The Gin Game Study Guide

The Gin Game by D. L. Coburn

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Introduction

In 1997, the play had a revival on Broadway, starring Charles Durning and Julie Harris, and was nominated for a Tony for Best Revival of a Play. Harris suggested adding a dance between Weller and Fonsia, since Durning is such a wonderful dancer. At first, Coburn rejected the idea, but then he realized that a dance could bring the two characters even closer and give the audience a glimpse at how happy they might be if only they could get past their crippling faults. The dance also shows the psychological damage resulting from the physical debilitation that often comes with age. Coburn came to consider this revision essential to the play. Through the years, *The Gin Game* has been shown in dozens of countries around the world. Coburn has written several more plays, screenplays, and television scripts, but none has had anything like the success of *The Gin Game*.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1938

D. L. (Donald Lee) Coburn was born on August 4, 1938, in East Baltimore, Maryland, to Guy Dabney and Ruth Margaret Somers Coburn. East Baltimore is an impoverished neighborhood, and Coburn's childhood was made the more difficult by his parents' divorce when he was only two. He served in the U.S. Navy from 1958 to 1960, right after graduating from high school. Coburn operated a one-person advertising agency in Baltimore from 1965 to 1968 and then worked for the Stanford Advertising Agency in Dallas, Texas. He married Marsha Woodruff Maher in 1975 and has two children, Donn and Kimberly, from a previous marriage, to Nazle Joyce French (1964-1971).

When he was thirty years old, Coburn began writing short stories for his own gratification and discovered that he had a talent for dialogue. After seeing Thomas Troupe's one-act play *Diary of a Madman* (adapted from the work of the Russian writer Nikolay Gogol), he decided to try playwriting. It took him several years to put pen to paper, and after only eight pages, he put aside his first attempt, *The Gin Game*, for two more years. At the urging of his young son, he finally went back to the project and finished the play in four months. Amazingly, the play progressed from a small Los Angeles theater to Broadway in little more than a year's time and earned Coburn a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony nomination for Best Play in 1978.

Other plays written by Coburn include *Bluewater Cottage* (1979), *Guy* (1983), *Noble Adjustment* (1985), *Return to Blue Fin* (1991), *Fear of Darkness* (1995), *Firebrand* (1997), and *The Cause* (1998). They have not gained sufficient popularity to warrant publication and are therefore not readily accessible to the reading public. In addition, Coburn has written television series pilots for two major networks and several screenplays, including *Flights of Angels* (1987), *A Virgin Year* (1991), and *Legal Access* (1994).

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

Seated on an unused, enclosed porch of the Bentley Home for Seniors, a seedy nursing home, Weller Martin is occupying himself with a game of solitaire. A new resident, Fonsia Dorsey, wanders out onto the porch, and the two become acquainted as they talk about what brought them to the home. Weller offers to teach Fonsia how to play gin rummy. It is visitor's day, and, as they sort their cards, they share the reasons that neither of them has visitors. Fonsia wins the game, claiming beginner's luck. As they continue to play, they talk about their failed marriages, their children, and Weller's business. When Fonsia wins more games, Weller starts to curse, and Fonsia declares that in her Methodist upbringing, her father never said a foul word. They discuss the cheesy entertainment that is constantly foisted upon the residents of the nursing home, until Fonsia wins another gin game and Weller throws down his cards in disgust.

Act 1, Scene 2

The next week, Fonsia seeks out Weller on the porch as they both try to escape another visitor's day. Weller asks for a rematch at cards, and Fonsia eagerly agrees. However, before they start to play, they talk about the peculiarities and problems of other residents in the home as well as their own loneliness and frustration with their situation. During the card playing, Fonsia denies that she is on welfare, but Weller admits to panic attacks. Weller excuses his belligerent attitude as frustration about the theft problem in the home, but Fonsia's continued streak of wins leads him to increased shouting and profanities that culminate in his flipping over the table in anger.

Act 2, Scene 1

The next evening, Weller seeks out Fonsia in the garden. He asks her to join him on the porch so that he can apologize for upsetting her. She tries to get him to understand how frightening his temper can be. She advises him against playing gin, since he cannot control his temper when he plays. Unfortunately, Weller interprets the comment to mean that he is not a good gin player and once again gets the cards so that he can show her his skill at the game. She refuses to play, and they pick at each other with criticisms. When Fonsia starts to go inside, Weller advises that playing cards with him is better than being distressed by the empty stares of the other patients, whose bodies have outlasted their minds. When Fonsia wins another game, she says that she wishes that Weller could win, and he warns her not to lose on purpose for his sake. When he does win the next game, he accuses her of letting him win. Fonsia gets up to leave, but Weller grabs her arm and steers her back toward the table. Fonsia expresses concern that Weller needs to see a doctor. He is determined to find an explanation for her uncanny winning streak, and he starts talking to a little man who he imagines is sitting

on his shoulder. Afraid that Weller has gone crazy, Fonsia once again starts to leave but is pressured into finishing the hand, which she wins. Weller accuses her of getting the card she needed from God, and his language grows rapidly worse until she curses back at him when she again calls, □Gin!□

Act 2, Scene 2

The next Sunday, Weller tricks Fonsia into coming out onto the porch by having the nurse tell her that her sister is waiting to see her. Because she has not seen her sister in fifteen years, Fonsia knows that Weller is just trying to get her to play cards. Fonsia says that such mania is abnormal. Weller confronts her for complaining to the staff about him and suggesting that he needs a psychiatrist. In their exchange, Weller corrects Fonsia's mistaken assumption that he has money. He explains that his long convalescence after his heart attack cost him all his assets. Fonsia reiterates her concerns that he might do something awful to her in a fit of temper, and he retaliates by guessing that her son does not visit her because she was always so negatively critical. She tries to hit him in her rage and then collapses into sobs. When he comforts her, she admits that she lied and that she, too, is on welfare. However, she did have a house that she gave to the church to spite her son.

Weller reaches for the cards to get her mind off the subject, but Fonsia refuses to play, and they argue about it. Weller accuses Fonsia of manipulating him and of attempting to be as vindictive with him as she was with her son by trying to get him in trouble with the staff. He makes her sit down to play, and verbal warfare ensues about each other's excuses of bad luck for failing at business and marriage. Weller calls Fonsia rigid, self-righteous, and vicious. When she wins again, he beats his cane on the table until he cries. Then he gathers himself up and walks out silently as Fonsia realizes that she has pushed him too far, and he will not be back.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The scene is an unused sun porch of an old-folks home. A bookcase is filled with seldom-read books and discarded newspapers. The porch is cluttered with items no longer used inside, such as old sinks, broken wheelchairs and walkers, a shabby sofa, and a broken piano. Planters are filled with now-dead flowers. Broken flower pots are on the floor. It's a sunny springtime afternoon, a Sunday, visitor's day at the home.

Weller Martin sits at a card table wearing terry-cloth slippers, khaki pants, a pajama top, and an old, brown wool bathrobe. An unlit cigar stub hangs from his mouth. An old biscuit tin lid serves as his ashtray. A pad and pencil sits in front of him. He sits in front of an incomplete game of solitaire, and he stares into space and mutters to himself. He resumes the game and discovers he has no moves left. As he is about to pick up the cards, he pulls an ace and a two from the last stack of cards. He returns to the game.

Fonsia Dorsey enters the scene through the screen door. She wears faded pink slippers, an old house coat, and a cardigan. She is crying and she is surprised to find someone else on the porch. Fonsia apologizes for her emotional state. Weller asks if she's new at the home; she responds that she is. Weller has been there three months; he tells her it takes some adjustment. Fonsia has diabetes. Weller has one of the most advanced cases of old age in the history of medical science. Fonsia asks if he's ever lived at the Presbyterian Home. He has not. She comments that she wanted to live there, but that they take all of their residents' money. Weller knows of the place, "what a racket!" he exclaims. All those people out there thinking they are working for themselves, when they're really working for the Presbyterian Home. If she was wealthy enough, Fonsia could have gone there to be with her friends. Weller counters that even the wealthy people in nursing homes are lonely.

Weller asks Fonsia if she plays cards. It has been years since she played Rummy and Pinochle. He asks if she plays Gin. She has played Rummy and asks if it's the same thing. He responds that it basically is, and he explains the rules and begins to deal. She is excited to be playing. She thought the day, visitor's day, was going to be awful. Weller inquires about family. She has a forty-five year old son named Larry who lives in Denver, as well as two grandchildren. She hasn't seen them in over a year. She has a sister who lives in Ottawa. She asks Weller if he has any children, but then interrupts him to declare "Gin." Weller compliments her on her play. Weller has three children, but he lost touch with them long ago, when he and their mother divorced. It was a nasty divorce and his ex-wife turned the children against him. Fonsia wishes her husband had been so bad off. Weller counters that he wouldn't wish what he went through on anyone. She says that for the hell she went through, she would wish it on him.

Fonsia has Gin once again. Weller is stuck with twenty three points and is a little testy. He tells her she will get no more lessons. Weller deals again.

Weller owned a marketing and research firm before he retired. His job was to tell people how to run their business. Weller tells a story from when he first started his business; he sat in a boardroom in front of a group of executives who asked him how much he would charge for his work. He was very nervous. He felt the job was worth $500, but felt better to tell them $400. He said "four," and the President turned to the other board members and asked them if they thought four thousand sounded fair. One of the other members said, "that sounds about right to me." Fonsia asks if Weller corrected the man and told him $400; he says he did not.

Fonsia pulls Gin once again. This time Weller is even more upset. "Goddamnit," he exclaims, and says to himself that he knew she was keeping Jacks and that he gave it right to her. Fonsia never heard her father curse. He didn't drink, smoke, or run around either. Weller thinks about his father. Even after his father retired, he still went to the office everyday until he was 83. He could do that because he owned the company. He wasn't the type to play checkers in the park. His father had better luck with his partners than Weller did.

Weller shuffles the cards and deals another hand. A choir sings in the background. Weller doesn't understand the "entertainment" at the home. He wonders why there is a constant need to entertain the residents. Management must think that if there isn't a choir or a magician they will all drop dead at once. While Fonsia enjoyed a magician who entertained them a few days prior, Weller remarks that the magician was awful and poured milk all over the floor. Weller feels magicians like playing at old folks' homes because half of the audience is asleep and the other half is shaking so bad they can't focus.

Weller cannot decide which card to throw. He knows Fonsia needs one of the two. He contemplates and then throws a card. She immediately picks it up and declares "Gin." Weller throws his cards down on the table.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Everything about the setting of the opening scene of the play suggests abandonment, loneliness and despair. An unused sun porch, seldom read books, discarded newspapers, broken wheelchairs, old sinks, a shabby sofa, a broken piano. These items are symbolic of the residents who reside at the home. Weller must feel right at home on the porch with these items. He is rather unkempt, wearing a bathrobe and playing solitaire. His game is interrupted by the crying Fonsia, who thinks she will be alone on the porch. She, too, wears a bathrobe and looks a mess. She tries to walk away from Weller, but she is trapped by a locked door and a room filled with other residents watching TV. He is trapped with no moves left in his solitaire game, until, in desperation, he finds an ace and a two in his last stack and keeps playing. The two cards he finds are symbolic of Fonsia and the opportunity for some form of happiness that they provide each other.

Fonsia agrees to play Gin with Weller, despite not being much of a card player. By the end of the scene, she will beat him by scoring "Gin" in three straight hands. By the third hand, Weller becomes frustrated.

Weller's short fuse and testy personality is first demonstrated when they compare notes about their divorces. Fonsia would have been happy if her ex-husband had never been allowed contact with her children after the divorce. Weller says that is something he would not wish on anyone.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

A full week has passed. Weller is on the porch wearing a jacket and tie. Fonsia joins him with her hair done, wearing make-up and a nice dress, and looking like a different woman. They agree to play Gin again. Weller is upset that the family of another retiree has seemingly belittled him as a man who just sits and amuses himself playing cards.

The pair begins another game of Gin. Fonsia knocks with three points and wins the first hand. Fonsia scores Gin in the second hand. Fonsia begins to feel dizzy and blames the prescriptions she has been taking. She is briefly upset when she thinks Weller insinuates she is on welfare, but he quickly apologizes. Weller talks about how sometimes he slips into a dreamlike trance, a feeling of sheer terror. At first he could snap right out of it, but later he could not seem to shake the feeling. He would sit, panic-stricken, as other people went about their business. Then, suddenly, his feeling would pass. Fonsia went through the same thing years before, after her divorce. Her panic attacks passed with time.

When Fonsia makes Gin in the third hand, Weller begins to get upset. He calls Fonsia the luckiest Gin player he has ever seen. Weller realizes he could have won the game if he had knocked, because Fonsia held two Queens until Weller gave her the third for Gin. Weller tells her she played the hand stupidly, that she never should have held Queens so long. After Fonsia reminds him she won the hand, he cautions her not to be so cocky about her play simply because she won a few hands. She is on one of the luckiest streaks he has ever seen. Fonsia tells him not to yell at her, and he apologizes for raising his voice.

During the next hand, Fonsia cautions Weller not to get excited, and then lays down her cards to show she has made Gin. Weller throws his cards down excitedly and exclaims "Jesus Christ! Do you have to win all the Goddamn time? ... Can't you lose just once?" When she tells him she's not trying to win every time, he is really upset. He thinks she is not even trying to win the hand, but still winning. Fonsia would rather not play than go through this every time she wins. She will quit if he keeps up this behavior.

Weller will not let her quit playing. He deals again. Fonsia tells Weller that he's taking the game far too seriously. Weller needs one card for Gin. During the course of play, when it is not her turn, Fonsia looks down at her cards and realizes she has Gin. Weller erupts: "Aw, Bullshit! Bullshit! Jesus Christ. Look at that shit!" Weller grabs the table and flips it over.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

One week after their first meeting and card game, Fonsia and Weller have prepared to meet each other again. Once again, it is visitor's day at the home. While Fonsia and

Weller were both disheveled at their first meeting, they have both done their best to look good this time. Fonsia's hair is done up, and she wears make-up and a nice dress. Weller sports a coat and tie.

The couple plays five hands of Gin, and Fonsia wins every hand. With each win, Weller gets more and more upset. After the fifth consecutive win, Weller is so upset that he throws the card table over. Weller is extremely competitive when it comes to card playing. He has played Gin for years and says he has never seen someone as lucky as Fonsia. She tries to calm him after each of his outbursts, but is only successful in calming him long enough to deal the next hand.

During the game, Weller tells Fonsia about his panic attacks. Sometimes he falls into a terrifying dreamlike state that he can't seem to shake. The panic attacks he complains of seem somewhat similar to the reaction he has when he loses at Gin.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

A day has passed since the table-flipping incident. Weller enters the porch looking for Fonsia; he wants to talk to her. She is in the garden, and at first she wants to be alone, but then decides it is getting too late to be in the garden. Weller apologizes for being such a poor loser. His temper, she says, frightened her. He comments that except for his outbursts, they seem to enjoy each other's company. She agrees, but tells him he "can't play Gin." Weller immediately takes this as an insult to his Gin-playing abilities when what she meant was that he should not play Gin because of his temper. After Fonsia jokes with him that she is now an expert Gin player, Weller immediately begins to look for the deck of cards for a rematch. She does not want to play.

As Weller shuffles the cards for a game of solitaire, a minor argument occurs. Fonsia points out Weller's horrible temper and sarcastic streak. Weller notes that neither one of them have any visitors on visitor's day. He asks why her son does not visit. After she replies that he lives in Denver, Weller wonders why she is not in a rest home there.

Fonsia relents and agrees to another game of Gin. Weller warns her that if she doesn't play Gin, she will atrophy and become just like the other residents at the home—staring out the window waiting to die. Fonsia admits to Weller that all her life she had a fear of misspelling words. She never graduated high school, but told her employer that she had.

Fonsia wins the first hand by scoring Gin. Weller does his best to keep his temper down. The second hand is a breakthrough for Weller. He makes Gin and finally wins a hand. Weller behaves poorly in victory, however, suggesting that Fonsia threw the game. She denies the allegation. She starts to leave, but he physically puts her back in her chair and tells her they have much more playing to do. She tells him that she is not feeling well.

Weller wants to conduct an experiment and figure out exactly why Fonsia seems to win every hand. He deals the cards and begins talking to himself during the course of play. He believes she has been reading his mind. When she makes Gin yet again, Weller thinks God gave it to her. When she mockingly agrees with him, he responds: "Don't patronize me, you bitch." Fonsia has had enough of his poor temper and gets up to leave. Weller apologizes and begs her for one more hand. She sits down to play. When she makes Gin this time, she simply lays her cards down. Weller tells her she has to say, "Gin" when she wins. She says the word quietly and he tells her to say it again. She says, "Gin, Goddamnit! Gin"! They go inside.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Fonsia has grown weary of dealing with Weller and his outbursts and chooses to work in the garden rather than speak or play cards with him. They get along well except when they play Gin. Weller is hyper-competitive. After finally winning a hand, he insists that she threw it. By the end of the session, she has won three hands to his one. At the end of the final hand, she lays down her winning cards without even saying Gin. Weller forces her to exclaim Gin. Weller has succeeded in making Fonsia just as irritable and surly as him.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

It is Sunday at the home once again. Weller waits for Fonsia to come out to the porch. He has instructed a nurse to tell Fonsia that her sister is waiting for her outside so that she will come out. Fonsia, however, does not believe that her sister is outside; nonetheless, she goes. She accuses Weller of instigating his ploy to get her outside for another game of Gin. She does not want to play anymore.

Weller accuses Fonsia of reporting him to the home staff. The staff told him they were thinking about sending him to a psychiatrist. He fears they could send him to the State Mental Hospital. She admits talking to the staff, but says she thought he might benefit from a psychiatric visit. She assumed that he had money because of his talk about his successful business and could afford a psychiatric visit; however, Weller begins to get upset as he informs her that his business partners literally threw him out of his own business. She is partly right, though. He had some money saved before he retired, but what he had was spent on hospital bills after he had a heart attack. Weller is on welfare.

At first she apologizes for talking to the staff, but then she reconsiders when she thinks that if she had not done so, one of them could wind up dead on the patio. Weller thinks she is being ridiculous. He asks if she really thinks he might hit her over the head with a chair. He accuses her of making harsh judgments about him: thinking he is a potential murderer, crazy, vulgar, and dishonest in business.

Weller tells her that the problem with most people today is that they had a mother like her. Fonsia is very insulted. Weller tells her that her son does not visit her because he hates her. Weller does not think her son lives out of state; he thinks her son lives in town, but refuses to visit her. He calls her a liar. Fonsia confesses that he is correct, but wants to know how he knows. When he confides that he was only guessing, she runs at him and beats him, calling him a bastard. Weller apologizes and tries to put his arm around her, but she walks away. He follows and puts a sweater over her shoulders to protect her from the cold.

Fonsia admits that she lied to him, that she is on welfare, too. She also lost her savings to hospital bills. Her house will go not to her son, but to the presbytery. Her son takes after his father. She disowned him for trying to look up his father five years earlier. A thunderstorm and brief power outage disturbs their talk.

After the lights come back on, Weller suggests another game of Gin. Fonsia tells him he is enjoyable to be around if it weren't for the Gin game. She tries to leave, but he blocks her way inside. Weller tells her she is trying to manipulate him. They have been playing her game, now they will play his. He accuses her of coming out to the porch to play Gin. He thinks she enjoys beating him and watching his temper rise. Weller grabs her so she will not go inside. She screams at him to let her go. He accuses her of wanting to get

him in trouble with the staff. He tells her she is vindictive. She says he is the vindictive one that will say anything he can just to get her to play Gin. She sits down to play, hits the table and says "Deal!"

Weller thinks he is going to beat her this time. Fonsia tells him if he was such a good Gin player he would have beaten her long before. When he tells her it will take more than luck this time, she responds by asking why he has to be the victim of luck. If he could not blame his losses on bad luck, he would have to admit that he just was not that good a Gin player. Likewise, she tells him that perhaps he did not have bad luck with his business partners, but instead they were just better businessmen. She tells him that his filthy mouth reminds her of her ex-husband. One night he came home drunk to find that she had put all of his belongings on the street.

Weller observes that she does not have kind things to say about the men in her life. When Fonsia attributes her problems to bad luck, Weller pounces and turns her argument back against her. She must be having the same sort of bad luck he has. If it is not bad luck, he says, it must be her fault: she is rigid, self-righteous, and vicious.

Weller plays a Queen and Fonsia picks it up. She calls him stupid for playing a Queen because she picked one up moments earlier. He calls her an idiot. She warns him to never call her an idiot and curses at him. She tells him she has never used that curse word in her life. The game is heated. Each of them seems to be waiting for one card to make Gin. Fonsia picks up Weller's discard and fits it into her hand. She selects a card to discard, displays it for Weller to see, as it is the card he needs, but then lays it face down on the card pile and declares Gin. Weller stands, walks over to Fonsia, and hits her chair with his cane. She screams for a nurse as he whacks at the card table with his cane and repeatedly says "Gin! Gin! Gin! Gin!" He begins to sob. After a few moments, he goes inside. Fonsia, sitting on the glider, says, "Oh, no."

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

In this final scene, the truth about Weller and Fonsia is revealed. They are both on welfare, having lost their savings to hospital bills. Weller was not really a success in business; Fonsia was not a successful wife or mother. After upsetting each other, there is a moment of tenderness and caring when Weller warms her with his sweater and puts his arm around her.

Weller insists on another game of Gin. Fonsia does not want to play and insults Weller by suggesting that perhaps he is not as good at Gin as he thinks. This prompts Weller to stab back at her by suggesting that she is rigid, self-righteous and vicious. The final Gin game is heated and competitive due to the fact that they have worked each other up with insults. With both players nearing Gin, Fonsia grabs Weller's discard, fits it into her hand, and then teasingly shows him the card he needs for Gin before putting it face down on the stack and declaring Gin. It is likely that she knew this was the card he needed for Gin. Fonsia's comment of "Oh, no" after Weller's fit of rage signifies that she realizes that she never should have played this game with him. She knew playing Gin

with him would set him off, but she allowed herself to be talked into it to please Weller. Though they had a chance at happiness together, their competitive natures ruin the opportunity.

Characters

Fonsia Dorsey

Fonsia Dorsey is a prim and proper elderly woman who has just moved into a rundown nursing home. She appears to be a fragile victim, a diabetic woman who has been abandoned by everyone she knows. No one comes to visit her. She says that her son lives too far away, in Denver, but eventually the audience learns that her friends, if she really has any, live in an upscale nursing home that Fonsia cannot afford because she is on welfare and that her son actually lives in the same town but hates his mother too much to visit her. Fonsia is only a victim when it suits her purpose. She wears a mask of charm and reticence to hide her anger and intolerance. Underneath, she is very much in control□perhaps too much in control□of her emotions and has an intense need to be right, whatever the cost.

Fonsia has reached this desolate point in her life because no one has ever been able to live up to her expectations. She is relentlessly hypercritical. Weller hits the bull's-eye when he describes her as □rigid, self-righteous, vicious.□ Her oft-mentioned rigidity perhaps developed from her upbringing in a strict family, where her father did not □smoke, drink or run around□ and never said a curse word or approved of playing cards. Possibly because she could never find anyone who could live up to her father's stature or because she had the misfortune of a bad marriage, Fonsia is drawn into conflict with men. She is desperate to form a connection with someone, but she is unwilling to admit her own flaws and manipulative tendencies or unable to overcome them. At first, Weller gets her to laugh, forget her troubles, and enjoy playing a game. There is a chance for her to have a comfortable relationship with a friend, perhaps even a romance, but she has a need to defeat Weller in their card games and probably in everything else, too. Even though Weller becomes verbally abusive, she keeps returning to the card table because she needs to win as much as he does, and she can give as good as she gets from him.

It is impossible to tell from her behavior whether her game winning is the result of skill or very good luck. Chances are that she is hustling Weller. She acts as if she is forgetful and silly, but she is a fast study with infallible strategy and a poker face. She behaves graciously when she wins, and each win buoys her depressed spirits, but in truth her manner of winning is creating another failed relationship. She cannot help herself, even though she surely knows where her manipulations are taking her. She also cannot forgive herself for driving away her husband and son, so she takes it out on Weller, thus pushing everyone away until she has no one left.

Weller Martin

A resident of the Bentley Home for Seniors, Weller Martin is a man who sees life in terms of winning and losing, and he is deeply enraged because life has apparently

defeated him. However, he gets a chance to win at something when he meets Fonsia Dorsey, a new resident at the nursing home who, like him, still has her wits about her. Here, at last, is someone with whom he can have an intelligent conversation. Furthermore, Fonsia can play cards with him, and he will have a chance to compete and win, since he considers himself an expert at gin rummy.

Weller is a man of fierce spirit and will who has to have his own way and have the last say. He is also not above resorting to low blows and hurt-filled insults. Fortunately, his sharp, sarcastic, cutting nature often translates into humor. As Richard Scholem describes him in a newspaper review, Weller Martin is a □raging bull, a volcano of a man. He sweats, snorts and sneers.□ Weller blasphemes, but he is, in fact, a man of faith who talks to God as if God were a man on his shoulder. His conflict with God is that he wants his own will done, not God's will.

For Weller, the gin game is a way to keep his mind sharp and avoid falling into dementia, as have the rest of the people in the nursing home. Although he has heart problems and carries a cane, Weller is energetic, but he tends to express his energy in angry outbursts and foul language. He can be charming when he wants something, however, and he wants Fonsia to play cards with him. Unfortunately, his charm quickly wears off once he starts losing game after game to this inept amateur, and he uncontrollably takes out his frustrations on Fonsia. She tries to tell him that it is just a game and not worth getting upset about, but to him the game is not just a game. It is a continuation of his life's story.

Weller blames bad luck for his business failure. His compulsion to play cards stems from his belief that he would have been able to keep his business, he would have had better partners, and he would not have had a catastrophic illness, if only he had been luckier. He cannot admit to himself that he is a loser: he has to win at something, even just a game. He cannot accept that his skills and determination are not necessarily enough to be successful, so he looks for that intervening power□that evil twist of fate□that is keeping him from winning. Just as Weller touched success in business, only to have it escape his grasp, he touches upon an enjoyable relationship with Fonsia, only to have it slip through his card-holding fingers because of his own character flaws. He sees himself as a victim, but he does not understand that he is a victim of his own temperament.

Objects/Places

The Porch

The porch setting of this play is littered with broken down objects and discarded items. It symbolizes Weller and Fonsia's loneliness and despair. Like the broken piano and sink thrown on the porch, they have been cast off by society. Like the shelf of abandoned, dusty books, no one has been interested in either of these two characters in a long, long time. Both divorced their spouses relatively early in their marriages. Both have been cut off from their children. They have no one; they are alone.

The Garden

There is a garden just off the porch. Fonsia spends time there, gardening, but Weller pulls her away for a game of Gin. Fonsia's gardening metaphorically represents that she desires to plant something and make it grow. She wants to give Weller a chance. She wants a relationship to sprout and grow between them. This is demonstrated when she repeatedly acquiesces to his request to play Gin, even though she knows that when he plays, he is likely to erupt into a rage. She tries and tries and tries, with no success. Weller is so stubborn and set in his ways that she cannot change him.

The Nursing Home

The nursing home where Fonsia and Weller reside is a last-stop nursing home for people on welfare who cannot afford to go anywhere else. The home provides second-rate entertainment such as magicians and choirs. The residents are the victims of theft, likely by employees of the home. Weller and Fonsia cannot stand being there, but neither has the means to go anywhere else.

The Presbyterian Home

The Presbyterian Home is another nursing home. The Presbyterian Home demands that its residents donate all of their assets to live there. Fonsia wishes she had gone there, but first says she did not want to give them her house. Many of her life-long friends are there. Later, however, when she reveals that she lost everything she owned to pay for her hospital bills, the truth is revealed. She is on welfare and stuck at this nursing home, the only one that would accept her.

The Game of Gin

The dealer deals 11 cards to the opponent and 10 cards to himself. The opponent then discards one of their 11 cards and the game begins. The dealer can then pick up the

discard or choose a card from the top of the deck. The object of the game is to form sets of 3 or more of a particular card, Kings, for example, and/or sequential runs of cards in the same suit, 6-7-8 of Diamonds. If a player can make all 10 cards fit into a set or a run, then that player has Gin and wins the hand. A player who makes Gin receives 25 points plus the numerical value of the cards that don't fit into a run or set in the opponent's hand. A player can also end a hand by knocking if the numerical value of the cards that don't form a set or run in their hand is 10 or less. A game of Gin consists of several hands played until one player has scored either 150 or 100 points, depending on what the players decide beforehand.

Themes

Religion

"Yes, Weller, God gave me the card." This line from *The Gin Game* is at the heart of Weller's dilemma. He is engaged in a struggle with God about his life. Weller exhibits a universal defiance among humans: we want to live by our own will, not God's. So far, Weller thinks that God has dealt him a rotten hand in life, and he wants to try to make it right, at least symbolically, by winning hands of gin rummy. He tries to will himself to win a game, but only a magician can bend a spoon with his mind. Thus Weller asks, as so many others have asked throughout the ages, whether there is an unseen force or presence, a divine will, that determines what happens. Weller is trying to figure out whether Fonsia's winning is a matter of luck, personal skill, or divine intervention. When her winning streak becomes uncanny, Weller cannot help but suspect that a higher power is at work, and he starts talking to the man on his shoulder; that is, he starts arguing with God. Actually, every time Weller blasphemes, he is expressing his faith in God simultaneously with his perpetual argument with God.

It is likely that Fonsia is also sincerely pious. She is not putting on an act of gentility when she says that she is offended by Weller's habit of taking the Lord's name in vain. Her beliefs were strongly ingrained by her Methodist upbringing, yet she does not treat others with the openness and forgiveness of Christian teachings. She cannot overcome her own character failings to achieve the loving self-sacrifice idealized by her religion. Fonsia, too, fails to satisfactorily answer in her life the same question with which Weller contends: Are we predestined to live as we do, or can we rise above our natures?

The Baggage We Carry

Unresolved problems, bitterness, and destructive habits are the types of things that people carry with them throughout life, even though they do not necessarily need to. It is possible to solve one's problems, set aside bitterness, and change bad habits, but most people, like Fonsia and Weller, do not manage to do so. They tend to cling to their pain-generating habits until they can no longer break them. Consequently, they keep making the same mistakes, but they justify their failures by blaming someone or something else and doing it often enough to convince even themselves that that are innocent victims. Weller still wants to win, even when it is just a game. Fonsia still wants to exercise control, even though it will drive away another man in her life. Although *The Gin Game* has many humorous moments, it is a dark, depressing story about reliving the mistakes of the past.

Wasted Opportunity

The acute sadness of this play arises from the momentary hope that Fonsia and Weller will finally find some comfort with another person, only to have that hope brutally dashed

by the two characters themselves. Their own personality weaknesses are too strong to overcome, so they end up destroying a relationship that they could have built into something mutually satisfying. They could have become close. Indeed, they could have been right for each other, if they could have gotten past their self-centeredness and self-hatred. *The Gin Game* shows how easy and how tragic it is to let one's own self-serving habits get in the way of something good. Weller and Fonsia are too caught up in their personal demons to reach out to each other, and thus they perpetuate the loneliness that they have always brought upon themselves.

The Power Struggle between Men and Women

Coburn originally imagined the story of *The Gin Game* as simply a conflict between a man and a woman. It became more than that, but the core of the plot remains the competition to control the relationship. Weller wants to be a winner, at least in cards if he was not in life. He wants his skills to count for something, at least in cards if not in his business success. Fonsia wants to control the relationship, just as she tried to do with her husband and her son. Winning puts her in control and allows her to defeat a male partner in cards, even if she did not satisfactorily defeat her husband or son in her relationships with them. Both Weller and Fonsia have had lifelong problems with the opposite sex, so there is an automatic uneasiness between them that they cannot overcome.

In dramatic terms, they are perfect foils for each other, in that Weller is boisterous while Fonsia is reserved. But they are much the same when it comes to strong personalities and intense anger at fate. Both are experiencing the bitter fruits of a life of competition. They are attracted by what eventually drives them apart: a battle of wits. It is possible that Weller is a lot like Fonsia's former husband, and people tend to gravitate to what they know. This is true even when the situations are bad, as often happens with the spouses of alcoholics and abusers. It is also possible that Fonsia is rebelling against a culture that denies her intelligence and abilities and gives control of her life to the men around her. In her own subversive way, she will beat the men at their own games. She will divorce her husband and support herself, she will give her house to the church instead of to her son, and she will crush Weller in a game in which he thinks he is an expert.

The Psychological and Experiential Aspects of Old Age

The Gin Game is peppered with jokes about old age, but the psychological and physical dissipation that often comes with advanced age is no laughing matter. Hopes and goals seem pointless, because the elderly person is running out of time. Loneliness becomes a serious problem, especially for people such as Fonsia and Weller, who have been abandoned by their families in a nursing home. They are experiencing changes in their lives at a time when they are probably least tolerant of change and are subjected to further detachment from familiarity by having to live in a public facility instead of their

own homes. Fonsia's diabetes and Weller's heart condition compromise their freedom, and they know there is no escape other than death.

There is a sense of isolation that is aggravated by the differences in mental and physical condition between Weller and Fonsia and the rest of the residents of the home. Although they each have health issues, they are not incapacitated in any debilitating sense. They both still have sharp mental capabilities, and that is a large part of their initial attraction to each other□they are almost unique in this nursing home, because practically everyone else is bedridden or has some form of dementia. This situation is difficult for them, as they try to maintain their dignity and sanity in, as Weller describes it, □a warehouse for the intellectually and emotionally dead.□ This situation is also the reason why they are the only two who ever come out on the porch. Both are angry about being on welfare and forced to live in a shabby nursing home, which reflects on the lack of accomplishments in their lives. They are embarrassed, even humiliated, by their circumstances, and they take out these feelings on each other.

The Solitaire Game

The opening scene finds Weller at a card table on the porch playing solitaire. His look is rather disheveled. The porch is a wasteland of discarded items from the nursing home. He is frustrated and thinks he has lost his game when he looks through the last stack of cards to find an ace and a two. He continues playing. At the same time, Fonsia makes her initial appearance. She has walked onto the porch, sobbing, wearing faded pink slippers and an old housecoat. She is surprised to see Weller there. She tries to walk away but finds one door locked and a TV room full of residents behind another. She is trapped and starts to cry.

The opening scene is full of symbolism. Both Weller and Fonsia are trapped at the rest home. They are no different than the other discarded items on the porch. Their families have discarded them. Fonsia is literally trapped when the doors around her are locked or lead to places she doesn't want to go. Weller was trapped in his solitaire game with no moves left until, under the last stack, he finds an Ace and a two. That he finds those particular two cards at his moment of desperation is symbolic in and of itself: the Ace, for the lonely Weller, represents Fonsia, and the two represents the couple they could make to continue playing the "game" of life just as Weller continues playing his solitaire game. It is no coincidence that it is not revealed whether Weller wins or loses that solitaire game. He is simply presented an opportunity to keep playing. What he does with that opportunity, just as what he does with the opportunity to make something happen with Fonsia, is up to him.

Loneliness, Abandonment and Despair

Both Weller and Fonsia are desperately lonely. Neither gets along well with the other residents of the nursing home. Weller believes they are all catatonic and do nothing but complain about their ailments. This is an interesting observation from him, given the fact

that he spends a good deal of time complaining about his own ailments when he is not complaining about the conditions of the home.

Weller and Fonsia have both experienced loneliness for far longer than they have resided at the home. Each split up with their respective spouse when their children were young. Each went through a rather nasty break up. Fonsia, after throwing her husband out for excessive drinking, was left to raise her son alone. She always worried that she would misspell a word and her employer would discover that she never completed high school. Weller never saw his children again after his wife left him. His business partners shut him out as well.

Their loneliness brings them together and gives them a chance to break free. Weller cannot figure out how to take advantage of the situation. He cannot open up to Fonsia. He cannot accept her offering of friendship, but, instead, fights against her. She tries her best to make him happy, giving in to his demand to play Gin each time. By the end of the play, Fonsia stops trying to please Weller and instead decides to be just as competitive as him. He is pushed over the edge.

Luck

The luck factor is introduced early in the play when Weller calls Fonsia the luckiest person he has ever seen play Gin. Luck is the scapegoat for the failings in both Weller and Fonsia's lives. Fonsia first makes the observation that Weller's losses at Gin are attributable solely to him being the victim of bad luck. Perhaps he thinks he is a much better Gin player than he really is. She expands the concept, noting that maybe the bad luck with his business partners was really bad judgment on his part. Perhaps his business partners were better businessmen. She is trying to force the truth out of him. He will have nothing of it, though, and curses at her. After Fonsia says she had bad luck with the men in her life, Weller turns the tables on her and suggests that her "bad luck" is simply a cover for her own deficiencies and failings.

Style

Two-Person Play

A two-person play demands special treatment to be successful. Obviously, it is difficult for only two people to hold an audience's attention for ninety minutes. To do so, the actors have to captivate the audience with rich dialogue and the sheer strength of the characters' personalities. The audience has to care about what is happening between the two people onstage. Physical actions, such as Weller's overturning of the table, and sight gags, such as Fonsia's forgetting the card stuck between her lips, help keep the audience busy watching every gesture as well as hanging on every word. In such a concentrated format, every little action carries a lot of weight.

Movements around the stage relieve the tedium, but they must be motivated, of course, by what is going on. Random movements for the sake of breaking up the scene do not fool the audience. In *The Gin Game*, the positions of Weller and Fonsia at the card table represent body language that signals the mood and becomes part of the dialogue as far as the audience is concerned. The movements can also be considered a type of choreography in a tango between these two people, as they circle each other, connect, detach, and then dance again. The set decoration, furniture, and props all take on an importance that is exaggerated compared with plays with a larger cast. In like manner, sound effects, such as the thunderstorm, actually play a part in the story; for example, the sounds of a visiting choir or the television in the background are worked into the dialogue as examples of activities at the home. Considering the elements required to make a two-person play successful, it is no wonder that this type of drama is quite rare.

A Card Game as a Structural Device

The gin game is the engine of the play. In the course of seventeen hands of gin, the layers of protection that the two characters have built around their memories and emotions are slowly peeled away to reveal their true personalities, complexities, vulnerabilities, and circumstances. Playing a game against each other causes Weller and Fonsia to drop their charming facades and expose their controlling and competitive natures. Their revealed secrets become weapons used against each other. Each hand has a different rhythm, which reflects the emotional interaction of the characters; each hand demonstrates an ebbing and renewing of tension. Fonsia's repetitive, but differentiated declaration of □Gin!□ provides a moment of comedy while acting as a catalyst to Weller's anger.

The game serves as a metaphor for life in that there is an indeterminate amount of luck and skill involved in the game, just as there seems to be a certain amount of good or bad luck that offsets a person's life skills. Weller was a skilled businessman but blames his failure on the bad luck of having dishonest partners. He is also a skilled gin rummy player but cannot account for Fonsia's winning streak against him. His losses at cards

are painful reminders of the seemingly unlucky events in his business career, so his bitterness and anger are aimed at Fonsia. For both of them, the game transforms into something larger than just a game.

Tragedy Mixed with Comedy

One reason for the success of *The Gin Game* is its skillful blend of light and dark. Even though Coburn's intent was to write a tragedy, he gave his characters a sharp wit that actors have been able to turn into comic moments, which every good script needs, to ease the tension. The jokes about aging are universal. (There is □no hotter topic of conversation□ than funerals around the home.) However, the comedy is achieved as much visually as verbally, through facial expressions and other body language. The humor is more prevalent in the first act, and the hostility is more present in the second act□as one would expect as the tension of the conflict rises. Nonetheless, there are hints of the potential for conflict in the first act that are manifested, yet tempered by humor, in the second act. Ironically, some of the humor arises from how ludicrously people can behave when they allow their competitiveness to go to extremes.

Point of View

The Gin Game is a two act play with no particular point of view. There is an average amount of stage direction, but no narrative voice.

Setting

The play is set on the abandoned porch of a nursing home. The porch is cluttered with unused and discarded items such as old newspapers, dead flowers, an old bookshelf, a broken piano and an old sink. There is a garden of some sort off the porch. The porch symbolizes the worn out and broken down residents who reside within.

Language and Meaning

The language of the play is informal and conversational. It is appropriate to late 1970s America, the publication date of the play. The language of the play is reflective of the despair of the two characters at being stuck and forgotten in the rest home. On a couple of occasions, the characters misinterpret what the other has said, leading to an outburst or short argument. Early in the play, Fonsia believes that Weller has insinuated she is on welfare. This is not what he intended, but it upsets her nonetheless. Later Weller is upset when he believes Fonsia has slighted his Gin-playing abilities. He is upset with her and insists on more Gin to demonstrate his skills.

Structure

The Gin Game is divided into two acts. Each of the two acts is divided into two scenes. The plot centers around two residents of a nursing home who play cards with one another.

Historical Context

The Gin Game was written mostly in 1976, the heart of the decade. In the 1970s, the various social movements of the turbulent 1960s, such as the Civil Rights movement and the sexual revolution, reached fruition. For example, women were admitted to the various military academies for the first time. Despite the myth that nothing much happened in the 1970s, it was a historically important time in which a vice president and a president of the United States resigned and this country found itself with a president, Gerald Ford, who had not been elected to the office. He had been appointed to the vice presidency when Spiro Agnew resigned because of scandals and then succeeded the Republican president Richard Nixon. Nixon had resigned over the Watergate scandal, a break-in at the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee during his reelection campaign in 1972 that was found to have been the work of people linked to Nixon's campaign. At the same time, an economic crisis hit the United States, and there was a shortage of gasoline. In 1976, Ford was defeated by Jimmy Carter, whose presidency was mired in the Iran hostage crisis in 1979-1980, leading to his defeat by Ronald Reagan.

In world affairs, the war in Vietnam ended, and the United States withdrew from that country completely in 1975. The next year, North Vietnam and South Vietnam reunited to become the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as China, improved. Former colonial powers continued to grant independence to the last of their colonies, and Spain once again became a democracy on the death of Francisco Franco, who had ruled the country for forty years. However, the revolution in Iran and the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979 began a period of aggressive, militant Muslim fundamentalism that has continued into the twenty-first century.

Science and technology made great strides in the 1970s, with continued lunar and interplanetary, and even interstellar, space missions. Element 107, bohrium, was discovered, and the CAT scanner was invented. While personal computers were still not universally available, pocket calculators replaced slide rules, video game arcades became popular, touch-tone phones began to replace rotary models, and digital clocks became available. Microsoft was founded in 1975, and the Apple II computer was released in 1976. The first Earth Day was held in 1970, and the environmental movement continued to grow throughout the decade.

Meanwhile, at the movies, blockbusters such as *Star Wars*, *Superman*, *Jaws*, and *Rocky* dominated. In music, the Beatles broke up, and Elvis passed away; rock music divided into genres, such as heavy metal and soft rock, and punk rock and disco music became the rage. On television *Saturday Night Live* premiered, and nostalgic shows such as *Happy Days* filled the channels. In sports, the tennis player Arthur Ashe in 1975 became the first black man to win at Wimbledon. Nadia Comaneci was the first Olympic athlete to garner a perfect score in gymnastics, which she received seven times at the 1976 Summer Olympics. Dorothy Hamill won the gold medal in ice skating that year.

Although the 1970s were an active time, these years were a transition period between the turbulent 1960s, which saw assassinations, demonstrations, and riots, and the rise of conservatism in the 1980s, in the wake of the Republican Ronald Reagan's election to the presidency. During the 1970s, the American people were sorting out what had happened in the 1960s, reevaluating gender roles, and attempting to overcome political and economic upheaval to come together again as a nation.

Critical Overview

There could be no higher praise than to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, which Coburn did for *The Gin Game* in 1978. Before that award, though, the play had caught the attention and admiration of some very important people in the world of theater. When Hume Cronyn, one of the most respected stage actors of the twentieth century, read the play, he immediately wanted to take it to Broadway. The famed director Mike Nichols agreed to direct it within hours of hearing about the play, and it went on to garner a Tony nomination. When Dick Van Dyke saw the play on Broadway, he decided that he and Mary Tyler Moore had to perform it together someday; in 2003, more than twenty-five years after the play premiered, the two performed the roles of Weller and Fonsia in a PBS television production of the play.

Thomas Luddy, in a review published in *Library Journal*, remarks that □the play's brilliance lies in its simplicity and economy.□ He goes on to say that Coburn etches the issues of aging, loneliness, and the need for meaningful activity □clearly and devastatingly in terms that are also witty and entertaining,□ and declares that *The Gin Game* □will become one of the great classics of the American theater.□ Tony Curulla, writing for the Syracuse *Post-Standard*, echoes these sentiments with a description of the play as having □taut writing that delivers more than it promises□ and a □fast-paced, smart dialogue.□

A reviewer for the *Buffalo News*, Terry Doran, says: □You wouldn't imagine so much laughter could be squeezed from one little word. The word is 'gin.'□ This critic comments that there is not much more to the play than Weller's dilemma of balancing his desire to play cards with Fonsia against his rage at always losing to her. On the other hand, Doran admires the way □Coburn restricts the confessionals.□ He comments further that □they illuminate but do not weigh down his play. The past, then, is no more than a dollop of sadness and perspective in the present.□ Peter Marks of the *New York Times* also declares *The Gin Game* to be □virtually plotless.□ In contrast, a theater critic for the *St. Petersburg Times*, Joy Davis-Platt, finds *The Gin Game* to be a □very rich story□ because there is □so much drama and subtlety□ within the play.

Terry Doran considers *The Gin Game* to be □a very funny play.□ While agreeing that the dialogue evokes laughter from the audience, Kathleen Allen, a critic for the *Arizona Daily Star*, finds *The Gin Game* □a disturbing play,□ because the two characters do not learn how to change their destructive behaviors and will likely die bitter and alone. In a review for the *Austin American-Statesman*, Jamie Smith Cantara likewise says that the play is □funny, yet bleak.□

Among those who have given *The Gin Game* a negative review is Greg Evans, in an article for the venerable theater newspaper *Variety* on the occasion of the revival of the play in 1997. He wondered how the play had deserved a Pulitzer, because it is □at best merely decent,□ and he called *The Gin Game* a formulaic □one-concept play.□ Some critics do not find jokes about aging and the aged to be funny, nor can they tolerate the lack of a happy ending. In fact, some viewers feel that there is no ending at all.

Nonetheless, *The Gin Game* continued to be a favorite of regional theaters and was still being produced around the world into the twenty-first century. Whatever its flaws may be, the play deserves its praise, because it has stood the test of time.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is a school district administrator and freelance writer. In this essay, she suggests that the card game is a metaphor for life and that the nursing home is a metaphor for hell.

Productions of Coburn's play *The Gin Game* have been staged in numerous countries and languages on a continuous basis since its debut on Broadway. While it may seem an oddity that a two-person play could have any depth to it, *The Gin Game* has proved that a play about a man and a woman can be as rich and complex as the relationships they portray.

Billed as a tragicomedy, *The Gin Game* focuses on an elderly man and woman living in a shabby nursing home. They chat as they play a seemingly innocuous card game, but as Polly Warfield notes in a review for *Back Stage West*, the deck of cards □is *The Gin Game*'s deus ex machina and an instrument of destruction. The machinery is set in motion; it proceeds inexorably, inevitably as Greek tragedy, to a shattering conclusion.□ On the surface, the play is an exploration of aging and loneliness, but on a deeper level, Warfield says, it exposes □the compulsive way we sabotage ourselves□ and the existence of our own personal version of hell. Life and its inevitable conclusion, it seems, are exactly what we make of them.

Weller Martin and Fonsia Dorsey are residents at Bentley, a run-down, low-rent nursing home. They meet on the sunporch, a room that collects all that is no longer useful□damaged wheelchairs, broken pianos, dead plants, and old people. Initially, Weller and Fonsia establish a welcome friendship. They dislike the other residents, who are either catatonic or complain too much, and neither of them ever has any visitors on Visitors' Day. As Weller tells Fonsia, □There's nobody to have a decent conversation with around here anyway. You're the only one I talk to.□ Despite living in a home full of people, they are still two lonely souls in search of companionship, and they appear to find that in each other.

This discovery of the other breeds hope, as evidenced by their change in appearance upon their second meeting. In act 1, scene 1, Weller is wearing □terry-cloth slippers, khaki pants, a pajama top and an old brown wool bathrobe,□ while Fonsia enters clad in □faded pink slippers, an old housecoat, and a cardigan sweater.□ However, in act 1, scene 2, Weller wears □a jacket and tie, khaki pants and loafers,□ and Fonsia □looks like a different woman . . . [in] a print dress, a rose-colored cardigan, and open-toed sandals.□ This new concern for fashion suggests anticipation, effort, and the possibility that life for them may not be over, as was previously assumed. Yet as the games of gin continue, attraction turns to competition. Slowly the vulnerabilities of both players are revealed, but these confidences do not lead to intimacy and comfort. Rather, they incite a fallback to old patterns of bitter, biting antagonisms. Just as in their card game, Weller and Fonsia are locked into roles from which they cannot, or will not, break free. Their behaviors doom them to their loneliness and decay, and the true tragedy is that, ultimately, they do it all to themselves.

It is the theme of self-sabotage that provides *The Gin Game* with layers of meaning beyond a simple examination of the complexities □of being old, poor, helpless, and rejected,□ as Warfield describes the pair. Weller wants to believe that he is □one of the best damn Gin players you'll ever see,□ but he never wins. He cannot even win when he is playing solitaire. He throws himself into horrific rages and yells at Fonsia for his losses, but he is the dealer. He is the one giving Fonsia every card she needs and ruining his own chances of winning. He wants victory, and one senses that he needs victory to redeem himself, but he does nothing but deal himself the losing hand. Still, Weller in no way takes responsibility; to him, it is all just bad luck□just as it was bad luck that he was □thrown out□ of his own business or that his former wife received custody of the children and he lost touch with them. Bad luck is his excuse for all his misfortunes in life, not just in gin. As Fonsia says, □You have to be the victim of bad luck, don't you, Weller. . . . Because if it wasn't bad luck, it'd have to be something else, wouldn't it?□ Weller's uncontrollable temper comes from the inner knowledge that he has created his own miserable situation, but his refusal to outwardly acknowledge his complicity allows the cycle of self-destruction to continue. He wants to win, but until he admits that he is to blame for his losses in life, he never will.

Fonsia, who initially appears to be delicate and deserving of sympathy, is really just as self-destructive as Weller. She has pushed away everyone in her family: she kicked out and divorced her husband, disowned her son (and, along with him, her two grandsons), and has not seen her sister in fifteen years (though the reason is not revealed). Fonsia is alone and on welfare, because the people she is supposed to love and who are supposed to love her are no longer allowed in her life. Then she is faced with an opportunity to establish a connection with Weller, and, like Weller, she compulsively destroys any chance to redeem herself. In the guise of a gracious, apologetic winner, she torments and criticizes Weller and eventually, inevitably, drives him away, just like every other man in her life. Also like Weller, it is everyone else's fault but her own: □When it comes to men, I've been very unlucky.□ Weller calls her on it, saying, □It had to be bad luck, because if it wasn't bad luck, it would've had to been the fact that maybe it was you!□ He suggests that Fonsia is □rigid, self-righteous, vicious.□ Fonsia will never take responsibility for her own actions and thus is doomed to making the same mistakes over and over. So she is left at the end of the play, sitting by herself on the glider, saying, □Oh, no.□

Weller and Fonsia's circular predicament lands them in a hell of their own making, where they are forced to examine their impoverished lives. The religious overtones in *The Gin Game* are abundant and, indeed, help to further explain the pair's situation. According to Fonsia, her □old time Methodist□ father never cursed and □would never have played cards. He didn't smoke, drink or run around either.□ By those standards, Weller and Fonsia are both □hopeless sinner[s],□ since they curse, take the Lord's name in vain, and play gin and Weller chews on an unlit cigar. They consistently use words like □[g□□d□□]it,□ □Jesus Christ,□ □for Christsake,□ and □Lord.□ Certainly neither one of them has treated the people in their lives with kindness or generosity. The sunporch is definitely no heaven; in fact, it seems as if heaven is taunting them from a distance. The Grace Avenue Methodist Church Choir sings offstage as Weller loses another game to Fonsia. Later, a TV evangelist can be heard in the next room, and

Weller □pauses for a moment to listen. Disgusted, he 'gives the finger' to the TV.□ Three of the four scenes take place on a Sunday□the Sabbath as well as Visitors' Day, when Weller and Fonsia's self-imposed isolation is most acute. Thunder roars, lightning flashes, and another choir is suddenly heard offstage just as Weller and Fonsia play their last tragic hand. It is certainly not a stretch to think of a dilapidated old-age home as a metaphor for hell, and this seems to be exactly where Weller and Fonsia have exiled themselves.

In fact, even the cards in the deck seem to play by rules outside the laws of physics. Fonsia, beyond all probability, wins every game. Perhaps, as Warfield suggests, □the malevolent gods of mischief have had a hand in dealing these cards.□ Or, as Weller claims, it is □Divine Intervention.□ He asks, □God gave you that card, didn't he?□ Perhaps the definition of hell for Weller and Fonsia is that all the self-sabotaging they have engaged in over the years has now trapped them in a place where they can no longer do anything except engage in self-sabotage. Thus they will never be able to leave and never have access to anything better. They are stuck in hell, and though they can hear heaven in the distance, they can never reach it. Weller and Fonsia began the gin game looking for comfort and companionship, but, ultimately, there will never be comfort, companionship, or visitors in hell.

The Gin Game not only speaks to the human condition, human frailty, and the inevitable aging process we all face but also acts as a metaphor for the lives (and possibly afterlives) we choose for ourselves and the fate we must face at the end. Just like two souls standing in front of Saint Peter, Weller and Fonsia are held accountable for their actions, which they must admit to themselves. The tragedy is not simply where they end up but the fact that it could have been different. If only Weller had kept in touch with his children or Fonsia had not been so vindictive, they could have lived out their golden years with loving relatives instead of trapped in a home full of faceless strangers. Weller and Fonsia, like the original sinners Adam and Eve, must suffer the consequences of their own actions and are destined to spend the rest of their days in exile.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on *The Gin Game*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Trudell is a doctoral student of English literature at Rutgers University. In the following essay, he discusses Weller's inner turmoil and its sources, arguing that Coburn designs the play so that audiences are forced to experience this feeling themselves.

This essay refers to the Drama Book Specialists version of the play, while the preceding entry refers to the Samuel French version. Certain differences may be apparent.

The fascinating part of *The Gin Game* is that it creates such extraordinary tension despite its complete lack of plot action. The play cannot be classified as a straightforward comedy, because of this uncomfortable, affronting tension, all of which comes from the character of Weller. This mystifying, unstable, violent, cynical, and sexist old man intrigues and amuses audiences enough that they are able to endure a lengthy exposure to his discomforting personality. In fact, Coburn designs his play as a psychological character study in which the anger, frustration, hopelessness, and despair inside Weller extends to Fonsia and the audience as well.

The crux or mystery of the play is the cause of Weller's final fit of madness, as it is described in the play's final stage directions. Weller voices his various gripes and alludes to his life's failures and frustrations throughout the play, but these descriptions do not add up to a clear idea of what it is that haunts Weller and ultimately causes him to go mad. His specific complaints range from the patronizing nursing home staff, to his family's desertion of him, to the other elderly people in the nursing home, to his old business partners who took his money, and to the welfare system. More broadly, he is troubled by the way that American culture treats the elderly, leaving them to die in inadequate facilities without even bothering to visit them.

Weller also seems to have a fear of death and a sense that life is pointless. He feels that he is wasting his life playing gin, but (as Fonsia points out) he has played gin his entire life. Fonsia says that this should make him think that gin is not a way of frittering [his] life away, but it would stand to reason that the gin playing throughout his life was, in fact, a purposeless waste of time. Because gin playing is the only thing that Weller does anymore, the only thing he believes he is good at, and a metaphor for all of life's events to which he dedicated himself, this suggests that his entire life has been wasted. The paralysis Weller describes in act 1, scene 2, in which he says, This feeling of sheer terror came over me, further suggests that he is petrified both of dying and of the idea that he has led a paralyzed, useless, and pointless existence that is about to come to an end.

The only thing that scares Weller more than pointlessness and death is the idea that he may be personally responsible for all of it because of his own faults and bad judgment, as opposed to being a victim of bad luck. In fact, this is the central realization that Weller reaches during the play because of his interaction with Fonsia. Fonsia is no weakling, willing to submit to Weller's aggressive baiting, although he does continually manage to lure her into spending more time with him. She rejoins his aggression with

perceptive and biting comments (as well as adept card playing) that enrage Weller and force him to come to terms with his own failures. When she reaches her most frustrated and aggressive point, telling Weller, □Because if it wasn't bad luck, it'd have to be something else, wouldn't it?,□ Fonsia severely shakes his confidence and his sense of self-worth.

On the surface, therefore, Fonsia causes Weller to go mad. Coburn suggests that this is the case in a number of places, including when Fonsia tells Weller that □Fons,□ an abbreviation of her name, □means 'source' in Latin.□ The gin game itself, which is the only rising dramatic action of the play, also suggests that Fonsia represents the cause of Weller's misfortunes. This is why Weller becomes so angry at Fonsia, why he sincerely believes that divine intervention gives her the right cards, and why he is so thoroughly humiliated and infuriated by the game. However, Coburn is very careful about how he places Fonsia in the position of cause and revealer of Weller's madness. By arranging the structure of the play so that the spectators feel that they are in Fonsia's position, the playwright is able to imply that the audience itself (and, by extension, the public at large) is the real source and root of Weller's madness.

Coburn develops this agenda, first, by ensuring that the spectator experiences Weller's character from a point of view that is much like that of Fonsia's. Like Fonsia, the audience always comes upon him while he is alone and waiting on the sunporch, and, also like Fonsia, they are initially charmed by his edgy and incisive wit. As Weller begins the process of uncovering the uncomfortable and potentially threatening aspects of his personality, however, the audience and Fonsia both grow wary of being near him. Because it has only two characters and because there is no live action to distract the audience from Weller's imposing psychological presence, the play steadily builds its sense of fear and discomfort until the climax at the end of act 1, when Weller swears and furiously throws over the card table.

Although audience members may be curious about Weller or interested to see what happens to him, they feel suspicious or frightened of him after this happens. Weller has invaded their space on intimate terms, offending them, just as he has violated Fonsia's personal space and her sense of security. Like Fonsia, the audience may prefer to □be alone for a while,□ or withdraw from their intimacy with and sympathy for Weller's character. It is because Coburn understands this probable reaction (in fact, he carefully tries to produce it) that he places Fonsia in the audience at the beginning of the second act. This dramatic device accomplishes two important goals. First, it reminds the audience that they are in Fonsia's position: calm and reasonable observers of Weller who may seem reluctant to engage with him but are nevertheless interested in his character. Perhaps more important, however, it serves to coax the audience back into their intimacy with Weller. Weller appeals directly to them, appeases them, and draws them back into conversation and card playing, causing them to move the memory of his bout of violence to the back of their minds.

It is at this point that Weller's great inner despair begins to spread to Fonsia. Weller purposefully allows this to happen (because of his resentment of Fonsia) by prying into the reason that no one visits her on Sundays. Fonsia then alerts the audience to the fact

that Weller is getting to her by suddenly exclaiming □Transferred!!!,□ presumably because she never could remember how to spell it but, more important, because Coburn wishes to suggest that there is a process of transference going on in the drama. Weller proceeds to thoroughly wear out, offend, threaten, and attack Fonsia as part of his defensive and bitter response to how she makes him feel. By the middle of act 3, he has uncovered the fact that Fonsia's son lives in the same city, yet never visits her. By the end of the play he has forced her to come to terms with the fact that she has some of the same qualities of bad judgment that he does, shattering her sense of security.

Because the audience feels that they are in the same position as Fonsia (again, she even sat in the audience to emphasize her proximity to them), they are also alternatively courted and frightened by Weller, and they are susceptible to his prying questions. Coburn has duped the audience into playing a sort of gin game with the play in which, like Fonsia, they submit to Weller's manipulations and engage with him because they are curious about him and feel a certain amount of sympathy for him. The play's humor is key to the success of this agenda; the audience is willing to accommodate Weller's sarcastic streaks because he is a funny old man and humor is an effective tool at diffusing uncomfortable moments. The result is a wide susceptibility in the audience that allows Coburn to make them feel shocked and afraid when Weller reaches his final explosion.

This dramatic device is effective, because Weller makes the audience feel that they are somehow implicated in the causes of his anger and terror. Weller is talented at turning around his own discomfort by becoming aggressive, which makes Fonsia feel insecure and also puts the spectators on edge. His accusations sometimes hit the mark (including his judgment about Fonsia's son), but he also throws out wild questions, such as □DIDN'T GOD GIVE YOU THAT CARD???□ Such accusatory yelling goes beyond Fonsia and implicates the audience, making them feel uncomfortable and somehow party to Weller's anguish. Coburn's design is to stir up uncomfortable feelings and guilt in the audience, attacking their self-worth. The most obvious form of guilt they might feel after Weller's upsetting outbursts is over how they have treated elderly people in their own lives.

Capitalizing on the prevailing emotions of Fonsia's weariness and shock and extending them to create a sense of guilt in the audience, Coburn infects the audience with the emotions of Weller's frightening outbursts. His play is designed to manufacture deep-seated feelings of anger and terror and then force the spectator to experience them in as intimate a setting as possible. This is not just to force a reaction in the audience or to scare them; it is to demonstrate the vigorous emotion that is possible in elderly people when they have been shunned and dismissed from society. As well as a kind of emotional exploration, Coburn's play is an existential message about the futility of life, a reminder of the terrifying approach of death, and a forceful urge for audiences to appreciate the passion and vigor of the elderly and reconsider shunting them away to poorly maintained, seldom-visited nursing homes.

Source: Scott Trudell, Critical Essay on *The Gin Game,* in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Heims is a writer and teacher living in Paris. In this essay, he examines those aspects of The Gin Game *that make it a tragedy.*

When used in everyday speech, the word *tragedy* refers to a grave and unexpected misfortune with terrible consequences. When used in relation to drama, *tragedy* signifies a play that chronicles such a misfortune and its consequences. Tragedies can end in death or in the exclusion of the person whom the tragedy befalls from membership in the common society. But there is a particular characteristic of a tragic dramatic figure that makes her or him different from a character in a play who merely suffers misfortune or even death. While it is tragic when a character in real life is, for example, attacked and killed on the street or maimed in an automobile accident or blown up in war or the victim of a terrible loss, such events in a play, by definition and despite their horrible or heartbreaking nature, are not tragic.

For a play to be called a tragedy, the character who is the victim of misfortune and catastrophe must be, in the core of his or her being, the very agent of the terrible event. Tragedy inextricably mingles individual responsibility and fate. The tragedy reveals and results from a flaw in character that causes the tragedy. A tragic character is not an evil person, only fatally flawed. To be a tragic character, the character must have lived in ignorance of the flaw in his or her nature or character, be blind to it, and be proudly proceeding as if everything were fine. Nevertheless, he or she, innocently, must set the tragic event in motion. The blindness that hurtles the character toward disaster, not the terrible occurrence itself, is at the heart of tragedy. The terrible occurrence paradoxically provides a moment of enlightenment, of insight and revelation. It reveals truth: the existence of the flaw that the tragic character has resisted seeing. The character remains helpless in the face of the tragedy but becomes painfully enlightened.

In one of the most famous tragedies, that of Oedipus, as presented in *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, first performed around 426 b.c.e. in Greece, Oedipus, the ruler of Thebes, is unaware of his own guilt as he sets out to find the man responsible for a plague that is devastating Thebes. The man he is searching for, whose crime is that he has murdered his father and become the husband of his mother, turns out to be Oedipus himself. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, written around 1595, the tragic aspect of the plot is not that the lovers die but that the cause of their death is the self-centeredness of their love and the hastiness of their actions. Similarly, in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (ca. 1605), the tragedy is not Lear's death and his daughter Cordelia's death but the fact that his own blind willfulness brings about their deaths.

The complex nature of tragedy is the result of the destruction and enlightenment simultaneously unleashed by the tragic event. Consequently, in tragedy there is an element of purgation both for the protagonist and for the audience. The reversal of fortune brings the hero down but also reveals something fundamental about the hero and humankind to the character and to the spectators. The character's blindness can also be the source of the audience's insight, and, if they pay attention to the story of the

tragedy, it is less likely that they will have to undergo the experience that the tragic character has suffered. Thus, the tragic character becomes a kind of sacred sacrifice. Considered as a dramatic form, tragedy is not just an event but a process, a painful ritual with transformative power.

Tragedy is usually thought of as belonging to Greek or Shakespearean theater. It is typically associated with great, powerful, and noble figures□rulers and heroes□not with common men and women. One of the tasks that modern playwrights, like Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), have set themselves is to write tragedies that involve common, ordinary people. These modern plays are about □little□ people, whose lives affect few but themselves and their immediate circle, rather than leaders whose falls have wide effects. In *The Gin Game*, Coburn has attempted to write such a tragedy. Set not against a grand background involving great or even monumental figures, whose lives and deaths affect multitudes, *The Gin Game* is set in an old-age home and involves two very ordinary old people who reside there.

In a tragedy, the process of tragic revelation begins without the tragic protagonist's even knowing it□since the protagonist is figuratively blind. In *The Gin Game*, it starts with a commonplace act. Weller Martin asks Fonsia Dorsey, whom he has just met on the porch of the home for the aged where they both reside, whether she plays cards. As *The Gin Game* opens, he has been sitting there alone, playing solitaire. She comes from inside the house, obviously disturbed and crying. She excuses herself, saying □I didn't think anybody was out here.□ In turn, he apologizes and then asks if she is not □new here,□ probably assuming that is the reason for her tears and delicately referring to her sadness without intrusively inquiring. They begin to talk about their illnesses and complain about nursing homes. After they have exhausted the subject, he invites her to play gin with him. The cards are already on the table. She confesses that she has not played in years but says that she had played quite a bit in her youth, even though her parents, □old time Methodists,□ would have disapproved, had they known.

Once they begin to play, it becomes clear that the card game is more than a card game. Within the format of the card game, Weller and Fonsia form a relationship that mirrors and repeats all their past relationships and brings to the surface their essential personalities and the aspects of themselves that they have tried to keep hidden, even from themselves, and which they have denied existed. They encounter themselves and each other. Weller seems in control but is ineffective. He has to beg Fonsia to play, as if he were a lover seeking affection, and when he keeps losing, it rattles him, threatens the self-esteem he struggles to maintain. Fonsia withholds part of herself, is impenetrable, and has an air of being superior. She is censorious, even punitive, by nature, and she wins every game. The fact of the tragedy is that the encounter with themselves that their encounter with each other provokes is, for each of them, their final encounter with their destinies.

The two are lonely old people whose lives have been failures, as much as they first try to deny it. Meeting each other gives Fonsia and Weller their last chance to redeem their lives and reverse their destinies, but so strongly are their characters their destinies that the chance for that redemption is thwarted. It could happen only if they could become

people they are not, and they are on the painful path of discovering who they unrelentingly are. Both are cut off from their families, uncared for, and indigent, and they are trying to keep up appearances. Both also explain their plight by ascribing it to bad luck, rather than accepting that their condition is a result of the flaws in their characters. In the course of the gin games, through the conversations and the behavior elicited by the games, those flaws are revealed: his pride and impotence and her self-righteous vindictiveness. The games are catalysts. For both Fonsia and Weller, the games begin to challenge the concept of luck.

Although Weller is an old hand at gin and prides himself on being an expert player, and although Fonsia seems to be an amateur to whom Weller teaches the game, from the start, she beats him at every hand. As they play, the little quirks of their characters, which suggest the possible conflicts that may arise, appear. He seems rough and his language coarse; she seems polished, refined, and genteel. He gives the impression of having been successful as a businessman, and she appears to have financial resources and a family. But the Sunday they meet, a visitors' day, they are both alone, without visitors. She explains that her son and her sister live far from the old-age home. He tells her of his divorce and of an ex-wife who turned his children away from him. As they speak, they play cards. As she keeps beating him, he is gracious at first. Soon, however, her victories and his losses begin to unnerve him, until, at the end of act 1, he throws over the card table. At the end of act 2, which is also the end of the play, he repeatedly beats the card table with his cane, crying □Gin□ over and over with every blow of the cane.

After Weller becomes enraged that Fonsia is beating him, she tells him, □You take it too seriously, Weller. Lord, it's only a game.□ But it is not just a game for him; the game is touching on something more serious. Losing undoes him, because it reflects and confirms his failure in life. Weller has protected himself from despair and rage at his losses and failures by thinking of himself as unlucky. He explains one of the pivotal experiences of his life, the loss of his business, as a result of bad luck. When Fonsia learns that he is on welfare, she says to him, □You had your own business . . . and you did well, I thought. Flying around the country. I just assumed. . . .□ He explains, □Oh hell, I did do well. You're right. I built that God-damn business. And if I'd had a little better luck with my business partners, I'd probably still have it. I was literally thrown out of my own business.□ When she asks him how it happened, he cannot explain but can only say, □It's too complicated.□

The loss at cards, the apparent bad luck, mirrors the loss of his business and seems to indicate that it is not just luck but a fate determined by something about himself that defines and plagues him. Later, Fonsia makes him face it: □You have to be the victim of bad luck, don't you, Weller. . . . Because if it wasn't bad luck, it'd have to be something else, wouldn't it? . . . It'd have to be something like maybe you think you play this game a whole lot better than you really play it.□ And then she makes the connection between their game and his previous losses. □If it hadn't been bad luck with your business partners,□ she says, □then it would've had to been bad judgment . . . or worse yet, maybe they were simply better businessmen than you were.□ The fury of his response□□You shut your . . . mouth! You don't know the first thing about it□□suggests

that Fonsia indeed has spoken a truth. But her acuity does not extend to herself. It is directed to the other, and, as payment for her penetration, Weller returns an indictment of her that is equally powerful, equally unwelcome, and equally accurate.

It becomes clear that the reason for Fonsia's tears at the beginning of *The Gin Game* is not that she is a new resident but that her son does not visit her on visitors' day. There has been a rupture between them, just as there was a rupture with her husband, his father, many years before. When her son, as an adult, decided to find his father, she broke with him and disinherited him. After Fonsia challenges Weller's claim that his failures stem from his being unlucky, he counters, referring to the venom that characterizes the way she has spoken of her husband and her son: □You don't have too many kind things to say about the men in your life, do you?□ She answers, □I'll admit it. When it comes to men, I've been very unlucky.□ □You've been what?□ he returns. □I haven't had much success,□ she says, trying to hedge, realizing that he is beating her with her own stick. □You've been unlucky!□ he persists, knowing he has cornered her. □Alright!□ she concedes. Then he comes in for the kill. □Sounds like you've been having the same kind of bad luck you've been telling me about. It had to be bad luck, because if it wasn't bad luck, it would've had to been the fact that maybe it was you! That maybe you're a rigid, self-righteous, vicious . . . .□ She stops him, crying, □Alright! You made your point. Just be quiet and play the cards.□

Their last game is an intense and angry contest, and it seals their fates and confirms their identities. She wins. He explodes in violence, raising his cane in the air and bringing it forcefully down on her chair, just after she has risen from it and walked away. Then he begins his agonized repetition of the word □gin.□ She cries □Don't hit me, Weller□ and calls out for a nurse. He falls sobbing onto the table, realizing the falseness of his pride and the reality of his impotence, and then goes inside. She calls his name, but he does not stay. He is defeated but enlightened. She exhales the words, □Oh, no,□ struck not by his cane but by the realization that, without knowing she was doing it and because of her character flaws, she has wrecked a man she cared for as well as her relationship with him and finds herself once more alone.

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

Quotes

"I have one of the most advanced cases of old age in the history of Medical Science. The mortality rate's incredible." Act I, Scene 1, p. 7.

"This is exciting! I'm actually enjoying myself." Act I, Scene I, p. 11.

"That's why Magicians like to play old age homes. Half the audience is shaking so goddamn bad they can't focus, and the other half's asleep." Act I, Scene I, p. 18.

"I just don't know how to act with people anymore. I'm unsure of myself... rusty." Act I, Scene 2, p. 22.

"You're the luckiest person I've ever seen play Gin in my life." Act I, Scene 2, p. 28.

"Now, Weller. Don't get mad at me... all I've done is sit here and play the cards the same as you." Act I, Scene 2, p. 30.

"Don't kid yourself that this is anything more than a warehouse for the intellectually and emotionally dead." Act II, Scene 1, p. 36.

"Now, I'll discard and it's going to be the exact card that Fonsia wants." Act II, Scene 1, p. 43.

"Alright. This is it! This is the game!" Act II, Scene 2, p. 55.

"You have to be the victim of bad luck, don't you, Weller... Because if it wasn't bad luck, it'd have to be something else, wouldn't it?" Act II, Scene 2, p. 56.

Adaptations

The Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn version of *The Gin Game* was made available on video in 1984 by RKO Home Video.

The version of the play made for PBS and starring Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore was released by Image Entertainment in both VHS and DVD formats in 2003.

Topics for Further Study

The Gin Game is not set in any particular geographical location or any specific time period. Conduct a small group discussion about the other plays that you know that also have no specific location or time period or both. Compare this characteristic of the play with those that must be placed in a particular time or place and with those, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, that were given a particular time and place but that have been reset in other times and places.

The setting of *The Gin Game* is a nursing home for the elderly. Visit a few nursing homes and record your impressions. Among those you visit, choose one that will likely have residents on welfare, like Weller and Fonsia, and one that is advertised as more of an upscale □retirement residence.□ Write an essay explaining the differences and similarities that you saw on your visits.

There are seventeen hands of gin played in the course of *The Gin Game*. Do a mathematical study to figure the odds of Fonsia's winning every hand.

The Gin Game is a rare two-person play. Hunt for one- and two-character plays and make a list of those that you find, noting any commercial success these plays have had. Explain in an essay why you think that ensemble plays are more common.

Compare and Contrast

Mid-1970s: In the mid-1970s, nursing home scandals break out across the country, demonstrating provider fraud and poor care, even though legislation was enacted several times to protect nursing home residents since the first major abuses of regulations were revealed in the 1960s.

Today: To protect nursing home residents from elder abuse and safeguard against Medicare and Medicaid and other fraud, numerous advocacy groups have been established, further federal and state legislation has been enacted, and litigation has increased dramatically on behalf of residents and their families.

Mid-1970s: Approximately twenty-five million people are sixty-five years of age or older, and life expectancy is about sixty-seven years for men and nearly seventy-five years for women.

Today: Approximately thirty-eight million people are sixty-five years of age or older, and life expectancy is about seventy-five years of age for men and eighty years for women.

Mid-1970s: People are retiring between the ages of sixty-two and sixty-five, with the expectation of living, on average, only another five to ten years after retirement.

Today: The retirement age is being increased to sixty-seven, and it is common for people to live relatively healthy lives into their eighties and even nineties.

Mid-1970s: Few people have heard of the age-related disease called Alzheimer's, even though it was identified in 1906, because it is difficult to diagnose and sometimes is confused with dementia and even short-term memory loss, which is considered more or less a normal part of aging.

Today: With Americans living to an older age, there has been a dramatic increase in the incidence of and research into the specific dementia that is now commonly identified as Alzheimer's disease and is known to be related to a characteristic clumping of plaques and tangles in the brain.

What Do I Read Next?

Like *The Gin Game*, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), David Mamet's play about cold and calculating real estate salesmen, depicts the destructive effects of competitiveness with bitter and sarcastic humor.

Weller Martin in *The Gin Game* is often compared to Willie Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1948), a play by Arthur Miller. Both men are belligerent losers who blame other people for their failures.

Lanford Wilson's play *Talley's Folley* (1979), like *The Gin Game*, involves a conflict between a man and a woman, but here prejudice provides the complication and a romance is at stake.

Nobody's Home: Candid Reflections of a Nursing Home Aide (2004), by Thomas Edward Gass, reports on the author's experience of working in a nursing home as a frontline caregiver and as the social services director. His stories run the gamut of emotions, and he makes suggestions about how to preserve the dignity of the patients and make a long-term-care facility a better place to live and work.

Further Study

Gussow, Mel, □'Gin Game' Author Lives a Miracle,□ in the *New York Times*, October 11, 1977, p. 43.

This article outlines the rapid success of D. L. Coburn in taking *The Gin Game* from its first reading to a Pulitzer Prize in little over a year and includes comments from an interview with the playwright.

Harrington, Joan, ed., *The Playwright's Muse*, Routledge, 2002.

This book is a collection of interviews with eleven Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatists about their inspirations and works.

Moody, Harry R., *Aging: Concepts and Controversies*, Pine Forge Press, 2000.

Although this is a textbook, Moody's clearly written discourse on aging is a good resource for questions about the social, biological, and ethical issues of aging, including demographic and Social Security data.

Sime, Tom, □Playwright Has Played His Cards Right with the Timeless 'Gin Game,'□ in *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, January 20, 1999, p. K.1896.

Originally an interview for the *Dallas Morning News*, this article includes several quotes from the actors who performed in the 1997 Broadway revival of *The Gin Game*. Primarily, however, the article reports Coburn's answers to questions about his most famous play, his family, and his continuing career as a playwright.

Stewart, Gail, *The 1970s*, Lucent Books, 1999.

Part of the series entitled Cultural History of the United States through the Decades, this short book has a theme-based approach and extensive photographs and sidebars that thoroughly cover the people, places, and events of the times.

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□□□, *The Gin Game*, Drama Book Specialists, 1978, pp. 25, 29, 39, 40, 48, 53, 69, 73.

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Marks, Peter, □A Card Game as Metaphor for the Emotional Battle of Aging,□ in the *New York Times*, April 21, 1997, Section C, p. 11.

Scholem, Richard, □Our Man on Broadway,□ in *Long Island Business News*, Vol. 44, No. 21, May 26, 1997, p. 49.

Smith Cantara, Jamie, □In 'Gin Game,' Old-timers Play but Find Little Luck as Friends,□ in the *Austin American-Statesman*, February 13, 2002, Section E, p. 4.

Warfield, Polly, □The Gin Game at Theatre 40,□ in *Back Stage West*, Vol. 10, No. 20, May 15, 2003, p. 15.

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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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