The Front Page Study Guide

The Front Page by Ben Hecht

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Introduction

Written by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The Front Page* is a play that is considered responsible for defining the modern stereotype of a reporter as a hard-drinking, hard-boiled journalist intent on uncovering truth even in the face of danger. The comedy was a smash hit from its premiere in Broadway's Times Square Theatre on August 14, 1928; it ran for 276 performances.

The Front Page was controversial at the time for its use of profane language and references (to such things as sex, prostitutes, and peeping toms) unfit for a decent audience. Modern critics assert that *The Front Page* paved the way for the use of such language in the theater.

Drawn from Hecht and Mac Arthur's careers as journalists in Chicago in the 1910s, the play is set in the pressroom at Chicago's Criminal Courts Building and concerns a group of reporters covering a controversial execution.

The Front Page has been revived regularly over the years and is regarded as a quintessential American play. Although modern critics deride its outdated language and ideas, it is still valued as an important landmark of the American theater scene.

Author Biography

Hecht was born on February 28, 1894, in New York City, the son of Joseph and Sarah Hecht. When he was six years old, his family moved to Racine, Wisconsin, where he resided until moving to Chicago in 1910.

In Chicago Hecht began working for the *Chicago Journal* and eventually become a successful journalist. His interests were not limited to reporting; he also wrote a newspaper column, poetry, and plays. By the early 1920s, he was also a celebrated novelist.

Hecht's reputation as a playwright was established in the 1920s. Though he had a play produced as early as 1917, his first Broadway show was *The Egotist* (1922).

His most popular plays were written in collaboration with Charles MacArthur (see below), a fellow Chicagoan with a newspaper background. Their most successful collaboration was *The Front Page* (1928), which drew on both their newspaper backgrounds and established a stereotype of reporters repeated on stage and screen.

In 1926 Hecht launched his Hollywood screenwriting career at the invitation of friend and already established screenwriter, Herman Mankie-wicz. Although he wrote more than seventy scripts and was highly respected for his work, he considered scriptwriting as strictly a source of income, not an artistic endeavor.

Hecht directed and produced a number of his own films several in collaboration with MacArthur. By the 1950s, he also worked in television after being blacklisted for his anti-British activities in the post-World War II era. He was a firm Zionist and supporter of Jewish causes, including independence for Israel. He died on April 18, 1964, in New York City.

MacArthur was born on November 5, 1895, in Scranton, Pennsylvania, the son of William Telfer and Georgeanna MacArthur. He spent his childhood in Scranton, but his family moved to Nyack, New York, while he was a teenager.

He enrolled in the Wilson Memorial Academy in order to prepare for a career in the clergy like his father. Realizing that he wanted to be a writer, he moved to Illinois and began his journalism career at his brother's paper, *Oak Leaves*, in Oak Park, Illinois.

Between 1914 and 1923, interrupted only by a brief stint in the armed services during World War I, MacArthur was a hard-drinking reporter at some of the best papers in Chicago, including the *Chicago Tribune.*

In 1923, Mac Arthur's life changed dramatically when he moved to New York City. His first produced play was *Lulu Belle* (1926), a commercial hit written with Edward Sheldon.

After a chance meeting with Hecht on the streets in New York City they were acquaintances from Chicago's newspaper scene the pair collaborated on what became their defining play, *The Front Page.*

Although MacArthur wrote several plays on his own and in collaboration with a few other writers, his most successful stage works were written with Hecht. Like Hecht, he also had some success as a solo screenwriter.

Hecht and MacArthur also wrote and produced four films together, including *The Scoundrel* (1935). MacArthur returned to journalism in 1947 when he became editor of *Theatre Arts* magazine, a post he held until 1950. On April 21, 1956, he died of an internal hemorrhage.

Plot Summary

Act I

The Front Page opens in the pressroom of the Criminal Courts Building in Chicago. Several reporters are playing cards, waiting for new information on a major story: the hanging that night of a convicted cop killer, Earl Williams.

The reporters talk about one of their colleagues, Hildy Johnson; though rumor has it that Hildy has quit the newspaper business to get married, none of the reporters can believe it.

Another reporter, Bensinger, calls his boss and reports that Williams will be examined by a psychiatrist before his death. McCue, one of the other reporters, calls his office to report that the Governor is on a fishing trip and cannot be found to give a stay of execution.

A cop, Woodenshoes Eichhorn, stops by for a visit. He tells the reporters that Williams told his priest that he is innocent; he admitted he killed the cop, but believes that he is being executed because of his radical beliefs. The reporters send Woodenshoes to get hamburgers.

Hildy enters and informs his boss, Burns, that he is quitting his job and going to New York City with his fiancee, Peggy, and her mother that night. Hildy tells the other reporters that he is going to work in an advertising agency. After he leaves to say goodbye to others in the building, the reporters express their jealousy over his good fortune.

Mollie Malloy, a hooker who has been romantically linked to Williams, enters. She is angry about the lies the newspapers have published about her. The reporters throw her out of the office.

Sheriff Hartman enters and predicts that there will be no stay of execution. He leaves as Hildy and Woodenshoes return.

After avoiding another call from Burns, Hildy packs and says his final good-byes. His leave is interrupted by the news that Earl Williams has escaped. Hildy decides to work on the story, even though it means trouble with Peggy.

Act II

Twenty minutes later, the reporters reveal that Williams escaped by shooting the psychiatrist. Hildy calls Burns and tells him that Sheriff Hartman gave his gun to the psychiatrist to be used as a prop in his psychological exam.

Peggy enters, angry with Hildy for always putting his job before her. Peggy's mother, Mrs. Grant, comes in; she has been waiting in a cab downstairs during the argument. Hildy tells them to go ahead to the station he will meet them later.

In the meantime, the Mayor enters and refuses to make a statement on the escape. The Sheriff announces that they know where Williams is hiding; the reporters rush to the scene.

The Mayor asks the Sheriff why Williams escaped. Their conversation is interrupted by the appearance of Pincus, a man from the Governor's office, who has come with a reprieve for Williams. The Mayor bribes Pincus to say that he never delivered the document. Pincus accepts the bribe and the men leave.

Hildy returns to the office. Suddenly, Williams falls through the window into the room. Williams gives Hildy his gun while he explains his actions. Hildy hides him in the bathroom and calls Burns.

Mollie enters, happy to see Williams. They hide him in a reporter's desk. The disappointed reporters return and call their editors with new information: Williams was not in the house; and tragically, another man was shot in a case of mistaken identity.

Another reporter, Schwartz, theorizes that Williams is still in the building. The reporters decide to look for Williams. Hildy suggests they each take a floor. Before they can leave, Mrs. Grant enters, and reveals that Hildy has caught Williams. Hildy denies it, and the reporters do not believe her.

To deflect attention from Hildy, Mollie claims that she knows where Williams is. To avoid the insistent reporters, she jumps out the window. While the reporters rush out to pursue Mollie, Burns comes in and Hildy tells him that Williams is in the desk. Mrs. Grant sees this; to keep her quiet, Burns has an associate, Diamond Louie, take her to a safe place.

Hildy tries to leave to meet Peggy, but Burns will not let him; he convinces Hildy to finish the story while he smuggles Williams out in the desk. While Hildy writes the story, Peggy returns. She accuses Hildy of not wanting to get married. She leaves and Hildy declares that he loves his job.

Act III

Five minutes later, Hildy is still writing as Burns makes arrangements to smuggle the desk and Williams out of the building. Burns reads over what Hildy has written and makes him rewrite it.

Bensinger knocks at the door. Burns lets him in, and before he can get to his desk, Burns hires him to work for the *Examiner* and sends him to the office. Hildy regrets choosing the newspaper over Peggy.

Hildy's musings are interrupted by the appearance of Diamond Louie. He tells them that there was an auto accident while they were transporting Mrs. Grant. Louie does not know what happened to her. Hildy worries that she is dead and starts calling hospitals.

Hildy calls Burns a murderer. More people appear at the door: the Sheriff, two deputies, and several of the reporters. They will not let Hildy leave to find Mrs. Grant. The deputies discover that Hildy is in possession of Williams' gun. The Sheriff tries to arrest Hildy and Burns.

Mrs. Grant appears at the door. She accuses Burns of kidnapping her, and reveals that Burns and Hildy are hiding a murderer. It is revealed that Williams is inside the desk, and the Sheriff drags him out. Burns and Hildy are handcuffed.

Pincus returns and tells the Mayor that he does not want the bribe; instead, he delivers the reprieve. Hildy questions Pincus and discovers the truth about the Mayor. Peggy returns.

Hildy quits, and assures Peggy that he will change. Burns gives Hildy his pocket watch as a wedding present. Hildy and Peggy leave for New York. Burns calls a man and arranges for Hildy's arrest a few hours later for stealing the pocket watch.

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

The play is set in the press room of the Criminal Courts Building in Chicago where reporters covering the courts fill time while waiting for news to happen. As the play begins several reporters are in the middle of a raucous poker game - Murphy, Endicott, Schwartz, and Wilson. Another reporter, Kruger sits by himself strumming his banjo and occasionally singing. With the poker game continuing noisily in the background yet another reporter, McCue works three phones simultaneously talking to his paper, a police sergeant, and a woman reporting a peeping tom. As he interviews her other reporters tell him what questions to ask her hinting lewdly they'd like to interview her as well. The woman becomes upset with McCue and hangs up. A fire-alarm box, which rings whenever there's a fire in the city, goes off loudly. The reporters look up to see where the fire is but return their attention to the game when they see it's far away.

As McCue continues to work the phones the poker players talk about how they're waiting to attend a hanging. McCue answers a call from Walter Burns, who's looking for reporter Hildy Johnson. When McCue asks if anyone's seen him Schwartz says Hildy's quit to get married. The others react with disbelief saying there's no way Burns, Hildy's boss, would let Hildy leave. Kruger complains that Hildy should have said goodbye.

As McCue digs up a story about a sexual predator called the Electric Bandit and talks about it with the other reporters Bensinger comes in. He's a reporter as well, intensely protective of his desk and his phone, obsessed with germs, and resentful that the other reporters use his desk as a laundry basket and picnic hamper. As McCue investigates a story about a missing girl Schwartz asks Bensinger if there's anything new on the hanging. Bensinger says there's nothing much.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

The atmosphere and attitudes established in this scene define the play as a whole. The fast-paced, multiple conversations, the endless digging for stories, and the simultaneous cynicism and laziness of the reporters create the impression of high-energy impatience barely kept in check but ready to explode as soon as that one big story comes along. On one level it all foreshadows the end of the act when the big story does come along and everything that these reporters have been waiting for, this evening and possibly all their lives, actually happens. On another level the powerfully evoked atmosphere also makes the play's first thematic statement that the press is grasping, self-indulgent, and driven.

In the middle of it all the various ongoing conversations include important pieces of information that lay the foundations for the play's plot built around the imminent execution of an as yet unknown prisoner for an as yet undefined crime and the near-

legendary status of both Hildy Johnson and Walter Burns. Hildy turns out to be the play's central character while his relationship with Burns plays a principal role in directing both its story and its theme.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Mrs. Schlosser the wife of another reporter comes in looking for her husband. McCue and Endicott greet her but Schwartz and Murphy complain about the rule barring women from the pressroom being broken. Mrs. Schlosser asks if the reporters know whether her husband had any money with him when he left and whether he was with Hildy. Another call from Burns looking for Hildy comes in as Mrs. Schlosser accuses the reporters of covering up for her husband and then asks to speak with Burns. She asks him for some help with money explaining that her husband is bad at handling cash. Burns apparently says he'll help and Mrs. Schlosser hangs up turning to the reporters and telling them they should be ashamed of themselves. She grabs Murphy's cards saying she's going to hang around until they tell her where her husband is. When they finally tell her she throws Murphy's cards face up on the table and exits.

As Murphy sadly collects the cards, which were his best hand of the night, Bensinger calls his paper and reports his story on the hanging, which is revealed to be the execution of a criminal named Earl Williams. Bensinger says the Sheriff won't change the hour of the execution and that it's still scheduled for 7 AM telling the other reporters that he requested the execution be moved up to 5 so the papers could get the news into their early editions. As Bensinger reports on what Williams had for his last meal Murphy picks up a phone still playing poker and calls his paper with his version of the story Bensinger just gave changing a few details to make them more interesting. The poker game continues as Bensinger tells his paper that city officials are prepared for an uprising of the city's socialists of which Williams was a member to take place as soon as the execution is completed. Meanwhile, Murphy invents details of the precautions city officials are taking and of the planned uprising and gives them to his paper. As Bensinger answers another call and talks about a noted psychiatrist who's going to examine Williams before the execution Kruger calls his paper to say there's nothing new on the hanging. He goes back to the game just as McCue makes a call to his paper and a grinding crash is heard outside. McCue explains that it's just the prison officials testing the gallows for the hanging. Kruger yells out the window for them to keep quiet the fire alarm goes off again and again the reporters don't move. Another phone rings. McCue answers it and shouts happily that it's Hildy adding that Hildy said he's coming over.

The poker game continues as a policeman, Woodenshoes comes in. He tells the reporters that Williams told his priest he was innocent, which leads Murphy to comment that the policeman Williams killed must have committed suicide. Woodenshoes says Williams had an explanation for that but Endicott cynically comments that Woodenshoes is feeling sorry for Williams and suggests that he should send flowers like a woman named Mollie did. Woodenshoes says that Williams claims that the police and the city are using the death of the policeman as an excuse to hang him because he's a radical. Murphy asks Woodenshoes to go out and bring him a hamburger but Woodenshoes appears to not have heard as he explains his theory that psychologically Williams

couldn't have been a killer. The other reporters chime in with their orders for hamburgers as Murphy tells Woodenshoes that Williams was just a guy with the bad luck to kill a, "nigger policeman in a town where the nigger vote is important." He adds that as a result of the execution both the Mayor and the Sheriff are going to get a lot of votes in the upcoming election. Wilson complains that he hasn't had a good hand all night.

Diamond Louie, a minor member of the local mob comes in. As the reporters order their hamburgers from Woodenshoes they tease Louie reminding him he used to work a fruit stand. When Woodenshoes asks for money to pay for the burgers the reporters tell him to charge them. As he goes out Louie asks where Hildy is. As Endicott and Murphy make jokes about Hildy the other reporters make jokes about killings Louie's been involved in. Louie says he's not involved in that part of the business any more. The reporters don't believe him but Louie insists adding that he now works for Burns. The reporters have even more difficulty believing that but Louie says he's a circulation manager. The reporters ask him whether he knows anything about Hildy quitting and Louie says he doesn't think it's permanent hinting that Hildy and Burns had a minor argument and it will all sort itself out. The whir and crash is heard again the reporters explain to Louie what's making the sound and Murphy jokes that Louie better be careful it might be him out there some day. Louie goes out indignantly Murphy comments that he has no sense of humor and then the reporters discuss how it must be true that Hildy's quitting and reminisce about all the other great reporters no longer in the business.

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

The outside world intrudes on the world of the reporters three times in this scene and in each case is rebuffed. The way that Mrs. Schlosser, Woodenshoes, and Diamond Louie are all allowed into the room but only allowed limited interaction with the reporters world and in each case are mocked, belittled, and dismissed. This combines with the way the reporters make up their own versions of Bensinger's, Williams story, and the way they continue to focus on the poker game to suggest that these reporters in particular, and perhaps the press in general, are self-centered and insensitive to anything outside of their own sphere of interest. This interest can be boiled down to the question of what will sell the most newspapers, a fairly cynical perspective that simultaneously makes one of the play's central thematic statements--that reporters make news as much as report it. In other words if it doesn't sell papers they just don't care.

This premise forms one side of the play's central conflict. The other side is the struggle to live a life of integrity outside the world of the newsroom a struggle embodied by the character of Hildy and which begins in earnest with his first appearance in the next part of the scene. As is the case with all good drama the central conflict dramatizes and embodies the theme as Hildy representing integrity struggles to remove himself from the world of cynicism and self-centeredness he thrived in for so long represented by the other reporters and later in the play by Burns.

On a technical level a noteworthy aspect of this play is the way information is revealed piece-by-piece peeled away like layers of an onion to eventually reveal the truth. For example, we first hear about an execution, then the criminal's name, then the fact he killed a policeman, and then the fact that the policeman was a "nigger" (to use the term in common usage at the time). Finally, we learn that the execution has a political angle an aspect to the story that plays a key role in the action to come. This narrative technique combines both exposition or the revealing of information with foreshadowing or hints at what's to come to generate ongoing and deepening interest in what aspect of the truth is going to be revealed next. In short it keeps us hooked. The technique continues throughout the play as more and more layers of the various plot threads are peeled away until finally the core of both the story and the theme is revealed in the third act.

Act 1, Part 3

Act 1, Part 3 Summary

Hildy (short for Hildebrand) comes in well-dressed and groomed. The reporters tease him about how he's taking such good care of his appearance and then tell him Burns is trying to get hold of him. Hildy calls Burns, uses insulting language, and tells him there's no way he's going to cover the hanging. He hangs up and the other reporters ask why he quit saying they heard he was getting married. Hildy says that's true and shows them the train tickets he has for his trip to New York with his fiancy and her mother. The reporters tease him about being in love, make jokes about the wedding, and ask where its taking place. When Hildy tells them New York they make jokes about what a lousy town to work in New York is. Hildy counters by saying Chicago is an even lousier town adding that he's quitting the newspaper business, getting a job in advertising for good money, and shows them his contract. He then speaks at angry length about how badly Burns reacted. The fire bell rings again. Hildy recognizes the district reporting the fire and wonders if it's the school. The reporters ask him why he cares saying he's quit. Hildy says it might have been a good fire but is interrupted by the sound of the gallows being tested again.

The reporter's tease Hildy about what life will be like punching a time clock and doing regular work like everybody else but he responds with a long speech about how lousy the reporter's life is. The reporters comment that he's been listening to his girlfriend too much and that he won't last long in that regular job. Hildy comments that the job is a sure thing saying his girlfriend's uncle owns the advertising company he'll be working for and gave them five-hundred dollars cash as a wedding present. The reporters don't believe him but Hildy takes the cash out of his pocket and shows them. As they make jokes about getting a loan from him Hildy takes out a notebook and lists off how much money they each owe him. They all offer excuses as to why they can't pay them back. Hildy rips the page out of his notebook and hands it to them.

Jennie, a cleaning woman comes in. The reporters, including Hildy tease her as she asks whether it's all right for her to clean up. Bensinger urges her to hurry and get the place clean and Hildy says he'll go through the building with her and help her. He says that he can't carry her bucket of water and throws it out the window on the guards below. As they yell at him Hildy and Jennie go out.

Act 1, Part 3 Analysis

The much talked about Hildy finally makes his appearance in this section the main purpose of which is to illustrate the differences between him and the other reporters. These differences range from his positive attitude towards getting married, to his lack of fear in speaking his mind to his boss, to his negative views on the reporter's life, to the way he responds to the fire alarm, and to the way he responds so warmly to Jennie

when the other reporters make jokes about her. This is a clear example of an important technique for revealing character used throughout this play, definition by contrast.

On first glance these examples of Hildy's character may seem contradictory. For example, his determination to get married, which shows him to be at least interested in leaving the male-dominated world of the pressroom behind him is clearly in opposition to his constantly humming reporter's instincts, which are represented by his response to the fire alarm. At the same time his warmer-hearted teasing of Jennie contrasts with the more pointed comments of the other reporters while his pride in the five-hundred dollar wedding present shows him to be as obsessed with money as his comrades. All in all, however, these first glimpses of Hildy's character indicate one way or another that he's got more depth than the opportunistic vultures with whom he shares this room

Foreshadowing in this scene include Hildy's mention of the train, which provides a stakes-raising clock against which Hildy is constantly racing and his having five-hundred dollars in cash. The way he spends it plays an important role in the play's increasingly frantic action.

Act 1, Part 4

Act 1, Part 4 Summary

The reporter's talk about what Hildy's paper, the Examiner, is going to do without him saying how great it must be to be able to walk into a place and quit. McCue starts making more phone calls as Wilson answers an angry call from Hildy's fiancy. In the middle of these two conversations and the noise of the continuing poker game Mollie comes in and gets teased by the reporters about her relationship with Williams. She angrily tells them she only saw him the day before the shooting and went to talk to him because he looked unhappy. The reporters' comments suggest that Mollie is a prostitute but Mollie tells them that all she and Williams did was talk and that she never saw him again until the day of the trial. She angrily reminds them that she was the only person to stand up and defend Williams but they make crude comments about how the dead policeman should have been her brother and how that would make her feel differently. The gallows are tested again and Mollie begins to cry telling the reporters they should be ashamed of themselves for cracking so many jokes. Murphy throws her out of the room, he and the others then go back to their game, and McCue picks up a phone and makes another call.

The Sheriff comes in gaining the immediate attention of all the reporters. Instead of giving them any news about the hanging he instead demands to know who threw the bucket of water onto the guards below. The reporters make jokes about who it was and finally the Sheriff asks whether it was Hildy and asks where he is. McCue tells him he's out and Endicott says that he's quit. As the Sheriff comments that it's good riddance Bensinger asks him again to move the hanging to five o'clock from seven. The Sheriff comments that he can't schedule a hanging to please a newspaper but the reporters needle him about scheduling it just before an election. They ask what will happen if the psychiatrist examining Williams discovers that he's not insane and the Sheriff says that will never happen. He says the examination is going to take place in his office in a couple of minutes and that once it's done they'll find out all about it. He then gives out the tickets to the hanging and the reporters all complain there aren't enough. The Sheriff tells them there might be more tickets if they publicize the dangers of the socialist menace as represented by Williams. The reporter's talk about how they've been doing exactly that for weeks adding that the Sheriff doesn't need to worry about the election because Williams' execution is going to bring in "the nigger vote." The phone rings and it turns out to be the Sheriff's wife. As he talks to her Hildy comes in.

The Sheriff hangs up and accuses Hildy of throwing the water on the guards, threatens to have him arrested, and says the Examiner is getting no tickets to the execution. Hildy says if he wanted to go to the execution he'd go without a ticket, that he knows that the Sheriff spent a night in a hotel with a librarian, and if the Sheriff knows what's good for him he'll get two tickets for the hanging over to Burns right away. The Sheriff goes out and the reporters tell Hildy to call his girlfriend. As he makes the call Woodenshoes returns with the hamburgers. As the reporter's pass out the burgers Hildy explains to his

girlfriend why he never made it to her party, assures her that he handed in his resignation, promises to meet her at the train station, and tells her he's got the tickets in his pocket. The reporter's make jokes as Hildy tells his girlfriend he loves her and then hangs up.

Woodenshoes goes out as Burns calls again. Hildy tells him he's making a nuisance of himself and then rips the phone out of the wall and throws it out the window telling the reporter's that if Burns calls again they're to tell him to get in touch with him in New York. He then says his farewells and tells the reporters to not forget him. Just as he's going out the door there's the sound of gunfire from the courtyard below and voices from the guards shouting orders. The reporter's realize it's a jailbreak and shout out the window to find out who's escaped. The guards shout back it was Williams and the reporter's scramble out the door. Alone in the room with stray shots still being fired Hildy stands very still for a moment and then goes to a phone and calls Burns explaining that Williams has escaped and that he is on the job.

Act 1, Part 4 Analysis

Two important characters are introduced in this scene, Mollie and the Sheriff. Mollie becomes important in the second act as she plays a key role in Hildy's efforts to keep Earl Williams hidden while the Sheriff plays a similarly important role in the play's principal subplot exploring the politics of corruption and the corruption of politics. Mollie's story of what happened with her and Williams is another layer of information that gets peeled away from the story's core truth while the Sheriff sub-plot and his references to Williams' socialism offer hints as to what that truth actually is. Finally, his mention of Williams' psychiatric test foreshadows the story Hildy tells at the beginning of Act 2 of how the jailbreak happened.

Meanwhile, the opposing forces pulling at Hildy create even more conflict for him as the lure of his new life as represented by his fiancy and the lure of his old life represented by the jailbreak become more insistent. At the end of the act it becomes clear that at least for now his instincts as a reporter have won out over his instincts as a future husband. Nevertheless, his increasingly frantic attempts to balance these two equally important aspects to his life fuel most of the dramatic action of the next two acts and provide significant portions of the play's comedy.

As previously discussed this whole first act is an example of how a play's style can illuminate a dramatic or thematic point. As the play fills time between plot points by constantly bringing the poker game and the cynicism of the reporters back into focus it illustrates how empty the lives and work of these men are. This makes the central thematic point that on some level reporting is about making news as much as it is simply recounting it. In the contemporary world's news-saturated environment this Roaring Twenties view of the so-called objective press is once again relevant and important.

Act 2, Part 1

Act 2, Part 1 Summary

Jennie cleans up glass and other debris left behind by the gunshots as Woodenshoes comes in wondering if the reporters are all out looking for Williams and also talking about his psychological theories saying if they'd caught Williams' tendencies when he was a kid they wouldn't be trying to catch him now.

Endicott comes in and heads for a phone to call in his story. While he's talking Woodenshoes shows him his psychological theory of crime prevention. Endicott promises to take it home and study it and then gives the reporter on the other end of the phone the first part of the story of Williams' escape, how he grabbed a gun, over-powered the psychiatrist examining him, ran out the building, and onto the street. He says that nobody knows where he got the gun. Murphy comes in, goes to a phone, and is giving his version of the story to his paper as Endicott goes out. The Sheriff comes in as Murphy is telling his paper that a tear-gas bomb went off in the hands of a deputy sheriff. The Sheriff complains about Murphy selling him out and then goes out as Murphy lists the men that were hurt in the explosion. As Murphy continues Kruger comes in, goes to a phone, and starts telling his story - how Williams was seen boarding a bus downtown. As Kruger continues Murphy goes out and McCue comes in and calls his paper. As Kruger goes out McCue tells his editor how a cleaning woman was accidentally shot by one of the Sheriff's deputies. Hildy comes in just in time to hear this last comment and the simultaneous firing of gunshots from outside. He jokes that another cleaning woman just got shot then goes to his phone and calls Burns as McCue goes out.

Hildy tells Burns he got the full story of how Williams escaped from the warden saying that it cost him two hundred and sixty bucks and that he wants to be compensated. He then explains that as part of his examination of Williams the psychiatrist re-created the crime, borrowed a gun from the Sheriff, and gave it to Williams. He says Williams shot the psychiatrist and ran off adding the psychiatrist wasn't badly hurt. He promises Burns the story is exclusive, says again he wants to be compensated for the money he spent, and adds this is his last story and that he's leaving. A young woman, Peggy, appears in the doorway unnoticed by Hildy and listens as he tells Burns he needs the money right away and he'll be waiting in the press room until a courier shows up with it. He hangs up, turns to go, and sees Peggy whom we immediately understand is his fiancy.

Act 2, Part 1 Analysis

In the first few frantic moments of this act three elements first developed in Act 1 reappear. The first is the technique of layering the truth first used in Act 1 to introduce Earl Williams and used here to reveal piece-by-piece the information of how Williams escaped and what has happened since. The full truth eventually emerges through

Hildy's story to Burns making the thematic statement that core truth resides with Hildy and comes to light as a result of his work. This is the second repeated element reinforcing the earlier discussed idea that he's a better reporter than the others.

The third repeated element is the cynical joking, which somewhat surprisingly comes from Hildy in his joke about the cleaning woman. This is jarring for a couple of reasons, firstly the aforementioned indications that he's also a better man than the other reporters and secondly, his friendliness with Jennie. This attitude combines with the fact he actually went out and got the story suggest that his reporters instincts and drives are still powerful and they are also a source of conflict, as indicated by the following scene with Peggy.

Act 2, Part 2

Act 2, Part 2 Summary

Hildy greets Peggy explaining that he was telling Burns once and for all that he's quit. Peggy asks what's happened to the money suggests she should take care of it and then when Hildy doesn't turn it over right away realizes he has done something with it. Hildy says that Burns promised to repay him and is sending the money right over explaining that he had to use it to get the story. Peggy says she's not surprised he didn't meet her as he promised and reminds him of all the times he's let her down. Hildy says he wouldn't do anything to hurt her but she accuses him of being unable to resist Burns and Hildy says that's exactly what he just did.

Peggy's mother Mrs. Grant is brought in by Woodenshoes explaining that she came in to tell Peggy and Hildy the meter's running. Hildy tries to get her and Peggy to go back down to the cab and wait for him at the train station explaining he has to wait for some money to arrive. Mrs. Grant says she's beginning to think that Hildy's more than a little irresponsible and Peggy tells her to stop picking on him. As McCue comes in and calls his paper with the story of a black woman who gave birth in the back of a cab Peggy and Hildy take Mrs. Grant out with Hildy shouting instructions that if someone arrives with an envelope for him McCue is to hold him until he gets back.

The Mayor arrives looking for the Sheriff. McCue hangs up saying the Sheriff has been in and out of the pressroom all night. Murphy and Endicott come in eager for the Mayor to give them a statement. As the Mayor repeatedly refuses the reporters repeatedly ask questions about where Williams got the gun and whether the escape will affect the election. The Sheriff comes in and the reporters turn their questions to him. The Sheriff announces that his men have cornered Williams in a house on Clark Street. The reporters rush out the Mayor says he wants to talk to the Sheriff. The Sheriff tries to get away but the Mayor corners him and asks whether Williams got the gun from him. As the Sheriff is trying to blame the psychiatrist Kruger comes in asking whether the escape means there's going to be a socialist uprising and saying that a Senator has called for military intervention. The Mayor says that anything the Senator says is a lie Kruger calls in the story to his paper and concludes by quoting the Senator as saying it's a good thing the election is happening soon since it means the voters will be spared having to impeach the Mayor and Sheriff. The reporters go out leaving the Mayor and Sheriff alone.

Act 2, Part 2 Analysis

Even though the overall attitude of the play so far to the reporters and the work they do is fairly negative the appearance of Peggy and her mother hints that the alternative life being offered to Hildy away from the newsroom has its own negative aspects. In particular, the way that both women seem primarily focused on money suggests that

their values are less than ideal when compared with Hildy's, which are, ultimately, about getting to the truth. It's beginning to seem the play is less of an attack on reporters in general than an effort to praise the kind of reporter Hildy is a person to which integrity, honesty, and the importance of facts are paramount. This idea is reinforced by the contrasting character of the Sheriff whose willingness to make deals for tickets to the execution suggests that he's somewhat lacking in the integrity department and whose incompetence is revealed by his confession that he enabled Williams to get his hands on a gun. The character of the Mayor performs a similar contrasting function as his conversation with the Sheriff in the following scene reveals.

Act 2, Part 3

Act 2, Part 3 Summary

The Mayor reminds the Sheriff a couple of years ago they almost lost an election because of a mistake he made and that as a result of this mistake, which the Mayor calls the worst mistake the Sheriff ever made they stand to lose this election as well. The Sheriff says he's sworn in four hundred new deputies but the Mayor says that's not good enough and fires him. The Sheriff pleads to keep his job saying his deputies already have Williams surrounded. The Mayor says they're up against a lot more than just Williams escaping reminding the Sheriff that the socialist scare he keeps talking about isn't real and they need the "colored voters" in order to win the election, which means they need to hang Williams.

A messenger from the Governor arrives with a reprieve canceling the execution. As the Sheriff panics and then takes a phone call confirming that his deputies have got Williams surrounded the Mayor tries to get the messenger to say he never arrived offering him a new job with higher pay as a bribe. At first the messenger is reluctant but then the Mayor tells him to come to his office tomorrow and they'll make it official. The messenger appears to agree the Mayor tells him to lay low for a while, and then pushes him out the door. The Mayor then turns to the Sheriff who is still on the phone and tells him to tell his deputies that when they see Williams they are to shoot to kill. The Sheriff passes on the order and offers a five-hundred dollar reward.

Hildy pounds on the door shouting to be let in. The Mayor tells the Sheriff to be calm and open the door. Hildy comes in and goes to make a phone call to Burns asking the Mayor if anyone's come looking for him. The Sheriff brags to Hildy that his men have Williams surrounded but then the Mayor drags him out.

Act 2, Part 3 Analysis

As previously mentioned, one purpose of this scene is to illustrate how much integrity Hildy has by creating a comparison with two characters who have little or no integrity at all, the Mayor and the Sheriff. This aspect of their character and their dramatic purpose is illustrated through the way their actions dramatize the play's secondary theme that people involved in politics will do or say anything to get and keep power in the same way as newsmen represented by the reporters and later by Burns will do anything to get a good story and sell papers. As previously mentioned the technique of defining a key trait in one character by creating a contrast with another is a common and generally an effective way of illustrating both character and relationship in drama. The appearance of the messenger is similar to the appearances of several other minor characters in the play in that their first appearances introduce them and their relationship to the plot but it's in their second appearances that they actually affect the action. This is also true of Mollie, Mrs. Grant, Peggy, and as is revealed in the following scene, Louie.

Act 2, Part 4

Act 2, Part 4 Summary

Still on the phone, Hildy asks Burns' assistant whether Burns has sent the money over. When he finds out he hasn't Hildy angrily hangs up. Woodenshoes comes in talking about his psychological theory of crime prevention. Hildy asks him whether he's got two hundred and sixty dollars. Woodenshoes says he doesn't but that he knows how they can get ten thousand suggesting that because he knows where Williams is they can collect the reward. Hildy says Williams is out being shot at by cops but Woodenshoes says he's more likely to be over at Mollie's. Diamond Louie comes in and Hildy asks him whether he's got the money from Burns. Woodenshoes goes out as Louie explains that Burns is angry and that Hildy better go over to the office and talk to him. Hildy and Louie argue about whether Louie should accept an IOU from Hildy and Louie finally offers to give Hildy a hundred and fifty dollars. Hildy tries to get the full two sixty but Louie is insistent. Hildy finally accepts and writes out an IOU. Louie then goes out wishing Hildy good luck in New York.

As Hildy gets ready to leave Earl Williams falls through the window and onto the floor. Hildy can't believe his eyes and for a moment says nothing but then tells Williams to put down his gun. Williams says it's empty and hands it over. Hildy locks the door and tries to figure out what to do as Williams speaks ramblingly about what the police did to him, his socialist values, and his negative opinions about the war. He collapses from nervous exhaustion and Hildy drags him into the bathroom and closes the door. He then picks up the phone and calls Burns. While he's waiting to be connected another phone rings and it turns out to be Peggy in tears because Hildy's not at the train station. Hildy divides his attention between the phones telling Burns he's got Williams in the bathroom and telling Peggy he got caught up in a story. We understand from Hildy's side of the conversation that Burns is coming right over and that Peggy has hung up in disgust.

There's a knock on the door. Hildy asks who it is and when there's no answer he opens it slowly. Mollie rushes in looking for the reporters. Hildy tells her they're out at Clark Street where Williams is surrounded. Williams staggers out of the bathroom and there's another knock on the door. When he hears Woodenshoes' voice Hildy tells Williams and Mollie to hide in the toilet but when they don't Hildy manages to keep Woodenshoes out in the hall. They have a barely audible conversation as Williams reveals to Mollie that he's been hiding on the roof the whole time, came down on the drainpipe, and that he didn't mean to shoot the psychiatrist. Mollie tries to get him to leave and hide with her but Williams says he's ready to die for the socialist cause. He says that fighting for humanity is a wonderful thing adding that Mollie is wonderful too.

Hildy comes back into the room saying the reporters are on their way back. As the reporters are pounding on the locked door Hildy hides Williams in Bensinger's roll top desk saying he'll let him out in ten minutes. Williams is reluctant but Hildy and Mollie convince him with Mollie promising she won't leave him. Once Williams is safe in the

desk Hildy lets the reporters in and they immediately head for the phones calling in their stories. They also make nasty comments about Mollie, Hildy tells them to leave her alone and the reporters make jokes about why he's taking care of Mollie saying she's going to get jealous because he's getting married. As the phone calls and jokes continue, Hildy offers to cover the phones in the press room if the reporters want to go out and chase leads but the reporters say they're staying talking about their beliefs that Williams isn't actually where they've been told he is. They realize it's possible that he might have just jumped across to the building they're in and as Hildy makes fun of their idea they realize that Williams might still be there describing the means of escape that Williams actually found - crawling down the drainpipe and into the press room.

Bensinger comes in feeling unwell and eager for the medicine he's got in his desk. Because Williams is still in the desk Hildy tries to stop Bensinger from opening it by pretending to be ill and coughing in his face. Bensinger quickly becomes frightened and runs out. Schwartz turns the conversation back to Williams saying they should call the cops and help them search the building. Hildy suggests they search the building themselves and collect and share the reward. He seems to have them convinced but at the moment they're about to leave Mrs. Grant comes in demanding that Hildy come to the train station with her. He tries to convince her to let him stay but she says she's not going anywhere adding that she doesn't care whether he did catch a murderer like he told Peggy he's coming to New York!

As Woodenshoes enters and listens Hildy says he said nothing about catching a murderer, Mrs. Grant insists he did, Mollie says he wouldn't, and then the reporters and Woodenshoes surround her and angrily ask what she knows. She tries to run for the door but is blocked. Woodenshoes and the reporters continue their questioning, threatening to beat the information out of her. Mollie becomes hysterical threatening them with a chair. As they move to grab it from her she throws it at them and then throws herself out the window. The reporters rush to the window comment that she's still moving and then rush out to help her. Mrs. Grant moans in shock, Woodenshoes is stunned, and Hildy can't believe what happened. At that moment Walter Burns comes in.

Act 2, Part 4 Analysis

The action moves at a dizzying pace in this scene as complication piles on complication taking the play into the realm of farce a style of comedy in which increasingly desperate characters do increasingly desperate things in order to prevent increasingly important secrets from being known. What's particularly noteworthy about the farcical aspects of this scene is that they build to a point of intensity to which few farces have gone before or since - the ultimate desperate act someone throwing themself out a window. It's at this moment that comedy turns on a dime and becomes tragic making an intensely theatrical and emotionally powerful thematic comment warning of the dangers of the kind of insensitivity displayed by the reporters greedy as always for that one big story.

Why does Mollie do what she does? On one level she is simply reacting in the way a cornered and tormented animal would at first snarling and fighting back and then making a last-ditch effort to get away. Mollie clearly would rather die than betray Williams and the reason why lies in the previously discussed idea of contrast. Earlier in the scene Williams treated her gently and with loving respect. It's not too much of a stretch to suggest that if this isn't the first time in her life this has happened it's the first time in a long time. Williams' actions clearly deepen Mollie's feelings for him, increase her commitment to his safety, and therefore lead her to make what many would say is the ultimate sacrifice. By contrast the reporters are unbelievably cruel to her even before they believe she knows where Williams is and once they come to that conclusion the gloves come off and they are simply vicious. All this suggests that Mollie does what she does out of love and a spirit of retaliation as much as anything else showing the reporters that they can't and won't win.

Her gesture of defiant love also reinforces Hildy's belief that there has to be something more to his life than the self-serving avariciousness of his comrades in the press pack strengthening his determination to leave the business once he finishes working on this story. But just when it seems as though the dramatic and thematic tension couldn't be any higher in walks the one remaining obstacle to this goal the embodiment of all the negativity that Hildy is trying to escape...Walter Burns.

Act 2, Part 5

Act 2, Part 5 Summary

As Hildy, still in shock, repeatedly talks about what Mollie just did Burns repeatedly asks where Williams is. Hildy eventually says Williams is in the desk and as Williams asks to be let out Burns tells him to be quiet. Louie appears and Burns tells him to take Mrs. Grant out and lock her away for a few hours. Mrs. Grant and Hildy protest but Burns insists and Louie takes Mrs. Grant out. Hildy starts to follow but Burns holds him back angrily telling him he's being childish. Hildy tells him he can get somebody else to write the story. Burns says that the story isn't just Williams the story is the city's whole political system. He explains that as a result of their exclusive story of Williams' escape the Examiner can expose the corruption of the Mayor, the Sheriff, and even the Senator adding that this isn't just a story it's a career. He then says that he and Hildy are going to take Williams down to the Examiner offices and keep him there and calls the paper to make arrangements for members of his staff to help him move the desk out with Williams in it thereby keeping him hidden. Finally, he tells Hildy to start writing the story.

Peggy comes in shouting for Hildy. Burns on the phone to his staff tries to get rid of her but she doesn't go asking where her mother is. Hildy starts to ask her a favor but Peggy angrily turns to Burns blaming him for distracting Hildy and saying Hildy is leaving with her right away. When Hildy tries to get her to change her mind Peggy accuses him of not loving her but he says he'd do anything for her. Peggy completely loses her temper and they argue with Hildy finally saying she's right and he's a worthless human being. As they continue to argue Williams pokes his head out of the desk and Burns yells at him to go back into hiding. Peggy starting to cry goes to the door. Hildy tells her that if she loves him she'll take him as he is. Peggy goes out Burns shouts into the phone and Hildy starts to write but makes a mistake and has to start over.

Act 2, Part 5 Analysis

The pressure applied by Burns is more direct but he nevertheless performs the same function as the reporters simultaneously representing both the allure of the newspaper business and its ruthless greed. As a result of Burns' smooth operating Hildy finds himself drawn back in to the world of journalism but what's interesting to note is that it's not because he seeks glory and reputation. What he responds to is Burns comments about political corruption and the possibility of both exposing it and ending it, which means that Hildy gets sucked in because he's a man of sympathetic integrity. In that way he's like Williams who sees a chance to make a difference in the world by exposing political corruption. The similarity is reinforced by the way Burns insists that Williams remain in the desk in the same way as he insists that Hildy remain in the business. He's dominating and controlling both of them for his own purposes revealing himself to be as corrupt as both the Sheriff and the Mayor. The action of the play reveals how Williams

and Hildy in their own ways come out from under his control and find ways to live life the way they know it should be lived.

Peggy's reaction to Hildy's situation is a misinterpretation seeing what he's doing in terms of the way that Burns and the other reporters interpret it as opposed to being aware of Hildy's true motivation. Part of the problem is that Hildy never gets a chance to explain but actually Hildy is absolutely right when he accuses her of not wanting him to be who he is but who she wants him to be. Peggy eventually appears to come around to his way of thinking later in the play but even when she does we're left with the impression that she doesn't really mean it and that if he marries her Hildy's struggle to be himself will be going on for a long time.

Act 3, Part 1

Act 3, Part 1 Summary

A few moments later Burns is still on the phone and Hildy is still writing. Burns knocks three times on the desk reminding Williams that's the signal he's safe and then shouting into the phone that his men better be there fast and that the line has to stay open. He puts the receiver down without hanging up and tells Hildy they have to hang on for fifteen more minutes until the men get there. Hildy warns him that the other reporters will be there to phone in their stories soon but Burns says he'll handle them. Hildy reads what he's written so far and Burns complains that there's no mention of the Examiner in the first paragraph. They argue about who's the better writer with Burns finally giving Hildy the opening sentence Hildy liking it and then writing more.

Bensinger is heard at the door trying to get in. Burns opens the door and then as Bensinger heads for his desk Burns distracts him by saying how much he liked a poem he recently published and offering him a job. He speaks to his assistant who is still on the line and makes arrangements for Bensinger to start work the next day. Bensinger insists that his writing must be printed without editorial interference and as Burns moves him slowly towards the door he promises that's exactly what will happen. Bensinger goes out and Burns runs back to the phone telling his assistant that when Bensinger comes by he's to be allowed to write some poetry, then told it stinks, and shown the door.

Burns puts the receiver down, realizes that Hildy has stopped writing, and tells him to get back to work. Hildy tells him he's been thinking about how Burns has ruined his life but Burns is busy trying to figure out how he's going to get Williams out of the building. He finally realizes that Hildy is talking about Peggy and tells him to concentrate on his work. Hildy talks about how wonderful Peggy is, how patient she's been, and the kind of life they'd have had together. Burns talks about how his three wives have all treated him badly especially the third one whom he discovered having an affair with the publisher of another paper. They become angry and start arguing about women but stop when someone tries to get in the room. After Burns finds out it's Louie he opens the door and lets him in.

Louie is a mess and explains that the cab he and Mrs. Grant were in crashed into a police car full of officers. When Hildy and Burns both demand to know what happened to Mrs. Grant Louie says he didn't know he was too busy running from the police to notice. Burns angrily imagines that Mrs. Grant is in a police station somewhere telling the cops everything she knows but Hildy imagines she's dead, wonders hysterically what he's going to tell Peggy, and shouts at Burns that he killed her. He starts calling hospitals to see if he can find her while Burns gets on the phone to his assistant and gives him instructions to call the police and try to find out what happened. He then takes a call from one of the men who's supposed to be on his way down to help him move the desk but is actually in a hotel with a blond. He yells at him and then at the blond who

has gotten on the phone but who apparently hangs up. Burns shouts into the phone for his assistant, can't get hold of him, and then shouts at Louie to go round up some men to help move the desk. Louie calmly goes out and Burns realizes that Hildy is still calling hospitals. Burns tries to get him to help him move the desk but Hildy refuses still trying to find out what happened to Mrs. Grant. As Burns angrily shouts about how women are ruining everything there's a knock at the door. Hildy, on his way out to check the morgue for Mrs. Grant's body, opens it in spite of Burns' orders not to and reveals the Sheriff, two deputies, and three of the reporters.

Act 3, Part 1 Analysis

The first important element of this scene occurs almost in passing with the reference to the three knocks on the desk. This seemingly innocuous signal plays an important role in the play's action eventually turning the tables on Burns and sending him and the other characters into the play's climax. The second important element of this scene is the clear parallel between the actions of Burns and the earlier actions of the Mayor, both of whom bribe people they want to control with jobs. The details of the bribes are different in that the Mayor bribed the messenger to tell a lie while Burns bribes Bensinger to simply get him out of the way but the thematic point of the bribes is the same to illustrate again that Burns is just as corrupt as the people he's trying to expose. Once again, corruption contrasts with integrity as Hildy becomes increasingly aware of just the kind of man Burns is, sees that life with Peggy offers him an opportunity to be a better man than he thinks he would have become under Burns' influence, and fights with Burns so he can be that better man even under these extremely awkward circumstances. These circumstances become even more awkward as the action of the play unfolds escalating the momentum, the comedy, and the dramatic tension of wondering what's going to happen next as we build towards this act's climactic confrontations and ultimate resolutions.

Act 3, Part 2

Act 3, Part 2 Summary

As Hildy tries to get out saying he's got to try to find his girlfriend's mother the Sheriff restrains him and the reporters accuse him of conspiring with Mollie to hide Williams. Burns says that if the Sheriff has any accusations to make he needs to make them in the proper manner or else get out. As the reporters urge the Sheriff to question Hildy the Sheriff tells his deputies to close the door and not let anyone in or out. He then asks Hildy what he knows about Williams, Hildy says he knows nothing and the Sheriff tells the reporters to grab him and bring him down to the station. As the reporters grab Hildy they realize he's got a gun (Williams' gun), which Hildy passes to Burns but which the Sheriff grabs. He stares at it and asks where it came from. Hildy says he's got a right to carry a gun, Burns says that he gave it to Hildy because he was covering a dangerous story but then the Sheriff says it's the gun Williams shot the psychiatrist with admits it's his gun, and demands to know how Hildy got it. Hildy and Burns make jokes at the Sheriff's expense and he runs to the toilet and opens the door to see if Williams is there. When he sees it's empty the reporter's tell him to interrogate Burns. As Burns is trying to calm him one of the deputies notices the phone that Burns left off the hook. The Sheriff picks up the receiver and assuming that the person on the other end is Williams, pretends to be Burns. When he realizes who he's talking to he places Burns and Hildy under arrest. Burns doesn't move hinting that the Sheriff doesn't know what he's getting into.

Mrs. Grant comes in disheveled and angry and accompanied by two policemen saying that Burns ordered her to be kidnapped. Burns pretends to not recognize her and then accuses her of being drunk. As she reacts angrily Hildy tries to calm her down but she doesn't listen saying she was kidnapped because Burns didn't want her revealing that he and Hildy were hiding Williams! The reporters and the Sheriff all become quite excited but Burns shouts out that she's a liar and pounds on the desk three times for emphasis. A moment later he and we realize what he's done.

As Mrs. Grant is explaining what happened to her Williams knocks three times from inside the desk in response to Burns' knocking. The reporters realize where Williams is, the Sheriff tells his deputies to take out their guns, Hildy shouts that Williams is harmless, the Sheriff tells the deputies to shoot through the desk, the reporters rush to the phones, Mrs. Grant runs out, the Sheriff prepares to order fire--and is interrupted by the arrival of Diamond Louie and two friends he picked up from the street. As one of the deputies asks what they want Burns waves them out and they disappear. The Sheriff tells Williams he's surrounded, Burns gets on the phone to his assistant, the Sheriff tells his men to be ready, and the deputies raise the lid of the desk.

Act 3, Part 2 Analysis

An important principle of storytelling is put to good use in this scene; a useful principle not just in theatrical storytelling but also in storytelling in general. That principle is - if you're going to set something up you have to pay it off. This scene is full of points of action that are in fact payoffs of situations set up earlier. These include Hildy's having the gun (taken from Williams when he first came in), the fact that the gun is the Sheriff's (first established by Hildy when he phoned in his exclusive story about how Williams escaped), and the return of Mrs. Grant and her accusations. The ultimate payoff is, of course, Burns' knocking on the desk, which as previously discussed was set up almost in passing at the beginning of this act and which sends the farcically intense action careening towards its climax, which begins with Burns knocking on the desk and concludes when Williams is taken out.

Worthy of note at this point is the fact that through most of the climax Hildy, the play's central character, is purely reactive. In other words he's not driving the action but watching it happen caught up in circumstances in which he has no real control. This emphasizes the point made earlier about how helpless he is while under Burns' control making this particular stage of the story's development important to the development of Hildy's character and his decision to leave the business. It is never stated outright but implied that as a result of his not being in control he realizes he has a chance for greater control through marrying Peggy.

Act 3, Part 3

Act 3, Part 3 Summary

As the deputies raise the lid of the desk Williams is revealed. As soon as he sees the coast is clear the Sheriff grabs him. Williams urges him to shoot him but the Sheriff hauls him out. The reporters have all rushed to their phones and are calling in their stories each inventing new details. They then rush out in search of Mrs. Grant and the Sheriff rushes back in ordering his deputies to handcuff Hildy and Burns charging them with harboring a fugitive. As Hildy and Burns are cuffed the Mayor comes in congratulating the Sheriff on a job well done. Burns doesn't seem to be bothered by what's happening saying there has been all kinds of people who think they've gotten the goods on him and the Examiner and all have turned out to be losers. The Sheriff calls the warden and tells him Williams has been captured and the execution is going to go as planned. Meanwhile, Burns tells the Mayor he's going to lose the next election and Hildy adds that both he and the Sheriff are going to be out of a job.

The messenger comes in drunk out of his mind and presents the Mayor with the reprieve saying he can't be bribed. The Sheriff tries to get him out of the room but the messenger insists on handing over the reprieve, which Hildy and Burns both try to get their handcuffed hands on. The Mayor and Sheriff both accuse the messenger of making the story up but Hildy and Burns get the truth out of him and accuse the Mayor of being willing to hang an innocent man in order to get elected. The Mayor and Sheriff insist the messenger is lying Burns asks the messenger what his story is and the messenger starts to tell him. The Mayor suddenly tells the deputies to take the cuffs off Burns and Hildy saying the Sheriff had no business acting the way he did. The Sheriff also apologizes as the Mayor looks at the reprieve declares it genuine and says it's a relief that, "Chicago has been spared the painful necessity of shedding blood".

Peggy comes in asking what's going to happen to her mother and repeatedly trying to talk to Hildy as the Mayor takes the messenger over to the Warden's office to deliver the reprieve yelling at the Sheriff to come along. As the Sheriff goes Burns starts to tell Hildy how he wants the story about the messenger handled but Hildy stops him and says he's really done this time promising both Burns and Peggy that this time he really means it and promises to change. Peggy says she loves him just the way he is. Burns says he never dreamed that Hildy was this much in love and apologizes for trying to get in the way. He and Hildy shake hands and begin reminiscing about the good times they've had together. Peggy wonders if Hildy really means what he says about changing but Hildy insists he does. Burns gives Peggy a gentlemanly kiss, says goodbye, and then offers his watch to Hildy as something to remember him by. At first Hildy refuses but Burns insists saying it was a gift to him from the Examiner's publisher. Peggy tells Hildy to take the watch and Hildy does. He and Peggy say their goodbyes and go out. Burns closes the door behind them and goes to the phone to the Examiner, which is still off the hook. He picks it up and tells his assistant to get in touch with the chief of police in Indiana

where Hildy's train is going to stop on its way to New York and tell him to arrest Hildy and bring him back to Chicago because he stole Burns' watch.

Act 3, Part 3 Analysis

The play's climax concludes at the beginning of this section as Williams is revealed and arrested. When he's gone another payoff setup earlier follows as the messenger arrives with the reprieve. Once the impact of his appearance plays out giving Burns and Hildy even more material with which to go after the Mayor and the Sheriff it's all denouement or falling action as Hildy and Peggy reconcile, Burns appears to let them go, and the true nefarious purpose of his farewell gesture is revealed.

It's possible at this point that Hildy having seen that Burns and the Mayor are no different in terms of their capacity for corruption means what he says when he's going to give up his life as a newspaperman. It's somewhat less possible that Peggy means what she says when she talks about Hildy wanting him to be himself and we can't help but imagine the fireworks that will erupt when Hildy gets hauled back to Chicago to explain the "stolen" watch and in all likelihood gets sucked back into journalism by Burns. Ultimately, though, by the end of the play Hildy has accomplished his purpose - truth has been revealed and will continue to be revealed as there is little doubt that Burns is going to publish the story of what happened to the reprieve. The play's final moments in which we see that in spite of some fundamental differences Hildy and Burns really are kindred spirits hint that Hildy really does belong in the newsroom, that Burns knows it, and that bringing him back is actually doing them both a good service. This concludes the play's thematic statement indicating that in spite of the corruption, greed, and self-absorption of press and politicians alike there is still the possibility that truth will triumph as long as there are integrity-driven reporters like Hildy Johnson on the job.

Characters

Roy Bensinger

Bensinger is a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. He is the owner of the big, ornate desk; later in the play, Williams hides inside of it. Bensinger is a neat freak, a quality that the other reporters constantly violate by leaving garbage all over his desk.

Walter Burns

Walter Burns is Hildy's boss at the paper. Desperate to keep his star reporter, he will go to any lengths to entice Hildy to stay. When he finds out that Hildy is hiding Williams in the press office, Burns helps to keep the convict hidden so that Hildy can get the exclusive story.

Burns is a cold, calculating man; he is willing to break the law to get an edge. When Mrs. Grant realizes the truth about Williams, Burns kidnaps her. When the truth is revealed and Williams is found, Burns is able to talk himself out of trouble.

Although he encourages Hildy to leave with Peggy at the end of *The Front Page* he even presents him with his prized pocket watch he arranges for Hildy to be arrested for stealing the watch.

Diamond Louie

Diamond Louie is a local thug. He works for Burns as a circulation manager. He helps kidnap Mrs. Grant.

Woodenshoes Eichhorn

Regarded as inept and slow, Woodenshoes is a police officer. He believes that Williams has a duel personality and that the convict is hiding out with Mollie Malloy. He tries to share his information with the reporters, including Hildy, but they are dismissive.

Endicott

Endicott is a police reporter for the *Post.*

Mrs. Grant

Mrs. Grant is Peggy Grant's mother. She is suspicious of Hildy and his commitment to Peggy. When Hildy does not appear at the train station right away, Mrs. Grant is the one

who reveals that Hildy is hiding Williams. Though Hildy convinces the other reporters that she is confused, she eventually sees the convict hiding in the desk.

In order to keep her quiet, Burns has Diamond Louie drive her to a secluded place; en route, there is an auto accident and Hildy fears that she has been hurt. When she returns at the end of the play, Mrs. Grant discloses what has happened to her and Burns is almost charged with kidnapping.

Peggy Grant

A strong and popular girl, Peggy is engaged to Hildy. Frustrated because he puts his work before their relationship, she constantly asks him to make a true commitment to her. Although Peggy questions if he really loves her, they do leave together at the end of the play. It seems that she has won the battle, if not the war.

Peter B. Hartman

See The Sheriff

Hildy Johnson

Hildy is a star reporter for the Chicago *Herald-Examiner*. He is ready to leave his job and start a new life when he gets caught up in the story of Earl Williams.

Hildy is engaged to Peggy Grant; later that afternoon, he is supposed to go to New York City with Peggy to get married. After the wedding, Hildy is planning to work at an advertising agency.

Yet before he can leave the pressroom and get on the train, he becomes very involved in the Williams case: he hides the convict in the pressroom; lies to Peggy and her mother; and deceives the other reporters in order to get an exclusive story.

In the end, Hildy realizes that he really does want to marry Peggy and move to New York City. There seems to be some question if he has really left his old life behind or whether he will eventually return to it.

Ernie Kruger

Kruger is a reporter for the *Journal of Commerce.*

Mollie Malloy

Mollie is a prostitute in love with Williams. She berates the reporters at the beginning of the play because she believes they published lies about her. To protect Williams she

jumps out of the window. She survives the fall, but her fate is unclear at the end of the play.

The Mayor

The Mayor is the corrupt leader of Chicago. There is an election in three days and he wants Williams to be executed to improve his chances of being re-elected: Williams murdered a black cop, and he figures his death will ensure many African American votes.

To that end, the Mayor bribes Pincus to *not* deliver the reprieve. Later in the play, Pincus changes his mind and delivers the reprieve. To save his own skin, the Mayor removes the cuffs from Burns and Hildy and grudgingly implements the reprieve.

McCue

McCue is a reporter for the City News Bureau. He is eager and enthusiastic.

Murphy

Murphy is a police reporter for the *Journal.* He is cocky and contemptuous towards everyone, except reporters. He physically throws Mollie out of the pressroom when she begins to cry.

Irving Pincus

Pincus delivers the reprieve for the execution of Earl Williams. When the Mayor offers him a bribe to not deliver the reprieve, Pincus agrees. Later he changes his mind and delivers the reprieve. He exposes the attempted bribery to the reporters.

Schwartz

Schwartz is a police reporter for the *Daily News.* He is the first to speculate that Williams was hiding in the building.

The Sheriff

The Sheriff is the primary law enforcement officer in *The Front Page.* Not particularly respected, he tries to get along everyone, including the reporters, but his efforts often make him look soft. Because he furnished the gun for the psychological exam, he is also viewed as somewhat inept at his job.

Earl Williams

Williams is the cop killer and anarchist in *The Front Page.* He killed an African-American cop and has been sentenced to die for the crime. He escapes by stealing a gun during a psychological exam; he hides on the roof of the Criminal Courts Building, then in the pressroom. After hiding in a desk for much of the play, his reprieve is finally delivered by the end of the play and his life is spared.

Wilson

Wilson is a police reporter for the *American.*

Themes

Choices and Consequences

Hildy Johnson has to make several hard choices in the course of *The Front Page* the most important choice being his old life or a new one. His new life means that he must leave his career behind in order to move to New York City with Peggy and her mother, get married, and work at an advertising agency. His old life is in the pressroom reporting the news.

This choice results in many humorous situations. Hildy repeatedly puts off Peggy and her mother in order to pursue the Williams story. He almost loses his future several times because of this choice. At the end of *The Front Page,* Hildy chooses his new life over the old one by leaving with Peggy to go to New York City.

Because he makes this choice, Burns gives him his pocket watch and later arranges for Hildy's arrest for stealing it. Thus the choice leads to an unexpected consequence.

Loyalty

Loyalty is a recurring theme in *The Front Page*. Despite their constant complaints, the reporters are loyal to their newspapers and their jobs. They do what it takes to get a story, and are content with their way of life. Even Hildy is loyal to his paper and Burns when the chips are down.

The criminal, Williams, is in trouble out of loyalty. A diehard anarchist who killed a police officer when the cop tried to take down his red flag on Washington's Birthday, he does not mind dying for his cause. He believes it is the right thing to do. Mollie Malloy is so loyal to Williams that she jumps out of a window rather than compromise his hiding place in the press room.

In contrast, the Mayor and the Sheriff are loyal to their own self-interests. They believe that Williams' s execution will win them the African-American vote in the upcoming election (the officer he killed was black). They are so determined that when a reprieve is issued to stop the execution, they bribe the messenger, Pincus, to say it was never delivered.

All of these loyalties define the characters and their values. Hecht and MacArthur also use these loyalties to inspire humor and drama.

Deception

Several characters in *The Front Page* participate in deception. The primary example is when Williams hides in the pressroom. Hoping for an exclusive story, Hildy helps him.

First, Hildy puts him in the adjacent bathroom, then inside of reporter Roy Bensinger's desk. Then Mollie also helps Williams by jumping out of the window, nearly killing herself. When Walter Burns arrives, he does everything he can to keep Williams's location a secret.

The Mayor and the Sheriff conspire to keep Williams's reprieve a secret by bribing Pincus, the governor's messenger. Although both of these deceptions ultimately fail and the truth is revealed, these incidents show the lengths each side will go to achieve their agenda.

Politics

Politics and political beliefs play a large role in *The Front Page.* Williams is a confirmed anarchist and is convinced that he is to be executed because of his radical beliefs.

The Mayor and the Sheriff conspire to make sure Williams will die so that they will win the upcoming election. When a reprieve is issued, the Mayor views it as a political move against him.

The reporters are not particularly political in the same sense. They use politics and politicians to create good press. They want to expose corruption and exploit it to sell newspapers.

Style

Setting

The Front Page is a comedic melodrama set in Chicago. All of the action is confined to one place (the pressroom) and one time (around 8:30 p.m. on Friday night).

The room is rather bare and dirty, with a few tables, chairs, garbage cans, and telephones. There are several windows that overlook the Cook County jail and an adjacent bathroom. The largest piece of furniture is an ornate desk.

By confining all the action to one location, Hecht and MacArthur emphasize the importance of the reporters; after all, it is there that the truth is eventually discovered.

Symbolism

For Williams, the pressroom symbolizes sanctuary from his pursuers. It serves a similar purpose for the reporters; they avoid their wives, their bosses, and the problems of everyday life by hanging out there. Even the Mayor and the Sheriff are able to talk privately there.

For Burns and Hildy, Williams is perceived as a symbol of the corruption of the current political administration. Burns and Hildy want to use Earl as a means of exposing this corruption to the world.

To that end, Earl is hidden in the only nice piece of furniture in the room: the ornate black walnut desk. Ironically, the desk was once the property of a Mayor of Chicago, Fred A. Busse.

This complex symbolism could be interpreted a number of ways. The desk could symbolize the greater power of the press over politics. The Mayor's desk is the property of the reporter like the Mayor is meant to serve the public.

The actions of Burns and Hildy, no matter how selfish their agenda, lead to a reprieve for Williams. This reinforces the idea that the desk ultimately represents the power of the press.

Dialogue and Language

Throughout *The Front Page,* Hecht and MacArthur employ overlapping dialogue, especially in the scenes that feature several reporters. In other words, there are several conversations going on in the pressroom at once. Reporters also constantly interrupt and contradict each other. This kind of dialogue gives a speedy edge to the play and makes it seem more realistic.

What the reporters are saying is also important. They speak in a vernacular appropriate to their profession and they say whatever they have to in order to get the story.

Historical Context

During the 1920s, America emerged as the world's major economic and cultural force. Under the administrations of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, big business flourished. One such business was the automobile industry; by 1930, twenty-two million cars would be on the road. Roads connecting cities were being built. The proliferation of automobiles and roads allowed better transportation and more efficient movement of goods and services.

Skyscrapers were going up in many major cities. Indeed, the first air-conditioned office building was opened in San Antonio Texas in 1928. With such obvious symbols of prosperity and progress, President Hoover believed that the end of poverty was in sight.

Yet all was not well: the economy showed signs of instability; fluctuations in the stock market foreshadowed the crash in October of 1929; government corruption undermined public confidence; and racial and ethnic conflict increased as the differences between rich and poor intensified.

Lynchings of blacks were still common throughout the United States. Schools were segregated, especially in the southern regions of the country. Many homes in rural areas did not have electricity or indoor plumbing.

In 1920 a constitutional amendment prohibited the distribution of alcohol in the United States. (It was repealed in 1933.) Prohibition was hard to enforce, and in 1927, the Prohibitions Bureau was created. Approximately 75,000 people were arrested for violations in 1928.

For women, the decade signaled some positive changes. In general, women received a better education; more women attended college in 1928 than a decade earlier. They had more opportunities, especially for employment.

Entertainment options increased during the decade. Radio became the dominant form of entertainment and information. Radios played more music and serial dramas (the precursor to the television series), and coverage of the first sport events aired. Many people had radios in their homes.

There was an increase in the number of mass circulation magazines. Tabloid papers were introduced and were growing in number. In all of these mediums, advertising became a key source of revenue and the advertising industry exploded.

Television was in the experimental stages, and the first license for a television station was granted in 1928. It began broadcasting in May 1928.

Critical Overview

When *The Front Page* first opened in New York City in 1928, the play's critical praise was qualified by a controversy over language. Many reviewers considered it harsh and inappropriate.

J. Brooks Atkinson of *the New York Times* summed up the controversy. He asserted, "The Front Page, which is one of the tautest and most unerring melodramas of the day bruises the sensitive ear with a Rabelaisaian vernacular unprecedented for its uphill and down-dale blasphemy."

Still, Atkinson found much to praised. "Hilarious, gruesome, and strident by turns, *The Front Page* compresses lively dramatic material into a robust play." Atkinson closed his review with this qualifier: "Quite apart from its authenticity, which may be disputed, it adds a fresh peril to casual play going for the purposes of entertainment."

An unnamed colleague of Atkinson's at the *New York Times* came to a similar conclusion. The reviewer maintained: "Wrangling at poker, leering over the political expediency of the execution, abusing the Sheriff and the Mayor insolently, they [the reporters] utter some of the baldest profanity and most slattern jesting that has ever been heard on the public stage. Graphic as it may be in tone and authenticity, it diverts attention from a vastly entertaining play." These issues of authenticity return repeatedly in later years.

A few critics considered what *The Front Page* said about journalism and America in general. Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt, a reviewer for the *Catholic World,* claimed that "*The Front Page*, as an example of American stagecraft is spectacular, as an example of open-hearted coarseness of speech it is outstanding."

She continued, "[T]hough its basic morals are quite sound and its vulgarity lacks innuendo, the words used are neither nice nor seemly. The humor, however, is thoroughly American and spontaneous."

While *The Front Page* did not have a long run, the play has been revived regularly over the years. The controversy over the language basically died down, and many critics debated how the play had aged.

Reviewing a popular New York revival in 1969-70, John Simon wrote in his book *Uneasy Stages:*

This 1928 play is full of the least attractive ideas of its time: American chauvinism, contempt for culture, condescension to the intellect, sentimental affection for crooks in and out of government. And, vilest of all, the notion that newspapermen are the toughest, shrewdest, meanest and ultimately cleverest guys in the world.

Yet many critics have found aspects of *The Front Page* timeless, if not contemporary.

Walter Kerr maintained that the play aged well because it was not about a specific time. In his book *God on the Gymnasium Floor and Other Theatrical Adventures,* he contended that *"The Front Page* isn't really faithful to the early twenties or later twenties or to anything in particular. Its authors admitted that at the time."

Alan Brien of *Plays and Players,* viewed the script as the reason for its agelessness. "It still works, like an ancient nickelodeon, because of the craftsmenship of its authors."

In 1986-87, *The Front Page* was revived on Broadway. Critics noticed how the play echoed contemporary America. Robert Brustein of *The New Republic* asserted that "Mosher believes *The Front Page* to be the finest American play ever written. I'm not prepared to go that far with him, but the Lincoln Center production certainly makes the case with persuasive eloquence."

Later in his piece, Brustein maintained that "for all the double crosses, good-nature chicanery, and idiomatic wisecracks, the play provides a glimpse of the seamy side of American politics and press practices that is ferociously contemporary."

Similar assessments were made about a 1994 revival at Canada's Shaw Festival. Michael A. Morrison of *The Village Voice* points out that "At times the play shows its age. The misogyny of the reporters and references to the black citizens with the N-word grate on the ear, but the play's satirical flogging of political correctness (half a century before the phrase was coined) is engagingly contemporary." Similarly, John Bemrose *of Maclean's* writes "Anyone who thinks that current TV programs such as *The Simpsons* where crude putdowns are the rule represent a disturbing new trend in American life should consult *The Front Page."*

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

In this essay, Petrusso examines the role of women in The Front Page.

In recent reviews of *The Front Page,* several critics have contended that the play denigrates the role of women. For example, John Bemrose of *Maclean's* maintained that "the air is perpetually blue with profanity and verbal attacks some of them directed against blacks and women."

John Simon argued that the reporters "have contempt at best for women lovers, whatever doesn't jibe with their grimy, grubby, ecumenical smugness."

I assert that the negative attitudes towards women in the play are not this simple. While *The Front Page* certainly has sexist elements, the female characters play key roles: defining standards and even saving their male counterparts on occasion.

There are two kinds of women in *The Front Page:* those who work (Jennie and Mollie) and those who marry (Mrs. Schlosser, Peggy Grant, and Mrs. Grant). Though the two types of women are treated somewhat differently by the reporters and the authors, each plays a vital part in maintaining standards of decency. Sometimes their words contradict their actions, and what the male reporters say about them undermines their efforts. Yet each woman triumphs in her own way.

Jennie is the building's cleaning woman, and a relatively minor character. The stage directions call her "slightly idiotic" but when she enters, "[s]he receives an ovation" from the reporters. They tease her, but they appreciate the fact that she keeps their office clean.

Although the reporters believe that Jennie is sometimes in the way such as at the beginning of the second act they appreciate her persistence and hard work. She does her job despite Murphy's complaints that she is in the way; this proves that she is not intimidated by his words.

Mollie Malloy plays a much more vital role in *The Front Page.* She is a known prostitute who is treated with derision by the reporters. When she comes into the office, she is angry that the reporters have published lies about her relationship with Earl Williams, the convict.

Mollie asserts: "I never said I loved Earl Williams and was willing to marry him on the gallows! You made that up! And all that other crap abut my being his soul mate and having a love nest with him."

She tries to explain that she only invited him up to her room because it was raining the day before the shooting. She felt sorry for him, and they only talked. Mollie yells at the reporters, "I was the only one with guts enough to stand up for him! And that's why

you're persecuting me! Because he treated me decent, and not like an animal, and I said so!"

Mollie has touched on something very profound about the play. She realizes before anyone else that the reporters use people like her and Williams to sell newspapers. They do not really care about their fate unless it makes a good story. The actions of Walter Burns proves this point later in *The Front Page.*

Yet the truth is that Mollie does have feelings for him. When Hildy hides Williams in the pressroom, Mollie sacrifices everything for him. She does everything she can within her very limited power to protect him. One reason Mollie does this is because Williams admits he likes her. He tells her "Yeah, I think you're wonderful I said you were the most beautiful character I ever met."

So when the reporters become suspicious and insist on answers, Mollie makes a bold decision. She jumps out of the window with the words, "You'll never get it out of me I'll never tell! Never!" This succeeds in deflecting attention away from Hildy and the desk for a long time.

Mollie's actions are heroic compared to the rest of the characters in the play. She does not die, but her self-sacrifice says more than enough about the nobility of the female character in *The Front Page.*

The "married" women are not nearly as dramatic; instead, they represent oppression and respectability. The first woman introduced in the play is a minor character, Mrs. Schlosser. She is the long-suffering wife of a reporter, Herman, who works for the Examiner. She is angry because she believes that he is out drinking.

Several reporters try to appease her and cover for Herman. She forces them to reveal that he has gone to a Turkish bath. After Mrs. Schlosser leaves in a huff, several reporters berate her behind her back. Endicott muses, "I don't know what gets into women. I took Bob Brody home the other night and his wife broke his arm with a broom."

These reactions reflect the general attitudes of men towards women and women towards men depicted in the play. These attitudes are a recurring theme of *The Front Page*. In this case, Mrs. Schlosser is only placated when she talks to Herman's editor, Walter Burns, on the phone and he agrees to deal with the paycheck situation to her benefit. Mrs. Schlosser gets her way in the end.

After Mollie, the two most powerful women in the play are Peggy Grant and her mother. Mrs. Grant functions as Hildy's conscience throughout the play; she realizes the truth and threatens to reveal it. This knowledge makes her so dangerous that Burns feels compelled to kidnap her to keep her quiet. She only goes because she is taken forcibly by Diamond Louie.

The subsequent automobile accident and Mrs. Grant's disappearance from the scene underscore the choice Hildy must make. It forces him to confront questions about why he is pursuing this job and what he wants to do with his life.

Later, when Mrs. Grant reappears, she exposes Burns and Hildy in front of the authorities. She also reveals Williams's hiding place. She proves that women are not pushovers.

The woman who affects the most change is Peggy. Through her ultimatum, she causes Hildy's dilemma: he is forced to choose between his love for her and his love of reporting.

Hildy finds that it is a difficult decision. He is happy with his old job: he loves the excitement, the camaraderie, and the attention. Yet the prospect of moving to New York City, working in advertising, and making more money appeals to him. Peggy realizes how difficult it will be for him to leave his old job; she knows the powerful attraction it still holds for him.

So she is proactive in order to get what she wants. When Hildy does not arrive at a farewell party, she calls while he is saying his good-byes in the building. When Hildy gets on the phone with her, he is contrite and promises her that he will be there. Eventually she has to show up herself. This happens repeatedly throughout *The Front Page:* Hildy makes a promise, does not keep it, then Peggy has to come to confront him.

When Hildy lies to her like about spending their wedding money on a lead for the story Peggy keeps him straight and makes him tell the truth. Peggy's actions make Hildy face up to his responsibilities. He cannot lie to her.

Later, there is a showdown of Burns versus Peggy: tyrant versus wife, bad versus good. Burns wants to control Hildy while Peggy wants to make him face himself and his choices. She accuses him: "You never intended to be decent and live like a human being! You were lying all the time!" Though the argument ends with Peggy leaving in tears, Burns pushes Hildy too far. He realizes what he truly wants: Peggy.

When Peggy returns at the end of the play, Hildy has made the choice to be with women instead of men. Though Burns tries to get him to come back to the paper, Hildy tells her:

Listen Peggy, if I'm not telling you the absolute truth may God strike me dead right now. I'm going to New York with you tonight if you give me this one last chance! I'll cut out drinking and swearing and everything connected with the God damn newspaper business. I won't even *read* a newspaper.

While Burns may get the last word in *The Front Page* by arranging for Hildy's arrest, he has lost the war. Hildy will probably not want to come back as a reporter after such a stunt.

The women in the play have fought hard for what they want; in many ways, they each get what they want. They play an important role in the course and outcome of the play.

Source: A. Petrusso, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Brustein reviews a 1987 revival of Hecht and Mac Arthur's play at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in New York. Finding that the play's potent message has endured, the critic offers a favorable review of The Front Page.

Yet another revival of *The Front Page,* Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's 1928 play about Chicago newspapermen covering an execution, would not appear to be a particularly original theatrical idea or an especially bold choice to open Gregory Mosher's second season at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater. The play has already enjoyed three movie versions one of them macerating this hard-nosed farce into a gender-reversed romantic comedy, with Rosalind Russell as a female Hildy Johnson and Gary Grant doing one of his incomparable comic turns as her editor-lover, Walter Burns. It is, besides, a regular feature of resident theater schedules in this country, and in 1972 it was even memorialized by the National Theatre of Great Britain in a version that, stretched to three hours and groaning under labored American accents, was treated with as much reverence as the Wakefield Mystery Cycle.

This new production under the direction of Jerry Zaks is far from reverent. It lasts for two hours that sweep along like one. From the moment the lights came up on Tony Walton's massive rendering of an improvised press room, with its parquet floors, twirling fans, broken-down chandeliers, overstuffed wastebaskets, old Royal typewriters, and upright telephones all backed by the silhouette of a Chicago courthouse I was captured by the show, refreshed as if by a new play. This is one of those happy occasions in the American theater when a familiar work of secondary reputation asserts its claim to classic status. Mosher believes *The Front Page* to be the finest American play ever written. I'm not prepared to go that far with him, but the Lincoln Center production certainly makes the case with persuasive eloquence.

The Front Page doesn't have a soft bone in its body. We are told that the authors originally conceived the work as a satire on ruthless reporters and sensationalistic journalism, only to end up with a valentine to the whole newspaper profession. I'm not so sure. These reporters certainly have their engaging side so do the hack politicians and corrupt cops who serve as foils for their banter. But for all the double crosses, competitive dodges, sardonic backbiting, good-natured chicanery, and idiomatic wisecracks (expressed in that special urban argot that O'Neill kept trying, unsuccessfully, to create), the play provides a glimpse of the seamy side of American politics and press practices that is ferociously contemporary. Earl Williams, an anarchist in an age of "Red Menace" hysteria, is going to the gallows because he has jeopardized the mayor's bid for re-election: he has shot a black policeman, and the "coon" vote in Chicago is crucial. When the governor sends a reprieve in the last days of the campaign God knows what *his* motives are the mayor bribes the messenger to say he never delivered it. When the prisoner escapes, the mayor orders him shot on sight.

The fact is that nobody gives a damn about Earl Williams not Walter Burns, who only wants an exclusive for the *Examiner;* not the reporters, who tailor the facts to suit their

purposes; not even Hildy Johnson, who helps to hide him in a rival reporter's desk. Aside from Mollie Malloy, the sentimental hooker who jumps out of a third story window rather than testify, Williams has no value for anyone except as an opportunity for greed, ambition, vanity, or worse. For the press, the highest premium is "the great big Scoop": the reporters want Williams hanged at five in the morning instead of seven, in time for the city edition. For the politicians, whose only motive is perpetuating themselves in office, ideology, conscience, even human life itself are hostages to expediency. *The Front Page* dramatizes Darwin's survival theory with a breezy sangfroid equalled before only by Ben Jonson and John Gay, and only by Brecht and Mamet in our own time.

Under Zaks's meticulous direction, the play zips along like a hound dog with cans on its tail. Obviously, Zaks responds to plays with an edge (he is equally good with Durang), and this is a remarkable recovery after the blatant audience-fondling of *House of Blue Leaves.* He has cast the newspapermen with performers in the tradition of [1930's] character actors Allen Jenkins, Edward Brophy, Edward Binns, the old broken-nose school of working toughs who lounge at their desks playing poker or hugging phones, "sitting here all night waiting for them to hang the bastard." They recall a livelier time in American life, when it was energy not efficiency that flowed from ruthless careerism.

The casting of the major roles (with one debatable exception) is also impeccable: Jerome Dempsey as the rotund, orotund mayor, equipped (by the costumer Willa Kim, whose period designs are characterizations in themselves) with tailcoat and fez, bouncing languorously about the stage like a huge beach ball on the surface of a pond; Richard B. Shull as the persistently deflated Sheriff Hartman, a Klaxon-voiced pol with a permanent sore throat; Bill McCutcheon as Mr. Pincus, the messenger with the reprieve, a sleepy little pink mouse with a passion for peanuts; Jeff Weiss as Bensinger, the fastidious hypochondriac who sprays his telephone receiver for germs; Paul Stolarsky as the pathetic goofball Earl Williams, appealing vainly to be recognized not as a Bolshevik but as an anarchist; Jack Wallace as Woodenshoes Eichorn, the bullheaded cop with phrenological theories of crime; Julie Hagerty as Peggy, the girl who competes with Walter Burns for Hildy' s affections, a thin, nervous, high-pitched hysteric in a cloche hat; and, of course, John Lithgow as Walter Burns.

This is surely one of Lithgow's finest opportunities as a character actor, and although he doesn't enter until late in the second act, he makes the part, if not the play, his personal property. Bearing himself like a Junker general, with a brush moustache and military haircut, he towers over Hildy with the authority of one accustomed to absolute power (at one point, he wraps Hildy's head under his arm and pulls him around the stage like a cowboy breaking a steer). Lithgow offers a considerably more ruthless Walter Burns than did his predecessors in the role (Adolphe Menjou, Pat O'Brien, Walter Matthau) menacing and dour for all his charm. His passion for his newspaper leaves him indifferent to any weaknesses that aren't exploitable. To an ailing reporter he shouts, "To hell with your diabetes, this is important." "I was in love once," he tells us in an uncharacteristic moment of Sir Andrew Aguecheek tenderness, only to add "... with my third wife." Like the play, he has a cartilaginous heart, and by the time he barks the play's famous last line "The son of a bitch *stole my watch"* he has created a comic scoundrel unique in the annals of deception.

The casting flaw is Richard Thomas's Hildy Johnson. When he first appears on stage, a slight, youthful figure in a camel's hair coat, it looks as though a stripling has been called in to do the work of a man. Paradoxically, however, Thomas ends up contributing one of the most detailed performances in the production, precisely because he *has* been miscast. Like a repertory company actor challenged by a part for which he has to stretch and transform, he builds his character piece by piece, and with such commitment that he proves he understands the role, even if he doesn't finally claim it. His hair slicked down, his accent washed with a Chicago rinse, dancing about the stage like a cocky young torero making passes, Thomas brings a crackling energy to Hildy that almost makes you forget he lacks the seasoning and the grit. He's the only alloy in an evening of tempered metal. In the way it takes a beady look at human corruption, *The Front Page* suggests how soft we have since become as a people and as a culture.

Source: Robert Brustein, "Headline Hunting," in the *New Republic*, Vol. 196, no. 1&2, January 5 & 12,1987, pp. 25-26.

Critical Essay #3

While finding some fault in the casting of the lead roles, this critic still contends that The Front Page *has endured as a powerful dramatic work, one that is borne out in this 1986 revival.*

Whenever *The Front Page* is revived, reviewers feel an obligation to apologize for liking the play, and I am no exception. It is indeed a ramshackle affair, flung together with more scaffolding than structure and containing more funny lines than clever ones, but there is also at the heart of its pretense of heartlessness an air of youthful, ignorant high spirits that we cannot fail to find endearing. If its authors, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, had known more about writing plays, they would surely have written a worse one; like two literary Elizas, they keep leaping from one shaky ice floe of plot to the next, always in peril of their lives and yet always laughing. Walter Burns, the second-most important character in *The Front Page,* doesn't make his appearance until the play is two-thirds over an error that any proper teacher of playwriting would birch his pupils for committing. Nevertheless, our untutored authors have done exactly right by doing wrong: Burns, the dreaded cynical, ruthless managing editor of the Chicago *Herald-Examiner,* would be hard to put up with for an entire evening. As for the chief character, Hildy Johnson, who is the star reporter of the *Examiner* and Burns's slave, he is a vain, noisy, drunken, and unscrupulous lout, and would also be hard to listen to for long, but again ignorance triumphs: Hecht and MacArthur, seemingly unaware of how expensive a big cast is, fill their stage with such a host of characters twenty-five in all that we are never given an opportunity to lose patience with any individual among them. Though reputedly drawn from real life, they are without exception one-dimensional; whenever they get a chance to speak, they nearly always say what they said before, or a close variation of it. This economy of language is applied throughout the play without regard to whether the speaker is a slovenly newspaperman, a crooked politician, a bedevilled prostitute, a middle-aged housewife, or a condemned murderer.

If the play is the cobbled-up comic claptrap I have described, how does it happen to have survived so successfully for sixty years? To me, the answer is an unpleasant one, so a second apology is in order for liking the play; this time the reason is not its faulty craftsmanship but the point of view that lies behind its knockabout melodramatics and is the unexamined source of its energy. Which is to say that *The Front Page* is a classic embodiment of the still prevalent American male fantasy about the nature of paradise: a place whether a pressroom, a locker room, or a club where men can sit around and drink and tell adolescently dirty stories; a place where a woman, if she should make the mistake of entering it, would be abused and ordered away (when the prostitute in *The Front Page* attempts suicide by jumping from a window of the pressroom, the reporters present feel neither sympathy nor interest: a prostitute committing suicide is not news); and a place, finally, where even the love that boozy middle-aged men may wish to offer one another is expressible only in terms of vulgar pranks.

Having offered this indictment of the construction of the play and of what I see as its lamentable cultural provenance, I am obliged to add that *The Front Page* delights every

audience before which it plays audiences at least half of which are made up of women. (Why women are amused to see themselves depicted as stereotypes virginal girlfriend, good-hearted prostitute, mindless mother-in-law, and the like would require a parenthesis far longer than this one.) The audiences at the Vivian Beaumont measure up to the usual standard or perhaps ought to be said to exceed it, because the production they applaud is not a very good one. The two main characters are radical examples of miscasting. Richard Thomas plays Hildy Johnson as if in imitation of James Cagney playing George M. Cohan, with a cocky strut and a high-strung manner that make it difficult for us to believe in him as a charming, hard-drinking reporter desperately in love with a pretty girl and eager to abandon his career on her behalf. As for John Lithgow as Walter Burns Mr. Lithgow is a marvellous actor, but a venomous misanthropy that would make lago blanch is evidently beyond his capacity to depict. Jerry Zaks has directed with an exceptionally heavy hand. Richard B. Shull is funny as the bumbling sheriff, and so is Jerome Dempsey as the crooked mayor, but Mr. Zaks has made no effort to curb their too obvious pleasure in squeezing more humor out of their roles than the roles possess. When Bill McCutcheon, in a small but crucial role as a virtuous nitwit, struggles to understand the simplest instruction, one can almost hear him counting the beats before he changes expression; telegraphy on this scale of obviousness has long been obsolete on any stage.

Also in the cast of *The Front Page* are Jeff Weiss, Julie Hagerty, Mary Catherine Wright, and Jack Wallace. The welcomely realistic set the pressroom of the old Criminal Courts Building in Chicago (the building has been preserved, though the pressroom has vanished) is by Tony Walton, the costumes are by Willa Kim, and the lighting is by Paul Gallo.

Source: Anonymous, "Low Life in Chicago," in the *New Yorker,* Vol. 62, December 8, 1986, pp. 134-35.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Smith probes the transformation of lead character Hildy Johnson from a male role to a female role by film director Howard Hawks.

Clearly central to the task which director Howard Hawks sets himself in adapting Hecht and MacArthur' s *The Front page* into his own film, His *Girl Friday*, is the need to reformulate the central character, Hildy Johnson. Hawks has both begun this reformulation and compounded its difficulties by opting to present Hildy as a woman rather than a man. To bring to fruition this initial switch, while retaining the broad outlines of the stage play's plot, Hawks must justify his new Hildy in terms of the demands levied by Hildy's role in the original play. Specifically, he must make his female Hildy believable as what her opposite, Walter (Gary Grant), dubs her in the film: "The best newspaperman I know." At the same time he must establish her as a recognizable, 1940 romantic lead. Hawks seems to aim at building his essentially new comedy around the special irony of a Hildy who is both. That the resulting character may prove to be of a type the sophisticated, strong-minded career woman Rosalind Russell often portrayed in such films will only confirm Hawks's success. It is no argument against the peculiarity of the problem to this situation. Hawks, producer and director on *His Girl Friday*, inherits a stage plot turning upon the irreconcilability of professional and romantic life for its (male) Hildy. To transmute that story into romantic comedy on film, he must retain a measure of conflict but finally cause romance and professional obligation to converge. Hawks saw that a female Hildy might accomplish this fusion but once brought into being, she *must* do so for the comedy to work at all. Thus arises Hawks's central task.

To assess his approach to it, we naturally would look for scenes that focus intimately on Hildy's character. One such scene ensues when Hildy seeks out the condemned man, Earl Williams, for an interview in his prison cell. Hawks's great success in this scene is the creation of an integrated Hildy who is credibly "a great newspaperman" *precisely* because she is female and conversely one who, as newspaperman, is exactly the woman to succeed in the hard-bitten newspaper world, in Walter's life, and in the pivotal role of Hawks's newly forged romantic comedy. Stylistic analysis of the brief scene yields much insight, not only into Hawks's particular strategies but also into the larger issues involved in adapting a theater comedy of one *genre* into a film representative of another.

The "cell" scene does not appear in the stage version. This fact itself, linking the scene with other important sequences written new for the film, makes it characteristic of Hawks's transmutative work. Predictably, given the task as outlined, most of the new material occurs in the first, largely expository half of the film, when characters are established. The cell scene occurs at an important point near the end of this first half. Reasons for its appearance lie in the logic of Hawks's new plot. The Hildy of *The Front Page* falls back into reporting by instinct, in a reflexive response to the crisis of Earl Williams's jailbreak. Walter, to that point, has done nothing to persuade Hildy to come back to work. His incessant browbeating and his single attempt at trickery have earned only Hildy's vow to "walk right up to you and hammer on that monkey skull of yours."

Hildy first betrays reportorial instinct only some time after this exchange. By contrast, Hildy's visit to Earl Williams in the film follows from Walter's conniving. Hildy here shows more of conscious calculation than bombast and instinct. Also, of course, she appears manipulable, but this trait derives from her weddedness to newspaper work and, implicitly, to Walter, who is altogether more visible to us in the film than in the play. As is quite opposite in the play, Walter's influence at this point is that of newpapering. Hildy succumbs to both with the same act. The convergence begins.

On the face of it, therefore, the cell scene presents a conscious, more commanding Hildy, one who is on more intimate terms with Walter and thus subject to the grip of her profession through him. The "monkey skull" line does return later to remind us of the story's central conflict. But an eventual resolution of that conflict, something we are not given on stage, has been hinted at in this interweaving of Hildy's romantic and professional predilections.

Stylistically, the cell scene furthers these effects at deeper levels. Composed of eight shots neatly divisible into groups of four, with each half-sequence forming a unity in time, its central action proceeds by showing Hildy's command of situations her professionalism and then integrating that commanding quality with compassion: a compassion derivable in part from the ability to command, and in part from Hildy's distinctly "feminine" character.

The first four shots work principally to show her authority. Heretofore, the film has not shown her functioning as newspaperman, nor in any newspaper setting other than the office. But it is "on the beat" that Hildy will unfold as a reporter. (Significantly, the whole sequence takes place between scenes in the newspaper office and in the Criminal Courts press room. By embedding the scene solidly within these journalistic settings, Hawks underscores its key position as a setting for Hildy's action in that world.) Hildy is discovered in the doorway to the prison foyer at the fade-in. She is already there, in our first view of this world, and, by implication, has been all along. Lighting from an off-camera window highlights her in contrast with the guard, Jacobi, who sits in shadow at his desk. She is prominent here; this is her natural element.

That the guard must turn his head from the side opposite Hildy to come to face her is also worth noting. As the second shot brings us in closer, he is about to turn away again, backside to her, as her interview request ends in her assured, perfunctory, "How about a little service?" The fact that her bribe forces him to turn around once more, unnatural though the movement has come to seem visually, shows us her magnetic hold on him and implicitly, on the whole system. Hildy does not miss a beat during this bit, which occupies the rest of the shot. With virtually the same movement that brought her through the door, she lifts the bribe from her handbag, drops it, stoops to pick it up and, in the process, carries through the dialogue: "Oh, say, is this your money?" "Don't think it is...." "Twenty bucks." "Well, it just may be." "That's what I thought." It is all one motion, a single, coordinated sentence. She has been certain from the moment she entered what to do, ritualistically, each second.

Hildy's left hand still clutches gloves and a handbag, as it did the moment she entered. Thus, the same hand that just effected the bribe now pushes Jacob from his chair, and the words again coordinate: "C'mon, I'm in a hurry." Her attitude is not the pushiness of one anxious or uncertain about getting her way; it is the total assurance of one so practiced as to be able to carry on automatically with one hand, so to speak.

We must pause here before other elements that influence the larger comedy. The ease with which Hildy bribes Jacob underlines not only her strength, but the whole system's weakness particularly that of the yet-to-appear Mayor and Sheriff. The sweep of Hildy's hand to the floor and back with the money just as easily sweeps aside the Sheriff's authority (in this case, to keep her from seeing Earl Williams). Subtextual play and comic undercutting of this sort work importantly, we will discover, throughout this scene.

Also, we notice that Jacob is reading a newspaper when Hildy arrives. Newspaperdom, as noted, permeates the setting; that is the setting's point. But the pencil in Jacobi's hand further suggests what *type* of newspapering is involved. A good guess would hold that Jacobi has been busy with a cross word puzzle. The image will be repeated later in the press room, where a dangling newspaper in one reporter's hand shows a comics page to the camera. Jacobi's nonthreatening nature comes home to us as we spot this, but, more importantly, so does that of this whole world. However seriously it may present itself, even on death row the world of Hildy's profession finally appears containable, "fun," light-heartedly comic.

Moving through a barred door into the cell area in Shot Three, Hildy resumes the motion, only briefly interrupted by the inconvenience of the bribe. Her speech and tone are continuous with what has gone before: "Hey, Joe, open up here." Waving aside Jacobi's last protest, she strides in. Her movement up until now has been from right to left, an unnatural direction visually. Death row is an unnatural place. Yet Hildy shows no consternation; the surety in her step overcomes our visual difficulty, as her assured manner generally takes command of, even redeems, this otherwise alien world.

Shot Four develops this last theme. It is a high-angle shot embracing the whole cell room, and thus delimiting it to stand clearly apart from us. We see it from an unlikely angle that gives us a commanding, all-encompassing overview. The effect of the angle is our sense both of alienness and of the fact that this world *can* be encompassed. It sets us up, as have foregoing shots, to witness Hildy take command. Hildy's ability to move, her efficacy, again overcomes a visually unnatural image, and her movement becomes firmly established as a metaphor for control. It stands in contrast both with the stark, unmoving angles and lines and the long shadows of the cell room dominated by Earl's cage-like enclosure and with the severely circumscribed, inefficacious "movement" of Earl within the cell, or of the mechanically pacing guard in the background. Hildy moves assuredly where movement otherwise is absent or confined.

Her name, she tells Earl, is "Johnson," a reminder of her professional, unmarried, pre-Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy) condition. But she addresses her subject as "Earl." Later, her personal touch will seem almost maternally patronizing. That there is in this attitude a contrast between herself and Earl, one as great as the difference in their

respective abilities to move, is emphasized by Earl's ironic assent to the interview: "I haven't anything else to do." Hildy, we are certain by now, has much else to do in this film. As proof, the first half-sequence ends with reminders of her composure, as we saw it at the outset. Still clutching objects in her left hand, Hildy executes another deft sweep with her right as she pulls over a chair. The shot fades with her again in motion, stepping toward Earl.

The second half-sequence continues to show Hildy dominate; but now, as the last shot presaged, it reveals her dominance as a force of quiet strength, enabling her to lend others her support in a sympathetic, "feminine" fashion. Her manner is thus distinguished from that of fellow "gentlemen of the press." Hildy's command becomes empathy, as she works to command Earl *for his own benefit.* This further elaboration of her character supplies an "equals" sign between her femininity and her capacity to be "a great newspaperman." The sequence begins with a fade to a two-person close shot the first close-up in the cell scene. Visually the tone has changed, quieted; Hildy's movement, emphasized in the preceding series of medium and long shots, largely ceases. Despite the heavy cell wire between them, a clear sense of intimacy appears in this close view of Hildy and Earl. The two are visually pushed together by the solid cell door that frames them on the left. Molly's picture in triangulation on the wall behind enhances this sense of intimacy and of a specifically personal bond, a bond based *on feminine* warmth. When she speaks, Hildy seems to have lost the briskness in her voice. She projects a nearly maternal sense of peace and reassurance.

Both other clues remind us that Hildy still commands the situation. Her profile stands in the foreground, fully lit, higher in the frame than Earl's face, and prominent. It stands out against her own dark clothing. Earl's downcast visage, by contrast, seems of a piece with his drab prison outfit. This is the first shot in the film to present Earl at close range, and everything in actor John Qualen's appearance, right down to his little mustache, reassures us that he is harmless, no match for Hildy, and only comically conceivable as the "Red menace" the Mayor's and Sheriff s hysterics make him out to be. Earl's eyes draw us downward to reveal, moreover, that movement still exists. Hildy's hands finger a pack of cigarettes. As movement on her part has come to represent assurance and control, we here sense Earl's awareness of that control a reminder of it also for us.

In every respect, the dialogue that commences during this shot reinforces the irony present in visual signs of Hildy's and Earl's relative strength. It begins with Earl's protestations to sanity, a self-characterization we would be the last to deny him. If anything, he is banal normalcy run riot, and every bit the "tough luck" character to find himself fired after twenty-two years on the same job. Hildy, who evidently has him all figured out, affirms this impression. When she asks, "You didn't mean to kill that policeman," she need not look at Earl to read an answer. She assumes it, like a forgiving mother toward a child who has misbehaved. In fact, throughout the scene she rarely lets Earl finish a sentence. Earl's response, "It's against everything I've ever stood for," insists on the absurd premise that he has ever "stood for" anything. "It's just just the world." (Earl, of course, begins to seem a parody of the Marxist the Major and Sheriff want us to believe he is. Here he offers a quasi-doctrine of social conditioning for crime.)

But above these contrasts, the intimate bond between Hildy and Earl draws certain equations between the two. Earl's reference to "the world," a world this scene has been exploring, may implicate Hildy even more than Earl. The suspicion rises that Earl is a "foil" for Hildy. We might reasonably expect it to rise further.

A first visual confirmation that it does so appears in the next shot, which simply mirrors the preceding. Earl comes into the foreground; Hildy's face remains dominant, but the camera now has captured her in Earl's world, through the bars. To cement the bond, Hildy and Earl exchange a cigarette through the cell wire. Had we begun viewing at Shot Five, we might not now know which of the two sat *inside* the cell. Nor does it finally matter. Earl will be free, and Hildy, in the end, will not be or, she will realize her subconscious choice not to be. That choice is inescapable. She is "imprisoned" herself, though in a world that, as a prison, fails to be very threatening. As a tag to the shot, Hildy calls her femininity to mind again by apologizing for the lipstick on her cigarette.

The scene's last two shots serve as a compressed re-emphasis of the themes thus far developed. Shot Seven, a visual return to Shot Five, makes circular the mini-sequence between Hildy and Earl, just as the final shot closes off the whole scene with another long view of the cell room. The "produced for use" bit completes Earl's depiction as a parody of both a Marxist and a murdering gunman. It comically undercuts the hysteria that later will attend his escape. It is itself the victim of subtextual play focused on the cigarette, which the non-smoking Earl remembers to hand back to Hildy, who crushes it to the floor wnused. Intimacy also culminates in Shot Seven in the admiring of Molly's picture. As the first stimulus to animate Earl, this exchange suggests that the kindness of women is indeed his life and salvation.

As they rise in the final shot, we notice something we now expect: a visual mark of Hildy's entrapment. She is framed against the barred wall afront the foyer, and even the chair she pushes back, again with one hand, is backed in a way that suggests "bars." Earl's line is, "Goodbye, *Miss* Johnson*,"* another reminder. Hildy is straight, and again brisk and deft, but her glance back at Earl before leaving shows that the bond remains. Her final line, "Good luck" a favorite with Hawks was the sort of farewell given aviators in World War One before they undertook dangerous missions. It indicates that the bond is one of collegiality; that, again, Hildy belongs in this professional world. A fade denies us the chance to see Hildy outside the cell room, since, the film says, her existence outside this world really is irrelevant.

Is Hildy not herself "produced for use" her proper "use" being the newspaper business and married life with Walter? We are led to believe by this scene that she is as stuck here as Earl, and as at home in this incarnation as he comically seems amid his cell's drab but human furnishings. But Hildy does more than passively fit. The composure, command, and compassion she lends the situation work redemptively on her world to make it a fit little "home." If redemption themes are the basis of comedy, the cell scene, in less than three minutes' total running time, has established a comic vision for the whole film. In its own composure and its concentration on two persons, the scene models sanity and humanness of a kind needed for this film, and altogether absent from the frenetic action of *The Front Page*. It discloses Hildy in the integrated wholeness of

her being, thus rendering credible her character itself and her eventual reunion with Walter. It shows that the romantic and professional dimensions of her being each help realize the other. As a paradigmatic case of theatre-to-film adaptation, it helps soften and knead the unrelentingly caustic, crazy stage comedy into a proper romantic-comedy shape exactly what Hawks meant the "feminizing" of Hildy to do in the first place.

Source: Jeffrey A. Smith, "His *Girl Friday* in the Cell: A Case Study of Theatre-to-Film Adaptation," in Literature/ Film *Quarterly,* 1985, Vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 71-76.

Critical Essay #5

Brown reviews a 1946 production of The Front Page, *appraising the play as a "lusty" piece of writing that accurately captures the era it seeks to portray.*

From the millions of words spoken as dialogue in new American plays during the last quarter of a century, a few sentences here and there refuse to be forgotten. Most of the others, even when they have done their nightly duty as flares, have been swallowed up in the darkness.

The lines I have in mind are different. Beauty is not their strong point. Neither is wit, eloquence, profundity, nor, as a rule, reverence. Yet they have stuck in the memories of playgoers. They have lodged there as summaries and as tags; as vivid reminders of past pleasures. What is more, they have hung on with the insistence of slogans.

Any theatregoer of fair constancy and of a certain age can place them at once. The stagestruck find them as readily identifiable as schoolboys do such military nifties as "We have met the enemy and they are ours," "Don't give up the ship," "Damn the torpedoes!" "You may fire when ready, Gridley," "LaFayette, we are here," or, as spoken at Bastogne, just plain "Nuts." For that matter they are as spottable as such Presidential declarations as "Speak softly and carry a Big Stick," "I do not choose to run," "Too proud to fight," "The return to normalcy," or "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Many of the lines which ring bells immediately in the minds of playgoers are mere phrases. "Dat ole davil sea," for instance. Or "Sign on the dotted line," "I belong, dat's me," "The mountains of Nebraska," or "It's only Mother."

Some such as "Gangway for de Lord God Jehovah," or (a long pause, please) "I may vomit" served as memorable entrance cues. Others such as "Eleven o'clock in Grover's Corners. You get a good rest, too. Good night," and "No! I'm going to be baptized, damn it!" ended evenings of rare delight.

Among all such lines, I doubt if any have proved more adhesive than those which rang down the curtain on two of the twenties' rowdiest successes. One of these was, of course, the ebullient, "Hey, Flagg, wait for baby!" with which Laurence Stallings and Maxwell Anderson concluded "What Price Glory?" The other left audiences gasping and roaring when the late Osgood Perkins barked it into a telephone. It ran, (and still runs, because *The Front Page* has recently been revived), "The son of a bitch stole my watch!"

This last gun in Ben Hecht's and Charles Mac Arthur's newspaper comedy came as a jubilant climax to a merry melodrama. It capped the barrage of surprises which eighteen years ago had kept all of us laughing and startled for the whole of a noisy, fast-moving evening. It was a *coup de theatre;* unexpected, and as hardboiled as the play. It showed us the true character of the managing editor Mr. Perkins acted to perfection. It was his trick to win back to Chicago newspaperdom the star reporter who had dared to fall in

love, dared to go on a honeymoon, dared to think of becoming an advertising man in New York.

The editor had just given the newly married reporter the watch in question as a present. The two men, long friends, had, after squabbling sacrilegiously, enjoyed an almost sentimental moment of reconciliation before parting. Yet, no sooner had the reporter and his bride left for the station, than the editor stepped to the telephone. He had hesitated for an instant and heaved a huge sigh. Managing editor though he was, he was at least that human. Then he had proceeded to growl his instructions to his henchman.

"Listen," he had said, "I want you to send a wire to the Chief of Police of LaPorte, Indiana.... That's right. ... Tell him to meet the twelve-forty out of Chicago ... New York Central... and arrest Hildy Johnson and bring him back here. . . . Wire him a full description. ... The son of a bitch stole my watch!"

Time is the best of all shock absorbers. It can turn a scandalized "Oh!" into an accepting "So!" within an unbelievably small number of years. *The Front Page*, when seen and heard today, remains a far, far better play than most. One of the proofs of its skill is that its excellences as a script cannot be obscured by the less than indifferent performance to which it is just now being subjected. It is stoutly built. And, what matters more, it is peopled by an entertaining group of characters; hardboiled members of the Fourth Estate who breathe to swear and swear at every breath.

To their authors these profane news-hawks are obviously the most glamorous of figures. They see them as D'Artagnans in modern dress; as King Arthurs whose scandal-dripping typewriters are their Excaliburs; as Robin Hoods defying the Sheriff, not of Nottingham but of Cook County, in the Press Room of Chicago's Criminal Courts Building. Their lack of sentiment is what makes their creators feel sentimental about them. They are enchanted with their disenchantment. So, may I add, are we.

That these curmudgeons of the press use the language colorfully, no one can deny. Even so, the "tough-guy" speech, which they sport as romantically as Cyrano flourished his plume, no longer astonishes us. The intervening years have robbed the oaths of *The Front Page* of their novelty. The dialogue now tires us at times by its striving, instead of amazing us throughout by its daring.

If ever realism swaggered as romance, or romance masquerade as realism, it is in Mr. Hecht' s and Mr. MacArthur' s melodrama. *The Front Page* was the work more accurately, the play of two young men who were described by their original producer, Jed Harris, as "the Katzenjammer Kids of the theatre." Their lightheartedness was the measure of their own youth and of the times in which they were lucky enough to be young. This is what Brooks Atkinson meant when, in his review of the present revival, he said, "Today it would be difficult for anybody to write anything so gay in spirit."

As important to any creative work as what is included in it is what is left out. The point of choice is indeed the point where art begins. Darwin may have championed natural selection, but the creative processes depend upon a selection which, regardless of how

inevitable it may seem in the finished product, discards irrelevances and chooses with a definite and quite arbitrary purpose in mind.

Often, in a piece of writing as lusty as *The Front Page,* there is more to the play than is captured in the dialogue or suggested in the action. The very omissions speak for themselves. Mr. Hecht's and Mr. MacArthur's melodrama is based on the assumptions and the attitudes of the Prohibition era. Its tone is tough with a toughness born of those times. Its spirit is jaunty, immature, untroubled. It is written with a lightness of heart which, tragically, may be no longer possible but with a worship of the "lowdown" which, fortunately, has become as dated as it is discredited. Though tamer than it once was, *The Front Page* has, as a script, outlasted the days of its writing. It has become a period piece only because it so successfully captures the feeling of its period.

It was George S. Kaufman who first staged the melodrama. He performed a difficult task with a drive which kept the play cracking like a snakewhip in action. The group scenes, where a stageful of reporters must be given their individual chances to talk "tough," were timed with a precision calculated to win a Swiss clock-maker's envy. Everything was kept moving at so insistent a rate that, until the text was published, no one could be certain how self-reliant the script would prove as a play when unaided by its staging.

One of the disquieting faults of the present revival is that it makes us realize the virtues of the writing merely by granting them no assistance. To those never fortunate enough to have seen *The Front Page* before, and who do not keep seeing and hearing Osgood Perkins and Lee Tracy in it now, the comedy may seem satisfying enough. I say "may," though I gravely doubt it. I know only that I found this performance a dreary, inept affair; miscast, slouchily acted; and lacking, above all, in the fire and the precision needed to do the script justice.

In Mr. Tracy's part of the incurable reporter, Lew Parker acts with more effort than effect. He manages to skid on a dry road. His characterization is smudged and blurred, when it cries out loud to be clean and definite. Arnold Moss is totally lost in Osgood Perkin's shoes. Mr. Moss is an excellent classic actor. His Prospero in last year's "Tempest" made this clear. Yet, as should go without saying, almost every characteristic of voice, gesture, and mind which distinguished him in Shakespeare is misplaced in his impersonation of a tough Chicago newshawk. The late Henry Van Dyke trying to write like Ernest Hemingway could not possibly have been more at a loss.

Much as I admire *The Front Page* as a newspaper play, in the presence of the current slow-paced and amateurish revival I found I had one wish uppermost in my mind. I kept wanting to rush to the telephone in the manner of their managing editor, and warn Mr. Hecht and Mr. MacArthur that someone backstage I only said "someone" had stolen their watch.

Source: John Mason Brown, "Gentlemen of the Press," in the *Saturday Review*, Vol. 29, no. 43, October 26, 1946, pp. 24-26.

Adaptations

The Front Page was adapted as a film in 1931. It was directed by Lewis Milestone and produced by Howard Hawks. It starred Pat O'Brien as Hildy and Adolphe Menjou as Walter Burns.

A version was filmed in 1940 by director Howard Hawks under the title *Girl Friday*. It featured Rosalind Russell as a female Hildy and Gary Grant as Walter Burns.

A television series based on the play was produced from 1949-50. It starred John Daly as Walter Burns and Mark Roberts as Hildy.

Another version was filmed in 1974. Directed by Billy Wilder, the movie starred Walter Matthau as Walter Burns and Jack Lemmon as Hildy.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast the Hildy Johnson of the stage version of *The Front Page* with the Hildy Johnson in the 1940 film version, entitled *Girl Friday.* In the latter, Hildy is a woman played by Rosalind Russell. How do these changes impact the dynamics of the play? What does this express about the role of women in 1928 versus 1940?

Research the history of corruption in Chicago politics. Has the press played a role in revealing corruption and/or getting rid of corrupt politicians?

How has journalism changed over the years? Research what working at a local newspaper or television news program would be like. Write an updated description of the pressroom that reflects the technological and cultural changes.

Compare and Contrast

1928: Fifty percent of American households have radios. Television is still in developmental stages, but would eventually replace radio as a dominant means of entertainment and information.

Today: At least one television can be found in nearly every American household; many homes have multiple sets. Its primacy as an information and entertainment source is challenged by the Internet.

1928: The first talking film, *Lights of New York,* is released by Warner Bros. It uses the Vitaphone system. Some believe talking films are a fad that will go away. Separately, Kodak introduces color film stock.

Today: Movies feature increasingly better sound systems that use digital technology. There are also many ways of watching films outside of the theater, including DVD.

1928: Railroads are the primary means of crosscountry travel. Commercial aviation is in its infancy.

Today: Airplanes are the primary means of cross-country travel. Amtrak, the primary American passenger system, needs government subsidies to survive.

What Do I Read Next?

All the President's Men is a nonfiction book written by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward in 1974. Written by two journalists, it chronicles their efforts to uncover political corruption during the administration of President Richard Nixon.

The Twentieth Century, a play written by Hecht and MacArthur in 1933, is a farce that examines the theater scene.

Written by Bruce D. Price, *Too Easy*: *A Novel* was published in 1994. The story focuses on a murder investigation in New York.

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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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