never* have a daughter. She won't like you.□ Her statement reflects her own attitude toward her mother and what she assumes is Echo's attitude toward her.

When Dorothea discovered the benefits of eccentricity, she took control of her daughter's life, concluding that she knew best how to live. She insisted that Artie be well educated, claiming □a smart girl can hide what she knows, so there's still a chance for happiness.□ Nancy Churnin notes, in her review of the play for the *Los Angeles Times*, that Artie tried □unsuccessfully to escape from Dorothea by taking refuge in hard science,□ as a counter to her mother's New Age philosophy. Dorothea's will, strengthened through years of suppression, became too strong for Artie to fight.

Dorothea's control over her daughter reached a breaking point, however, when Artie became pregnant. After Artie announced that she wanted to keep the baby, Dorothea angrily insisted that □none of our plans, none of your potential□ would then be realized. Trying to persuade Artie to get an abortion, Dorothea argued that she could be more than a mother, more than just □something a child needs.□ Artie eventually allowed her mother to browbeat her into getting an abortion but, soon after, ran away from home, ready to break off all ties with Dorothea.

When Artie got pregnant with Echo, however, she tried to reestablish a relationship with her mother. She called Dorothea, who immediately insisted that she would travel to California to help her. Soon after Echo was born, Artie's husband died, and Dorothea regained control over her daughter and granddaughter's lives. She named the baby Echo over Artie's objection and took over the job of raising the girl, teaching her letters before the child could speak. Dorothea established a close relationship with Echo, transferring all of her dreams to the child. Their closeness, however, damaged Artie's own relationship with Echo. She admits, □I have trouble touching my daughter□ but notes that Dorothea □could touch her all day long.□ Understanding that Echo had come to prefer Dorothea to her and desperate to get out from under her mother's control, Artie took a job overseas, where she spent the next several years.

Dorothea doted on Echo, and, as she grew up, Echo became bitter about her mother's abandonment of her. Once, when Artie called home wanting to speak to Dorothea, Echo hung up on her. When her grandmother asked who was on the phone, Echo replied, □It was a dead person□ or, at least, □nearly dead□ to her. Eventually, though, as Artie attempted to make contact with her, Echo readmitted her mother into her life. Churnin writes that when the three women □pull at the ties that bind, they find that these are bonds that cannot be severed. They can, at best, be renegotiated so that the dynamics between the characters are less suffocating and lethal.□ Slowly, and ironically, through the study of words, Echo and Artie are able to establish a familial relationship, which Dorothea encourages as she notes, □We all need forgiveness.□

Echo and Artie find common ground after Dorothea dies. Echo notes that Dorothea's control over her was difficult for her as well. When her mother sends her to live with her uncle, Echo initially feels hopeful that she □could live a whole new life□ there, where she could be Barbara, not Echo. But she soon realizes that what she wants more than anything is her mother's love.

Blessing provides no panacea at the end of the play that neatly wraps up the troubled relationship between mother and daughter. Artie sometimes tries to resist Echo's efforts to be close to her, answering Echo's question about whether Artie loves her with □yes and no.□ But Echo insists that she will not give up on her mother, for although the Wesbrook women can be eccentric, they are also eleemosynary. She will tend to her mother and □cultivate□ her, because she, like all the Wesbrook women, ultimately is charitable at heart.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *Eleemosynary*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature and is an independent writer specializing in literature. In this essay, she explores Blessing's characterization of the matriarch Dorothea in Eleemosynary.

Blessing's *Eleemosynary* is a minimally staged play with few props. This simple presentation brings the reader's focus sharply toward the three characters, Dorothea, Artie, and Echo. By eliminating all distractions from the stage, Blessing manages to remove his three characters from the concreteness of a setting. He challenges the audience to understand these three women and how they relate to one another and the world. There are no secondary characters or context cues on which we can rely for information or perspective. Blessing's play is all about characterization, and it hinges on Dorothea.

Dorothea is Artie's mother and Echo's grandmother, but she has acted as mother to them both. The action of the play is set off by Dorothea's stroke, an event that forces Artie and Echo to meet for the first time in years. This reunion is the catalyst for telling the family history that makes up most of *Eleemosynary*. Dorothea's subsequent death triggers profound change in the relationship between Echo and her estranged mother. For years, the two have talked on the phone without ever discussing anything substantial, let alone indulging in long-overdue arguments. Dorothea's estate, however, prompts the first-ever fight between Echo and Artie. Knowing that they have only each other forces them into honesty. This is just the first of the changes in their relationship; Dorothea's death ultimately brings Artie and her daughter back together as a family. Clearly, Dorothea's role in the family has been significant, since her passing brings with it such anxiety, turmoil, and change. An examination of Blessing's characterization of Dorothea reveals why she was such a central figure in the lives of her daughter and granddaughter.

The pivotal moment in Dorothea's life was when she decided to become an eccentric. By her own admission, this was a conscious choice that liberated her from caring what her husband thought of her. As a teenager, Dorothea had dreamed of graduating from high school, attending college, and someday getting married. The news that her father had arranged for her to marry a boyfriend, however, changed her entire view of who she would become. Although she was reluctant to get married, her father had no plans to pay for her to go to college, and her husband-to-be assured her that she could be a student again someday. After having children, Dorothea realized that her husband never intended for □someday□ to arrive. Her dreams would go unfulfilled. Dorothea had been unconventional (for her time) from the time she was very young, and she had difficulty finding her place within her family's and society's expectations of her. She found it impossible to reconcile her independent spirit with the life she led, so when she talked to a man who explained that nobody applies expectations to eccentrics, she had her answer. She chose to be an eccentric as a way to release herself from external expectations.

Whereas □wife□ and □mother□ were definable roles, □eccentric□ was not. This role enabled Dorothea to create her own persona and become whatever kind of woman she wanted to be. Unfortunately, it also enabled her to use her identity as an eccentric as an excuse. She could disregard social rules, be selfish, and refuse to compromise. Further, she no longer needed her husband's approval, or anyone else's. This made her oblivious to how she made other people feel, including her sons, daughter, and granddaughter. Over time, this attitude made her insensitive to Artie. Dorothea came to value her own right to be an eccentric over her daughter's right to be understood as her own person. When Artie became pregnant at the age of eighteen, Dorothea was consumed with thoughts of how the baby would destroy her plans for Artie. Dorothea took advantage of Artie's frightened and vulnerable state to impose on Artie her own agenda about female empowerment and show her husband (Artie's father) that women can be more than mothers. Artie argued with Dorothea, but Dorothea pressured her into having an abortion, after which Artie ran away to start her own life without her mother.

Dorothea became so entrenched in her own eccentric lifestyle that she came to lack the ability to connect with her daughter in a meaningful or supportive way. As a result, her daughter ultimately escaped her domination in search of her own way. Intuitively, it would seem that Dorothea□who champions letting women define themselves□would be thrilled at her daughter's independence and desire to test her mettle in the world. In fact, Dorothea is always desperate to keep a tight hold on her daughter, directing her moves and running her life. After Artie left home, Dorothea went so far as to have a detective find Artie and then arrived uninvited in Artie's home. This only succeeded in driving a wider wedge between herself and her daughter. Dorothea allowed her self-centered eccentricity to eclipse her view of how her daughter was struggling against the same forces with which she herself had struggled.

Another important character trait of Dorothea's is her passive-aggressiveness. This tendency is consistent with her general approach to life, which is one of avoidance. Perhaps because she feels that all attacks on her happiness have been indirect, she is aggressive in the same way. Dorothea's happiness was attacked first by her father, who arranged for her to get married immediately after finishing high school. He never discussed it with her, just made the decision for her and then informed her of it. Her hope for future happiness was then attacked by her husband, a man she did not love but who controlled her future. He had assured her that she could go to college someday but later told her that he never really meant it. Because her experience in being attacked was never direct, Dorothea never learned how to confront issues or problems directly. For example, she had a detective find Artie and then showed up at Artie's house and criticized the house, the view, and the food instead of coming right out and criticizing Artie. Later, Artie told Dorothea that she was pregnant again, and Dorothea informed Artie that she was coming to help with the baby. She then moved into the neighborhood without consulting Artie at all. After the baby was born, Dorothea decided that although Artie had named the baby Barbara, her name instead would be Echo. These are all very intrusive and insensitive forms of behavior, carried out in nonconfrontational ways. Dorothea never budges, and Artie is left to deal with an overbearing and seemingly oblivious parent.

Dorothea is characterized as an intelligent woman who has reared her daughter and granddaughter to be intelligent women. Throughout *Eleemosynary*, Dorothea puts little emphasis on anything other than developing the girls' intellects. When we see her for the first time with her granddaughter, Echo, it is not a typical grandmotherly scene. Where we would expect to find a grandmother rocking and singing to a new baby, Dorothea is seen reviewing alphabets with the three-month-old baby. Dorothea establishes her expectations of Artie and Echo early in their lives, and she expects them to be geniuses who let nothing stand in the way of pursuing their full intellectual potential. This is what is so devastating to Dorothea when Artie becomes pregnant for the first time at the age of eighteen; all of Dorothea's plans for Artie's education and career are jeopardized by the baby. In her experience, becoming a mother is a great burden that hinders more important intellectual pursuits.

Dorothea values education; after all, she was denied going down that road. She expects the girls to be motivated to attend college and to excel when they get there. After Artie has abandoned Echo to be reared by Dorothea, Dorothea keeps Artie's memory alive by telling Echo how proud she should be of her mother, who is doing research. She places no emphasis on what kind of person Artie is but focuses solely on her intelligence and accomplishment in her field. That Artie is so accomplished in her field (science) comes as no surprise to Dorothea, just as Echo's winning the spelling bee does not surprise her. Artie is hardly surprised when Echo mentions that she may begin taking college classes at the age of thirteen. Amid Dorothea's expectations that the girls will be intellectual giants is the expectation that they will achieve great things as scholars.

Dorothea's development of Artie's and Echo's identities as intelligent women is so deeply embedded in them that they are initially able to connect only at an intellectual level. Artie suggests that Echo pursue spelling bees, and this gives them something to talk about on the phone. Once Echo starts working on being a spelling champion, Artie calls more often, so she can help Echo study her words. As superficial as it is, practicing spelling words is their only consistent link to each other. When Echo attempts to lure her mother into more personal discussions, Artie uses the passive-aggressive tactics she learned from her mother to ignore Echo and continue with spelling practice. There is also an incident before Dorothea's stroke, when Artie sees Echo at a book fair. Echo sees Artie too, and Artie drops her book and runs out of the building. Echo promptly buys the book (*Robinson Crusoe*) and reads it seventeen times. This is the only way she knows to connect with her mother. Because Dorothea never develops the other sides of their personalities (emotional, intuitive, social), the intellectual level is all they have.

As a mother to both Artie and Echo, Dorothea passes some of her own characteristics on to them. She teaches them independence, even if she fails to provide appropriate guidance for it. She teaches them that women can be respected for their intellects and that the world of academic discipline is open to them. She also teaches them to be proud of their intelligence and not hide it, as she was forced to do. Because of her own interpersonal failings, Dorothea also passes on to Artie and Echo the inability to have healthy relationships. She fails to provide them with a role model for how to forge healthy relationships with family members or men, and her relationships with them

render them incapable of achieving normal emotional intimacy. After all, Dorothea chose to be the eccentric and thus free herself of obligations, but Artie and (later) Echo had to learn to coexist with her. Although they both love Dorothea, albeit differently, their relationships with her do not prepare them for a relationship with each other. Because their feelings for her differ, the two cannot even find common ground in their love for Dorothea.

At the end of the play, we see Artie and Echo determined to find a way to relate to each other and be each other's family. Dorothea's legacy, however, is a difficult one to integrate into their relationship, and it is impossible to overcome. Dorothea has shaped both of their lives and molded their identities. Because Dorothea herself was an unusual person, Artie and Echo are unusual women, too. Unlike Dorothea, Artie and Echo feel free to be themselves without having to cast off social conventions or expectations. In the final scene of the play, Artie and Echo review the tape that shows Dorothea making Artie try to fly. For Echo, the tape captures a time she never saw, when her mother and her grandmother had a life together. It represents hope that she and Artie can find a way to relate to each other. For Artie, the tape captures her mother's determination, regardless of what society or the laws of physics say. It is symbolic of her mother's approach to life. The play ends on an uncertain note. Dorothea was larger than life; now that she is gone, we hope that Artie and Echo can find their way into a well-rounded life and a healthier mother-daughter relationship.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *Eleemosynary*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Heims is a writer and teacher living in Paris. In this essay, he analyzes the structure of Eleemosynary *and argues that Blessing is more interested in creating a play that shows how his characters experience events than in developing action and plot.*

Having broken contact with her mother in her teens, Artie telephones her a number of years later to tell her, □I'm going to have a baby.□ □I'll come and stay with you,□ her mother says. □Where do you live now?□ Artie replies, □Oh□you don't have to do that.□ □I want to,□ her mother answers. □What state do you live in? Just tell me that.□ Reluctantly, Artie tells her that it is □California.□ To which Dorothea responds, □Out there, eh? Well, I'll have to make some arrangements.□ But Artie interrupts her. □Mom, don't come. I don't want you to.□ □Nonsense,□ Dorothea replies. □I'll be there in a week.□ □Mom,□ Artie says, □don't you want to know what city I'm in?□ □No,□ says Dorothea, characteristically. □I like the challenge.□ Artie's next line is not part of the conversation with her mother. She tells the audience, □A week later, there she was.□

This dialogue toward the end of scene 4 of Blessing's *Eleemosynary* is not an actual dramatic exchange happening in real stage time. It is recollected and narrated by Artie. She is presenting it to the audience. □When I ran away the second time,□ she says, □I kept moving . . . Once after about three years, I called.□ With a change of inflection, she starts the dialogue, speaking as if into a telephone, □Mom?□ When this conversation□a snapshot of their relationship and of Dorothea's temperament□ends, Dorothea, as if arriving in California, says, □Hi.□ She does not speak to Artie but, as the stage direction indicates, to the audience□comically, even rakishly, as if in the panel of a cartoon, framing and caricaturing herself. At that moment, Dorothea exists simultaneously within and outside the action of the play. The actress playing her portrays her as if the character were a puppet and the actress a puppeteer. In turn, Artie resumes her stance as a narrator. Not answering her mother's greeting, she, too, speaks to the audience: □She bought a house on our block. She came over every night. My husband actually liked her.□ □Richard had taste,□ Dorothea interjects. Artie responds, telling *us*, not her mother, □He had more than that.□

In the foregoing scene, Blessing does not present action and conversation for the sake of dramatic realism□although the conversation is realistic□but as dramatized narrative. The actors are narrating what their characters said. In *Eleemosynary*, the story is less important than the characters it serves to reveal. The play is designed not to develop a plot but to make the audience think about the characters and the values they represent. For this reason, too, it is presented on a bare stage. Blessing is not attempting to create the illusion of reality but to represent, onstage, individual consciousness.

Repeatedly, throughout the play, one of the characters tells the audience something about herself or another character, and one or both of the others step into the narrative to help *show* what she is saying. *Eleemosynary* begins with Artie's daughter and Dorothea's granddaughter, Echo, speaking to the audience. She spells □eleemosynary□ and then says, □It's my favorite word. Not just because I won with it,

either.□ With this, she establishes her character□precocious, outspoken, and brainy. She then points to another section of the stage, to a platform where a woman is lying with her eyes closed, and says, □This is my grandmother. She had a stroke.□ Without moving, Dorothea says, □Could you open the drapes, dear?□ Echo pretends to open imaginary drapes. As she does, she tells the audience, □She can't really talk. I can hear her, though. At least I think I can.□ The actress playing Dorothea says, □Oh, that's nice. That's warm,□ and Echo continues to speak to the audience, telling more about her grandmother. The audience learns about Echo and Dorothea and also must recognize that the play is representing mental action occurring inside one character's mind as much as external interaction between characters.

Eleemosynary ends just as it began. Echo speaks to the audience. Throughout the play, too, one of the three characters always serves as the narrator, framing a dramatic scene that the three of them present. Thus, never is any of the dramatic action set in the present time. Only the narration is. Nevertheless, *Eleemosynary* is less a play about recollection than it is about defying the boundaries of time and space to represent on the stage the feeling of life as a process of consciousness and desire. Rather than dramatizing events, *Eleemosynary* dramatizes the way three women perceive events and experience living.

In *Eleemosynary*, Blessing shows the experience of experience, not just the events experienced. His concern with problems of formal exposition and dramatic structure□his technique of distancing the actors from their roles so that the audience can observe the characters and their situations and interactions rather than becoming absorbed in their melodrama□does not overwhelm his interest in representing and exploring the human matters of this unusual drama. *Eleemosynary* presents the lives of three generations of women, their influence on each other, and the ways in which each of them deals with being a woman in a society where, as Dorothea remarks, □Girls really *weren't* worth much.□ As she puts it, being a girl □gave me such a feeling of worthlessness. It was like an asthma of the soul. I could never take a deep breath of who I was.□ None of the three women is content to accept the condition of inferiority that is socially imposed upon her. Each is endowed with a particular genius. Each also represents a characteristic generational response to the treatment of women in society, as the social definitions of women, women's identities, and women's roles evolve.

Dorothea represents women of a generation who were devalued because they were not men. □As for my father,□ she tells us, □well, the only sentence of genuine interest he ever uttered about me was, 'Is it a boy?'□ Consequently, Dorothea shows how she was defined not as herself but as a wife. □The day I graduated high school, my father smiled at me, and said he had a wonderful surprise□which turned out to be an arranged marriage between me and John Wesbrook. . . . I said, 'What about college?' And he said, 'John's going directly into his father's business.'□ But Dorothea interjects, □No, no□what about college for me?□ And her father laughs. □Can you imagine it?□ she says. □Feeling guilty for learning?□ Brilliant and thwarted, Dorothea finds refuge for herself and escapes from the limitations imposed upon her by becoming a spiritualist and an eccentric.

Artie is no less gifted than her mother, but Dorothea's eccentricity, which allowed her to escape the bondage of masculine constraints, binds Artie to her at the expense of Artie's own personality. Dorothea imposes herself upon Artie. Although she is encouraged by Dorothea in her intellectual development, Artie is stifled emotionally, her own consciousness swallowed up by her mother. Overwhelmed by the force of her mother's bohemianism, eccentricity, and ever-changing spiritual quests, she harnesses her intellectual power and suppresses her tenderness. Not only does she break with her mother, she also later leaves her daughter in the care of her mother to pursue her own career. Even when she talks to Echo□over the phone□she remains aloof, unwilling to discuss either her feelings or her actions.

Raised by Dorothea, Echo misses her mother's love and longs for it, but she is not, as her mother was, thwarted by Dorothea's eccentricities. She is nourished by them. She thrives on her grandmother's ways of sharpening her intellect and cultivating her sensibility, and she loves her grandmother as her mother never does. Echo is, therefore, the product of the clash of her grandmother and her mother. Her narrative quest is to integrate her mother and grandmother in herself. She is the principal narrator of the play and, to the degree that *Eleemosynary* has a fixed point of view, it is hers: her narration frames the others. She is, in addition, the focal point of her grandmother's and her mother's attention□however greatly the nature of each of their relationships with her differs. She tries to unite them, and they are united in her. Her particular and spectacular talent for spelling is encouraged by her mother. It is a way for Artie to be in contact with Echo as she goes over words with her, but it is also a way of avoiding intimacy with her, for she will not discuss anything else. Dorothea, however, disdains Echo's dedication to becoming a champion speller. □Why do that?□ she asks. □If you already know the word, why beat someone to death with the fact?□ Echo, nevertheless, pursues the championship in order to gain her mother's love and to □fly□ like her grandmother. She uses the spelling bee also as an occasion to bring her mother and grandmother together, so both can be present for her.

What the three women have in common is symbolized by the metaphor of flying and, for each in her own way, by the desire to fly. The idea of flying is expressed verbally throughout the play and represented by the image of wings and by the actual pair of wings that Dorothea makes Artie wear in a film she shoots to document her attempts □to prove that man□or, in this case, woman□can fly without the aid of any motor of any kind, using only the simple pair of wings you see my daughter . . . wearing.□ The idea of flying represents the freedom of the spirit when it overcomes the constraints and boundaries of convention and matter and soars despite obstacles. Dorothea attempts flight through her eccentricity and imagination, undeterred by the laws of the material world. Artie attempts it by running away from her mother and daughter and pursuing scientific research, hoping to discover what is not yet known. Echo tries it by spelling words with such facility that it seems the words are revealed to her as entirely perceived objects from above, rather than agglomerations of letters. She spells as if she were a funambulist walking a tightrope, hoping to win the love of her audience.

As she competes in the spelling bee, Echo demonstrates the neediness and the fierce dedication and self-involvement each of the three women brings to whatever they

pursue. □Echo was a little different than I thought she'd be. . . . She seemed so . . . desperate,□ Artie says. □She was frightening, is what she was,□ Dorothea continues. The actress playing Echo shows what they mean, speaking Echo's thoughts during the competition. □This can't go on forever, buddy. I'm going to crack you like an egg,□ she says mentally to her one remaining adversary. □Dear God,□ she prays, □please let me win! . . . I want five minutes . . . when all the lights are on me, and all the pictures are taken of me, and for five minutes I'm the most famous child in America, and Mom and Dorothea see it.□ When she does win, however, the focus for each of the women is not Echo but the misery of the boy she defeats.

Considering the self-reflexivity that propels each of the three women, it is perplexing that at the end of the play Echo says, □No matter what we've done□no matter how we've done it□we're all three of us, in our own way, completely . . . eleemosynary . . . 'Charitable.'□ Is she deceiving herself? Or does she mean that each of them, despite and even because of her need for independence, has attempted to give to the others fully whatever she has to give? It is a depth of spiritual power and defiance of limitations in Dorothea's case. It is an unremitting pursuit of a goal in Artie's. In Echo's own case, it is loving care, which is shown both in how she tends her grandmother and in the words she says to her mother in the last moments of *Eleemosynary*. Determined to satisfy her own need for love and to repair her mother's weakened ability to love, Echo tells Artie that she chooses to love her and will work to make □you love me.□ She says, □I'm going to stay with you. I'm going to prepare you for me. I'm going to cultivate you. I'm going to tend you.□

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on *Eleemosynary*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Quotes

"Eleemosynary. It's my favorite word." (Scene 1, p. 7)

"There's something about the Westbrook women. We have this expectation about ourselves. To be extraordinary. It's a little like having a disease in the family." (Scene 1, p. 11)

"I have trouble touching my daughter. I have trouble touching most people, but I don't worry about that. It's my daughter that worries me." (Scene 2, p. 14)

"It's a life." (Scene 2, p. 17)

"Life is a swift ascent, followed by an endless, downward, dreamy, downward mutation." (Scene 3, p. 20)

"As for my father-well, the only sentence of genuine interest he ever uttered about me was, 'Is it a boy?'". (Scene 3, p. 21)

"So you could give back to others what you find beautiful about them." (Scene 4, p. 25)

"We all need forgiveness." (Scene 4, p. 26)

"It's hard for Grandma-dedicating her life to theories that are... difficult to prove." (Scene 5, p. 29)

"It's a terrible desire to want to know everything." (Scene 5, p. 33)

"They'd produced in the end someone that was completely all right. Someone with perspective." (Scene 6, p. 36-37)

"All I could look at was the boy she'd beaten. He looked like a dead mouse." (Scene 6, p. 39)

"I wasn't any end product. I wasn't any less... cruel." (Scene 7, p 41)

"No matter what we've done-no matter how we've done it we're all three of us, in our own way, completely... eleemosynary." (Scene 7, p. 47)

Topics for Further Study

Another of Blessing's plays that focuses on family relationships is *Independence*. Read this play and compare in an essay its treatment of family dynamics to that of *Eleemosynary.*

Imagine a screen version of the story of *Eleemosynary*. How would you deal with the fragmented narrative and its disrupted chronology? Write out one scene as a screenplay.

Investigate the New Age movement in America. As you research this topic, conduct interviews with present or former adherents of this movement. How do they describe their approaches to spirituality? Explore the diversity of these approaches, the causes of this movement, and its effect on American society. Present your findings to the class.

Write an autobiographical essay or a short story on a situation involving family members. The essay or story should focus on a specific conflict between two or more members and describe the resolution of that conflict.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: The ERA fails to gain ratification in a decade when women are pressured to adopt more conservative roles. Conservative activists like Phyllis Schlafly argue that a woman's place is in the home since her primary role is childbearing and child raising.

Today: Women have made major gains in their fight for equality. Discrimination against women is now against the law, and women have the opportunity to work inside or outside the home or both. However, those who choose to have children and a career face difficult time-management choices, owing to inflexible work schedules and promotion hurdles.

1980s: The New Age movement becomes a popular alternative for Americans who reject the more conservative strictures of traditional Christian denominations. While New Agers have some influence on American society, they have little impact on the political atmosphere of the country.

Today: Right-wing Christian groups, especially evangelicals, have gained popularity in America and have had a measurable impact on the social fabric of America and even on the 2004 presidential election, helping to reelect the conservative Republican George W. Bush.

1980s: The term □Me Generation□ comes to represent the 1980s, an age when self-interests are encouraged.

Today: □Family values□ is the popular buzzword, in an age when many Americans try to promote traditional social mores.

What Do I Read Next?

Blessing's *Nice People Dancing to Good Country Music* (1982) is considered to be the best of his early plays. It centers on the relationship between a former nun and her aunt, who runs a bar in Houston.

Another of Blessing's plays that focuses on family relationships is *Independence* (1984). Here Blessing follows the lives of three daughters and their mentally ill mother.

Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) looks at the troubled relationship between a salesman and his two sons.

The Awakening, published in 1899, is Kate Chopin's masterly novel of a young woman who struggles to find self-knowledge and inevitably suffers the consequences of trying to establish herself as an independent spirit.

Further Study

Coen, Stephanie, ed., *American Theatre Book of Monologues for Women*, Theatre Communications Group, 2003.

The monologues included in this text were selected from plays by authors such as Wendy Wasserstein, Edward Albee, and Sam Shepherd, published in *American Theatre* magazine.

Friday, Nancy, *My Mother / My Self*, Doubleday, 1977.

Friday explores the often complex relationship between mothers and daughters.

Heelas, Paul, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

Heelas traces the history and explores the philosophy of the movement.

Rhodes, Ron, and Alan W. Gomes, *The New Age Movement*, Zondervan Publishing, 1995.

This study focuses on the pantheistic worldview of the movement.

Bibliography

Blessing, Lee, *Eleemosynary*, Dramatists Play Service, 1987, pp. 7-9, 11-17, 19-21, 23, 25, 26, 31, 33, 35, 41, 43, 45, 47.

Churnin, Nancy, "Lee Blessing Takes 3 Women on Trip," in the *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1990, p. 1.

Everett, Todd, "Three Productions with Strong Female Roles Involve Dealing with Love, Tangled Families and the Consequences of Rape," in the *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 2000, p. 7.

Henry, William A., III, Review of *Eleemosynary*, in *Time*, May 22, 1989, p. 110.

Klein, Alvin, "Child with a Way with Words, Maybe," in the *New York Times*, April 25, 1999, p. 14CN.11.

Winer, Laurie, Review of *Eleemosynary*, in the *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 1989, p. 1.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Drama for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

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

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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