The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds Study Guide

The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds by Paul Zindel

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Introduction

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds is Paul Zindel's best-known play. It is an autobiographical drama loosely based on his experiences growing up in a single-parent household. The play's main character, Beatrice, is modeled on Zindel's mother, who became a bitter and disillusioned woman after the departure of her husband. The play was first produced in 1964 at the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas. It eventually opened off-Broadway in 1970, and in 1971 made a brief jump to Broadway. Overall, the play enjoyed a very successful New York run of 819 performances. Zindel's portrayal of the painful side of family life struck a chord with audiences who found they could easily relate to the themes of loneliness and shattered dreams. The play was critically acclaimed and earned several awards, including an Obie Award for best play of the season (1970), the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best American play of the year (1970), and the Pulitzer Prize for drama (1971). It was so popular that in 1972 Twentieth Century-Fox released a film version starring Joanne Woodward.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds has been widely read and performed up to the present day. Its realistic portrayal of the struggles of young adults still resonates with audiences, even though it was written more than thirty-six years ago. An edition with a new introduction by Zindel was published in 1997. In it Zindel talks about the direct parallels between the characters and his own family, and notes how pleased he is that the play still speaks to modern audiences.

Author Biography

Paul Zindel was born in Staten Island, New York, on May 15, 1936. He is the son of Paul, a New York policeman, and Betty Zindel. He also has an older sister, Betty. His father left the family when Paul was two years old, and from then on, Zindel was raised by his mother. Betty Zindel moved the family from town to town and worked at various odd jobs to support them. Zindel's mother was a troubled woman who was bitter and very distrustful of men. She constantly threatened suicide. Her despair and disappointment in life is found in the character of Beatrice Hunsdorfer in *Gamma Rays*. For a time, Betty worked as a private duty nurse, and this is directly reflected in the play, as Beatrice rents out her spare room to invalids to make extra money.

At the age of fifteen, Zindel was diagnosed with tuberculosis and confined to an adult sanatorium for eighteen months. This period of isolation gave him time for a great deal of introspection and contributed to his ability to sit back and observe the world around him. Zindel received a Bachelor of Science in chemistry and education from Wagner College in 1958, and went on to receive a Master's of Science in 1959. In college, he attended a lecture given by playwright Edward Albee. It inspired him so much, he decided to sign up for a playwriting course taught by Albee, who eventually became his mentor. Zindel wrote his first play, Dimensions of Peacocks, in 1959 under Albee's tutelage. During his early years as a playwright, 1959 to 1969, Zindel also taught chemistry at Tottenville High School in Staten Island. He wrote plays in his spare time and attended as many professional productions as he could.

In 1964 Gamma Rays had its premier at the Alley Theatre in Houston. Nina Vance, head of the Alley Theatre, liked the play so well she invited Zindel to be a playwright-in-residence during the 1967 season. During this time, he wrote his secondmost popular play, And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little, which was produced at the Mark Taper Forum that same year. In 1970 *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* opened in New York to overwhelmingly positive reviews. Zindel won the Pulitzer Prize and was finally able to devote himself to writing plays full-time. In 1973, Zindel married Bonnie Hildebrand. The couple eventually had two children, David Jack and Elizabeth Claire.

Zindel has also had a successful career writing fiction for young adults. In 1966 Charlotte Zolotow, an editor at Harper and Row Publishers, saw a televised version of The Effect of Gamma Rays and contacted him to see if he would be interested in writing a novel for teenagers. He agreed and published the *The Pigman* in 1968. The book was extremely well received. He followed this with many successful young adult novels, which have won numerous awards. Zindel also continues to write plays, though none of his subsequent plays has gained quite the popularity or critical acclaim of *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*. His most recent play (published by Dramatists Play Service in 2000) is Every Seventeen Minutes the Crowd Goes Crazy, about a family of children who are left to fend for themselves.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds opens with a voice-over of Tillie talking about how the same atoms now in her hand were once contained in different parts of the Earth throughout history. The scene then shifts to Beatrice Hunsdorfer talking on the phone with Tillie's science teacher, Mr. Goodman, explaining why Tillie is absent from school so often. Beatrice doesn't tell him that it is because she often keeps Tillie at home to do household tasks. She is very complimentary to Mr. Goodman, and thanks him for the pet rabbit he has allowed Tillie to bring home. Once Beatrice hangs up the phone, however, her kind demeanor changes, and she angrily berates Tillie for putting her in the position of having to call the school. Tillie's sister Ruth enters, ready for school. She tells Beatrice how Tillie became the laughingstock of the entire school during an assembly when she was up on stage cranking a model of an atom. Ruth then tells Beatrice that there is a file of the family's history kept in the school office. Beatrice voices her concern about this file. The stage goes dark, and Tillie's voice is heard describing a science experiment in which a small piece of metal placed in a cloud chamber started to smoke. Tillie is enthralled when Mr. Goodman tells her this fountain of atoms could go on for eternity. The lights then come up on the stage. Tillie is preparing boxes of dirt in which to plant marigolds for a science experiment. The marigold seeds have been exposed to cobalt-60, and Tillie is going to study the effect this has. Beatrice enters and talks about her wish to transform the house into a teashop. She asks Tillie about the science experiment, and Tillie explains the concept of half-life to her. Suddenly, Nanny begins to shuffle into the room with her walker. She is very old, and moves extremely slowly over to the table. Beatrice reluctantly serves Nanny hot honey-water, all the while making nasty comments behind her back and yelling sarcastically into her face as if she were a deaf child. Beatrice then relates the story of how Nanny's career-minded daughter brought her to the Hunsdorfer's because she didn't want to bother with taking care of her. The scene ends with Beatrice bemoaning her life, "Half-life! If you want to know what a half-life is, just ask me. You're looking at the original half-life!"

In the next scene, Beatrice is again talking on the phone to Mr. Goodman. She tells him she is worried about the effect the radioactive marigolds may have on Tillie. Mr. Goodman assures her there is no danger. The stage then goes dark, and a thunderstorm begins. Ruth is heard screaming from her room upstairs. She is having an epileptic seizure. She stumbles onto the stairs just as Beatrice runs out and catches her. Tillie also rushes in, but Beatrice sends her back to her room. Ruth's seizure finally runs its course, and Beatrice sits on the couch with her to calm her. She tells Ruth her favorite story, about a happier time when Beatrice used to ride on her father's produce wagon. During this story, Beatrice gives insight into how her world fell apart when her father became so ill he had to be confined to a sanatorium. The scene ends with Beatrice in despair, wondering if life has anything good left in store for her. The stage goes dark again, and the lights come up with Nanny seated at the table. Beatrice is

madly cleaning out the upstairs rooms, throwing paper and junk everywhere. The audience discovers that Beatrice has had a revelation and has decided to take immediate action to turn the house into a teashop. She is also drinking whiskey and is slightly inebriated. Beatrice rants about how she is finally taking stock of her life and is going to make some changes. She is going to throw Nanny out, and tells Tillie she must get rid of the rabbit. Ruth bounds in and relates the news that Tillie is a finalist in the science fair. For once, Ruth is proud of her sister. The phone rings, and it is Dr. Berg, the principal, asking that Beatrice be present to sit on stage for the finals of the science fair. She screams at Dr. Berg on the phone, "I SAID I'D THINK ABOUT IT!" and then hangs up and begins screaming at Tillie. Tillie begins to cry, and Beatrice suddenly realizes how cruel she has been to Tillie. She moves toward Tillie to hug her as the act ends.

Act 2

As act 2 begins, Beatrice, Tillie, and Ruth are all getting ready to go to the science fair. Tillie readies her project while Ruth babbles on about Tillie's main competition, Janice Vickery. Ruth drops a bombshell when she mentions that the teachers are anxious to see what Beatrice will wear to the science fair. Many of them knew her as a strange outcast in high school whom they used to call "Betty the Loon." Tillie begs Ruth not to tell Beatrice this. She agrees only after Tillie gives the rabbit to her. Beatrice comes in. She is dressed up in an outfit that is described as "strange, but not that strange, by any means." She acts annoyed at having to go, but it is clear that she is proud. The taxi arrives, and they start out the door. Ruth begins to put her coat on, but Beatrice tells her she must stay home to look after Nanny. Ruth gets very angry and nastily calls her mother "Betty the Loon." The words hit Beatrice like a shot. Her world crumples. She stops, totally defeated, and tells Ruth to go with Tillie. Ruth hesitates at first, but Beatrice screams at her, "GET OUT OF HERE." Ruth exits and Beatrice begins sobbing as the lights go down.

The lights then come up on the science fair. Janice Vickery gives her presentation standing next to the skeleton of a cat. She describes how she got a dead cat from the ASPCA and boiled the skin off to get the skeleton out and reconstruct it. Janice's speech provides some much-needed comic relief at this point in the play. The scene then switches to Beatrice on the telephone. She is drunk. She telephones the school to give a message to the principal and teachers, "Tell them Mrs. Hunsdorfer called to thank them for making her wish she was dead." Beatrice also phones Nanny's daughter to tell her Nanny must be out by tomorrow. Beatrice then spies the pet rabbit in his cage. She picks up the cage, a towel, and a bottle of chloroform and slowly walks upstairs as the lights fade. The scene switches back to the science fair, where Tillie is giving her presentation. She describes the past, present, and future of her experiment with man-in-the-moon marigolds. During this speech, as in her voice-overs throughout the play, the audience can see Tillie's true brilliance and optimism. The lights go down and come back up on the Hunsdorfer household. Ruth rushes in announcing that Tillie won the science fair. Beatrice does not greet her with the expected happiness, but numbly informs her that the rabbit is dead in her room. This news sends Ruth into a seizure.

Beatrice and Tillie get Ruth through her seizure as Nanny begins to shuffle into the room. At the end of the scene Beatrice weakly announces, "I hate the world." The play concludes with Tillie's voice-over describing how the science experiment with man-in-the-moon marigolds has made her feel important. The play ends on an optimistic note as Tillie ponders the possibilities science can open up for mankind.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

The play opens in a dark room of wood, which formerly served as a vegetable store. The room is run down, messy, and depressing with the windows covered in newspaper. There is a staircase and two rooms are upstairs, as well as a bedroom downstairs.

As the lights go down, music begins to play, and Tillie's voice begins to speak through the darkness. She gives a monologue on the atom and her relation to it, as the lights begin to come up on the stage. Her speech ends with the words, "And he called this bit of me an atom. And when he wrote the word, I fell I love with it. Atom. *Atom*. What a beautiful word."

As Tillie's monologue ends, a phone rings. From off stage, Beatrice calls for Tillie to answer the phone. Frustrated and angry, she enters the stage in search of the phone, while mumbling about how she never gets help. The phone call is from Mr. Goodman, a teacher at Tillie and Ruth's school. He is calling to inquire as to why Tillie has been absent from school so often recently.

After hanging up the phone, Beatrice becomes extremely upset with Tillie for what she interprets as tattling on her. Despite Tillie's defense, Beatrice continues to refuse to believe her and prevents her from going to school that day as well. However, Ruth is allowed to go.

Before leaving for school, Ruth informs her mother that Tillie is being made fun of at school for the funny way she dresses and the weird things she is interested in, such as science class. Ruth goes on to tell her about seeing her file at school, which included many personal details of their life as a family, which seems further upsets Beatrice.

Another monologue by Tillie begins this scene. She discusses the white cloud Mr. Goodman creates in the clod chamber. Tillie explains the way the atoms work to create the cloud, saying "Atoms exploding, flinging off tiny bullets that caused the fountain, atom after atom breaking down into something new." By the end of the speech, the lights are up, and Beatrice is reading the newspaper and discovering all the things she believes are missing in their lives.

Tillie brings in her marigold seeds while her mother continues to peruse the newspaper. Beatrice asks what Tillie is bringing into her house, and Tillie replies that these are special marigolds because they have been exposed to cobalt-60.

Beatrice dismisses what to Tillie is exciting news and continues her planning and plotting. She says she wants to turn the store/house into a teashop so that they can become rich and move to the country. As they talk, Nanny, the woman Beatrice cares for, enters the room. Nanny is very deaf and Beatrice talks badly about her, primarily out of frustration that she must care for such a person to provide for her daughters and

herself. As the scene ends, Beatrice talks about half-life, a concept explained to her by Tillie. She says "Half-life! If you want to know what a half-life is, just ask me. You're looking at the original half-life!"

As the scene opens, we hear someone dialing a telephone; the lights come up and we see Beatrice on the phone to Mr. Goodman. She is calling out of her concern about the seeds he sent home with Tillie. She has heard that the radioactivity can cause sterility, and as the seeds were exposed to radioactivity, she is afraid that on top of everything else Tillie will become sterile. As Mr. Goodman tries to explain the concept to her and tell her what a mutation is, she gets extremely upset and accuses him of thinking she is stupid. Finally, she is appeased, the phone call ends, and the stage goes black.

Music in a minor key blends with increasingly loud pulses turning into crashes of thunder. Suddenly a scream is heard from upstairs. Tillie rushes into Beatrice's room telling her that Ruth is having an episode. She is hysterical and going into seizures. They get her down the stairs and begin trying to calm her down. We learn that her episodes

began when she heard the man with a brain tumor who used to live downstairs die.

In order to distract Ruth and avoid being upset, Beatrice begins to tell her the story of when she stole a wagon from her father. Her father was a wonderful man, but when he became sick, he wanted her to get married so she would be cared for. However, she says he would roll over in his grave if you knew how she felt now. Ruth becomes concerned that Nanny might die in their house as well, but Beatrice answers that that will not happen.

Beatrice tells Tillie that she must get rid of her rabbit as soon as possible or she is going to kill it. Tillie then goes on to tell her mother that she has been asked to do something at school, but is ignored as Beatrice begins to yell at Nanny. Ruth ends up being the one to tell Beatrice the news that Tillie is a finalist in the school science fair.

Dr. Berg, the principal, calls the house and tries to convince Beatrice to allow Tillie to come to school and participate in the science fair. She tries to convince him to choose someone else, and ends the conversation by screaming at him and hanging up. She becomes extremely agitated and angry because she believes that Tillie is trying to embarrass her by getting her to go out when she does not have the appropriate clothes. Tillie breaks into tears, saying "But…nobody laughed at me." The scene closes with Beatrice saying "Oh, my God…" as she realizes how she is hurting her daughter.

Act 1 Analysis

The play's setting and opening help us to get a feel for the background of the play. For example, the downstairs room of the house is where most of the action of the play takes place. The different changes in the room throughout the play signal changes in the life of the family. Here, in the beginning, they are closed off from the rest of the community

and to some extent, prisoners in their own house due to their fears, specifically those of Beatrice.

Tillie's monologue about the atom shows us her interest in science, and the importance to her of her knowledge about the atom. As we progress through the book, and especially the last scene, we begin to understand the significance of the atom for her.

This scene is the first to really introduce our characters. Here we see the traits and relationships of the main characters, Tillie, Beatrice, and Ruth. In Beatrice's first entrance onto the stage, we see her bitterness and disillusionment with life as she complains about how she never gets any help.

In addition, as she talks to Mr. Goodman, we see her insecurities and selfishness when it comes to the lives of her children. Frustrated that Mr. Goodman has called to inquire about Tillie's frequent absences, she takes it out on Tillie and selfishly refuses to let Tillie go to school, even though she is more interested in school than Ruth who does go. The fact that he has called is a personal affront to her and her parenting ability.

Exacerbating the situation is Ruth's comments about seeing her file in the counselor's office. Beatrice becomes upset when she finds out that so many of her and her family's personal details are on file and available at the school.

Tillie has finally gotten to go to school, and we again see her intense interest in science. She talks about how atoms explode against each other, breaking down and creating a new substance. This can be considered a symbol of her family life. The main characters are often having major conflict, but rather than destroying the family in the end, the friction creates new relationships among the characters. Beatrice's cynicism concerning her life is again apparent as she gripes about the lack of things in her life and that of her family.

We are first introduced to the man-in-the-moon marigolds in this scene. Tillie explains how they have been exposed to a radioactive substance, and she is trying to see if they can grow. The flowers become a symbol for the environment in which Tillie lives. Whether the flowers can grow in such an environment of death such as a radioactive field symbolizes whether Tillie can survive and grow in the stale, uncaring environment provided by Beatrice.

Beatrice thinks this is a silly, pointless project and begins discussing her plans to get rid of Nanny and to open her own teashop in the house. She continues to show a lack of interest in Tillie's projects and concerns, while focusing primarily on her own concerns. After learning about half-life, she decides that this describes her life; however, she overlooks her most important assets: her daughters.

Finally, in this scene we see some concern on the part of Beatrice for Tillie. She has called Mr. Goodman to see if radioactivity can cause Tillie to be sterile; however, the way she words her questions shows her lack of confidence in Tillie to become anything special.

Once again, her insecurities come to the forefront as Mr. Goodman begins explaining scientific concepts to her. Rather than listening to his explanations, she becomes defensive and hostile.

We see another part of Ruth in this scene. We finally understand why she seems a little different and what has caused this change in her. Beatrice's life seems a little more pitiful as we see Ruth go into a major seizure. The fact that Beatrice has to take care of dying people has caused her daughter to have these hysterical outbreaks, which helps us see the difficult position Beatrice is in. She has had to decide between survival and her daughters' living with the sick and dying.

Beatrice seems to be harsh as she tells Tillie that the rabbit must be gotten rid of or she will kill it. In addition, she continues to ignore Tillie as she through the majority of the play. The only one who ever seems able to get through to her is Ruth, who tells Tillie's good news; perhaps this is due to Ruth's fragile disposition and Beatrice's feelings of guilt for what has happened to her.

Finally, during the fight with Dr. Berg and Tillie, Beatrice seems to begin to have a breakthrough. As Tillie breaks into tears, Beatrice realizes the unfair treatment she has been giving her daughter. They seem to have a moment of connection and love that they both need and deserve.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act 2 begins about two weeks later. The downstairs room has become somewhat cheerful, and there is an air of excitement throughout the house. Everyone is getting ready to go to Tillie's science fair. Her board and charts are lying around the room, and all three of the women are dressing up.

As they get ready, Ruth and Tillie discuss Janice Vickery's project in which she boiled the skin off a cat. According to Ruth, she is Tillie's only competition. Ruth tries to change some of the things about the way their mother dressed Tillie so that others will not laugh at her.

Ruth begins telling Tillie that Beatrice used to be known as "Betty the Loon." She tells Tillie that their mother was just as weird then as Tillie is now. Ruth says everyone has been talking about their mother, and they are all waiting to make fun of her. Tillie makes Ruth promise not to say anything to Beatrice about this, and Ruth forces Tillie to give her the rabbit in return for her silence.

After Beatrice comes down from getting ready, she and Ruth get into an argument, because Ruth does not want to stay home with Nanny while Beatrice and Tillie go to the science fair. They end up getting into a screaming fight, which only ends when Ruth tells Beatrice that everyone is waiting to make fun of her. As they are beginning to walk out the door and Ruth says, "Goodnight, Betty the Loon." Beatrice totally breaks down and refuses to go to the science fair. Beatrice breaks down into tears as the lights go down on the stage.

Next, we see Janice holding a cat skeleton and giving a speech about her science project. She talks about the past, present, and future implications of her project. She comes across as a bit spacey and shallow, more interested in her college application than in science.

The scene quickly turns to Beatrice back at home. She has been drinking and is flipping through a phone book. She calls the school and asks to speak to the principal, who is at the science fair now. She leaves a message with the person who answered, saying, "Tell them Mrs. Hunsdorfer called to thank them [Mr. Goodman, Dr. Berg, and Miss Hanley] for making her wish she was dead." She hangs up, and then crosses the room, ripping the newspapers down from the windows that have been covered throughout the play.

She then returns to the phone and finding a piece of paper, dials another number. She calls Nanny's daughter and tells her that she will have to come pick her up by noon the next day or Beatrice will send her in an ambulance. She begins laughing a terrifying laugh before taking the rabbit cage and chloroform upstairs with her.

Suddenly the lights turn to Tillie who is now giving her presentation. She is impassioned with her project and gives an informative and moving speech about the marigolds and their growth, as well as the importance of the atom to her light and everyone else's. Then closes as she says, and then Ruth repeats, "THE DAY WILL COME WHEN MANKIND WILL THANK GOD FOR THE STRANGE AND BEAUTIFUL ENERGY FROM THE ATOM."

Ruth bursts into the house screaming to Beatrice that Tillie has won the science fair. Tillie then enters beaming and carrying her plants and trophy. Ruth grabs the trophy and heads upstairs to show it to Beatrice. By this time, Beatrice has had a great deal to drink and, as she approaches the stairs, has difficulty standing up.

Ruth notices that the paper is missing from the windows and begins to question what is going on, as she helps her mother tack up some curtains. Ruth becomes upset as her mother continues to ignore her excitement over Tillie's success. Beatrice then tells her that the rabbit is in her room and that she wants her to bury it the next day. She also says that Nanny will be leaving tomorrow.

Ruth rushes upstairs, while Beatrice tells Tillie that she is planning to open a teashop at which she expects Tillie to work after school. After a moment, Ruth appears at her door holding the dead rabbit, and Tillie tells her mother that she thinks Ruth is about to have a breakdown. She is correct, and a moment later, Ruth's eyes begin to roll back in her head and she begins to have tremors.

Tillie reacts immediately, calling for their mother to help her. Working together, they get Ruth downstairs onto the sofa. Tillie offers to call the doctor, but Beatrice refuses because need the money to open the shop. Tillie picks up the rabbit, and beginning to cry says she will bury it in the morning. Nanny comes out of her room, unaware that anything has been happening. As the lights begin to dim, Beatrice tells Tillie that she hates the world.

The lights focus on Tillie as she slowly climbs the stairs to her room. We hear her recorded voice give the Conclusion of her speech from the science fair earlier that night. She discusses the strange effects of radiation, as well as her plans for the future. She says that she plans to learn more about the atoms in the world. However, she says the most important part of her experiment was that she had begun to feel important. She speaks the last three phrases live, "Atom. *Atom*. What a beautiful word."

Act 2 Analysis

As Act 2 begins, the family begins to look normal. Everyone is getting ready for the big event, the science fair, and for a few moments, everyone interacts cheerfully. We see that the downstairs room, which generally reflects the atmosphere of the home, is looking very cheerful and pleasant. However, the happiness and excitement quickly end.

As Ruth begins to tell Beatrice's history to Tillie, we begin to get the feeling that things are going to go downhill quickly. Ruth's unstable personality warns us that any promise she makes is in jeopardy of being broken according to her whims. The fact that Tillie is willing to give up her beloved pet rabbit is evidence that Beatrice's past is something she does not want mentioned on her big night and that she knows Ruth is prone to telling these types of things at inopportune moments.

Despite Tillie's best efforts, Ruth ends of telling their mother in the midst of her anger. She does not want to stay home with Nanny, because she is terrified that she might die while she is there, just as their former resident had died. Beatrice seems to ignore this problem, wanting to support Tillie. However, after Ruth's telling comments, Beatrice breaks down and cannot go. Her insecurities are once again keeping her from being there to support, protect, and encourage Tillie.

Switching back and forth from the science fair to Beatrice at home helps the reader clearly see what she is missing. After hearing Janice's speech, we can be almost certain that she will not win the science fair. Her presentation and reasoning is weak and shallow. We begin to feel for Tillie and Beatrice, as Beatrice is missing what could be a great moment in her daughter's life. In addition, Janice's lack of caring for the cat she has killed is representative of Beatrice's subsequent actions.

We learn here that Beatrice is a heavy drinker when she becomes greatly upset. This may help us to understand some of the major problems between her and her daughters. Her message to the staff of the school exposes her terrible feelings of worthlessness, and we even begin to wonder if she might not be a danger to herself.

However, the tearing down of the newspapers and the call to Beatrice's mother are somewhat symbolic of her tearing down some of the walls standing in her way. As always, the room symbolizes the attitudes and changes going on in the family. Beatrice's removal of the newspapers opens up the family to other people, the community, and possibility. The odd part of the whole scene is that she still kills the rabbit. Perhaps this is a symbol of the death of her old life as she sees it. Throughout the play, the rabbit's very existence has been a nuisance to her. These feelings combined with a large amount of alcohol cause her to follow through with her threat of killing the rabbit throughout the play.

Tillie's speech is in exact opposition of Beatrice's self-destructive behavior. Although nervous, she speaks with knowledge and confidence, attitudes we have not seen in Tillie before. As she speaks of the atom, we see her appreciation for it, bringing light to a turning point in Tillie's life when she realizes she is capable, talented, and important. Just as Beatrice has removed the newspapers from the windows and the walls from between her family and the community, Tillie is breaking barriers in her personal self-concept and her relation to others in her school and community.

Next is the resolution of the play. Long and dramatic, we see many changes during this scene. Ruth verifies Tillie's changes in confidence and as she runs in, screaming that

Tillie has won the science fair. Tillie is obviously very excited about the win, but as follows her character, she remains much calmer than Ruth.

One of the saddest moments of the play is Beatrice's reaction to Tillie's success. Her lack of emotion and interest are confirming the picture we have had of her throughout most of the play. However, we now see her as the broken, disillusioned woman she has become. Ruth's comment earlier in the evening has finally sent her over the edge, to the point that she truly wishes she were dead. Her feelings are in sharp contrast to those of Tillie who has just discovered the importance of the atom, and by extension herself, on this exciting evening.

When Ruth sees the dead rabbit, her emotional high comes crashing down. We know from experience that Ruth is not very stable, especially when a major event is concerned. The death of the new rabbit, she has just coerced from Tillie, completely breaks her. Tillie's responsibility and awareness are evident as she hurries to help her sister. The tragedy is that she has to call to her mother to get her to do anything. Beatrice refuses to call the doctor because she wants to open her shop. Although this does in some ways seems selfish, she is once again sacrificing and scrimping in order to try to keep her family safe and sheltered. In the end, Beatrice tells Tillie that she hates the world.

Tillie's final speech is the conclusion of her earlier speech. In contrast to Beatrice's defeated attitude, Tillie has finally discovered the importance of her own life. The marigolds have shown her that plants and people, even having been raised in the harshest environments, can still grow and become beautiful and important. Atom is a beautiful word, because it symbolizes both the grief and the pain of life as well as the happiness and meaningfulness of every life.

Characters

Beatrice Hunsdorfer

Beatrice is the central figure around whom the play revolves. She is a single mother who was left by her husband years ago. This event has fostered a deep distrust of men. She still lives in the same house in which she grew up and has become increasingly reclusive over the years. Beatrice still mourns the loss of her father, a man whom she was forced to confine to a sanatorium years ago. The world has caused her a lot of pain, and she takes it out on those around her. She vents her hostility primarily upon her two teenage daughters. Beatrice has always yearned to be popular, but she has always been an outcast. She is desperate to escape her circumstances and constantly dreams of a better life.

Ruth Hunsdorfer

Ruth is Beatrice's older daughter. She is an epileptic whose seizures are brought on by anxiety or stress. Ruth is somewhat promiscuous and is very concerned about her appearance. She constantly worries about Tillie, her younger sister, embarrassing her at school. Ruth is very fickle in her relationship to Tillie. She often makes fun of her, but as soon as Tillie wins the science fair and becomes somewhat of a school celebrity, Ruth is very quick to brag, "That's my sister." Ruth has a quick temper and is not afraid to talk back to her mother. Her attempts to lash out and hurt her mother are what drive much of the action of the play.

Tillie Hunsdorfer

Tillie is Beatrice's younger daughter. She is an outcast at school and is teased by the other students. Tillie is very intelligent, and her teacher, Mr. Goodman, encourages her interest in science. The title of the play comes from the experiment Tillie enters in the school science fair. Tillie is a dreamer who yearns for a better world. She is quiet and thoughtful. She is also somewhat awkward and is often chastised by her mother for this.

Nanny

Nanny is the boarder who lives in the spare room. She is nearly blind, deaf, and can barely walk with the aid of a walker. Nanny's daughter has given up responsibility for her care.

Janice Vickery

Janice is Tillie's main competitor at the science fair. She gives a gruesome but funny presentation in which she describes boiling a cat and collecting the bones to reconstruct the skeleton. Janice's speech provides comic relief right before the dramatic climax of the play.

Themes

Triumph in the Face of Adversity

The characters in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* all face adversity, but each reacts very differently. Beatrice has allowed the difficulties and bad luck she has encountered throughout life to defeat her. She attempts to better her life, but her bitterness presents a barrier. Beatrice is so caught up in the negative, unfair aspects of life that she is unable to see any goodness around her. Tillie, however, is able to prevail, even in the worst circumstances. She can find beauty in the smallest detail. No matter how many times she is chastised or disappointed, she gets back up and tries again. She is a survivor.

Self-Image

Beatrice and Ruth are very concerned with how they appear to others. Ruth is constantly worried about how she looks. She wears tight sweaters and refuses to go to school without first putting on makeup. Ruth wants to fit in and is very fickle in her relationship to Tillie. Most of the time she considers Tillie an embarrassment and doesn't want to be associated with her. Ruth quickly changes her mind, however, when Tillie wins the science fair, because she wants to boost her own image by bragging about Tillie's accomplishments. Beatrice is also trapped by a need to fit in. She talks about how popular she was in high school, but eventually the audience discovers that this wasn't true at all. Beatrice was an outcast in high school who was constantly teased. This caused her a great deal of pain and was a factor in her withdrawal from the world. Tillie is the only one of the family who is secure in her self-image. Although she is teased and made fun of, she continues to be true to herself. She doesn't try to change and fit in with the crowd, but instead pursues the things that are important to her. This ultimately leads to her success in the science fair, and the playwright suggests that it will help Tillie succeed in life.

Dreams

Dreams are a very important theme in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*. Beatrice, Tillie, and Ruth all share their dreams or tell of dreams they have had at some point in the play. In act 1, Ruth has a seizure brought on by a nightmare. Beatrice also relates a recurring nightmare about her father and his vegetable wagon. Throughout the play, Beatrice is constantly talking about her dreams of opening a tea shop, of becoming a dancer, and of escaping her dreary existence. Tillie's dreams are sparked by her discoveries in science class. Because Tillie can still find good in the world, the possibility exists for her dreams to come true.

Life versus Death

Images of death and decay are prominent in the play. Beatrice kills most things around her. She chloroforms the rabbit, and she tries to kill her daughters' spirits by constantly berating and belittling them. Nanny is nothing more than a walking corpse. Even the room looks as if it is decaying, with its piles of newspaper and objects strewn everywhere. Tillie is the only one who connects to a life force. She plants the marigold seeds that eventually grow into many strange and wonderful mutations.

The Inability to Make Meaningful Human Connections

Just as Nanny is shut out from the outside world through hearing loss and the thick cataracts that cover her eyes, Beatrice is shut out from the outside world through her fear. She has covered the large window of the front room with newspaper so passersby cannot see in. She doesn't want the family to interact with the outside world. Beatrice is just as trapped within her own self-made prison as Nanny is within her aging and failing body. Also, Beatrice, Ruth, and Tillie are unable to truly connect and share with one another. Most of the communication between Beatrice and Ruth consists of yelling and bickering, while Tillie chooses to remain silent. None of the three is willing to really open up and share their true feelings with their family members.

Half-life

The half-life of the radioactive isotopes that Tillie explains to Beatrice symbolizes numerous things about the family. Beatrice uses the words "half-life" literally to describe the unfulfilled potential she feels in her own life. Also, just as the radioactivity will go on forever, so will the unfortunate situations and bitterness that Beatrice is caught in. Half-life also symbolizes hope for Tillie, however. She relates to the concept in a positive way, recognizing the magic potential of something that never ends. To Tillie, half-life represents new areas just waiting to be explored, filled with wonder and fantastic possibilities.

Style

Setting

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds is a drama. The exact year is not indicated, however, the style and content of the play indicate that it is set in relatively modern times, probably during the early 1960s. Most of the action takes place in the front room of the Hunsdorfer house, a wooden structure that was once a vegetable shop run by Beatrice's father. The house is rundown and is strewn with clutter, symbolizing the broken bits and pieces of Beatrice's dreams. Beatrice has lived here her entire life. She feels trapped in her current circumstances and, to symbolize this, the playwright keeps her "trapped" in this room. Beatrice does not go out of the house during the entire course of the play.

Voice-overs

The play is framed by Tillie's voice-overs. This gives the impression that we are seeing the story through her eyes. Tillie's voice-overs help set up the themes of the play and give the audience a glimpse into Tillie's true self as she talks about the wonders of the atom and how science has opened her eyes to the possibilities of the world. At home Tillie is constantly stifled and berated. Zindel uses her voiceovers to allow her to speak her true feelings and dreams. This technique helps audiences to understand that Tillie is an optimist and a dreamer who can find good in the world no matter what her current circumstances.

Comic Relief

Zindel uses comic relief at various points in the play to break the tension for the audience. If the tension was sustained too long without a break, it would become too uncomfortable, and audiences would not want to continue following the story. The first scene with Nanny provides comic relief and serves to show that Beatrice has a sense of humor, although it is very sarcastic and biting. Janice Vickery's presentation at the science fair is also an important point of comic relief. It follows the very intense, climactic scene of the play. This is a place where the audience needs a "breather" before moving into the strong emotions of the last scene.

Telephone Calls

In *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* the telephone represents the intrusion of the outside world. Beatrice remains in the house throughout the entire play. The only time she is seen interacting with the outside world is when she is on the telephone. During her telephone conversations, the audience can see how uncomfortable and inadequate Beatrice feels. This technique provides a way for the

playwright to expand Beatrice's character without having to put her in multiple settings or bring a lot of other characters into the play.

Plot Structure

The play follows a standard linear, climactic structure, which means it has a beginning, a middle, and an end that follow in chronological order and lead to a climax, or moment of greatest intensity, near the end of the play. Act 1 precedes act 2 in time. Each event follows in sequence, except for Tillie's voice-overs, which are timeless. It is not important for the audience to know when Tillie is speaking these voice-overs, because they are there to give insight into Tillie's character and to develop the themes of the play, not to move the story along.

Historical Context

In the early 1960s, nuclear arms began to play a big part in world relations. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was in full force. In 1962, the Cuban missile crisis brought the world to the brink of disaster when the Soviet Union placed nuclear missiles aimed at the United States in Cuba. President John F. Kennedy demanded that the missiles be removed and warned that, if the missiles were launched, the United States would retaliate, resulting in an all-out nuclear war. The Soviets withdrew the missiles, but the incident deeply shattered Americans sense of well-being. Many citizens no longer felt safe. Families began to build bomb shelters in their backyards, and schools began holding regular bomb safety drills. In 1963, the United States and the U.S.S.R. agreed to install a "hotline" from the White House to the Kremlin to try to avoid nuclear disaster. That same year the two countries and Great Britain signed a nuclear testing ban.

During this time, there was also a great deal of scientific activity and experimentation, particularly in the areas of radioactivity and nuclear energy. Scientists recognized the power that atomic energy provided, and they continued to look for ways to harness this energy for positive means. The effects of radioactivity weren't widely known, and experiments such as the one conducted by Tillie in the play provided new information on the uses and dangers of this mysterious force. The growing interest in the use of nuclear energy also sparked the rise of the environmental movement. Many citizens became concerned that tampering with the destructive force of nuclear energy would destroy the Earth's ecological systems. Some were afraid mankind would destroy the planet.

On the American political scene, 1963 was a year of crisis. It is often considered the year in which the United States "lost its innocence," when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. It was a tumultuous time, as many Americans began questioning long-held beliefs. The civil rights movement was gaining momentum, as African Americans voiced their demands for equal rights. In 1963, riots broke out during civil rights demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. That same year the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., led 250,000 people to Washington, D.C., in a march for freedom where he gave his famous "I have a dream" speech. At this time, women's views of themselves also started changing. They had been taught that they were to stay home, raise families, and be dependent upon their husbands, but they began to discover that this type of life left them feeling unfulfilled. Many women longed for experiences apart from home and family, just as Beatrice longs to escape her circumstances in the play. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a book that discussed the way women were feeling and contributed to the start of the women's movement. More and more women began to look for work and opportunities outside of the home, and the typical American family started to undergo drastic changes.

Critical Overview

Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Manin-the-Moon Marigolds* was first produced in 1964 by the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas. It launched his career as a serious playwright. Nina Vance, head of the Alley Theatre, was so impressed with the play that she took an immediate option on Zindel's next work. The play was also presented on television in October 1966 by the National Educational Television as part of its *New York TV Theatre* series. The televised version was not very well received, however. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Ruth Strickland notes, "Reviewers of the television drama found little to praise." The version shown on television had been cut, however, and this may have caused the unenthusiastic reception.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds opened off-Broadway on April 7, 1970, at the Mercer-O'Casey Theatre. This time the reviews were overwhelmingly positive. Zindel was hailed as a promising new playwright. Audiences and critics appreciated his ability to create believable teenage characters and found the story of the Hunsdorfer family very poetic and moving. Many critics compared the play to Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, noting its sensitive portrayal of human relationships. As Ruth Strickland writes, "many critics found the play old-fashioned in the best sense of the word, praising its realism, yet moved by its poetry." In *American Theatre 1969-1970*, Clive Barnes gives the play very high praise, writing, "One of the greatest, probably the greatest, hit of the current off-Broadway season, Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, would clearly have made it equally as well on Broadway." The play continued off-Broadway until a fire forced it to move into the New Theatre on Broadway. The play remained there until May 14, 1972, when it closed after 819 performances. The play won numerous prestigious awards, including a 1970 Obie Award as best play of the season, a 1970 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as best American play of the year, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1971.

Some critics felt that *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* was so widely accepted by audiences because it hearkened back to a more traditional format than had been seen recently on many off-Broadway stages. In the late 1960s there was a wild explosion of experimental theatre off-Broadway. Many shows had little or no story line and were not much more than a collection of random acting exercises. While some audiences appreciated the experimentation and innovation, many found it hard to make sense of these performances. Plays with a story line were easier for audiences to understand. *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* provided a story, and therefore appealed to a wider audience. A play with a well-crafted story line is sometimes known as a "well-made play." Zindel's play can be considered a well-made play, and Clive Barnes notes this feature in *American Theatre 1969-1970* as part of its appeal: "The off-Broadway show that was most successful was Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*. Interestingly, it is almost completely a model of the well-made play, a family drama of the kind we thought had gone out with Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams."

One criticism that has been leveled against the play is that it is melodramatic and overly sentimental. While most critics have appreciated the gentle tone of the piece, some feel that Zindel is a bit too sappy in his presentation of the family's situation. Ruth Strickland notes that Zindel's "weaknesses are lapses into melodrama" and, in the *Concise Dictionary of American Literary Biography*, Jack Forman describes the piece as "a domestic melodrama with an occasional lapse into sentimentality." Overall, though, the response of audiences and critics alike has been positive. In his recent book *Hot Seat: Theater Criticism for the New York Times, 1980-1993*, Frank Rich notes that he finds the play "compassionate," and he appreciates that Zindel avoids "simple moral judgments." The play is still performed in regional theatres throughout the country, a testament to its quality and the universality of its themes.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Kattelman has a Ph.D. and specializes in modern drama. In this essay, she discusses the theme of the triumph of the human spirit in Zindel's play.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds presents the themes of alienation and man's inhumanity to man played out in the microcosm of the family. Life has not been kind to Beatrice Hunsdorfer, and she takes her frustration and hatred of the world out on those around her. Beatrice has been deeply hurt and has developed an instinct to lash out at others before they get the chance to do the same to her. She lives by the rule, *Do unto others before they do unto you*. She is particularly abusive to her daughters. Throughout the course of the play she calls them names, makes fun of them, and does whatever she can to thwart their dreams and desires. Beatrice constantly reminds her daughters that they are nothing more than a burden to her: "Marry the wrong man and before you know it he's got you tied down with two stones around your neck for the rest of your life." She shows little warmth or affection and uses her children as scapegoats for her anger at the world.

Yet, even though the play presents the bleak situation created by Beatrice's frustration and despair, it also offers a glimmer of hope in the character of Tillie who, despite her mother's cruelty, refuses to be defeated. Tillie embodies the spirit of the survivor. Tillie is an outcast at school. She is awkward and is considered strange and unattractive by her classmates. Yet Tillie is able to appreciate what life has to offer because she has discovered something more important than external appearances, something more lasting. She has discovered that she is important. This knowledge gives her an inner strength. As Beverly A. Haley and Kenneth L. Donelson note in their essay "Pigs and Hamburger, Cadavers and Gamma Rays," "Tillie emerges a potential winner, for her thirst for knowledge and her scientific experiment with the marigolds have given her confidence in her own self-worth." In the play, Zindel gives the message that if one can hold on to one's faith and can see past the immediate ugliness to the beautiful potential in the world, there is the possibility not only to survive but also to triumph. Tillie's realization that all things are interconnected inspires her. "Most important, I suppose, my experiment has made me feel important—every atom in me, in everybody, has come from the sun— from places beyond our dreams." She knows that there is life beyond her mother's household and that there is a huge world out there filled with possibilities. Tillie remains true to herself and her vision and is thus able to succeed. There is a sense that her victory at the science fair is just the first in a string of great accomplishments.

Zindel has captured an important theme of the play in its title. Although Clive Barnes of the *New York Times* once called the title "one of the most discouraging titles yet devised by man," it is nonetheless appropriate. This phrase provides a clue as to what the play is about. The title of the play refers to not only the science project Tillie is working on, but also the larger theme of the influence human beings can have on one another and the different ways people can react under the same circumstances. Beatrice's tirades and her constant negative pronouncements about the world are the "gamma rays"

which bombard Tillie and Ruth. Throughout the play, Beatrice sends out almost nothing but negative energy, and it works to slowly damage many of those around her. But not everyone in the environment succumbs. Although Beatrice treats both her daughters with cruelty and abuse, their reactions are quite different. Tillie remains quietly true to her own vision and thus counteracts some of Beatrice's damaging effects. Ruth, on the other hand, tries desperately to fight back, but with little success. She is ultimately on a path of self-destruction, perhaps destined to repeat Beatrice's mistakes. Just as the gamma rays destroy some of the marigolds while bringing about wonderful mutations in others, one daughter succumbs, while the other becomes even stronger in her determination to succeed. As Ruth Strickland notes in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "The message is clear: Tillie is the mutant who has emerged from a horrifying environment with faith and potential intact—she is the double bloom. . . . Ruth is a victim of her mother's despair."

Numerous critics have praised *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* for its realistic portrayal of young adults and the perseverance they can possess. There are many examples throughout history of young adults who have faced adversity with courage and spirit. One of the most extreme examples, but one that has some parallels to the play, is the way in which the young Anne Frank was able to persevere during the two years she and her family were forced to hide from the Nazis in the attic of an Amsterdam house. Although Anne's circumstances were much more dire than those Tillie finds herself in, there is a similarity in the way both young girls are able to reach deep within themselves to find the courage and strength to carry on. Even the words they use have a similar ring. In her diary, Anne Frank wrote, "in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. . . . [I]f I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again." Tillie also finds strength by looking beyond her current situation to the possibilities of what might be: "I believe this with all my heart, THE DAY WILL COME WHEN MANKIND WILL THANK GOD FOR THE STRANGE AND BEAUTIFUL ENERGY FROM THE ATOM." Both girls are able to hold onto their faith in the human spirit despite the odds. Tillie and Anne are optimists, and that is their ultimate triumph.

Although Tillie is definitely the heroine of the play, she is not perfect. In a way, she may be too optimistic. For instance, in her exploration and discussion of radioactivity, she all but ignores the bad potential atomic energy may hold. Only one time in the play does she briefly mention the destructive potential of the atom, saying "My experiment has shown some of the strange effects radiation can produce . . . and how dangerous it can be if not handled correctly." Tillie downplays the negative and chooses to see the world her way. Ironically, this actually gives her some similarities with Beatrice. Each of these characters sees what she wants to see. Beatrice is determined to find the bad side of everything. Tillie is determined to find the good. Irony is an incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs, and there is irony in Tillie's one-sided attitude toward atomic energy. This aspect has been mentioned by some critics who found it interesting that Zindel would embed this celebration of atomic energy in the play. An uncredited author in *Types of Drama* notes, "Somewhat unfashionably, Zindel

takes science and the atom not as symbols of man's alienation and death, but as symbols of man's heavenly origin or his link with the sun." Zindel does not rely on the typical or expected way of presenting issues and families. That is one thing which makes the play so intriguing and powerful.

Paul Zindel writes from personal experience. He knows what it is like to grow up in a difficult situation and to come out on top. Zindel's youth was spent in the shadow of an abusive, slightly mad mother. He found a way to survive, and he wants his audience, particularly young people, to find a way to do the same. In an interview for *Top of the News*, Zindel told Audrey Eaglen, "I'm telling the kids that I love the underdog and sympathize with his struggle because that's what I was and am in many ways still. I want my kids to feel worthy, to search for hope against all odds." Zindel's message is clear: Find a way to believe in yourself; you are important.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds gives audiences a lot to consider. It raises many more questions than it answers. Some of these questions were consciously written into the play, while others came as a surprise, even to Zindel. In his new introduction to the most recently published edition of the play he writes, "I found questions lurking in the shadows of Beatrice Hunsdorfer's vegetable store that I hadn't even known I'd asked. What is it, really, to grow up in a home without a loving, competent father or mother? Do we yet understand the pain and loneliness and disability of kids who do? And from where do survivors of such homes conjure the magic to insist that, despite everything, their dreams will stay alive?" These are important questions, and Zindel hopes that by raising them he opens up the opportunity for audiences to make some discoveries about themselves. In his new introduction Zindel also states, "It's important, too, that those who read and hear our stories find answers for their own lives."

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds is a play about the triumph of the human spirit that still resonates with audiences today because it ultimately deals with universal concepts. But the thing that has sustained its appeal is its optimistic message of hope. After sharing some painful, yet funny moments in the lives of these characters, the audience is left with an upbeat, positive message summed up in Tillie's final declaration, "Atom. Atom. What a beautiful word."

Source: Beth A. Kattelman, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Loomis extols the antisexist message of The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds *and points out the correlation between Zindel's play and Dante's* Divine Comedy.

Already preparing a bridge to such a recent male feminist play as Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias*, Paul Zindel, in *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Manin-the-Moon Marigolds*, gave us, two full decades ago, a strong indictment of sexism. In Zindel's revisionary Dantesque play, the frumpy housewife Beatrice Hunsdorfer may look like an illusionfrustrated female transplanted into a Northern urban landscape from the barren Mississippi River towns of Tennessee Williams. Beatrice's tantrum in Act Two, turning her house into a chaos, may seem fully explained when she declares "I hate the world"; she thus appears at first no more positive a rebel than Kopit's Madame Rosepettle in *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad.* But Beatrice's rebellion does not seek merely to hiss venom toward dominant patriarchs, in the manner adopted by La Rosepettle, and she surely does not demonstrate strength (like Williams's Serafina Delle Rose and Maggie Pollitt) only while working out an alliance with males on whom she remains dependent. If Beatrice is like a Williams character, the model seems Big Mama. Like that Mississippi matriarch by the end of her play, Beatrice fully intends to create a freer, more dignified life for herself and the children she loves— including, in her case, a highly intelligent daughter, Tillie, who, if she fully grasps her evident educational opportunities, might eventually live a life of considerable success.

Whatever the superficial resemblances one might remark between *Gamma Rays* and Williams's *Glass Menagerie*, the "hopeful" philosophy apparent in Zindel seems a radical departure from Tennessee Williams. Williams's most famous heroines, in *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*, remain, for all their vividness of personality, resolutely trapped in all the illusions imposed on them by patriarchal culture. His heroines surely often enough prove sexually liberated—but still, frequently, remain encaged. Perhaps the ideal Williams heroine is one of calm spiritual liberation—a person like Hannah in *Iguana*, Yet Hannah, despite her spiritual liberty, remains economically starving; Big Mama is more amply fed, but only because she inherited a wealthy man's estate. Even though Hannah and other Williams heroines might become, like Big Mama, capable businesspersons, few even dare think of seeking economic self-determination, as Zindel's Beatrice finally does.

Gamma Rays may ultimately appear too much a product of late Sixties social optimism; Zindel does not seem aware of how harshly even educated Tillies must struggle for independence. Yet the main power of this play still remains its longunrecognized anti-sexist vision. That vision makes it clearly a historically prophetic work; it is not, as multiple critics have narrowly claimed, a mere tired echo of earlier writers.

Gamma Rays ends with the rhapsodic teenage scientist Tillie Hunsdorfer declaring that

. . . [T]he effect of gamma rays on man-in-the-moon marigolds has made me curious about *the sun and the stars*, for the universe itself must be like a world of great atoms—and I want to know more about it. But most important, I suppose, my experiment has made me feel important—every atom in me, in everybody, has come *from the sun*—from places *beyond our dreams*. The atoms of our hands, the atoms of *our hearts* . . . (emphasis mine).

Surely, whether consciously or not, these lines— like Tillie's earlier response to a wondrous atomic cloud-chamber—call to mind both the imagery and the visionary fervor which conclude Dante's *Paradiso:*

. . . [L]ike to a wheel whose circle nothing jars, Already on my desire and will prevailed The Love that moves the sun and the others stars.

Zindel's play—if by accident, nonetheless with uncanny regularity—demonstrates remarkable affinity with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The clearest hint of such affinity is Zindel's choice of the two main characters' names: Beatrice and Matilda. Obviously, Beatrice Hunsdorfer does share the name of Dante's central female character, although she markedly differs from her namesake, the medieval icon of spiritually quiescent splendor. Tillie Hunsdorfer, the incipient teenage intellectual, bears more direct resemblance to the Dantesque character she recalls. Matilda of Tuscany, the likely historical model for the character Matelda whom readers meet at the height of Purgatory near Dante's Beatrice, was "a wise and powerful woman . . . splendid, illustrious . . . surpassing all others in her brilliance . . . educated, [with] a large collection of books. . . ."

At least in Tillie Hunsdorfer, then, Zindel has a character who closely recalls an analogous character in Dante's great poem. It is, of course, Tillie who voices this play's most Dantesque sentiments; she shares Dante's belief that all earthly atoms are connected with originating stars of Love; that they were, as she speculates, "formed from a tongue of fire [the Holy Spirit?] that screamed through the heavens until there was our sun."

But the Dantesque affinities of Zindel's text do not cease with Beatrice's name and Tillie's name and personality. Zindel's earliest stage directions in the play set the action in "a room of wood," "once a vegetable store." The mention of "wood" and "vegetation," and, most of all, the note that this place was once "a point of debarkation for a horsedrawn wagon to bring its wares to a small town," all summon to my mind Dante's *selva oscura*, the "dark wood" which serves, in *Inferno* 1, as Dante's own "point of debarkation" for a pilgrimage toward the starry multifoliate rose of Paradise. According to Dante, he completed the visionary journey which young Matilda Hunsdorfer hopes, in her lifetime, to share.

But Matilda's mother Beatrice seems long ago to have lost any chance for a meaningful pilgrimage through life. Even as a child, she thought herself proven unworthy to take over her father's vegetable business—to sit atop its wagon, as if clothed in the radiant garb of Dante's own Edenic chariot-rider Beatrice, and be a woman recognized

(independently of any male mate) for her talents. She might, given other life circumstances than those she knew, have imitated Dante's successful pilgrimage. But—because her father truly was not, as she mistakenly still wants to believe, one who "made up for all other men in this whole world"—she encountered in him her primal "bogey man." He made her think that she, as a woman, was inferior to all men, that she could not care for his vegetable business either before or after his death, that she needed instead to "marry . . . [and] be taken care of." As a result, by the time of the play's scenes Beatrice has become a perpetual "widow of confusion," much as Dante began (but only began) the *Commedia* as one whose "way was lost."

Like Dante, too, Beatrice Hunsdorfer has dreamvisions. But her visions do not foresee an attainable future bliss; they recall, instead, a "nightmare" of past denial. Her dreams, also like Dante's, contain ghosts of lost loved ones. Yet Dante's lost Beatrice still beckons ahead of him; she there pledges to teach him "nobility, . . . virtue, . . . the Redeemed Life," his soul's "ordained end." By contrast, Beatrice Hunsdorfer's lost earthly father, as a ghost, continues to deny her the self-esteem he first refused her long ago:

And while he was sleeping, I got the horses hitched up and went riding around the block waving to everyone. . . . I had more nerve than a bear when I was a kid. Let me tell you it takes nerve to sit up on that wagon every day yelling "Apples!" . . .

. . . . .

Did he find out? He came running down the street after me and started spanking me right on top of the wagon—not hard—but it was embarrassing—and I had one of those penny marshmallow ships in the back pocket of my overalls, and it got all squished. And you better believe I never did it again. . . .

Let me tell you about my nightmare that used to come back and back: Well, I'm on Papa's wagon, but it's newer and shinier, and it's being pulled by beautiful white horses, not dirty workhorses—these are like circus horses with long manes and tinsel—and the wagon is blue, shiny blue. And it's full—filled with yellow apples and grapes and green squash.

. . . . .

Huge bells swinging on a gold braid [are] strung across the back of the wagon, and they're going DONG, DONG . . . DONG, DONG. And I'm yelling "APPLES! PEARS! CUCUM . . . BERS!"

. . . . .

And then I turn down our street and all the noise stops. This long street, with all the doors of the houses shut and everything crowded next to each other, and there's not a soul around. And then I start getting afraid that the vegetables are going to spoil . . . and that nobody's going to buy anything, and I feel as though I shouldn't be on the wagon, and I keep trying to call out.

But there isn't a sound. Not a single sound. Then I turn my head and look at the house across the street. I see an upstairs window, and a pair of hands pull the curtains slowly apart. I see the face of my father and my heart stands still. . . .

Ruth . . . take the light out of my eyes.

Convinced by her sexist father that she had no gifts for managing her own meaningful career— "afraid that [if guarded only by her] the vegetables would spoil . . . and . . . nobody . . . [would] buy anything"—Beatrice has ever since been trapped in her own everyday earthly Inferno: on a "long street," "everything crowded," "not a soul around." Although she is like Zindel's own mother in her concocting "charmingly frantic scheme[s] . . . to get rich quick," she is, not surprisingly, highly jealous of her invalid boarder Nanny's daughter, "Miss Career Woman of the Year." She also envies her own daughters, refusing to admit that they have gifts which could lead them to careers even semiprofessional. She can't believe that her daughter Ruth can even use a typewriter; at one point, she proclaims that Tillie should forget about her scienti fic ambitions and instead go to work in a dime store.

And Tillie might have been behind that dime store sales counter the next week had she not suddenly become a finalist in her high school's Science Fair. Her science teacher Mr. Goodman— himself typically sexist, at least in his shock that "he never saw a girl do anything like that before" —was convinced of her promise. As a slightly inattentive Ruth reports to her mother, Mr. Goodman said that Tillie "was going to be another Madame Pasteur."

So Tillie is spared the dime store, and Beatrice as her mother seems simultaneously spared her sense of being a complete "zero," "the original half-life!" Once it reaches her consciousness that Tillie has achieved what Ruth calls "an honor," Beatrice can declare, as she embraces her brainy child, an expletive which almost briefly approaches a creedal statement of faith: "Oh, my God. . . .' ' And, as she tells Ruth in the next act, "Somewhere in the back of this turtle-sized brain of mine I feel just a little proud! Jesus Christ!"

Indeed, it does not seem altogether fanciful to suggest that Act Two of *Gamma Rays* becomes (although not at all in a traditional Dantesque manner) Beatrice Hunsdorfer's encounter with a personal purgatory. As Act One ends, the school principal Mr. Berg (translation from the German: "Mr. [Purgatorial?] Mountain") invites Beatrice to the Science Fair competition ceremonies. At the opening of the play's second act she has dressed for that event in a feathery costume, leading Ruth to quote some gossip from one of her mother's childhood companions: "[Mama's] idea of getting dressed up is to put on all the feathers in the world and go as a bird. Always trying to get somewhere, like a great big bird." Has Beatrice always frustratingly hoped that an eagle would lift her, as it lifted Dante, up to higher purgatorial crests?

Beatrice, after all, recalls her own youth as being something like Tillie's youth now. She might have advanced toward a better life had she not been intimidated (as Tillie herself is not) by others' disparagings. As Ruth tells Tillie, Beatrice as a girl "was just like you

and everybody thought she was a big weirdo"; "First they had Betty the Loon, and now they've got Tillie the Loon."

Unfortunately, the selfish Ruth who utters these words eventually comes close to ruining her mother's chances for any sort of purgatorial experience. In brattish rage because she herself is being asked to skip the Science Fair and replace her mother as guardian of Nanny the Boarder, Ruth screeches "Goodnight, Betty the Loon" at a Beatrice who is finally escaping, if still somewhat timidly, her fear of the outside world in order to attend Tillie's school ceremonies. Ruth's vicious ploy does gain her what she wants: Beatrice now immediately returns (or so it seems) to the agoraphobic terror of life which has for so long characterized her; she "helplessly" sends Ruth off with the Science Fair paraphernalia that she herself was to carry, and she then "breaks into tears that shudder her body, and the lights go down on her pathetic form."

Yet Act One had already prepared the way for Beatrice's doing something (in an earthly purgatory) with the insights which her memories (like Dante's in non-earthly Inferno) were giving her. She said then that she had "almost forgot[ten] about everything [she] was supposed to be." Still, Zindel built irony into such of her statements as "Me and cobalt-60! Two of the biggest half-lifes you ever saw!" Zindel's stage-directions soon afterwards say that Beatrice was forming "mushroom cloud" smoke rings with her cigarettes; thus, her "halflife," like that of cobalt-60, always perhaps could, in its "mushroom cloud" explosion, hold positive mutation within it.

And, in the last scenes of *Gamma Rays*, Beatrice does lunge after such positive mutation. She tears newspapers off from the house's windows, then rearranges tables and places tablecloths and napkins on them. She calls Nanny's daughter, ordering her to take the old boarder away. Sitting down, guffawing over that conquest, and hitting her daughter's pet rabbit cage with her foot, she decides to chloroform the creature—which is, in Hugh Hefner's America, not only a children's pet, but an unfortunate symbol of female suppression.

No mere self-centered cruelty leads Beatrice to these behaviors. She is striving to make meaningful mutation occur in her (and in her daughters') life. Thus, when the girls start to express a fear that she may truly have killed their bunny, she doesn't directly respond to them. She matter-of-factly pronounces broader concerns: "Nanny goes tomorrow. First thing tomorrow"; "I don't know what it's going to be. Maybe a tea shop. Maybe not."

So long trapped in a hellish rut because not daring to lead a business-woman's produce-wagon off from "a point of debarkation," pilgrim Beatrice now seeks to redirect her life. For her, "hat[ing] the world" has not meant a spiritual leap beyond that world, in the manner of Dante's original Beatrice. She has, instead, made a ramshackle earthbound leap into self-assertion. And yet a certain level of spiritual other-centeredness has allied itself with that self-assertion. Even though she will force her daughters to "work in the [tea-shop] kitchen," she will not any longer seek to deny them an education for future self-determination. They will have "regular hours" in the business, but those hours will be scheduled "after school." She will no longer live so much in the shadow of her father that she tries to limit others in the way he limited her.

In introductory comments to the *Gamma Rays* script, which are really an unofficial dedication of the play to his mother, Zindel makes it clear that he considered that woman a beautiful mutation: someone who had at least striven, in her limited way, to become like the liberated modern mom he described in a short children's piece written for *Ms.* in 1976:

. . . She says "Absolutely not," when I want to drive the car, and "Have a good time," when I tell her I'm running away to Miami. She doesn't want me to know when we don' t have enough money. . . . If I see her crying she says, "It's just something in my eye." She tells me secrets like she's lonely. When I tell her I miss my father she hugs me and says he misses me too. I love my mother. I really do.

("I Love My Mother")

Zindel has given the reader enough information to show his own mother's clear resemblances to Beatrice Hunsdorfer. One thus chuckles at his jocose offhand comment: "I suspect [the play] is autobiographical." Besides, autobiography may extend past the characterization of Beatrice to a character (unseen onstage) who may in some ways markedly suggest Paul Zindel himself: Mr. Goodman, Tillie's high school chemistry teacher.

Zindel taught high school chemistry for ten years and only left Staten Island, where he had taught, after the Pulitzer Prize award for *Gamma Rays*. Despite that fact, one of course would not claim that he deliberately insults himself when he has Beatrice at first describe Mr. Goodman as a "delightful and handsome young man" but then refer to him, a few minutes later, as "a Hebrew hermaphrodite." After all, the "hermaphrodite" reference is not ultimately intended as a physical description—at least not in the play's thematic undertext. A statement which at first seems only to exemplify Beatrice's crude-mouthed bitterness more importantly helps introduce the play's revisionist Hebrew theology, viewing all humankind as androgynous.

Zindel's anti-sexist thoughts of 1970 might be challenged now by such radical feminists as Mary Daly. She considers "androgyny" to be "a vacuous term," "expressing pseudo-wholeness" as an example of one of those "false universalisms (e.g., humanism, people's liberation) . . . which Spinsters must leap over, . . . must span" in order to affirm their own "intuition of integrity" [*Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978)]. And, it is true, Zindel's androgyny still has a patriarchal sound; his anti-sexist thesis emphasizes the pun "Adam"/ "atom," and he thus does recall for us the name of the first legendary Hebrew patriarch. Still, even Daly would grant "deceptive" but hardto-avoid concepts of androgyny some relative value in progress to a non-sexist world. And others would remain more encouraged than she by Zindel's androgynous creed.

That creed is voiced throughout a play which has appeared to invite regular misreading. For instance, despite her obvious affection for the character's gutsy energy, Edith Oliver claims that Beatrice "is as much a victim of her own nature as she is of circumstance" [*New Yorker*, 18 April 1970]. Yet, given Zindel's pointed indictment of her father's sexism, why should we be assigning Beatrice herself with a heavy load of blame? Adler

does perceive, without explaining why, that Beatrice's father caused her psychological problems. And yet he, too, does not seem at all to sense that this is a feminist play; he does not discuss it in his mildly feminist chapter "Nora's American Cousins," and he indeed rates Beatrice's plan to open a tea-shop as "slightly outrageous."

I do not believe for a moment, as Adler implies and as Brustein shouts, that *Gamma Rays* simply clones the illusion-ridden mother-daughter encaging atmosphere of *The Glass Menagerie* [Thomas P. Adler, *Mirror on the Stage: The Pulitzer Plays as an Approach to American Drama* (1987); Robert Brustein, *The Culture Watch: Essays on Theatre and Society, 1969-1974* (1975)]. Jack Kroll approaches closer to the truth about the play when he says that "The calculus of love, jealous vengefulness, remorse, flaring hatred, and desperate reconciliation[,] among these three people fighting for spiritual life, is the point and merit of Zindel's affecting play" [Newsweek, 27 April 1970]. And Harold Clurman, that ever-trustworthy sage, adds that "In *Gamma Rays* . . . a real person [he means Tillie, but I think Beatrice also fits the description] flowers from the compost of abject defeat and hysteria" [*Nation*, 15 March 1971].

In the play's very opening monologue, Tillie expresses indomitable faith in human androgynous potential as she tells of how Mr. Goodman, in chemistry class, helped her sense that in adamic atoms of origin all human beings are equal:

He told me to look at my hand, for a part of it came from a star that exploded too long ago to imagine. This part of me was formed from a tongue of fire that screamed through the heavens until there was our sun.

. . . When there was life, perhaps this part of me got lost in a fern that was crushed and covered until it was coal. And then it was a diamond as beautiful as the star from which it had first come.

. . . . And he called this bit of me an atom. And when he wrote the word, I fell in love with it.

Atom.

Atom.

What a beautiful word.

For all its potential Dantesque echoes, Zindel's beautiful play finally shines with the ameliorative twentieth-century hope of an original, deeply sensitive, and highly enlightened modern good man. Paul Zindel, that man, is distant from the norm, even in our own age, as he rebuffs the patriarchal sexism which was not absent even from Dante's enlightened Renaissance Christianity. Neither Beatrice Hunsdorfer nor Paul Zindel wants to idealize only "GOODY-GOODY GIRLS" like Dante's Beatrice Portinari dei Bardi. Both believe, or at least want to believe by their play's conclusion, that, by "hat[ing] the world" which limits women to roles as men's slaves (or even sacred muses), they may recreate that world—in Zindel's words, "bring innovation to civilization, to institutions, . . . make contributions . . . [toward a] world which is a better

place to live" [interview with Paul Janeczko, *English Journal 66*, No. 7 (October 1977)]. Zindel's revised Genesis myth (perhaps his own creatively revisionist response to the very different Garden of Eden scenes which culminate Dante's *Purgatorio*) suggests how hard a non-sexist world is to create, and even to define. But such a world—in which we would recreate the meaning of "Adam" by finding our common personhood as "atom"—still seems to him a necessary earthly paradise, one always meant to be.

Source: Jeffrey B. Loomis, "Female Freedoms, Dantesque Dreams, and Paul Zindel's Anti-Sexist *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*," in *Studies in American Drama*, 1945-Present, Vol. 6, 1991, pp. 123-33.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Adler notes flaws in The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds *and comments on the themes of the play.*

For critics to call *The Effects of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, Paul Zindel's Off-Broadway work and the 1971 prize winner, "honest" or "engaging" creates the impression that here is a work which pretends to be nothing other than what it is: a stark if overly familiar family-problem play about life's ability to sustain itself against great odds—doing for a particular family something of what [Thornton] Wilder does for the universal family of man in [*The Skin of Our Teeth*]. Zindel, though, appears to have pretensions to something more, attempting to impart additional weight to his basically simple characterization and content through overblown stage trickery. Originally produced at Houston's Alley Theatre, *Effects* too obviously recalls Williams's *Glass Menagerie* in its character configurations and stylistic techniques: both concern a mother, who lives mostly on dreams, and two children, one healthy, the other not; both households lack a father, through either death or desertion; in both, a gentleman from the outside world helps, or thinks he helps, one of the children. The stylistic similarities are even more pronounced: in both, the stage setting, while essentially realistic— an apartment in St. Louis, a vegetable store in New York—is used in a nonillusionistic fashion, particularly as regards lighting and music. In *Menagerie*, the nonrealistic elements, including the images and legends flashed on a screen, are integral to the play as "memory" occurring in Tom's mind. In *Marigolds*, however, such devices as recorded voiceovers (sometimes used pretentiously as when a character's voice reverberates electronically) and blackouts and spotlighting of characters (equivalent to cinematic fade-outs and close-ups) seem superimposed upon a fragile content that cannot support them, as if the form could supply a weightiness the content does not itself merit. Zindel seems interested in the techniques in and for themselves, simply as a means of avoiding straight realism.

Furthermore, perhaps because Zindel usually writes novels for adolescents, the abundant symbolism in *Marigolds* frequently lacks subtlety. The mother, Beatrice, for example, to assuage her guilt over having sent her own father off to a sanatorium, cares for the senile Nanny who, with her "smile from a soul half-departed" and her "shuffling motion that reminds one of a ticking clock," serves as a walking personification of death and of how affluent Americans (her daughter is "Miss Career Woman") mistreat their aged parents. More compellingly, the once orderly vegetable store now symbolically reflects the clutter and refuse of Beatrice's psychic and emotional life. With her motto "just yesterday," Beatrice lives on reminiscences of things *past*—a word prominently displayed on a placard at the high school science exhibit—on would-have-beens and should-have-beens. All her life she has romantically dreamed and schemed, yet she has seldom carried through on her plans, some of them, like turning the run-down store into a neighborhood tea shop, slightly outrageous. Like Willy Loman [in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*], Beatrice tends to blame something outside herself for her failure, though she accurately assesses the way that a competitive, success-oriented society attempts to force everyone into a predetermined mold, decrying the lack of tolerance

and the levelling down to sameness and mediocrity that, paradoxically, is a part of the American system: "If you're just a little bit different in this world, they try to kill you off." Difference may threaten the status quo and not be easily handled or accommodated, yet Zindel argues not only that some differences are beneficial but that variation rather than sameness is essential for there to be progress.

Although Zindel's exposition leaves some past events annoyingly obscure, it seems to have been criticism by the father she idolized that began Beatrice's descent into a present condition she characterizes as "half-life" and "zero." One day she hitched up the horses and rode through the streets selling fruit, to be met by her father's stern rebuke; ever since, she has dreamed of riding a shiny wagon pulled by white horses, only to see the forbidding figure of her father look on disapprovingly. She married badly, merely to please her father, but then no man could live up to her dream. After she took her father off to the hospital, she had the horses "taken care of"—a cycle of failure, guilt, and still more failure.

The cycle of parent destroying child continues in Beatrice's erratic relationship with her daughters, shifting suddenly between compassion and bitterness —in much the way that the pet rabbit is alternately loved and then hurt. Beatrice's older daughter, the mentally disturbed Ruth who was traumatized by contact with death and violence, tells tales, craves the attention of men by flaunting her sexuality, and appears just as destructive and vindictive as her mother; when she cannot have what she desires, she ruins it for everyone else. The younger Tillie, in her awkwardness and unprettiness and firm grasp on reality, stands as Ruth's opposite and a living denial that one need be determined by heredity and environment. Tillie discovers a much-needed father figure in her high school teacher (unfortunately named Mr. Goodman), who introduces her to the word *atom*, which she comes to love. The notion that everything in the universe, herself included, is somehow connected with every other thing from the moment of creation enthralls her; it provides a fixed point of reference and a feeling of importance. For her science project, she exposes marigold seeds to radiation, which need not produce sterility and may even yield a positive effect: while those that receive little radiation are normal and those exposed to excessive radiation (like Beatrice and Ruth) are killed or dwarfed, those subject to only moderate radiation produce mutations, some of which (like Tillie, who has experienced very detrimental influences but has emerged relatively unscathed) are good and wonderful things. Against all odds, Tillie not only survives but actually thrives.

Finally, though, Zindel's optimism does not grow organically from the play. Some might argue that Tillie's (and the playwright's) optimism, because it is won with so much difficulty and is so at variance with the adverse and negative atmosphere from which she arises, is therefore all the more impressive and no more facile or unwarranted than Wilder's. The widely divergent perspectives of the two writers, however, militate against this: where Wilder discerns a pattern of ultimate success after repeated failures over the entire sweep of human history, Zindel ties his faith and hope to a specific— and atypical rather than representative—household that he then proposes as symbolic and universally applicable. Though Zindel seems to find little difficulty in asserting this optimism, an audience might have a considerably harder time assenting to it.

Source: Thomas P. Adler, "The Idea of Progress," in *Mirror on the Stage: The Pulitzer Plays as an Approach to American Drama*, Purdue University Press, 1987, pp. 127-41.

Critical Essay #4

Kerr is an American essayist, playwright, and Pulitzer Prize-winning drama critic. Below, he recounts the memorable aspects of The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds *and probes the desperate lives of the characters.*

Whenever I think of Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*, I am going to think of three things, not one of them the title (the title, by the way, makes perfect sense and you will remember it readily once you have seen the play). The first is the sound, the sheer weighted sound, of a load of old newspapers being dumped from a balcony landing. Sada Thompson [who is playing Beatrice], slatternly mother of two and savior of none, is at her house-cleaning again, which means that she is picking up the accumulated refuse of her life and hurling it to another, though no better, spot. The bundle comes down like a dead heart; the force of the drop is shattering. And familiar. You seem to have heard it before.

The second memory that keeps coming back is the tactile, naked terror with which Miss Thompson, at midnight during a thunderstorm, brushes a prying flashlight away from her face. Her older daughter has long ago had a breakdown, for very good reasons, and is now desperately fearful of lightning; Miss Thompson has crawled out of bed to console her, a motherly duty she is perfectly willing to perform. But in the dark the daughter has discovered a flashlight, and she is using it to find the face that will reassure her. Suddenly, to Miss Thompson, the probing, isolating, totally revealing finger of light becomes a spider seeking out the seams of failure in her face; without warning she is flailing at it, attacking it as though the truth itself were something to be killed.

The moment continues, but in another vein altogether, arriving at one of the most evocative conjunctions of performing, staging and writing that we have had in the theater, on Broadway or off, in some years past. Miss Thompson must suppress her own terrors to help ease those of her daughter. To do it she passes from her sharp alarm and irritation to making girlish funny faces, conjuring up the child she once was and the way—perhaps— she once made her father laugh.

From that she passes to telling stories of her father, of his vegetable wagon that she sometimes rode through the streets, of the rhythmic cries he made to advertise his wares, of the singsong warmth that so long ago promised her a golden life. As she talks, the daughter becomes calm, pleased, halfdrugged with delight, so much so that at last the two of them are musically whispering "apples—pears— cu*cum*bers!" into the night while the flashlight swings as lazily as the clapper of an old bell. The image is morose and singularly charming; it is also essential to the cruel body of the play.

The third thing I'll remember is the play's ending, a coming-together of harshness and hope that exactly summarizes, without preachment of any sort, the meanings Mr. Zindel wishes his compressed and honest little play to carry. The brief lyricism of the wagon-bell-at-midnight passage is necessary if we are to endure, and understand, the venom that overtakes Miss Thompson in her relationship with a younger daughter.

This daughter, played plainly and plaintively and very well indeed by Pamela Payton-Wright, is as bright as she is rumpled. We first meet her alone, idly stroking a pet rabbit, staring at her hand, mouthing thoughts to herself about what the universe has had to go through—the tongues of fire, the explosions of suns—to produce her own five fingers. A knobby-kneed schoolchild with thin blond hair and a dress that bunches up in the back, she has a gift for scientific speculation; she is, at the moment, engaged in growing and studying marigolds that have been exposed to radiation, and she may just possibly win a competition her teacher has urged her to enter at school. Precisely because she is intelligent, because others are interested in her, because some sort of future may open itself to her, her mother cannot abide her. "I hate the world," Miss Thompson seethes as she stares at all the dreams that have emptied out before her. No one else is going to find it fascinating. Miss Payton-Wright is not even going to go to school all that often.

When a teacher phones to ask why the child is not at school, Miss Thompson descends a cluttered staircase in a shapeless robe—toweling with the nap all gone—that contains both her despair and her cigarettes. She snatches up the ringing instrument with such brisk indifference that you know she can only parody conversation, never truly enter it. Her eyes are wide, darting, expectant: they expect insult. Her body moves restlessly beneath the robe: it is a fencer's body, wary of attack and ready for evasion or assault. The woman is ordinary, recognizable; and half-mad.

On the phone, she is four or five persons at once. She is a plain bully: she will keep her daughter home when she pleases. She is a plausible, painful flirt. The teacher will either respond to her coy gestures or get himself classified a fag. She is all motherly concern: she cares so much for her children's studies that she "provides them with 75-watt light bulbs right there at their desks." Her eyes search the room for the nonexistent desks as she prattles on: the room is almost nothing but empty cartons and sagging bureaus; she sees the desks.

She sees, when she wishes, the carefree creature she might have become; she was, after all, elected "Best Dancer of the Class of 19-bootle-dedoo." (No one alive could manage this fey cop-out as well as Miss Thompson.) She sees the husband who first got a divorce and then a coronary. ("He deserved it," she parenthesizes, swiftly, meanly.) She sees her older daughter, tight sweater unbuttoned enticingly, turning into a fierce repetition of herself. She sees where they all are now, all except the gifted one. Their only source of income is a "$50-a-week corpse," an abandoned crone for whom they care, without caring. She sees "zero" wrapping its arms around her, and she repeats the word in a run-on babble that sounds like steam bubbling up from a lava bed. She is greedy, cynical, jealous, clever, irresponsible, vicious and lost.

In the play's last sequence, we are permitted to hear the schoolgirl's shy, halting, but determined brief lecture on the effects of radiation. Displaying her flowers in the high school contest—some of them blighted, some richer through mutation, all the product of those first exploding suns—she voices, tremulously, but insistently, her own stubborn confidence that "man will someday thank God for the strange and beautiful energy of the atom."

That is half of the final stage image. The other half is of Miss Thompson, near-mindless now, endlessly folding napkins for a tearoom she will never open, face-to-face with the half-paralyzed crone, aware of the presence of that other, older, sick and sensual daughter.

The play is thus framed. The mother is the wrong and right mother for these children, as the children are wrong and right sisters to each other. They all hurt one another simply by existing; the damage can never be repaired. But they constitute the situation as given, the human mutations thrown off; there is no dodging the gamma rays, there is only disaster for some and double-blooms for some others.

The ending doesn't press the point. It just expands to it, and bitterly—but gently—leaves the matter there. The play itself is one of the lucky blooms; it survives, and is beautiful. With it, Mr. Zindel becomes one of our most promising new writers. In it, Sada Thompson calls clear attention— perhaps more emphatically than ever before—to the fact that she is one of the American theater's finest actresses.

Source: Walter Kerr, "Everything's Coming up Marigolds," in *New York Times*, April 19, 1970, pp. 1, 3.

Critical Essay #5

Oliver began her career as an actress and television writer and producer. Here, she regards Beatrice as the central figure in The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds.

The title *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* is a false clue to a touching and often funny play that, whatever its faults, is not nonsensical or verbose or pretentious or way-out flashy. Actually, it is a rather old-fashioned domestic drama (old-fashioned is no insult from me) in that it is about people—and interesting ones at that—whose behavior, while outlandish at times, is made as comprehensible as anybody's behavior ever can be made. The play, which was written by Paul Zindel and opened last week at the Mercer-O'Casey, is more than anything else the study of a woman. Her name is Beatrice Hunsdorfer, and she has been all but destroyed by a life that so far has consisted of one disappointment after another. With all her expectations crushed but with plenty of energy left, much of it spent on wreaking a kind of petty vengeance on everybody around her, she is as much a victim of her own nature as she is of circumstance. There is, however, nothing bleak or whiny about Mrs. H. She is the fierce, embittered, wise-cracking mother of two young daughters. One of them, Ruth, is a highly strung, rather bratty girl subject to convulsions, and the other, Matilda, is an awkward, dim-looking but not dim, science prodigy. It is Matilda's gamma-ray experiment with marigolds at the local high school that gives the play its bumpy title, eventually wins her a prize, and, indirectly, almost finishes off her mother and sister and the rickety life they have built.

The plot is the least of it. The character of Mrs. H. is all, or nearly all. We learn that the only man she ever loved was her father, that her husband never amounted to anything and left her penniless in the horrible mess of a house where the action takes place, that she considers her daughters millstones around her neck (or she says she does; she is capable of sudden, remorseful tenderness and pride), and that there is no one on earth that she hates as much as she hates herself. She makes fifty dollars a week ("I'd be better off as a cabdriver") by providing minimum care for a decrepit old woman boarder. She is very intelligent. She is also, wandering around in a shabby bathrobe with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other, a holy terror, and she is so convincingly played by Sada Thompson that it is all but impossible to separate the role from the actress. The first and by far the better of the two acts is a series of vignettes and conversations: Mrs. H., all offhand iron courtesy and cutting explanations, talking on the telephone to a science teacher who is looking for Matilda; the girl herself, clutching her pet rabbit, listening to the conversation in frozen apprehension; Mrs. H. berating her daughter for not doing the housework ("This house is going to ferment"); Mrs. H., behind a glittery smile, raining down insults on her poor old boarder, who is as deaf as she is feeble; Mrs. H., impulsive and loving, soothing her edgy Ruth, who has had a nightmare. The second act, in which events and crises take over, and in which incidents are given more significance than they appear to warrant, seems artificial, and even melodramatic, after the first one, but the play stands up pretty well, all the same. The performances, under Melvin Bernhardt's direction, are all that any dramatist could wish

for. Pamela Payton-Wright is the shy, inspired Matilda, Amy Levitt is Ruth, and Judith Lowry is the tottery paying guest. Sara Brook designed the good costumes, and the good set is by Fred Voelpel.

Source: Edith Oliver, "Why the Lady Is a Tramp," in *New Yorker*, Vol. XLVI, No. 9, April 18, 1970, pp. 82, 87-88.

Adaptations

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds was presented in an abridged version as a television play in 1966. It was produced by National Educational Television and was presented as part of its *New York TV Theatre* series.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds was adapted as a film in 1972 for Twentieth Century-Fox. This version was produced and directed by Paul Newman. The screenplay is by Alvin Sargent. It stars Joanne Woodward as Beatrice.

Topics for Further Study

What do you think Beatrice, Ruth, and Tillie will be doing ten years after the play ends? What societal influences might contribute to the characters' futures? Consider such elements as increased opportunities for women, advances in scientific research, changes in the American family, and so on.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds has often been compared to Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie*. Both have been described as *memory plays*. How do memories influence the action in each play? Do the characters always relate past memories truthfully? If not, what insight does this provide into their current situation?

Tillie and Ruth are made fun of because they are growing up without a father. Does society have the same view of single-parent households today that it had in 1964? What changes in society have influenced the current view of a "typical American family"?

Tillie sees atomic energy as a discovery that opens up vast wonderful possibilities for mankind. Do you agree with her? Support your answer with examples that cite good and/or bad uses of atomic energy. What has atomic energy allowed mankind to do that was previously impossible?

In what ways could the Hunsdorfers improve their current family situation? Consider such elements as communication and honesty.

Nanny's daughter has given up responsibility for her mother's care to focus on her own career. Was she right in doing this? Is society's view of aging different than it was in 1964? Why or why not? Have things gotten better or worse for people who need special care?

Compare and Contrast

1960: About 36 percent of women have jobs outside the home.

Today: 60 percent of women are in the work force.

1962: The Cuban missile crisis puts the United States on the verge of an all-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Schools conduct bomb safety drills.

Today: The Cold War is over and the Soviet Union no longer exists. A great deal more is known about the effects of nuclear war.

1962: The Telstar communications satellite relays the first trans-Atlantic television pictures.

Today: Many people own personal satellite dishes that allow them access to hundreds of channels.

1964: The United States space probe *Ranger 7* takes the first clear, close-range photographs of the moon.

Today: The moon has been walked on, and Mars has been photographed. Space travel is increasingly common.

1964: Less than 13 percent of families are headed by a single parent. There is a strong stigma associated with living in a single-parent household.

Today: More than 27 percent of families are headed by a single parent. It is no longer unusual and does not carry the same stigma it once did.

What Do I Read Next?

The Glass Menagerie, a play by Tennessee Williams written in 1945, also deals with shattered dreams and a mother who is unable to appreciate her children for what they really are. Her inability to face reality keeps the family trapped in the past, unable to truly communicate with each other.

100 Amazing Make-It-Yourself Science Fair Projects, written and illustrated by Glen Vecchione in 1989 is a collection of winning science fair projects for students. It contains projects on a wide variety of subjects. Specific steps to create each project and illustrations are included.

My Darling, My Hamburger is a novel written by Paul Zindel in 1969. It deals with how parental influence can affect the boyfriend-girlfriend relationships of teenagers.

The Miracle Worker is a play written by William Gibson in 1956. It tells the story of how Helen Keller, a young girl who was blind, deaf, and dumb was taught to communicate with the world by her brilliant teacher Annie Sullivan.

Respect for Acting was written by Uta Hagen in 1973. It is a handbook that gives very good, practical advice for anyone interested in becoming an actor. The book introduces acting concepts and terminology and provides exercises that can be used by the student to develop his or her craft.

Surviving High School is a book written by Mike Riera in 1997. It provides a straightforward discussion of the challenges and problems teenagers encounter in high school. Each chapter discusses ways young adults can meet these challenges. The book contains many quotes and firsthand experiences from teens.

Further Study

Asimov, Isaac, *Atom: Journey Across the Subatomic Cosmos*, Dutton, 1991.

Asimov discusses the properties of the atom in easily understandable terms. This book was deemed "a masterpiece" by *Omni Magazine*.

Meadows, Jack, *The Great Scientists*, Oxford University Press, 1989.

This book is profusely illustrated and is about the lives of twelve great scientists and their discoveries. Of particular interest is the chapter on Albert Einstein.

Raymond, Gerard, "The Effects of Staten Island on a Pulitzer Prize-Winning Playwright," *Theater Week*, Vol. 2, No. 37, April 24, 1989, pp. 16-21.

Raymond discusses the influence of Zindel's experiences as a child on his writing.

Wetzsteon, Ross, ed., *The Obie Winners: The Best of Off-Broadway*, Doubleday, 1980.

This book contains the complete texts of ten plays that have won an Obie Award. It also includes a complete listing of the Obie Award winners through 1979.

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Haley, Beverly A., and Kenneth L. Donelson, "Pigs and Hamburger, Cadavers and Gamma Rays: Paul Zindel's Adolescents," in *Elementary English*, Vol. 51, No. 7, October 1974, pp. 940-945.

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Rich, Frank, "Amulets Against the Dragon Forces," in *Hot Seat: Theater Criticism for the New York Times, 1980-1993*, Random House, 1998, pp. 665-656.

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Zindel, Paul, *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, Bantam Books*, 1973.

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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

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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