The Fourposter Study Guide

The Fourposter by Jan de Hartog

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Introduction

The Fourposter, Jan de Hartog's most successful play, was first produced at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1951; it ran for 632 performances on Broadway. The play earned de Hartog the 1952 Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award. *The Fourposter* was adapted to the screen in a 1952 film produced by Columbia Pictures. A musical rendition, entitled *I Do! I Do!* opened on Broadway in 1966.

The Fourposter features two characters, Agnes and Michael, and spans the years 1890 to 1925, as key moments in their marriage are played out around their four-poster bed. In act 1, scene 1, they have just returned from their wedding ceremony, anxious and nervous about consummating their marriage. In scene 2, Agnes begins to feel the labor pains of their first child. In act 2, scene 1, Michael, who has become a highly successful writer, reveals to Agnes that he has been having an affair. In scene 2, Michael has just discovered what he thinks is a bottle of liquor in their son's bedroom. In act 3, scene 1, they have just returned from their daughter's wedding. In scene 2, they are moving out of their house to live in a smaller apartment.

De Hartog's play charts the ups and downs of a long-lasting marriage that is punctuated by moments of crisis and reconciliation. It maintains a balance in perspective between the special concerns and complaints of the woman and those of the man, as a function of their traditional societal roles. The "four-poster" bed, in and around which these moments of crisis are played out, symbolizes the lasting quality of the marriage bond, which remains steady throughout several decades of love and conflict.

Author Biography

Jan de Hartog was born on April 22, 1914, in Haarlem, the Netherlands. His father, Arnold Hendrik, was a minister and theology professor, and his mother, Lucretia (maiden name Meijjes), was a lecturer in medieval mysticism. De Hartog left home at the age of ten to work as a sailor on fishing boats, steamers and tugboats, becoming an adjunct inspector with the Amsterdam Harbor Police. He attended the Amsterdam Naval College from 1930 to 1931. From 1932 to 1937, he worked at the Amsterdam Municipal Theatre. During this period, de Hartog wrote a number of popular detective novels under the pseudonym F. R. Eckmar. From the late 1930s through the 1960s, de Hartog worked steadily as a successful playwright and novelist.

His 1940 novel *Hollands Glorie* was based on de Hartog's own experiences as a sailor, but it became a symbol of Dutch resistance against the Nazi occupation of World War II and was banned. Wanted by the Nazis, De Hartog hid in an Amsterdam home for senior citizens, disguised as an old woman. *The Fourposter*, his most successful play, was written during this period of hiding. Escaping to England, he became a correspondent for the Netherlands Merchant Marines in 1943. In 1946, he married the daughter of the English writer J. B. Priestly, Angela Priestly, with whom he had four children. *The Fourposter* opened on Broadway in 1951, earning de Hartog the 1952 Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award.

In 1961, he married Marjorie Eleanor Mein, with whom he adopted two children. De Hartog and his second wife became known for their many humanitarian efforts throughout the world. In 1962, he was writer-in-residence and lecturer in playwriting at the University of Houston. While there, he published a nonfiction book, *The Hospital*, based on his and his wife's volunteer work at the hospital in Houston, which attracted national attention to the quality of hospital care. In 1963, he and his wife aided survivors of a flood in Holland, out of which came his book *The Little Ark*. In 1966, they advocated the adoption of Vietnamese and Korean orphans, adopting two children themselves. De Hartog's book, *The Children: A Personal Record for the Use of Adoptive Parents*, was based on this experience.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The Fourposter takes place in the bedroom of Agnes and Michael, a married couple, who are the only characters in the play. Act 1, scene 1 takes place in 1890, at night. They have just come home from their wedding. Agnes's mother has placed a pillow with "God Is Love" embroidered on it on the bed. Michael is amorous, but Agnes is shy and nervous about consummating their wedding, even threatening to walk out on Michael. Soon, however, she feels comfortable enough to get into bed with him.

Act 1, scene 2 takes place in 1891, in the late afternoon. Agnes is pregnant with their first child. Michael complains that he is having labor pains and worries that Agnes is neglecting him in favor of the coming child. When she goes into labor, Michael leaves to get the doctor for her delivery.

Act 2

Act 2, scene 1 takes place in 1901, at night. Michael has become a very successful writer, and they are now quite wealthy. They have just returned from an evening out at a party, and they begin to bicker and argue. Agnes accuses him of being selfcentered, and Michael reveals that he has been having an affair. Agnes responds by hinting that she may also be having an affair. They make up, however, when Michael asks if he can read to her from his most recent writing.

Act 2, scene 2 takes place in 1908, from four A.M. until dawn. Michael has just discovered what he thinks is a bottle of liquor in the bedroom of their son, Robert, who is now seventeen. Michael claims he is going to beat the boy when he returns home. He and Agnes argue; she accuses him of favoring their daughter, while he accuses her of favoring their son. Agnes reveals to Michael that their daughter, Lizzie, is engaged. They then discover that the bottle does not contain alcohol, but cod liver oil, which Michael had poured into it years earlier to hide the fact that he was not swallowing it, as prescribed by his mother.

Act 3

Act 3 Act 3, scene 1, takes place in 1913, in the late afternoon. Michael and Agnes have just returned from their daughter's wedding. They argue, and Agnes informs Michael that she no longer loves him and is going to leave him. She criticizes Michael for discouraging a young aspiring poet who had asked for advice on his poems. Michael agrees to look at the poems again but is still critical. Agnes accuses him of not needing her any more, but he tells her, "It's you who make me sing . . . and if I sing like a frog in a pond, it's not my fault." Upon hearing this, Agnes simultaneously laughs, cries, and embraces him.

Act 3, scene 2 takes place in 1925, at dawn. Michael and Agnes are moving out of their house to live in a smaller apartment. Agnes wants to place their pillow, on which the words "God Is Love" are embroidered, under the bedcovers for the newlywed couple who will be moving into their house, but Michael protests. They bicker over the pillow, each in turn surreptitiously removing it and replacing it. Finally, Michael leaves the pillow where Agnes has placed it in the bed, setting a bottle of champagne next to it.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

This play begins in 1890 and there are only two characters, Agnes and Michael. The first scene opens in a bedroom at night. In the center of the back wall, there is an arch; to the left of the arch is a fourposter bed. Other furnishings such as bed table, washstand, armchair and trunk are situated in the room. Only low-burning gas lamps light the dark room.

Suddenly the door opens and Michael appears, carrying Agnes. She is in a wedding gown and he in his tuxedo, complete with a top hat. He kisses her, swings her around and carries her to the bed. She playfully chides him that he has mussed her hair and dress while he moves to turn the lamps on higher. When he returns to her, he is kneeling, and he declares that he is worshipping her. She declares that he must have had too much to drink but that she might be a bit tipsy herself. She tries to stand on one leg to prove it and starts to tip and he rushes to catch her.

He tries to kiss her but she artfully dodges him and changes the subject to his silly looking top hat. He then asks what she has in her hand; it is a rose from their wedding cake, which she wants to keep forever.

Michael puts the hat on again and pleads for her to tell him she is happy. She begs him please to change the subject. He cannot; he is deliriously happy and cannot contain it. He twirls, stumbles and falls back onto the bed. She is caught up in his enthusiasm and says that she feels like saying all sorts of shocking things but she will only tell him in his ear. She starts to whisper something and veers back, shocked by what she sees. She demands to see his other ear, which apparently is in no better condition, and chastises him for not cleaning them. He says that he washes the important things. She would like nothing better than to take soap and water to him, head to toe. Of course, he would love that.

Again, he tries to kiss her, and she dodges him and sits on the trunk to remove her shoes. He begs to do it for her, she puts out her foot and he kneels in front of her, pulls her skirt away and kisses her shoe. She is impatient with him but he kisses her foot again, even when she makes moves to do it herself. He takes her shoe again, unties the bow and tells her that he could take all night undressing her. She, of course, has asked for help only with her shoes.

Michael then changes the subject himself and asks if she remembers what he had told her when they first met; that they had met before in a former existence. She swats at the idea but he presses on, saying that he is certain of it now. He knows that he had experienced that moment they just shared once before: her sitting there before him, he on his knees in a rented tuxedo. He is just so happy he is saying anything and

everything and she begs him to stop or she will cry. He tells her that it would be fitting to cry because her youth is over.

With that remark, she pushes him away, gets up and declares that she is going home, that she should have never married him. She is outraged that he would have made such a remark; that, coupled with his attempts to undress her all night, and his dirty ears, and that stupid hat… it was all just too much! However, she throws herself at him and he tries to comfort her as best he can.

They are both a bit overwhelmed by the day, the champagne has done its work and finally he admits that he is embarrassed. It would have been such a relief if he could have spent the whole night taking off her shoes… all the way until it was time for breakfast. He does not want to revolt her. She is incredulous but he reminds her of his dirty ears and she said she only mentioned those because of what other people might think.

She changes the subject and asks if he has written a poem for the night; surely he had written something beautiful for their wedding. He says that he has not but he is working on another: would she like to hear that one? She knows he is lying and attempts to find it in his pockets but he dissuades her with lines from the other poem.

She abruptly picks up her suitcase and locks herself in the bathroom. He runs to the door, tries to open it, but she is silent. Suddenly, he is struck with inspiration. He opens his suitcase, takes out his nightcap, puts it on, undresses, starts to take his trousers off and stops to listen for any noise from the bathroom. He quickly puts his nightshirt on, then the trousers over that and then his coat. He tosses his shirt and vest into his suitcase, moves to the washstand, and starts to wash his right ear.

As she enters the room again, he is sitting in a chair with his arms folded. Her dress seems a bit rumpled and she has removed her wedding hat. She wonders what in the world he is doing sitting there with his collar upturned and his nightcap on his head. He removes his nightcap and she is incredulous that he has on a nightshirt; her father has been wearing pajamas for years.

She is tired now and asks which side of the bed he would prefer, and if it is all right, she will take the far side away from the door, just in case somebody should knock with breakfast. He could answer it. She picks up a little pillow that has "God Is Love" embroidered on it and remarks that her Mother must have left it.

She turns away to undress and after a few awkward moments she stops to comment on how pretty the bed is. It belonged to his mother and father and he was born in this very bed. She asks him to tell her once more, how much he loves her. He declares again that he is mad about her. She, too, is very happy, and wishes that everything could stay as it was before today—that she could not stand any more happiness.

He finally moves to turn down the lamp and climbs into bed. She tells him that she smells gas; could the lamps leak and they be dead before sunrise? He takes her hand

and tries to console her: "You are an angel, and I'm madly in love with you, and I'm embarrassed to death and so are you, and that's the reason why we—goodnight."

The lamps are finally out and she says that she is no longer embarrassed and tells him a secret—that she has never seen a man naked before. He can't make the same claim about a woman and changes the subject to tell her that a gypsy once told him that he would have a very happy married life and live to a ripe old age and that everything would turn out all right.

She swears she is comfortable in the bed but then she is too hot and she can still smell gas. He tells her it is the champagne still on his breath and leans in to let her smell it, again and again, and finally they embrace.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

This first scene is charming yet painful. Michael and Agnes have just been married and this is their first night together. It is clearly another era when a wedding night was rife with intrigue and mysteries. Michael is doing his best to woo his bride and Agnes is doing everything she can think of to deter him. In addition, the presence of societal and moral issues is in the bed with them with the "God Is Love" pillow placed there by her Mother. It would be hard to have carnal thoughts and consummate a marriage with such a cushiony intruder. However, finally, she leans into her love for him and feels comfortable enough to get into the bed and into the marriage.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

This scene is a year later, 1891. The stage is set with the same bedroom although now there's a bassinette added. Michael has been sleeping in the fourposter, which is strewn with books, papers and an oversized dinner bell. Suddenly he awakens and begins to call for Agnes and also picks up the bell and rings it incessantly.

Agnes, who is very pregnant, rushes into the room carrying a pile of clean laundry. Michael declares that he is having such pains that he can barely stand it any longer. She puts the laundry down, goes to him and determines that his pain is really sympathy labor pains. She is put out because she has been so concerned for him. He jumps out of bed, determined to get the doctor but she reminds him that the doctor is to be called when *she* has the pains, not him.

She is feeling nothing at all and tucks him back into bed with the "God Is Love" pillow behind his head. He cannot rest though; he is scared of the baby. He tells her that she has changed a lot too. She has become a woman; she is not the princess he married. She replies that he has changed but is still a baby and throws a rattle at him. He reminds her that she does not miss an opportunity to humiliate him; that he is merely the male animal, which has done its duty and which can now be dismissed. He whines that he is nothing but a drone and at any time, she will devour him as the queen.

However, he is still in a panic that he has lost her. He wishes it were he lying in the cradle. She tells him that she tells him all day, every day how much she loves him. He loves her. He loves how she gets the hiccoughs and cold feet and scratches her stomach in her sleep. He married a princess but now wakes up to his wife, his friend. She thanks him for his devotion and the attention all the past months and jokingly tells him that if he still feels put out by the child, they will simply take it to a home and visit it on Sundays. Even if they had 20 children, they would all be taken to the home, because he is her husband and she would rather leave them as foundlings than have him take second place.

Agnes begins to have labor pains and Michael begins a frantic rush to get dressed to go get the doctor. She reminds him that they have time, and finally he calms down, and changes his role and begins, now, to comfort her. She confides that she is not nearly ready yet, that there is still laundry drying outside. He puts his arms about her and begins to read from a new book that he has started to write.

Agnes' pains continue and they agree that Michael should go for the doctor. He puts on his coat, kisses her and heads for the door, turns again, sees the bassinette, runs to it and pulls it over close to her before he leaves.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Michael's petulant behavior related to Agnes' pregnancy makes us wonder if she will now have two children, instead of the one, when the baby is born. She is doing her chores almost up until the last minute of the beginning of labor and he has been prostrate in the bed, for what looks like quite awhile, with imagined pains and self pity. It is clear that the roles of the marriage have been established in their first year. He still loves her very much; however, she is no longer a princess, but his deepest friend. She still chides that he is a baby and that she expected a poet. She is the more sturdy of the two but they complement each other as they are about to move into the new roles of parents.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

It is now 1901. It is night, the same bedroom but the only piece of furniture left from before is the fourposter, which has now been draped with brocade curtains. There are now paintings on the wall and the room is crowded with expensive furniture. It is clear that the furnishings are very expensive and very grand. Only one side of the bed has been made and there is only one pillow with the "God Is Love" pillow on top of it.

Agnes enters the room and slams the door. She is removing her evening gloves when Michael knocks on the door. She tells him to come in; he enters, goes to the dressing room to get his nightclothes, crosses to the door and tells her goodnight.

She tells him that he was the life of the party tonight with his cute little stories. He leaves and shuts the door. It is clear that they have been fighting and she is not finished. She opens the door and yells at him to come back. He does so and they continue with the fight. She does not care if the servants hear or not. She thinks he is a pompous ass who has written a worthless novel and has sold his soul for it; and he has given up on the one person who loves him in spite of what he has become. That is when he tells her that he is in love with another woman. She is taken aback but she does not pause in her retorts to him.

He declares that he loves this other woman and she demands that he tell her that he does not love her anymore. He tells her that for so long he has begged, implored, and even crawled to her for a little understanding and warmth and got nothing. Whatever he did or tried—a carriage, servants, money, dresses, paintings—she still hated his book, and has driven him into the arms of someone else.

Agnes then taunts him that he is not the only one who has sought the company and pleasure of another. He is clearly upset and refuses to leave the room so she moves to the dressing room and returns with a suitcase, begins to pack a few things, and asks him to call her a cab. He, of course, will not allow her to leave. He grabs her arm, they struggle and he throws her onto the bed. She kicks him, frees herself and demands that he leave at once! She throws the "God Is Love" pillow at him, accusing him of being a hack writer. He grabs her and kisses her, she breaks free once again and he is on guard.

She sits on the bed and repeats that she wishes she were dead. Sarcastically, he asks that before she dies, won't she please look into his eyes one more time. She does and it is clear that they still love each other. His affair was lit out of loneliness and he tells her that he has started a new book and she agrees to read the manuscript tomorrow. However, he will not take that for an answer, moves to her and they embrace.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Much has happened in the last ten years for Michael and Agnes. They have had two children and he has finally seen success with one of his books. Agnes, however, does not share in the public accolades for this particular work, and does not like the person it has made him. She feels betrayed because she has been the one encouraging him for years during all his failures and now that he has had this shallow success, he has found someone else with which to share it. Her jealousy rises and she taunts him with the suggestion of indiscretion on her own part. The ploy works and they come together again to begin again.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

It is now 1908. The scene is still the bedroom and it is 4:00 a.m. when Michael storms into the room where Agnes is asleep in the fourposter. He wakes her and shakes a bottle of bourbon in her face, outraged that he has found such a thing in his 17 year-old son's drawer. In addition, to make matters worse, the boy has still not come home from a party. He accuses Agnes of being too lenient with the boy and she accuses Michael of favoring their daughter.

She is mildly offended when he challenges her child rearing skills and she does not waste time telling him that his involvement is an occasional fit of fatherly hysteria like this one. They both calm down and agree that they are concerned that the boy is not yet home; maybe they could each use a swig of the bourbon in that bottle. He takes a big one and grimaces as it becomes clear that the liquid in the bottle is castor oil, not the bourbon he had counted on. Agnes realizes what he must have done; that the boy had been telling his mother that he was taking the castor oil and had been depositing it in the bourbon bottle and hoped to keep it hidden in his drawer.

Now, she is perturbed with the boy too and they are fixed in their attitude about him when they hear him come home downstairs. Michael leaves to administer punishment but returns shortly, distracted, and tells her that the only thing he told the boy was Good Morning. She is incredulous and wonders why that is all he said. He was wearing a top hat he told her; he rests with his head in his hands and she laughs, hugs him and kisses him on the top of his head.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Michael and Agnes are approaching mid life now. They are clearly back together in their marriage, but there are still invisible lines drawn as to the responsibilities. He works and she takes care of the children. Every now and then, Michael will take an interest and then become flustered by what he finds. It is almost as if he is railing at the passing of time and cannot believe that his son is old enough to go to a party where everyone stays out so late, and that he might have bourbon in his room. Then, when he does have the opportunity to confront the boy, he backs out, telling Agnes that he could not do it because the boy was wearing a top hat. He sees the boy now as a young man and comes face to face with the fact. Perhaps he sees a little of himself as well.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

It is a late afternoon in 1913. The scene is again the bedroom where the furniture has been rearranged and the curtains on the fourposter have been changed to a more conservative style. Agnes is seated at her dressing table holding a bouquet that matches her gown and hat. Michael enters, humming the Wedding March. She is a bit melancholy and he tells her to cheer up; he is the one who gave his daughter away to some nit with and has had to act happy about it for weeks.

She tells him that it is the first day of their daughter's marriage and the last day of theirs; that she is leaving. All her life she has been someone's wife or mother and she wants the chance to live before she becomes a grandmother. She does not want a trip; she wants to leave him.

As he presses her, it becomes apparent that she has become enthralled with a young poet who has asked Michael's opinion of his work. Agnes is put off by Michael's dismissal of the young man's work and so he challenges her to let him read it again. When he does, it is of an erotic nature and clearly dedicated to Agnes. He is appalled but she is pleased that at least someone takes an interest in her because Michael does not need her anymore.

"Well, let me tell you something. People may buy my books by the thousands, they may write me letters and tell me how I broke their hearts and made them bawl their damn heads off, but I know the truth alright. It's *you* who makes me sing—and if I sing like a frog in a pond, it's not my fault."

She is so relieved to hear this admission that she laughs and cries at the same time and they fall into their familiar embrace.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Agnes is melancholy on the day of her daughter's wedding and again, Michael seems ignorant of her feelings. The empty nest syndrome is looming large and she has one diversion; that of a young poet who has taken a fancy to her. She tells Michael that she needs to be away from him, yet what she really wants is to be closer to him, and somehow the crass words of the young man's poetry, are an affront to his wife and his love for her. He recognizes what she has meant to him all his life, and even better, he has the courage to tell her now. We sense that there is hope for them once again.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

It is 1925, at dawn in the bedroom. It is clear that Michael and Agnes are moving out. The pictures are off the walls, leaving discolored spots on the wallpaper; all the drapes have been removed with the exception of the canopy for the bed. The fourposter is the only thing that remains in the room.

Michael is struggling with getting some last articles of clothing and toiletries into suitcases that have already reached their limits. He calls to Agnes wanting to know if they have sold the bedclothes with the bed or are they taking them. They are leaving them, she begins to make the bed and he wonders what she is planning to do with the "God Is Love" pillow that she has tucked under her arm. She intends to leave it for the new tenants, such a nice young couple.

Michael declares that no young couple needs to enter a bedroom on their first night of marriage, uncover the bed and find a pillow that says "God Is Love" on it. She tells him that she is not going to argue about it, that the pillow stays, and sends him to check the cellar one last time for anything that may have been overlooked.

He returns with a bottle of champagne but she admonishes him that they cannot drink it that early in the morning. She looks about for some glasses and he throws the foil from the bottle into the wastebasket and then sees the "God Is Love" pillow back on the bed. He cannot believe that she is leaving it. However, she counters that she wants to leave the new couple with a message—that they had been very happy and that it was a very good bed—that it had a nice history and that marriage was a good thing.

Michael says that that is not the message he got when he saw that same pillow on his wedding night. He knew for sure that he had been trapped in a world of women, and that if he had not been a coward in woolen underwear he would have made a run for his freedom! Moreover, he was not going to leave it for this unsuspecting boy and paralyze him at such a crucial moment. Agnes said it was not for the boy; it was for the young woman… from her.

They get involved in shutting the final suitcases, decide not to drink the champagne and wait for the car to pick them up. As they wait, they muse about their life and the echoes they can hear in that room. It is a pity the bed will not fit in the new apartment. At that, the doorbell rings, they begin to gather their things and he leaves with his arms full. She puts the little pillow back on the bed and covers it when she hears him coming back into the room. He goes to his side of the bed, uncovers the little pillow, tosses it to her side of the bed, and puts the bottle of champagne down on his pillow and puts the cover back in place.

They stand together for a long moment looking at the room. Then he puts on his hat and scoops her up in his arms, kisses her and carries her out of the room.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Michael and Agnes have had an eventful and loving marriage born witness by this fourposter bed. Throughout all the phases of their life together, the bed has been the constant. It has anchored them from their first tentative moments to the flailing of their straying emotions when it seemed that all might be lost. And in the end, they both want to leave their own message, their own perspective, for the new couple; he, a bottle of vintage champagne; she, the "God Is Love" pillow; for surely, that is the measure of a long and happy marriage; celebration and conviction.

Characters

Agnes

Agnes Agnes is the wife of Michael. Over the course of their marriage, Agnes goes through several phases in her feelings for her husband. As a newlywed bride, she is nervous and anxious about consummating their marriage. As an expectant mother, she becomes more focused on the arrival of their child than on her husband. As the wife of a wealthy and successful writer, she is resentful toward her husband, who has become self-centered, and who, she learns, has been having an affair with another woman. Agnes and Michael face many hardships throughout their marriage, but their love sees them through. For Agnes, their love and enduring marriage can also be seen as an extension of God's love and blessing on them, as is evidenced by the "God Is Love" pillow that she places on the bed in the final scene of the play.

Michael

Michael is the husband of Agnes. Like her, he experiences their marriage over a period of decades as a series of crises and reconciliations between husband and wife. As a newlywed husband, he is anxious to consummate his marriage, but first he must contend with the fears and anxieties of his innocent bride. As a successful writer, he becomes self-centered and takes a mistress because he feels neglected by his wife. In the end, Michael reaffirms his love for his wife and his commitment to their marriage. Though Michael does not seem to share his wife's religious convictions, he finally acquiesces in letting her leave the pillow on the bed. He then adds a bottle of champagne, in his own way leaving a token of love to the new couple that is to move into his and Agnes's old home.

Themes

Marriage

The central theme of this play is marriage. Each of the six scenes takes place in the bedroom of Agnes and Michael, a married couple, during key moments of crisis and reconciliation in their marriage. The first scene takes place on their wedding night. The second scene takes place just as she is experiencing labor pains before the birth of their first child. In the following scene, seven years later, he reveals that he has been having an affair. In the next scene, they argue over how to raise their children, he favoring the daughter, and she favoring the son. In the following scene, they have just returned from their daughter's wedding. Agnes informs Michael that she no longer loves him and is leaving him, but they soon reconcile. In the final scene, they are moving out of their house to a smaller space in an apartment building. The play thus charts the patterns of conflict and resolution over thirty-five years of a marriage. This large-scale overview presents the marriage as rocky but ultimately stabilized by the strong basis of mutual love between husband and wife. In the end, Agnes concludes that they have been "happy" together, and that "marriage is a good thing."

Gender Roles

In portraying the marital relationship between Agnes and Michael, de Hartog explores issues of conflict over traditional gender roles within the family. On their wedding night, Michael, as a man, is eager to consummate their marriage, while Agnes, as an innocent and naive young woman, is extremely anxious and nervous about getting into bed with him. She complains that she wants to go home and hints that he has gotten her drunk to more easily undress her. Soon enough, however, she overcomes her initial fears and becomes comfortable getting into bed with him.

During the scene in which Agnes is about to give birth to their first child, Michael complains that she has neglected him while she has been preparing for the coming child. As a man, he feels jealous of the expected child, whom he fears will supplant him in his wife's affections. When she attempts to tease him, calling him a "baby," he bursts out, "That's right! Humiliate me! Lose no opportunity of reminding me that I'm the male animal that's done its duty and now can be dismissed! . . . A drone, that's what I am! The one thing lacking is that you should devour me. The bees. . . .' ' Michael then admits that he fears losing her to the baby and even wishes that he himself were "lying in the cradle," receiving her attentions. He fears "that cuckoo"—meaning the child—is going to push him "out of the nest." He complains that, since she became pregnant, he has become, "miserable, deserted, alone," and that "You do nothing else all day but fuss over that child." He goes on to assert that he feels, as a man, usurped by the coming child. He tells her, "I retired into the background as becomes a man who recognizes that he is one too many." However, she reassures him that she could not

have done it without the support of a loving husband, telling him, "You helped me more than all model husbands put together."

During a scene that takes place seventeen years later, Agnes expresses her sense of discontent and oppression in the role of wife and mother. She tells Michael, "I can't . . . die behind the stove, like a domestic animal." She goes on to compare the restrictions placed on women to the freedoms allowed men, telling Michael, "You are a man. You'll be able to do what you like until you are seventy." Agnes then expresses her rage and frustration with the restrictions placed upon her in her role as wife and mother:

I want to live, can't you understand that? My life long I have been a mother; my life long I've had to be at somebody's beck and call; I've never been able to be really myself, completely, wholeheartedly. No, never! From the very first day you have handcuffed me and gagged me and shut me in the dark. When I was still a child who didn't even know what it meant to be a woman, you turned me into a mother.

Through such outbursts as this, de Hartog represents marriage as a series of struggles between man and woman, a push and pull of love and conflict, often based on differences in the emotional needs, as well as the societal expectations, of men and women in their traditional marital roles.

Style

Setting

The setting is of central importance in this play. The play's title, *The Fourposter*, refers to the fourposter bed around which key moments of crisis and reconciliation in the marriage of Agnes and Michael take place. The bed is the site of such events as the consummation of their marriage on their wedding night and the birth of their first child. In their later years, they are moving out of their house into a smaller apartment and have to leave the bed behind because it is too big to fir into their new place. In the final moments of the play, Agnes sums up the significance of the bed to their marriage. She comments, "It's odd, you know, how after you have lived in a place for so long, a room gets full of echoes. Almost everything we've said this morning we have said before. . . . It' s the bed, really, that I regret most. Pity it wouldn't fit." The four-poster bed represents the stable base of deep love that remains constant throughout their long and rocky marriage.

The setting is also significant in act 2, as it demonstrates the wealth Michael and Agnes have achieved through his success as a writer. The stage directions describe the changes that have been made in their bedroom furnishings, from modest to extravagant: "The only piece of furniture left from the preceding scene is the four-poster, but it has been fitted out with new brocade curtains. Paintings hang on the walls; expensive furniture crowds the room. . . . The whole thing is very costly, very grand and very new." In act 3, scene 1, which takes place in 1913, Agnes and Michael are still wealthy, but their furnishings show the signs of established, rather than newly acquired, wealth. The bed canopy, drapes, and furniture in this scene have changed, "all in more conservative taste now."

Time Frame

The time frame of the play is significant to its central concerns. The six scenes, divided into three acts, span the years 1890 to 1925. The scenes take place anywhere from one to twelve years apart. The play as a whole thus provides an overview of key moments in thirty-five years of a marriage. Although this leaves large gaps of time in the reader's (or theatergoer's) knowledge of the marriage, it paints a broad, sweeping portrait of the relationship, highlighting the larger patterns of conflict, reconciliation, and change.

Visual Cues

The play includes two sequences that are played out almost entirely through actions rather than dialogue. These two sequences, one in the first scene and one in the final scene, parallel one another, as they play out in pantomime the push and pull of the marital relationship. In the first scene, which takes place on their wedding night, Agnes is so nervous about getting into bed with Michael that she picks up her suitcase and

walks out of the room, locking Michael inside. Michael, however, notices that she has left her shoes. The stage directions at this point describe Michael's actions and movements about the room, as he nervously and frantically unpacks his nightshirt, begins to undress, puts on his nightcap and nightshirt, then changes his mind and begins to dress again, without removing his nightshirt or night cap. At this point, Agnes returns, catching Michael in this state of partial dress and undress, an expression of his anxiety and uncertainty as to how he should best proceed with her.

In the final scene, Agnes and Michael act a similar series of moves and countermoves, which express an ongoing ambivalence between the two of them. Agnes wishes to place the "God Is Love" pillow on the bed for the incoming bride, but Michael is against the idea, for the sake of the groom. As each walks in and out of the room, Agnes and Michael put on and remove the pillow several times. Finally, Michael leaves the pillow on the bed, but he places a bottle of champagne next to it. Like the series of actions in the first scene, this series of actions plays out in pantomime a point of conflict and a moment of reconciliation between husband and wife—a pattern that continues throughout their marriage.

Historical Context

The Netherlands

De Hartog was born in the city of Haarlem in the Netherlands. He also spent an important period of his life in the city of Amsterdam, which is the capital of the Netherlands (although the seat of government is located in the city of the Hague). The nation of the Netherlands, officially called the Kingdom of the Netherlands, is often referred to as Holland, after one of the country's major provinces. The language of the Netherlands is Dutch. In 1795, the Netherlands was occupied by the French and, under Napoleon, renamed the Kingdom of Holland. National sovereignty, however, was restored in 1814. During World War I, the Netherlands remained neutral. During World War II, although the Netherlands claimed neutrality, its citizens were largely sympathetic to the Allied cause. In 1940, however, the Germans invaded the region, which they occupied until it was liberated by Canadian forces in 1945. During the period of German occupation, a Dutch resistance movement sprang up, which helped de Hartog to escape a death sentence by helping him secretly leave the Netherlands for England. In the postwar era, the Netherlands formed strong ties with the nations of the former Allied forces.

Developments in Twentieth-Century Theater

The late nineteenth century represented the height of realism in drama of the Western world. The Moscow Art Theater, established in 1895 by Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavsky, represented the pinnacle of realist theater. The beginning of the twentieth century, however, ushered in a variety of avant-garde and experimental efforts to break away from realism. In Italy, the theater of futurism, begun in 1909, initiated this break with the staging of theatrical events designed to break through the "fourth wall" separating the events of a play from the audience. From 1910 to 1925, a theater of German expressionism was inspired by the expressionist movement in the visual arts. Expressionism was a reaction against societal norms and the aesthetics of naturalism and impressionism. Experimental theater in France during the first half of the twentieth century included the organization of such theatrical companies as the "Cartel," beginning in 1927, and the *Theatre des Quinze*, which, in its brief existence between 1930 and 1934, exerted a strong international influence. In the United States, the Theater Guild was established as an art theater in 1918, becoming the most influential stage in the nation with productions of the works of great playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill and Elmer Rice. O'Neill, in particular, helped to elevate American theater to a level of literary quality. The post-World War II era, during which *The Fourposter* was first produced on Broadway in New York City, initiated further variety in the development of theater. Perhaps the most internationally influential playwright of this era was the German Bertolt Brecht, whose "epic theater," based on a technique he called the "alienation effect," was intended to break from the illusionary quality of drama to present social commentary directly to the audience. Influential productions on the American

theatrical scene during the 1950s included works by O'Neill, as well as by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

Critical Overview

The Fourposter, Jan de Hartog's most successful play, was first produced at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1951, and ran for 632 performances on Broadway. This first run starred the famous husband and wife acting duo, Jessica Tandy, as Agnes, and Hume Cronyn, as Michael. *New York Times* drama critic Brooks Atkinson gave the opening night performance hearty applause. In an October 25 review, he hails it as a "literate and professional work all the way through." He describes the writing of the play as "so compact and simple that you may not realize at once how good it is." Atkinson notes that while "nothing very extraordinary happens" throughout the play, de Hartog "has managed to skeletonize it with great understanding and skill." His one criticism is that "Once in a while it seems thin." In a somewhat longer review in the *New York Times* a month after the first, Atkinson expands upon his original praise for the play, calling it "a sparingly written and deftly acted cartoon of marriage." He again asserts that it contains sequences that are "thin and tenuous." However, he asserts that "minute as it is in size and reserved as it is in style, *The Fourposter* is a genuine and original piece of civilized comedy." John Gassner, in *Best American Plays* (1958), comments that *The Fourposter*, "revealed a facet of the author's dramatic talent hitherto unsuspected on Broadway," adding, "It was a warm sense of comedy that made *The Fourposter* one of the pleasantest of Broadway plays." Gassner goes on to explain, "The background of *The Fourposter* is vividly American, but in treating married life, the author dealt with timeless traits and foibles, even while availing himself of elements of period comedy." *The Fourposter* earned de Hartog the 1952 Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award. It was adapted to the screen in a 1952 film produced by Columbia Pictures. A musical rendition entitled *I Do! I Do!* opened on Broadway in 1966.

Describing the 1955 revival of *The Fourposter* in New York's City Center, including the original cast of Tandy and Cronyn, Gassner notes, "it was appreciated no less than on its first appearance on Broadway proper." Gassner does point out that "Dissent was possible on the grounds that the humor and sentiment were rather standardized," but defends the play in stating that

a critic could be mollified on the feeling that familiarity has been a requirement of domestic comedy ever since the ancients, and the standardization of humor in De Hartog's play was certainly mitigated by the rich acting roles provided by the author.

Atkinson said of the 1955 run of *The Fourposter* that "the comedy seems even brighter" than in his "happy memories of the original opening night." Calling it "original and funny," Atkinson observes,

Mr. de Hartog's dialogue is immensely entertaining, his point of view is sardonically humorous and he is never unaware of the fact that his version of the *comédie humaine* is frequently touching."

De Hartog saw the production of four of his plays between 1939 and 1951 at the Amsterdam Municipal Theater on Broadway and on the West end. Gassner describes de Hartog's appearance on the American theatrical scene:

[De Hartog] first attracted attention in the American theatre in 1948 with *Skipper Next to God*. . . , the drama of a sea captain who transported Jewish refugees to Palestine and refused to allow international politics to rule his conscience. It was not a play contrived for Broadway, but it attracted attention with its strenuous idealism when staged in New York with the late John Garfield in the role of the skipper."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses religious references in de Hartog's play.

Jan de Hartog's Tony Award-winning play, *The Fourposter* (1951), presents key moments of crisis and reconciliation between a married couple over the course of thirty-five years of their marriage. Throughout the play, there are many references to God, spirituality, and religion, which reflect upon the nature of the relationship between Agnes and Michael.

Act 1, scene 1, takes place on Michael and Agnes's wedding night. Michael, who is slightly intoxicated, is amorous toward Agnes, anticipating the consummation of their marriage. Agnes, on the other hand, is extremely nervous and anxious about her first night with her new husband and even threatens to walk out on him. Throughout the scene, Michael expresses his love and desire for Agnes in religious terms. Upon entering the bedroom, Michael, who is carrying Agnes, kisses her, lays her down on the bed, and tries to kiss her again. Self-conscious, Agnes tells him to hurry and to close the bedroom door. As he does this, she gets up from the bed and turns on a light. As she stands there, Michael removes her gloves and kneels at her feet. When she asks what he is doing, he tells her, "I'm worshipping you. . . . Can' t I worship you?" When Agnes cautions, "If our Lord could see you," Michael asserts that his expressions of love for her are not contrary to, but in harmony with, the will of God. He replies, "He could only rejoice in such happiness." Further equating his feelings for Agnes with religious sentiment, he calls her, "Angel!" as he repeatedly tries to kiss her.

Once they are finally comfortable enough to get into the bed together, Agnes continues to delay further intimacy by expressing concern that the oil lamp might leak. Michael, attempting to calm her anxieties, as well as his own, takes her hand, and tells her, "Darling, listen. You are an angel, and I'm madly in love with you, and I'm embarrassed to death and so are you, and that's the reason why we . . . Good night." Earlier, as he is attempting to take her shoes off for her, against her protests, Michael equates this romantic gesture with "heaven," telling her, "Isn't that heaven? I could spend the whole night undressing you."

But, as they are preparing to get into bed, Michael utilizes swear words to express his frustration over Agnes's many delays and hesitations. Agnes's fear of taking the next step in their relationship, toward the expected sexual encounter, is expressed as a desire that "everything could stay as it was—before today." Wishing in her anxiety to maintain the chastity of their relationship, she tells him, "I couldn't stand any more—happiness. Could you?" To which Michael replies, "God, no." But when she manages to find fault with even this assertion of his happiness with her, commenting, "How coldly you say that!" Michael blurts out, "But what the blazing hell do you expect me to say?" Agnes then chides him for swearing, admonishing him, "Is that language for the wedding night. . . before going to sleep? You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" In his

mounting frustration, Michael swears again, "But damn it, Agnes. . . .' ' Thus, while equating the wedding night with a religious sentiment, Michael also finds himself swearing in God's name with his frustration over Agnes's efforts to avoid consummating their marriage. Agnes, for her part, continues to scold Michael, both for expressing his love and passion as a religious sentiment and for swearing in God's name on such a sacred occasion as their wedding night.

The love between the newlyweds is also expressed as a sacred sentiment via the small pillow, embroidered with the words, "God Is Love," which Agnes's mother has placed under the bedcovers for them. Agnes exclaims, "Wasn't that sweet of her?" But Michael, who, on his wedding night, prefers not to be reminded of his bride's mother or of her chaste religious sentiment, flatly replies, "Yes, lovely." Once in bed, Agnes places the "God Is Love" pillow under her head, as if to comfort her anxieties about expressing the physical element of love between herself and her husband.

For Michael, as for Agnes, God is indeed love. But Michael, unlike Agnes, views the physical expression of love as equally sacred as the platonic ideal of love. In act 1, scene 2, a year later, Agnes is just about to go into labor with their first child. To sooth and comfort her, Michael offers to read her the first half page of the new book he has started writing. In the passage he reads, Michael once again equates the physical expression of love, as symbolized by a double bed, with religious worship. A romance, it describes a woman entering an attic to look at an old double bed as if she were entering a temple to regard a religious shrine:

When she entered the attic with the double bed, she bent her head, partly out of reverence for the temple where she had worshipped and sacrificed, partly because the ceiling was so low. It was not the first time she had returned to that shrine. . . .

The "God Is Love" pillow later plays a part in a moment of violent conflict between husband and wife. In act 2, scene 1, Michael and Agnes have returned home from a party. They begin to argue, and Michael reveals to Agnes that he has been having an affair. Throughout the scene, the bed has only one bed pillow on it, atop which rests the little "God Is Love" pillow. The one bed pillow indicates the separate sleeping arrangements of husband and wife, who have become estranged from one another over the years. Agnes clings to the "God Is Love" pillow, perhaps an ironic reminder of the loss of faith they have both experienced in regard to their marriage. As they argue, Michael continues to express his anger and frustration by swearing, "I'll be damned. . . .' ' He tells her that he has "lived through hell" while hiding his affair. Agnes, on the other hand, expresses her anger and frustration by invoking heaven and the name of God.

However, when she finally expresses concern over the announcement of the affair, Michael bursts out, "At last! Thank God, a sign of life." He explains to her that she has neglected him for years, despite his attempts to gain her attention. But as the argument heats up, Agnes tells him, "You're the vilest swine God ever created!" As they continue to argue, she hits him with the "God Is Love" pillow. He then grabs it out of her hands and throws it. From that point the argument turns into a minor physical struggle, but soon it becomes an expression of mutual love as they reconcile with one another. This

marital quarrel, like all of the conflicts between Agnes and Michael, ends with reconciliation and a reaffirmation of their love for one another. The use of the "God Is Love" pillow in the course of their fight is in part meant to be ironic. The pillow represents an ideal of holy matrimony, yet ends up being used for the physical expression of anger between husband and wife. But the use of the pillow in their fight is also a confirmation that the higher spiritual quality of their lifelong love for one another never disappears, even amidst their most violent conflicts.

In act 3, scene 2, Agnes and Michael are about to move out of their house and into a smaller apartment. The "God Is Love" pillow once again symbolizes the strong bond of love that underlies the cycle of conflict and reconciliation that characterizes their marriage. They have left the four-poster bed for the new homeowners, a newlywed couple, because it won't fit in their new place. As Michael packs their last suitcase before leaving, Agnes enters the bedroom with the "God Is Love" pillow hidden behind her back. Noticing it, Michael asks, "We don't have to take that little horror with us, do we?" Agnes explains that she plans to leave the pillow on the bed for the new occupants, "as a surprise." Describing exactly the scenario of their own wedding night, Michael pictures the "surprise" as "Two young people entering the bedroom on their first night of their marriage, uncovering the bed and finding a pillow a foot across with 'God Is Love' written on it." Tossing the pillow off the bed, he cynically mocks, "God Is Love!" But as soon as he leaves the room, Agnes puts the pillow back on the bed and covers it with the spread.

The pillow also comes to represent the male female conflict within marriage. From Agnes's perspective, it is meant to be a comfort to the new bride, a "message" from one woman to another to reassure her about the anxieties of consummating her wedding night. From Michael's perspective, however, the pillow represents a union of women, "the biggest trade union in the world," conspiring against the man's excitement over consummating his marriage and confronting him with the "horror" of a life of restricted "freedom," as represented by marital commitment. Reentering the room, Michael discovers that the pillow has been put back on the bed. He asks Agnes why she has done this, and she explains, "I wanted to leave something . . . friendly for that young couple . . . a sort of message." When Michael asks her what the message is, she replies, "I'd like to tell them how happy we've been—and that it was a very good bed . . . I mean, it's had a very nice history, and that . . . marriage was a good thing." Michael responds, "Well, believe me, that's not the message they'll read from this pillow. . . . I won't let you do this to that boy." Taking the pillow, she tells him, "When I found this very same little pillow in this very same bed on the first night of our marriage, I nearly burst into tears!" Michael replies, "Oh you did, did you? Well, so did I! And it's time you heard about it! When on that night, at that moment, I first saw that pillow, I suddenly felt as if I'd been caught in a world of women. Yes, women! I suddenly saw loom up behind you the biggest trade union in the world, and if I hadn't been a coward in long woolen underwear with my shoes off, I would have made a dive for freedom. . . . I' m not going to let you paralyze that boy at a crucial moment." Agnes retorts, "She would find it before, when she made the bed. That's why I put it there. It is meant for her, not for him, not for you, for her, from me!"

Ultimately, this conflict over the pillow symbolizes the gender-based conflicts that arise between husband and wife throughout the course of a marriage, as well as the strong basis of spiritual love on which the marital bond is based. In the final moments of the play, Michael once again removes the pillow from the bed, but, when he is not looking, she replaces it under the covers. Reentering the room, Michael pulls back the covers, places a bottle of champagne next to the "God Is Love" pillow, and pulls up the covers again. Michael then picks Agnes up, kisses her, and carries her out of the room. It seems that, from the perspective of Jan de Hartog, God is indeed love.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Kelly is an instructor of literature and creative writing at Oakton Community College and the College of Lake County. In the following essay, he explores the ways in which de Hartog has the characters in his play struggle for their freedom from each other, even as the play makes it clear that they belong together.

Much can be said for the range of human interaction that Jan de Hartog packs into his small play, *The Fourposter*. The play's scope is small, with only two characters and one set, but it captures thirty-five years of the struggles of a marriage, swooping easily between the extremes of joy and bitterness, anger and compassion. It is a comedy in the strictest sense of the word because everything turns out fine in the end, but even so it leaves open the question of whether or not its subjects, Michael and Agnes, have built their contentment with each other on unstable ground. From the first scene to the last, these two characters express deep ideological differences, giving viewers good reason to suspect that their marriage might be based on a selfish drive for comfort instead of on true, profound love. While vagueness is a sign of weak writing, this unanswered question is one that thoughtful romances are almost always forced to raise.

Audiences of the early 1950s, when the play first ran on Broadway, might have been content to think of *The Fourposter* as a sweet triumph of love, but time has shown the play to be more resilient and complicated, with a greater depth of understanding of the human condition than popularity alone requires. Ironically, the script tends to make Michael and Agnes seem like they were meant to be generalized, hazy representations of their social roles, referring to them as "He" and "She," which denies the clearness of the personalities that de Hartog establishes so well. Despite the way these pronouns mask them, the individual traits of these characters show through, providing dramatic tension between their roles within the marriage and their own personalities.

The play can be interpreted as presenting the struggle for simplicity in the face of life's complications, which become more twisted and indecipherable over the course of a marriage. To make the distinction, de Hartog takes measures to establish a solid base of serenity over which to layer the problems of human identity. For instance, he set the play fifty years before the time he wrote it (a hundred years ago from now), pushing it back to the nineteenth century, before both world wars, before airplanes and automobiles, before electrical connections modernized the world with appliances that are meant to save time. Writing about an earlier generation can give an author a chance to explain large events with the benefit of hindsight, but in a domestic comedy like *The Fourposter* the distance of years serves to wrap the action in a shroud of nostalgia, reminding viewers that the action takes place in a simpler, more manageable, time.

Another way that stability is asserted is in the play's central image, the four-poster bed itself. Huge, and always looming in the middle of the set, the bed serves to remind viewers that there is a firm base anchoring Michael and Agnes's marriage, in spite of the changes that occur over the course of thirty-five years.

Having established this core of stability, de Hartog is free to present aspects of these two characters that make them struggle against the confines of marriage. In doing this, he presents a case for understanding marriage as being, by its nature, at odds with individual freedom. There is no implication that the conflict between freedom and marriage is necessarily a bad thing, for, as the play eventually asserts, the union of "Him" and "Her" ends up being satisfactory for them both.

De Hartog does a superb job of treating the concerns of both Michael and Agnes with the fullest measure of respect, but he has rendered Michael's concerns more clearly. This cannot be read as greater approval for how Michael thinks, but only as a frank acknowledgement that de Hartog, a male writer, was able to understand Michael better. The sexes are so evenly balanced here that it seems unlikely that Michael's resistance to a settled relationship is meant as a statement about all men's view of marriage. Michael is almost matched in his struggle for independence by Agnes, but his struggle is rendered with more complete detail.

One way that Michael struggles against unity is that he drinks throughout the play, although de Hartog makes little use of alcohol's intoxicating effects. As a strict Quaker, it is doubtful that he would have had much insight to offer about intoxication. Instead of filling in much detail, he portrays Michael's relationship with liquor as a by-product of a rebellious streak that becomes frozen in him by his early entry into marriage, a facet of his character that becomes more and more pronounced as his social position becomes more confining. From the start, on their wedding night, he laughs off Agnes's concerns about his drinking, saying that he just appears intoxicated because he is so giddy with love, likening it to his fantasy about undressing her slowly: both are, in his mind, the offbeat products of a creative mind. The play foreshadows his drinking as a problem at this point by creating a link between the smell of liquor on his breath and the dangerous smell of gas from the lamp.

In subsequent acts, Michael continues to drink to rebel, and to distance himself from marriage. A turning point comes in the second act, when he sees his own drinking reflected back at him in his seventeen-year-old son Robert, forcing Michael to take a strong stand against liquor. His promise to someday show Agnes "the difference . . . between gaiety and delirium tremens" marks a threshold for his character, an end to any pretense he could have harbored that drinking makes life any more free and easy. This point is punctuated with symbolism when Michael becomes sick from drinking out of the bourbon bottle he has found, discovering only after he has gulped from it that it contains three-year-old cod liver oil.

While Michael's drinking increases through the years, his writing ability diminishes. Instead of heartfelt poetry, he starts producing cheap, sentimental, obvious novels. Writing ceases to be an artistic act, but a financial necessity: "I have to spend every waking hour making money," he tells Agnes just past the play's middle point, in the second scene of act 2. While he does take his responsibility to his family seriously, it blinds him to the needs that he has as an individual. When he talks about the young poet who is supposed to be his protege, Agnes sees a world-weariness in him, represented by the way he has his hands on his head; he is outright hostile to the young

man's work. When she forces the issue, Michael comes to see the relationship between his own youthful writing and the idealistic work of the young man who is just starting out; the enthusiasm of the protege's sonnet "Nocturne Embrace" is no more naive than Michael's poem from his wedding night, "The Fountain of the Royal Gardens." Remembering the sincerity with which he wrote as a young man, and seeing the passion the unnamed young man has, while writing about Agnes, Michael comes to realize how important she is to his talent, and he therefore sees that his life as an artist is not, as he had thought, separate from his life as a member of their marriage.

Ironically, the least serious threat to the marriage portrayed here is the possibility of other people. When, in the beginning of the second act, Michael talks seriously about leaving Agnes for another woman, she shows little worry, and in fact she responds in a cunning way that makes his own jealousy kick into gear, causing him to abandon his plan to leave her. Whether she has really had an affair is doubtful, given the lack of details she is able to provide. The important thing is that she can read Michael so well, and that she knows that he is not so much in love with the young woman as he is flattered by the attention that she gives him. His description of the young woman shows no sign of his appreciating her for who she is, only of appreciating the fact that she can appreciate him: "At last I have found a woman who'll live with my work," he tells Agnes, "and a better guarantee of my faithfulness nobody can have." Agnes, in fact, finds a better way to guarantee his faithfulness by feigning indifference, and by threatening their marriage, which, it turns out, is more important to him than his work. Marriages are often destroyed by love affairs, but in this play Michael's affair is a relatively minor thing, a brief lapse into narcissism that is quickly brushed aside. De Hartog's point throughout is that the marriage, like the big four-poster bed, is huge and looming; it is more important to the lives of these characters than are their individual concerns.

If it were only Michael who was reluctant about his involvement in the marriage, the lesson for viewers might be one of gender, fitting in with traditions of Western culture that see men as less cooperative, less compelled by love, and less willing to commit. Agnes, however, has her own problems with the marriage, and, although she is more inclined to put her interests aside for the sake of a working domestic relationship, she does reach a point late in the play where she fears that she will lose her individuality completely. *The Fourposter* is never pessimistic about the benefits of marriage, but neither of its characters is entirely committed to it without reservation.

As Michael's job is his writing, Agnes's is the raising of their children. She chastises him for not being more consistently interested in them, refusing to allow Michael to harm the boy when he becomes determined to discipline Robert. She also knows more about the personal life of their daughter, Lizzie, than Michael can guess. Like Michael, who comes to fear that his artistic ability has been squandered for the sake of the family, Agnes ends up fearing that she will have no life when the children are not there to care for anymore. She plans to leave after Lizzie's marriage, to find out who she is as an individual. The scene in which she announces her leaving has some parallels to Michael's announcement in the second act, in that there is a young man involved who is not identified by name. But Agnes has no delusions about having a romantic relationship with the young man. If Michael was interested in his young woman because

she was somewhat of a fan, in this case it is Agnes who is a fan, appreciating the young poet for his talent. The same fascination that drew her to Michael attracts her to this young poet, and she in fact forgets about him when Michael becomes like the young poet he once was, drawing upon her for inspiration.

Throughout the play, Agnes' maternal instincts are evident, from the way she cares for Michael when he suffers sympathetic labor pains to the way she worries about the young couple moving into the house at the end. Her fear, in the first scene of act 3, of losing the chance to be a woman before she becomes a grandmother, is much more poignant than any of Michael's concerns because the marriage relationship has seemed, all along, to be her idea, while he has seemed to only be going along with it. The most dangerous moment in the play, where the basic premise of marriage nearly comes apart, is when she shouts out words that seem more appropriate for him:

—don't you feel yourself that there is nothing between us anymore in the way of tenderness, of real feeling, of love; that we are dead, as dead as doornails, that we move and think and talk like—like puppets?

This brutal evaluation of their situation is shocking because up to that point it had been Agnes's role to nurture the marriage, not tear it down, and Michael's role to do what he could to struggle against their union, trapped by jealousy and the desire to make her happy. When Agnes stops believing in their marriage, audiences know that it is in grave danger.

After Michael sets the order straight again by showing Agnes that he needs her and that his art suffers without her inspiration, the crisis is over. In the play's final scene, de Hartog summarizes the personalities of these two individuals by giving them each a symbolic object to bring to the marriage bed as their commentary on marriage for the next newlyweds. Michael's is a bottle of champagne, because he is enchanted with the idea of showing up at their new apartment drunk at eight in the morning, showing the new landlady, an authority figure, that he is not locked into a conformist lifestyle. His interest in drinking the champagne is slight, and he is easily distracted from doing it. In some ways, his willingness to give up the champagne idea makes it even more unusual that he would be so strongly opposed to her idea, which is to leave the pillow, embroidered with "God Is Love," that her mother gave her on their wedding night. This pillow most strongly captures the differences of their two personalities. Agnes sees the mention of religion as a good, almost necessary thing for the newlyweds. She wants them to have a reminder about how important love is, over and above their individual concerns—for her purpose, the pillow might well say, "Love is God." Michael is strict in his opposition, almost panicking about the responsibility that is being put upon the young groom's shoulders. "You can burst into tears," he tells her, "you can stand on your head, you can divorce me, but I'm not going to let you paralyze that boy at a crucial moment."

In the end, Michael gives in: the pillow stays, but he leaves the champagne too. Their legacy to the new couple reflects the tensions of their own marriage, but it can easily be said that these tensions are what has made their marriage work for thirty-five years.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for Drama for Students, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Smith has a Ph.D., specializing in writing and American literature. In the following essay, Smith discusses how de Hartog uses elements of comedy, especially how he plays upon the conventional manners and morals of American society, both to make the audience laugh at their own foibles and to reflect upon the value of marriage and love.

In general, comedy written for the stage differs from other dramatic forms such as tragedy or theatre of the absurd in that it combines gaiety and optimism with the subtle working out of a philosophical or moral question. The question—in this case whether the heroic couple will sustain their marriage through the predictable calamities and banalities of everyday life—creates a dramatic tension intended to teach something vital about the human condition. A theater audience may be compelled to wait until the very last scene to discover the playwright's answer to this moral question, but in a well-written comedy at least two things happen: laughter and something that inspires hope for the future.

Comedy is balm for the soul. It lures the audience by its own amusement into a willing collaboration with the playwright. The audience learns to recognize the flaws of the dramatic personae (and by extension, their own). Laughter provides relief from the hectic workings of human consciousness. Comedy's message implies that it is okay to be human and imperfect. Comedy shares with tragedy the capacity to create a sense of greater community with those who are laughing (or crying). Every joke will yield some truth. If everyone is laughing at the same thing, then something in it must be universally felt.

As Paul Grawe writes in *Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination*, comedy assures the audience that conflicts will be resolved in such a way as to give them cause for optimism about the future, despite loss of innocence; loneliness associated with the dark, existential moments; and the suffering that comes with human loss, humiliation, and change. If tragedy tends to elicit pity and terror in the face of the human condition, comedy builds faith in the imaginative and skillful art of human survival. Indeed, comedy not only strengthens faith in survival, it dramatizes, writes Grawe, "the conditions" under which the future "can be assured." *The Fourposter* combines elements of romantic comedy with a comedy of manners. It teaches about the universal nature of love through the idiosyncrasies of its characters and the social codes of a particular period in history. In romantic comedy, as David Grote writes in *The End of Comedy*, "we are more concerned with the experience of the love than with the result of it," for it is expected that love will conquer all, but the pleasure as well as the revelation come from discovering how. Unlike the typical romantic comedy whose action revolves around the heroic couple wooing and finally winning one another (such as Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, or a more contemporary Hollywood film example, *The Runaway Bride*), the hero and heroine in *The Fourposter* are already married when they first appear on stage. Moreover, as the prologue states, the marriage stays intact for thirty-five years. There is, then, none of the usual suspense or intrigue as boy plots to get girl. Nor is there any clever maneuvering or hijinks on the part of friends and family to bring the shy and

unwitting couple together. No mistaken identities, parental fears, or obstacles of class or religion interfere with the lovers. In fact, no other characters appear on stage throughout the three-act play but the heroic couple Agnes and Michael; the action depends completely on the dialogue between these two, and the tension ebbs and flows with the pitfalls and small miracles of married life itself.

The play's comic effects spring as much from the mannerisms and social conventions of the times as they do from the private conversations and interactions between the couple that the audience "overhears." In his 1939 doctoral thesis, *The Development of American Social Comedy*, John Geoffrey Hartman suggests that often comedy will "reveal for our amusement the embarrassment individuals suffer because of the very conventions and institutions which they themselves have built up and supported." It certainly holds true here. The action takes place between 1890 and 1925, an era which is often referred to as "the Gilded Age." Many classics of American literature have chronicled turn-of-the-century social life from the so-called Gay Nineties to the Roaring Twenties, most notably, perhaps, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Agnes and Michael share with Fitzgerald's Gatsby "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness" that characterized a national mood, a yearning for fashionability and success within a strict social code that the "old money" American families had maintained against the "vulgar" industrialists and the *nouveau riche*. Gentlemen were chivalrous; ladies, discreet. Among the fashionable, intrigue was good if you could carry it off without scandal, and marriage was (ho-hum) "so" bourgeois. The "glittering aura" of the Gilded Age was, of course, not all it was cracked up to be. In *The Great Gatsby*, that recognition comes too late and ends in tragedy; in *The Fourposter*, it is cause for mirth and for recommitment to married life.

When the play opens, it is the couple's wedding night, and Michael is carrying Agnes over the threshold of their new home. Both their conversation and their movements make it clear that they have had too much to drink, although the chivalry and romance of the moment resist their admitting it. So much of the play's effect depends on staging, and the reader feels it immediately. When he gets her inside, he throws her on the bed before even closing the outside door; then there is a flurry of straightening hair and dress and uncertainty as to where to put his top hat and gloves. Romance battles with propriety and with the after-effects of alcohol. Michael is euphoric. He drops to his knees in an outburst of feeling, and when she asks what he's doing, says, "I'm worshipping you." She gets the first laugh with her response: "Are you out of your senses?" (Which of course he is.) "If our Lord could see you. . . ," she adds, as if God were the landlord, or as if He had carelessly turned His eyes away for a moment.

The couple's awkward but touching sentiment and the humor that arises from it continue to escalate during the first scene. When she gets close to him to say something "shocking," she discovers he has not washed his ears. In a classically romantic gesture, he offers to take off her shoes, but all she can think of is how much her feet hurt. She begins to tell him to get undressed, but she cannot say that word and finally orders him to take off his hat. Finally, he reads her a (very amateurish) poem that he has been working on. This drives her into the bathroom with her suitcase, where she feels it is safe to change. Meanwhile, with her offstage, he rips off his clothes, puts on his

nightshirt, and then pulls his trousers and coat back on over the nightshirt, of course, still wearing his shoes. All the while, he is desperately afraid she will emerge from the bathroom before he is "prepared." Frantically, at the last minute, he finds a towel, wets it, and begins to clean his ears. The audience can feel the suspense and the terrible awkwardness; when she reenters, they are ready for more hilarity.

Sex, the one word on everyone's mind in the first scene, is the one word that can never be broached. In the comic genre, the sexual innuendo works by "surprise." In *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*, Albert Cook writes, "We are continually delighted that the wit can plunge headlong against the mores at every turn and dodge aside just in time with an unexpected nonsexual word." Laughter both releases tension and serves to preserve the social norms or mores without which the innuendo would have no power. De Hartog knows this instinctively and uses it to his best advantage here. As the scene winds down, everyone is acutely aware that the couple must end up in the bed. They cannot even look at one another until both are fully covered by darkness and sheets. He wants to sleep, seemingly exhausted by the evening's activities and emotional stress, but she thinks she smells gas leaking from the lamps. She insists on smelling his breath, again and again, to see if it might be alcohol. By her smelling his breath, they cleverly conquer their fears of intimacy, embrace, and the scene ends.

The first scene establishes the essential patterns of interaction between Agnes and Michael that will be repeated, with variations, throughout the play. They achieve a delicate stability characterized by playful give-and-take despite the strangeness that marriage confers between even the most compatible of people. One of the most charming "exchanges" occurs in the second scene of act 1, when Agnes is pregnant with their first child, but it is actually Michael experiencing the labor pains. They have traded places and, unwittingly, supported each other by doing so. Her constant care of him has taken her mind off her own fears, and he has been able to enter into the process by being ill. Their interactions are affectionately amusing and endearing because they are both still innocent, in love, and fearful of the future. As in the first scene, when the fear is greatest, the humor is, too. When her pains come in earnest, she starts to sing "Yankee Doodle Dandy." He, thinking she is "going mad," slaps her cheeks several times. She slaps back, and they are once more on level ground. She was singing on doctor's orders, a kind of early Lamaze breathing practice.

As the action builds and the first act ends, a darker note is introduced, and the shape of the conflict that will emerge between Michael's sense of worth in his family and his work as a writer is apparent. Their unfinished phrases hint at trouble ahead. He fantasizes about taking the unborn child on adventures, and she reminds him, "First, there will be years of crying and diapers and bottles." He responds, "I don't mind, darling. Honestly, I don't. I'll—find something to do. I'll work and—and go fishing alone. You're never going to have to worry." But lest the looming difficulties of the married condition become overwhelming too soon, de Hartog again interjects a comic note. To distract Agnes from her labor, Michael reads from "a new book" he's started. It bears the ridiculously sentimental title, *Burnt Corn, the Story of a Rural Love*. He reads, "When she entered the attic with the double bed, she bent her head, partly out of reverence for the temple where she had worshipped and sacrificed, partly because the ceiling was low."

Appropriately enough, it begins with a bed, and it suggests, as does their life together, both a sentimental romance and an earthy pragmatism. Clearly, the romance must make allowances for the practical, here represented by the height of the ceiling.

Only twice in the play is the delicate balance of their marriage truly threatened. In the second act, Michael tells Agnes he has been unfaithful with a woman who makes him feel young and who appreciates him for who he is. In act 3, it is Agnes who experiences the dark existential moment. She tells Michael that she wants to leave the marriage, feeling she no longer loves him, that their life is dull and flat, and that her role as mother and wife has ended. The episodes are real enough; the audience feels the confusion, the pain of betrayal, and the possibility that the marriage may fail. But in both episodes, they come to one another's rescue. Both Agnes and Michael know that his popular book, the one that has gained them entrance into fashionable society and led to his affair, is sentimental tripe. She won't pander to him to gain him back, but instead she turns the tables on him and hints that she, too, has a lover. While the audience suspects that she probably does not (she never says so, but skillfully avoids telling him anything), he is burning with jealousy. He is mad to know the truth, and he realizes, as she packs her suitcase to leave, that he still wants and needs her love. Similarly, when Agnes expresses the emptiness she feels after the marriage of her daughter, and the reason she "must" leave (he has become coarse, harshly criticizing the poetry of a younger man under his tutelage), he humors her by reading some of the young man's poetry. It is every bit as bad as his was as a youth. And, as the playfulness threatens to dampen her enthusiasm for leaving, she discovers that he still needs her, she is palpably relieved, and they embrace.

The Fourposter leaves the audience smiling, as Agnes and Michael quibble over what to leave behind for the new couple that is to occupy their home and their bed. Unable to stop herself, and in defiance of Michael, Agnes sneaks the "God Is Love" pillow (it has stayed on their bed for thirty-five years) under the bedspread at the last minute. The pillow is more than a sentimental gesture; it is a morally apt symbol that represents and confirms the source and value of wedded life as well as her own sacrificial love for Michael. It is funny because Agnes thinks she has pulled one over on Michael. But he finds the pillow, and in a fine moment of husbandly compromise, he places a bottle of champagne on the groom's side of the bed, a kind of balancing act, thinking it will bolster the new man's courage on his wedding night. The interaction, of course, brings the audience back full circle to the opening scene, when the embarrassment and awkward shyness of the heroic couple nearly result in a wedding night fiasco. De Hartog's instincts are perfect. Michael can do nothing better than to sweep Agnes off her feet and carry her over the threshold.

It is, of course, the bed that signifies the couple's love and sacrifice for one another. And it is precisely this predictable and yet, as theatre critic Brooks Atkinson wrote in a 1951 review for the *New York Times*, "ludicrous . . . downright impossible" love that answers the basic question of the play; that is, what is marriage really good for anyway? All of the couple's vanities and peccadilloes, as well as their irritations and manipulations, are held in balance with the wonderful unconscious playfulness; the tender expression of emotions; the joyful and difficult sacrifices; and the comforts of the thirty-five-year

marriage bed. Agnes and Michael are about as middle-class and "ordinary" as they are likely to get, and somehow they, and the audience, take comfort in that.

Source: Kathy A. Smith, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Adaptations

The Fourposter was adapted to the screen in a 1952 production of the same name by Columbia Pictures. It starred Rex Harrison and Lili Palmer, and it was directed by Irving Reis.

Topics for Further Study

Famous Dutch artists include Rembrandt, Vincent Van Gogh, and Piet Mondrian. Learn more about one of these artists and his influence on other artists.

Because of the impact of his work on the Dutch resistance movement, de Hartog went into hiding during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Anne Frank was among the many Jews who went into hiding to avoid Nazi persecution, and who eventually perished in the Holocaust. Learn more about Nazi persecution of Jews in the Netherlands during World War II.

De Hartog was born in the Netherlands, where he lived during the Nazi occupation of World War II. One of his early novels became a symbol of the Dutch resistance movement and was soon banned. Learn more about the Netherlands during World War II. What were the events and conditions of the Nazi occupation? What was the Dutch resistance movement?

De Hartog's religion is Quaker. What are the central beliefs of the Quakers? What is the history of the Quakers?

One of the characters in de Hartog's play makes reference to the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Who was Schopenhauer? What were the basic tenets of his philosophy? In what ways has he influenced Western thought and culture?

Compare and Contrast

1940-1945: During World War II, the Netherlands officially maintains neutrality, despite the fact that its citizens are largely sympathetic to the Allied cause, and the country is occupied by Nazi Germany during these years.

Postwar Era: The Netherlands is liberated from German occupation by Canadian forces in 1945. The nation strengthens ties with former allied nations, joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Early-Mid-Twentieth Century: Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, is a center of art and culture and embodies a spirit of open-mindedness.

1960s-2000: Amsterdam gains a reputation as "swinging Amsterdam," a mecca of permissiveness, individualism, and counterculture freedoms, appealing to many youths and radicals.

World War II: Anne Frank, a German Jewish girl, hides out with her own and another family in Amsterdam in order to avoid Nazi persecution. They are eventually discovered by the Nazis and sent to concentration camps, where Anne Frank dies. In all, some 70,000 Jews are deported from Amsterdam and sent to concentration camps, where many are killed.

Late Twentieth Century: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, written while the author in hiding, is edited and published by her father, who survived the concentration camp. Her diary is now widely read and taught to school children as an example of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust.

1940-1945: During the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands in World War II, Queen Wilhelmina, her royal family, and the Netherlandic government establish a government in exile in England.

Postwar Era: Upon liberation from German occupation, Queen Wilhelmina and the legitimate Netherlandic government return to the Netherlands to rule. During this postwar era, the government makes important moves toward increased democratization, such as establishing universal suffrage.

What Do I Read Next?

The Threepenny Opera (1928), by German playwright Bertolt Brecht, is an operatic social satire by one of the most influential playwrights of the twentieth century.

The Iceman Cometh (1939), by American playwright Eugene O'Neill, was first produced in 1946. O'Neill, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1936, was a central figure in elevating American theater to the quality of literature in the first half of the twentieth century. *The Iceman Cometh*, one of his greatest works, is a tragic play that takes place over the course of one day in the life of a family whose lives are wracked by alcoholism, drug abuse, illness, and personal failure.

Captain Jan, by Jan de Hartog (original title: *Hollands Glorie*, published in 1940; English translation published in 1976), is based on the author's experiences as a tugboat sailor. The novel became a symbol of Dutch resistance during Nazi Occupation and was soon banned.

Death of a Salesman (1949), by American playwright Arthur Miller, is one of the most highly celebrated plays of the post-war era. It concerns an average man done in by his efforts to live up to societal expectations.

Waiting for Godot (1952), by Anglo-Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, is a central work of the Theater of the Absurd. It is set in an unspecified, abstract time and place, in which two men wait indefinitely to meet Godot. Beckett won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

The Little Ark (1953), by Jan de Hartog, is a play based on the experiences of de Hartog and his second wife, who, during a severe flood in Holland, turned their houseboat into a makeshift hospital.

The Hospital (1964), by Jan de Hartog, is a nonfiction work based on de Hartog's own volunteer experience and advocating improved conditions in American hospitals.

Further Study

Astro, Alan, *Understanding Samuel Beckett*, University of California Press, 1990.

Astro gives an introduction to the major works of Beckett, with discussion of the Theater of the Absurd, as well as central themes and stylistics elements of his plays.

Moore, Bob, *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940-1945*, Arnold, 1997.

This text provides a history of the treatment of Jews in the Netherlands during Nazi occupation of World War II.

Moorton Jr., Richard F., ed., *Eugene O'Neill's Century: Centennial Views on America's Foremost Tragic Dramatist*, Greenwood Press, 1991.

Moorton's book is a collection of essays by various critics discussing the significance of O'Neill to the development of twentieth-century American theater.

Stott, Annette, *Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art and Culture*, Overlook Press, 1998.

Stott's book discusses the influence of Dutch artists on nineteenth-and twentieth-century American art.

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Atkinson, Brooks, *New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, Vol. 12, No. 22, Critics' Theatre Reviews, October 29, 1951, p. 191.

Cook, Alfred, *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*, Norton, 1966, p. 43.

de Hartog, Jan, "The Writer in Violent Times: The Dutch Underground Theatre," a transcript of a talk given at Weber State College, November 17, 1986.

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Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925, p. 2.

Gassner, John, *Best American Plays*, Crown Publishers, 1958, p. 480.

Grawe, Paul, *Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination*, Nelson-Hall, 1983, pp.17-8.

Grote, David, *The End of Comedy*, Archon Books, 1983, pp. 36-7.

Hartman, John Geoffrey, "The Development of American Social Comedy 1787-1936," Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1939, p. 1.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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