Hot L Baltimore Study Guide

Hot L Baltimore by Lanford Wilson

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Introduction

Opening in February 1973, *Hot L Baltimore* was the first major success for Wilson and his theater company, the Circle Repertory Company. Critics and audiences loved Wilson's play, and it set an Off-Broadway record of 1,166 performances after playing Off-Off-Broadway for a month.

In the play, the actors mill about in the lobby of a dilapidated old hotel, from which the "e" in the hotel sign is missing hence the name, *Hot L Baltimore.* The play is comprised of a series of conversations between the residents of the hotel, who are contemplating an uncertain future after the hotel is condemned and scheduled for demolition.

Wilson's play won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the Best American Play of 1972-73. It also won an Obie Award for best Off-Broadway play, an Outer Critics Award, and the John Gassner Playwriting award. The play was also sold to ABC and adapted as a situation comedy.

Author Biography

On April 13, 1937, Lanford Wilson was born in Lebanon, Missouri. When he was five years old his parents divorced and his father moved to California; he lived with his mother until 1956.

Wilson attended Southwest Missouri State College (1955-56) and San Diego State College (1956- 57). When he was nineteen, Wilson moved to Chicago. He fell in love with big city life and got a job at an advertising agency doing illustrations.

At that time he began writing plays and enrolled at University of Chicago to learn more about the theater. After he moved to New York in 1962, Wilson became an active participant in the Off-Off Broadway movement.

Several of his early plays were produced at the Caffe Cino or at La Mama Experimental Theatre. These early one-act plays were followed by a succession of full-length works, beginning with *Balm in Gilead* (1965).

In 1968, Wilson co-founded the Circle Repertory Company, where most of his works premiered. Strong character development has become a hallmark of Wilson's work. His characters often exist on the fringes of society, but as the play progresses, they demonstrate that they are capable of growth and change.

Wilson has been the recipient of several awards, including the New York Drama Critics Circle award in 1973 for Ho*t L Baltimore* and in 1980 for The Migrants. He also received the American Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1974; in 1980 he received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Plot Summary

Act I

The play opens at 7 a.m. on Memorial Day. The hotel is being torn down and the residents are being notified that they have one month left before they must move.

As Bill notifies the hotel's residents, Mrs. Bellotti enters looking for Katz, who has refused to allow her son to move back into the hotel. Millie begins a conversation with the Girl about ghosts.

April complains about several things: the sunlight, her inability to sleep, the change to daylight savings time, and the state of the water in the hotel. Mr. Morse enters and loudly complains that his window does not close tightly and that he may well become sick from the draft.

Jackie and Jamie enter, and Jackie immediately begins looking for Katz. Jackie goes up to Morse's room to fix the stuck window. Katz finally enters and is accosted by the entire group with their complaints.

Jackie returns to the lobby to ask Katz to co-sign a loan she needs; he refuses. In the middle of their conversation, Suzy enters with a customer. Katz tries to stop the man from going upstairs with Suzy, but she claims that he is a friend who is going upstairs to have a drink with her.

Mrs. Bellotti pleads with Katz to allow her son to return to the hotel. Katz will not consider it, claiming that Bellotti's son is a thief. Mrs. Bellotti tells everyone that her husband has recently had his leg amputated because of diabetes and that he will not allow the son to return to their home. Jamie, who has been playing checkers with Morse, offers to help Mrs. Bellotti pack her son's belongings.

The Girl receives a phone call from her pimp and sets up an appointment with a customer, which bothers Bill. Suzy's customer comes downstairs, followed by a naked Suzy, who is complaining that the man beat her and locked her out of her room. At that moment, Jamie is descending the stairs and sees Suzy, minus her towel. He is so startled that he drops the box he is carrying.

Act II

Later that afternoon, Paul is badgering Mrs. Oxenham for help in locating his grandfather. Jamie and Morse are playing checkers. The Girl enters and begins to complain about the lack of hot water; she finally realizes that Katz has no intention of fixing the hot water.

Jamie and Morse fight about the checker game. It escalates into a physical brawl. After Morse hides in the closet out of embarrassment, Jamie feigns injuries to lure Morse from the closet.

Jackie enters, complaining that all the pawnshops in town are closed. The Girl asks Paul about his grandfather and learns that he has spent two years on a work farm for selling drugs.

Meanwhile, Jackie brags about the land she bought from a radio ad and about the organic food she is going to grow. The other residents realize that she has been conned. Millie talks about her childhood home.

Morse announces that he has been robbed all his wife's jewelry is missing. The residents realize that Jackie is the thief and Katz tells her that she must leave immediately or he will have her arrested. Millie informs Paul that she is sure his grandfather is still alive.

Act III

At midnight, April is complaining about her customers. Bill has had the hot water fixed. The Girl searches through receipts looking for information about Paul's missing grandfather.

The residents realize that Jackie has abandoned her brother. Suzy comes downstairs with all her luggage and announces that she is moving to a new apartment that her new friend (her pimp) has arranged for her.

After a glass of champagne, Suzy leaves. When the Girl informs Paul that she thinks she can find his grandfather, Paul tells her not to bother; he is no longer interested. As the play ends, April takes Jamie by the hand and begins to dance with him.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Hot L Baltimore is Lanford Wilson's three-act play about the lives of a motley group of characters, whose lives are about to be altered by the upcoming destruction of a dilapidated hotel in which they reside.

The Hotel Baltimore was built during the heyday of the railroads in the late nineteenth century, and its interior reflects the Art Deco interior design of that period. The hotel's gleaming persona has diminished, along with the waning of the railroad as a means of mass transportation.

Clearly, the hotel has seen better days. The lobby and lounge area is clean, but run down. The lighted sign outside has lost its "e," so that it reads, "Hot L Baltimore."

As the play opens, it is 7 o'clock in the morning on Memorial Day. A young man, named Paul Granger III, sleeps in one of the lounge chairs. Another man, named Bill, who is the night clerk, mans the check-in desk and switchboard, along with a hotel resident referred to only as Girl. Girl is a nineteen-year-old call girl and sometimes sits with Bill during his night shift, when she is between calls.

Bill begins to make wake-up calls to residents via the switchboard. The Girl tries to flirt with him, but he nervously deflects the Girl's attentions. A woman of 68, named Millie, descends the hotel steps and greets Bill and the Girl. Millie bemoans the fact that she has retired from a career as a waitress, yet her body cannot sleep in after rising early for so many years.

Bill mentions that a local hotel called the Pioneer is being torn down and motions to Millie behind the Girl's back, when he says that the Pioneer is not the only hotel falling victim to a wrecking ball. Millie does not register any surprise at this bit of information, clearly resigned to the fate of useless things.

A 55-year-old woman, named Mrs. Bellotti, enters the hotel lobby to look for Mr. Katz, the hotel's manager. Mrs. Bellotti is concerned, because Mr. Katz has evicted her son, named Horse. He has nowhere else to live. Bill repeatedly tells Mrs. Bellotti that Mr. Katz comes into work at 8 o'clock, but she whines about Horse's plight to anyone who will listen.

Bill tries to maintain the switchboard activity among all these distractions and gets frustrated at the Girl's good-natured attempts to help. Bill suggests that the Girl distribute the mail in the residents' mailboxes. The Girl soon sees that the letters are eviction notices and leaves them for the day desk clerk to distribute, as the Girl does not want to be associated with such a negative activity.

Mrs. Bellotti tries to discern from Bill why Mr. Katz has evicted Horse, but Bill defers any response. Finally, Bill suggests that Mrs. Bellotti visit the coffee shop on the corner to wait for Mr. Katz' arrival. Mrs. Bellotti exits the hotel.

Bill changes the subject and begins to talk to Millie again about the time she worked at the soon-to-be demolished Pioneer Hotel. Mille had worked as a waitress there for many years and is proud of the fact that President Calvin Coolidge always requested to sit in her section of tables, when he visited the establishment.

The Girl is inquisitive about any possible encounters Millie may have had with any ghosts in a building that had been around for so long. Millie tells her that there were quite a few ghosts in the hotel, and a few that frequented the restaurant. One ghost in particular was the figure of a shy woman, who never sat, but just stood at the doorway to watch the restaurant activities.

The Girl inquires about the possibility of any ghosts residing in the Hotel Baltimore. Millie advises her that sprits do not like to be discussed, so the topic is dropped. The Girl would like Millie to tell her fortune. However, she abruptly changes the subject, when she hears the whistle of a train. The Girl remembers the conversation about ghosts, and asks Millie what will become of the Hotel Baltimore ghosts. Millie replies that the ghosts will probably move along with the hotel guests with whom they have become attached.

Another hotel resident, a prostitute named April Green, enters the lobby and complains about the lack of hot water this morning. April also complains that it is too light in her room to sleep during the day, and the Girl reminds April that they are observing Daylight Savings Time. April does not like clocks and does not keep one in her room.

April begins to head back to her room upstairs, but the arrival of elderly Mr. Morse into the lobby distracts her. Mr. Morse is outraged. He is getting a cold, because the window in his room will not close all the way. When no one takes Mr. Morse's complaint very seriously, he threatens to hold the hotel responsible for his hospital bill should his health deteriorate any further.

Two more hotel residents, a 24-year-old woman, named Jackie, and her 19-year-old brother, Jamie, enter the hotel lobby. Jackie tries to enlist some help from April, who deflects any requests. Jackie then tries to warm up to Bill, who can see a request for a favor coming. He also deflects Jackie, who decides to wait for Mr. Katz to arrive.

Bill offers to send someone to Mr. Morse's room to close the window, but Mr. Morse declares that it will take someone with some appropriate tools to fix it properly. Bill once more tells Mr. Morse that he will send someone upstairs to close the window.

Jackie sees the possibility to make a quick friend of Mr. Morse and offers to close the window for him. Jackie heads upstairs to work on Mr. Morse's window, despite Bill's request that she not do it. Mr. Morse and Jamie start a game of checkers, and the Girl is once more distracted by the sound of a train whistle. She tells the group that she used to live by a railroad track and misses waving to all the people.

Finally, Mr. Katz arrives for work and inquires about the boy sleeping in the lobby. Bill tells him that the boy has been waiting for Mr. Katz since four o'clock this morning. Mr. Katz tells Mr. Morse that some of the residents have been complaining about Mr. Morse's vocal exercises. April breaks into the conversation with her complaint about the lack of hot water. Suddenly, Bill jumps up, remembering that Jackie had gone to Mr. Morse's room.

Jackie re-enters the lobby and is happy to see Mr. Katz, because she wants to ask a favor. Jackie tells Mr. Katz that she has just paid cash for a new car and needs new license plates. However, she cannot get the plates, until she purchases auto insurance. Jackie has recently lost her job at a pet store and cannot afford the insurance. Jackie does not ask Mr. Katz to give her the money but wants him to co-sign on a loan from the bank.

As Mr. Katz attempts to deflect Jackie's request, another hotel resident and prostitute, named Suzy, enters the hotel lobby with a male customer. The man is impatient, as Suzy chats with her friends in the lobby, and she is informed about the hotel's imminent demise. Mr. Katz disapproves of Suzy entertaining customers in her room, but Suzy contends that the man is a friend. They head upstairs for a drink.

Mrs. Bellotti returns to the hotel to discuss Horse's situation with Mr. Katz, who will not consider any of her pleas to let Horse stay. Horse's alcoholism is his main problem, but Mrs. Bellotti swears that Horse will behave if he is allowed to return. Mr. Katz will not be swayed on the issue and demands that Mrs. Bellotti remove Horse's belongings from his room.

Mrs. Bellotti is now distraught and tells the group that her husband has just had a leg amputated, due to complications from diabetes, and cannot help her with the removal of Horse's items. Mr. Katz tells her to take her time, but to make sure that the articles are removed.

Jamie has overheard this conversation and offers the fact that his and Jackie's father died from diabetes. Jackie chastises Jamie for sharing their personal information. Jackie can smell that Jamie has been smoking and reprimands him for that habit as well. Jamie removes himself from Jackie's presence and offers to help Mrs. Bellotti remove Horse's belongings from his room.

The Girl takes a phone call, which is obviously from her pimp. Bill is irritated that she is making an appointment to meet a customer this early in the morning. The Girl accuses Bill of being an ogre, because he will not give her a ride to her appointment, even though he will be driving right past the hotel where she is to meet her customer.

In the meantime, the others in the group have begun to discuss the eviction notices, and most of the residents have no qualms about leaving the hotel. Jackie claims that she and Jamie are headed for Idaho, anyway, so this news does not affect them at all.

Suddenly, Suzy's customer stalks through the lobby. Suzy appears, wrapped only in a towel, yelling that the man had beaten and locked her out of her own room. Mr. Katz

demands that Suzy return to her room, but she is hysterical that no one will come to her defense in the situation.

Paul awakens from his position in the lounge chair, senses the activity around him and declares the hotel to be a flophouse. Suzy and Jackie agree with him, as Mr. Katz continues to yell at her to go upstairs to get dressed. Jamie descends the stairs, carrying a box filled with some of Horse's belongings and drops the box immediately upon seeing Suzy in her state of undress.

Act 1 Analysis

The setting for the play is a dilapidated hotel in Baltimore, Maryland. The hotel is located relatively close to the railroad, as indicated by the Girl's constant observance of the train whistles. It had been a major hub of passenger travel. The play was written in 1973, but the time is noted by the author to be on a Memorial Day in the present, which means that the plot and themes are applicable to any time period.

The characters in the broken down hotel are all vulnerable or broken in some way, themselves. The author uses this symbolism to portray the inevitability of demise of each person, just as the hotel has outlived its glory days. The author also uses symbolism in his selection of Memorial Day for the action, as the characters will soon be memories themselves, as the place they have inhabited will soon be destroyed.

The play is written as a comedy, and there is some physical comedy, as well as witty banter. April has the sharpest sense of humor, due in part to her age and her profession, both of which have made her compassionate and savvy. For example, when Suzy the prostitute discovers that the hotel is to be torn down and that she will lose her home, she bemoans the fact that she will lose her beautiful eleven-foot ceilings. Mr. Katz wonders why ceilings are so important, and April replies, "If you spent as much time looking at the ceilings as she does, you'd care what they looked like."

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Later in the afternoon, Mrs. Oxenham, the hotel's day desk clerk and switchboard operator, is attempting to deflect Paul's request to determine whether or not his grandfather had stayed at the hotel a few years ago. Mr. Katz contends that Paul's grandfather had never been a resident at the hotel, but Paul is relentless in his request.

Mrs. Oxenham also states that the grandfather had never stayed at the hotel, but she also admits that she cannot possibly remember everyone who has been at the hotel.

Paul will not accept the lack of response and demands to see the rent receipts or some sort of hotel guest log. Mrs. Oxenham will not allow Paul access to the records. Ultimately, however, he reluctantly pulls out the record books to begin a search for evidence that the elderly Mr. Granger had stayed at the hotel.

Paul reluctantly takes his seat in the hotel lounge again, and Mille tries to engage him in conversation, apologizing for not remembering Paul's grandfather herself. Paul is not interested in conversation and turns his focus to the game of checkers being played by Mr. Morse and Jamie.

The Girl comes back into the lobby and tells Mr. Katz that she finally realizes that the hotel management company has no intentions of fixing the hot water problems or the broken elevator in the hopes that the residents will vacate early. Mr. Katz replies that the management company has fulfilled its duty by providing one-month eviction notices to the residents.

On the other side of the room, Jamie and Mr. Morse begin to fight about their checkers game with Mr. Morse, accusing Jamie of cheating. The fight escalates into a fist fight between the old man and the young man, until they are separated by Mr. Katz and the Girl.

Mr. Morse confusedly retreats to the broom closet in humiliation. The Girl tries to talk him out of the closet by telling him that Jamie is sorry for his behavior. Jamie has no intentions of telling Mr. Morse that he is sorry. So, the Girl yells through the closet door to inform Mr. Morse that Jamie has a black eye from his altercation with the old man.

The Girl retrieves a tube of mascara from her purse and proceeds to blacken the area around one of Jamie's eyes, just as Mr. Morse emerges from the closet. Satisfied that he is the victor in the conflict, Mr. Morse is ready for another game of checkers, but Mr. Katz will not let him play anymore today, because the old man gets too excitable. Jamie retreats to another room to avoid any more confrontation.

Jackie enters the room, claiming that her car has been sideswiped. Mr. Katz is immediately annoyed, because Jackie is always creating some problem. Jackie is also

annoyed, because all the pawnshops are closed today. Millie reminds Jackie that it is Memorial Day, and no businesses are open because of the holiday.

Jackie finally sees Jamie's blackened eye and demands to know the circumstances of the injury. The Girl interrupts to tell Jackie that Mr. Morse hit Jamie giving him a black eye, and that the whole incident had been a joke. Jackie is very protective of Jamie and tells everyone in the room that she does not want anyone to joke with Jamie, because his health is not good.

The Girl changes her focus to Paul and tries to engage him in conversation about his grandfather and his hometown, but Paul is not interested in talking to the Girl. Millie tries to intercede on Paul's behalf for some privacy. The Girl tells Paul that if he really wants to know about his grandfather, he should employ Millie's talents as a psychic.

The Girl persists in trying to identify Paul's hometown and rattles off an extensive list of all the cities that she has visited in the United States. Paul inquires if Mrs. Oxenham has discovered any information in her books yet, but she coolly tells him that she will notify him if she finds any information about his grandfather.

The Girl suggests that there is a possibility that Mr. Morse could be Paul's grandfather. However, this is not possible, and Mr. Morse heads back upstairs to his room to get away from the people in the lounge.

Paul shares with the Girl that he has been in a workhouse for the past two years for selling marijuana in college. Upon his release, Paul finds out that his wealthy parents would not let his grandfather live with them, claiming they do not have the room. Paul is determined to find his grandfather, because he wants to take care of the elderly gentleman himself, now that he is out of confinement.

Jackie continues to annoy Mr. Katz by spreading out paperwork that she is working on. Finally, he orders her to move her things to another table. Jackie shares with the others in the room her intention to raise organic foods on a plot of land that she purchased in Utah. Jackie and Jamie had been driving from Buffalo to Florida one day and heard an ad for the land. She bought twenty acres, sight unseen, so that she and Jamie can start their organic farm.

Realizing that Jackie's plan is woefully ill-fated, Millie and the Girl change the subject to the topic of Millie's girlhood home in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Millie tells tales of crazy servants and ghostly visitors. The Girl is enraptured with the glimpse into Millie's past.

Suddenly, Mrs. Oxenham yells at Paul that she has found his grandfather's name in her records. The only document available is a rent receipt. Mrs. Oxenham informs Paul that they never accept forwarding addresses from their residents, so she can be of no further help to Paul.

The Girl can see that Paul is crestfallen at the information dead end and tries to cheer him up by talking to him about his grandfather. When the Girl learns that the old man

had been a train engineer, she is ecstatic and demands the chance to talk to the old man, when he is found. Paul agrees to introduce her, if his grandfather is located.

Mr. Morse descends the stairs, silently waving his arms and trying desperately to say something, which will not come out. Finally, Mr. Morse is able to say that he has been robbed. Mr. Katz sees that Jackie is preparing to leave and confronts her, because she had been in Mr. Morse's room earlier today.

Jackie claims that she fixed Mr. Morse's window and does not know anything about any stolen goods. Mr. Morse tells Mr. Katz that he is missing jewelry that had belonged to his mother and his wife, plus some cufflinks and rings of his own. Mr. Katz snatches Jackie's purse and finds the missing articles inside. Mr. Katz orders Mr. Morse to return to his room with his recovered items, and then orders Jackie and Jamie to vacate the hotel by this evening.

The Girl, angered by Jackie's attempt to steal from old Mr. Morse, tells Jackie that she knows the particular area where Jackie has purchased land, and that it is a barren desert. Jackie instinctively knows this must be true, but defiantly defends the choices she has made for herself and Jamie.

Jackie runs out of the lobby in tears, and the Girl follows in an attempt to console her. Mrs. Bellotti carries one more box from Horse's room. Suddenly, Millie stands and declares that Paul's grandfather is alive. Although Millie does not know the location of Paul's grandfather, her psychic instincts validate that he is alive.

Act 2 Analysis

This play is one that has no dominant plot line, just a series of personal dramas by each of the residents of the hotel. The play does not seem to move to any particular point, but provides the backdrop for the individual scenarios to be enacted. Perhaps, the author wants the reader to share in his thoughts that this is the pattern of life.

Most people move along their lives trying to do the best they can. Then, fate or other forces intervene, and they must change course. The imminent demolition of the hotel will force the conclusion of the residents' stories, until they, too, become memories as spectral as Millie's ghosts.

This act does not contain the comedy like the first act, and the confrontation between Mr. Katz and Jackie over the stolen jewelry is as close as the play comes to a climax or high point in the drama. It is also in this act that the characters finally come to grips with the fact that they will soon be leaving the hotel. Their shared memories and dreams act as buffers for the anxiety-ridden emotional state of all the characters.

The author uses the characters' anxiety and tension almost as if it were another character in the play. The tension is the reason for the fight between Mr. Morse and Jamie; the reason for Jackie's shifty behavior; the reason for Paul's impatience, and so

on. It seems as if Millie is the only one who is unaffected by the imminent upheaval, and the reader is forced to question her level of rational thinking.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

It is now midnight, and Bill is back on duty, as the hotel's night manager. Bill places a wake up call to the Girl, as Mr. Morse sits by himself in the lounge area. April descends the stairs and begins to tell Bill about her evening with a challenging customer up in her room.

Mr. Morse complains about the heat, and the Girl enters the lobby area wearing a terry cloth robe and slippers. The Girl inquires about Paul, and Bill tells her that Paul has left his bag but has gone out for a while. The Girl tries to enlist Bill's help in searching through the old hotel records for any more information about Paul's grandfather. Bill declines, but the Girl proceeds to pull out boxes of files to begin searching.

The Girl asks Bill if he has heard about the excitement over Jackie and Jamie's eviction from the hotel, and he is pleased to hear the news. Soon, Jamie enters the hotel lobby to ask if anyone has seen Jackie, who left to get gas in the car six hours ago. The others try to console Jamie, who nervously watches the front door for Jackie's return.

The Girl gets a call from her pimp and declines an appointment with a customer so that she can keep searching the files for news of Paul's grandfather. As the Girl concludes her phone call, Suzy descends the stairs juggling many suitcases and informs Bill that she is moving out. Suzy goes back to her room to retrieve the balance of her luggage, telling the group in the lobby to stay where they are, because she has a surprise for them when she returns

Paul comes back to the hotel, and the Girl tells him that she has rekindled the search for clues about his grandfather's whereabouts. Paul tells the Girl to abandon the search, because he is no longer interested in locating his grandfather.

Suzy returns to the lobby with two bottles of cold champagne, so that the little group in the lobby can have a little impromptu farewell celebration. Suzy also shares the fact that she is moving into an apartment, set up for her by her pimp. Alice reminds Suzy that this is not the first time that Suzy has fallen for this type of situation, and it always ends disastrously.

Suzy's cab arrives, and she leaves in anger. Her feelings are hurt, because her hotel friends have diminished her dream of living in an apartment. After Suzy is gone, the little group in the lobby discusses Suzy's inability to judge character properly and hope that she fares better in this situation than she has before in similar situations.

Suzy then rushes back into the hotel, hugging each one of her old friends, because she cannot leave them in anger. The group wishes her well, and she disappears into her cab.

The Girl refocuses the conversation to Paul's sudden lack of interest in finding his grandfather and chastises him for lacking the conviction to back up his passions. Paul tires of the Girl's accusations and leaves the hotel, thanking her for her interest and efforts on his behalf.

Millie goes upstairs to her room, followed closely by the Girl, who is going back to sleep for a while. April sees Bill watching the Girl, lovingly, and chides him on lacking the courage to reveal his feelings to the Girl.

Jamie comes back into the lobby to ask the time, and April tells him that Jackie probably got stopped by the police because of the license plate issue again. Bill turns on the radio. April extends her arm to Jamie, inviting him to dance with her. Jamie declines out of shyness, but April persists. Soon, the odd couple is dancing in the hotel lobby, and April yells at Bill to turn up the radio.

Act 3 Analysis

Ironically, Suzy is the only character who has firm plans to leave the doomed hotel. Yet, the other guests deride her sense of judgment and the situation into which she is moving. While it is true that Suzy has made bad judgment calls in the past, perhaps the other characters envy Suzy's ability to assess a situation and make plans to exit.

It is interesting to note, too, that three of the characters in the play are prostitutes. The author portrays them with the stereotypical image of having hearts of gold. Each of these women admits to looking for love, but their circumstances keep them in dead end situations with no hope of getting out. Each also has much to give, too, as evidenced by the Girl's fanatic energy at searching for information for Paul.

April also exhibits compassion, as she dances with the abandoned Jamie at the end of the play. It's as if she has taken him on as her newest project, not as a customer, but as someone who sincerely needs help and life direction.

It is unclear why Paul has suddenly abandoned his efforts to find his grandfather. However, it is interesting to note his sporadic behavior as an "outsider," as opposed to the hotel "insiders," who are incredibly loyal and supportive of each other. Perhaps the author is trying to tell the reader that a person's circumstances do not define him or her in terms of ethics and integrity, and that even things like rundown hotels still contain some measure of beauty and goodness.

Characters

Mrs. Bellotti

Mrs. Bellotti is the mother of a former tenant. Described as a whiner and complainer, she tells the audience that her husband just had a leg amputated because of diabetes. When Katz makes it clear that her son will not be allowed to return, she goes upstairs and begins to pack his belongings.

The Girl

A nineteen-year-old prostitute, the Girl is caring and concerned about the other residents. She goes to great effort to help Morse. It is she who tells Jackie that she has bought worthless land.

Paul Granger III

Paul is a college student who was arrested for selling drugs. He has recently been released from a work farm. He comes to the hotel to look for his grandfather.

April Green

April is one of the prostitutes in the play. She is described as large, pragmatic, quick to laugh, and pretty. She is protective of Suzy.

Jackie

Jackie is a hustler traveling with her brother, Jamie. She needs money and tries to get Katz to co-sign a loan so they can go Utah to grow health foods on a worthless piece of land she has bought. She steals jewelry from Morse's room, but is caught and ordered to leave. She tells Jamie that she is going to buy gas, but never returns to pick him up.

Jamie

Jamie is Jackie's nineteen year-old brother. He is described as being a bit slow. In the last act, Jamie is abandoned by his sister, who simply drives off and leaves him to manage on his own.

Mr. Katz

Mr. Katz is the hotel manager. A balding, tired man, he resists Jackie's pleas for money. He gives the residents one month's notice because the hotel is to be torn down.

Bill Lewis

Bill is the night clerk at the hotel. He has a difficult time communicating and covers by talking too loudly. Bill is interested in the Girl and is more tolerant with her than the other hotel employees.

Millie

Millie is a retired waitress. Considered eccentric, she believes in ghosts and lives in a world more imagined than real. She tells the other residents that she grew up in a mansion. She is a caring person who tells Paul that she knows that his grandfather is still alive.

Mr. Morse

An elderly man, Mr. Morse is loud and demanding. He plays checkers all day and gets into arguments with other residents. When he and Jamie come to blows over a checker game, Morse hides in the broom closet and will not come out until he is convinced that he won the fight. He is robbed by Jackie.

Mrs. Oxenham

Mrs. Oxenham is the desk clerk and phone operator at the hotel. She is tough and tries to keep the prostitutes' customers out of the hotel.

Suzy

Suzy is a prostitute. In the opening act, she brings one of her customers to the hotel; she accuses him of beating her and locking her out of her room. She is tough but also romantic in her search for happiness with a new pimp.

Themes

Choices and Consequences

There are several instances where it becomes clear that in choosing prostitution, the women in the play face the dangerous consequences of their choice.

Suzy is beaten and locked out of her room by a customer early in the play. Later, she announces that she is moving into an apartment with her new pimp. Her friends are concerned that this man will treat her as badly as the previous one did.

Although April makes fun of her customers' fetishes, she has been put at risk by freaky and dangerous customers. Wilson does not emphasize it, but it is clear that prostitution is a risky way to make a living.

Human Condition

Jamie's abandonment is a tragic situation that underscores the precarious nature of the human condition. The young man is almost helpless without Jackie to care for him; his ability to think and rationalize is limited. It is unclear how he will be able to survive without his sister to help him.

The picture of this teenage boy bringing all his possessions to the lobby is heartbreaking. The other residents know that Jackie will not return, and the audience knows it as well. The last image in the play is of April trying to distract Jamie as she teaches him to dance.

Memory and Reminiscence

The majority of the conversations between the residents concern their memories of the past. Millie tells the other residents about her childhood and the large mansion that was inhabited by ghosts. The Girl talks about her travels around the United States.

These pleasant memories help to alleviate anxiety over an uncertain future. It is particularly important to focus on the past when in a short time they will all be homeless.

Morality

Wilson treats prostitution as just another profession. There is certainly no moral judgment about these women's choice of careers. April's descriptions of her customers and their desires is intended to amuse and evoke pity, but at no point is the audience expected to criticize her actions. She is simply working and trying to earn a living.

The same is true for Suzy and the confrontation with her customer. The audience is expected to laugh at Jamie's shock, but there is no expectation that she will call the police.

The only critical comment comes from Bill when the Girl is called with a job. Yet it is understood that he is likes her and wants to protect her. Wilson never makes a moral judgment about these women, and he does not allow any of the characters to do so either.

Wealth and Poverty

Paul Granger's story about his missing grandfather creates a dichotomy between wealth and poverty. Paul's parents are wealthy, but his grandfather was a working man. His parents are ashamed of him. Initially Paul searches for his grandfather because he wants to offer him a home. Later, he loses interest in locating him.

Wilson never suggests a reason for Paul's sudden disinterest. Perhaps the hotel provides insight into the kind of existence that his grandfather has lived and he realizes how different his grandfather's life has been from his own. Paul may realize that his parents are correct and there is no room in their lives for a poor old man on a railroad pension.

Style

Act

Acts are the major divisions in a drama. In Greek plays the sections of the drama are signified by the appearance of the chorus; they are usually divided into five acts. These five acts denote the structure of dramatic action: exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe.

The five-act structure was followed until the nineteenth century when Henrik Ibsen combined some of the acts. Hot L Baltimore is a three-act play. However, there is little plot in the play; hence the structure of dramatic action is not applicable.

Character

The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures to more complex multifaceted ones; they may also be defined by personality traits, such as the rogue or the damsel in distress.

Characterization is the process of creating a lifelike person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who he will be and how he will behave in a given situation.

Wilson does not create complex characters in his play. Most of what the audience knows is provided in brief vignettes. Characters tend to be stereotypical, such as the good-hearted prostitute or the street-tough youth.

Comedy

There are two types of drama: tragedy and comedy. *Hot L Baltimore* is a comedy. The purpose of comedy is to amuse. It has many forms, such as farce and burlesque, and may also include satire and parody. For instance, Wilson is using comedy to point out the problems that occur when cities are too eager to destroy debilitated buildings just because they are old. He sees historical wealth and social value in their preservation and renewal.

Setting

The time and place of the play is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for *Hot L Baltimore* is the lobby of a seedy hotel. All of the action occurs between 7 a.m. and midnight on Memorial Day.

Historical Context

In the early 1970s satellite transmissions meant that Americans could watch history unfold as it happened. Because more Americans were watching, television branched out and offered live coverage of important news events.

In the early part of the decade, the Vietnam War as well as the protests over the war across the country were televised into American homes. In a very real sense, it was the images of American men dying on camera that helped fuel much of the opposition to the war.

Television viewers also watched the shooting of four student protesters at Kent State University and the deaths of two more a week later at Jackson State University, events that led to protests at more than 1,200 other colleges and universities most of which were also covered by television cameras.

Certainly, television changed the way America fought wars. By early 1973 the last of American ground troops were finally pulled from Vietnam in 1975. The televised roof-top evacuation of the American embassy in Saigon was a haunting final image for American viewers.

Other dramatic events made for good television too. The moon landing in 1969 drew millions of viewers all over the world. A year later, the troubled mission of Apollo 13 reminded Americans that there was nothing routine about space flight viewers were glued to their sets, praying the astronauts would make it home safely.

In 1972, the murder of several Israeli athletes shocked viewers of the Olympic games. Throughout the 1970s, air hijackings and hostage situations escalated, often as a protest against American foreign policy.

When Arab countries, protesting American support of Israel, imposed an oil boycott that resulted in gasoline shortages and higher prices, it was television that brought the images of long lines into American homes. Helping Americans deal with the inconveniences of the embargo was another role for television, which brought the president's warnings about conserving energy.

It was television that broadcast the Watergate hearings as well as the live image of President Nixon waving goodbye as he left the White House after his resignation from office.

Critical Overview

Hot L Baltimore was very popular with both critics and audiences on its debut in February 1973. After a month, Wilson's play moved to an Off-Broadway theatre, the Circle in the Square Theatre, where it opened March 22, 1973.

Amongst critics, a sense of nostalgia prevailed. As Douglas Watt noted in his review, "It's no place to live, but it's worth a visit." Watt discussed the setting, a crucial element of this play: "Time stands still in seedy hotels. The locations may change, and the people's names; but today's castoffs are the same as yesterday's, giving their own kind of continuity to life. They're the ones you meet in Lanford Wilson's quietly affecting three-act play."

According to Watt, "nothing much happens ... [but] we become part of their small world." The audience becomes interested in these characters, although there is no plot or action, just dialogue.

Watt asserted that the characters are timeless; there is nothing that establishes them as from 1973, except for their clothing and the music playing in the background. "There are false notes and awkward moments," said Watt, "but Wilson is a gifted and appealing playwright."

One of the aspects of the play that apparently appealed to Watt was the absence of gunmen, cops, heroes, villains, and melodrama. In conclusion, Watt maintained that "you wouldn't want to room there, but *Hot L Baltimore* is an interesting place to visit on a quiet day."

Another critic, Martin Gottfried, lauded the play: "The *Hot L Baltimore* is first-class Lanford Wilson, and that is as good as you will find in the American theatre."

He praised Wilson's ability to find beauty in American stories:

Wilson was one of the first of our playwrights to seek an American beauty and an essential mythology in our national roots; one of the first to deal with that subject in a style of heightened, poetized reality; one of the first to return to language while fashion was still demanding minimalism and noncommunication. The *Hot L Baltimore* shows him still at the peak of his mastery over these qualities.

He also contended that Wilson's "writing is superb, a triumph of inspiration and craftsmanship." After praising Wilson's ability to create believable characters, Gottfried concluded that "Wilson builds a magnificently detailed concerto for humanity."

Richard Watts offered a mixed review. He deemed the play "as odd and original a play as you are likely to see all season."

After noting the lack of plot, Watts considered characterization the strength of this play, since Wilson is not trying "to make any particular points" but is interested in exploring people and their lives.

Wilson's characterization was also praised by Jack Kroll in his review for *Newsweek.* Referring to Wilson's work as "so old-fashioned in its humanity that it's the freshest play the best American play I've seen this season," Kroll wrote that Wilson "dares to remind us of what writers once were in this country."

The strength of character development was also noted by Leonard Probst in his television review of Wilson's play. Probst contended that "the people are alive and real" and the set is "so real that you feel that you're in the Hotel Baltimore." Probst also considered the lack of plot, but added, "the play is completely engrossing."

Probst maintained that "the play has a wonderful sense of humanity, a feeling [sic] of the loss of passion as we, our cities, and our institutions grow weary, and too wise to do anything about it."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Metzger is a Ph.D., specializing in literature and drama at The University of New Mexico. In the following essay, Metzger discusses the creation of character in Hot L Baltimore.

The 1970s were a decade of protests: protests over the war in Vietnam, protests for women's rights, and protests about racial inequities. It was a decade to rethink our nation's history. It is only right that Lanford Wilson's play *Hot L Baltimore* focuses on the importance of preserving America's cities, while embracing each character's personal history, since he presents the notion that history is worth remembering and savoring.

It is primarily the individual characters that bring Wilson's play to life. He manages to imbue each one with a unique spirit that makes it especially difficult for audiences to select a favorite. Each character whether a prostitute, the forgotten elderly, or the soon-to-be-unemployed hotel staff brings a humanity to his or her role. It is primarily the setting and the characters that deliver this play's message.

In an interview with Gene A. Barnett, Wilson perceives his strength as writing dialogue for his plays. After first mentioning that he became a playwright because he always wrote dialogue better than he wrote narrative, Wilson asserts that dialogue "was always something that I had under control and had always been attracted to juxtaposed sounds and rhythms of characters and so it was really natural." It is the natural sound of the character's dialogue that captures his audiences and the critics attention.

Reviews of *Hot L Baltimore* invariably cite the play's greatest strengths as the realism of the characters and the flow of dialogue. In his review for *Women's Wear Daily,* Martin Gottfried asserted that Wilson's

writing is simply superb, a triumph of inspiration and craftsmanship. He has created 17 [actually 15] individual characters with specific speech patterns and personalities, and has orchestrated them. Each weaves his strand through the play, maintaining his individuality yet part of the whole ... With such language, with such real and yet mythic characters, with such a clear conflict between life's rulers (the hotel personnel) and its victims ... with such poetic ambiguity (a cry for convictions by people whose convictions are doomed), Wilson builds a magnificently detailed concerto for humanity.

Gottfried is not alone in commending Wilson for the richness of his characters or for his appeal to his audience's humanity. Richard Watts' review for *The New York Post* also focused on Wilson's ability to create interesting characters. In fact, he credited the play's success to the characters, finding the plot not worth mentioning.

Watts maintained that "the important thing is that they [the people in the hotel] are entertaining and friendly people, though a little crazy, and their thoughts, woes, confidences and self-revelations make an engaging and sympathetic play." It is the character's stories that pull the audience in and holds its attention.

Each of the hotel's residents is an outcast, living on the fringes of society in a hotel that is on the fringe of existence. In her review of Wilson's life and works, Ann Crawford Dreher asserted that "all the people at the Baltimore are either hurting each other or helping each other." This "delineates a pattern of the human ability to go on feeling and striving in the midst of a crumbling world."

Although each of these people is a societal outcast, each has something to contribute toward the common goal of survival; thus they make their own place in a society that would consider them eccentric or foolish. In his article on Wilson's plays, Henry I. Schvey contended that many of Wilson's works "have large casts and are essentially peopled by characters who have no definite place in society."

Of *Hot L Baltimore*, Schvey maintained that Wilson's focus is not solely on the characters as outcasts; instead he is attracted to "the world as it is (dramatically conveyed by the shabby decaying hotel), and a community of people who need to believe in something whatever the odds."

These people refuse to give up. Their strength and humanity appeals to the audience. Whether or not they are losers, they convey the notion that they are survivors, and American audiences want to cheer for winners.

Schvey asserted that nearly all of the characters are searching for something but that something is, according to Schvey, "either worthless or fraudulent." Perhaps that is their attraction to audiences, who can identify with the character's fears, while remaining thankful that they, too, have managed to avoid those particular traps.

However, Schvey claimed that in spite of the play's "almost unanimously favourable reviews and wide public appeal ... its simple message wears thin, and its characterization is ultimately superficial." The play's "upbeat message of hope is not sufficient" and Wilson's play could not bear comparison to other works that also focus on similar ideas, such as Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard, which has a complexity that Wilson's play lacks.

Martin J. Jacobi would disagree that the characterization in Wilson's play is inadequate. In his article on Wilson's comic vision, Jacobi argued that Wilson'splays

move from bleakly naturalistic portraits of ineffectual outcasts who have little connection to their group, through pessimistic portrayals of outsiders who might have saved themselves from destruction but do not, to realistically optimistic views of individuals who challenge societal prejudices but still find acceptable places within it. They develop from pathos and incipient tragedy to true, and not sentimental, comedy.

This is far different from an assessment of the characters as superficial. Jacobi viewed Wilson's ability to "identify important traditions and cultural values" as a major contribution in his characters' development. Although they are society's outcasts, each has something to give to the other members of the group.

For example, the play's conclusion demonstrates that while April wants to help Jamie survive his sister abandoning him, he is capable of being on his own. Jamie may be flawed and different, but he is capable of surviving.

This idea is picked up by Jacobi, who noted that "Wilson professes to his audience that people can be individuals, sometimes eccentrically so, and still be good members of their group." This is a reassuring message for the audience, and it clearly belongs in a decade that valued individualism and rebellion as did the 1970s.

Often times, writers write to explore ideas, to help them develop a better understanding of an issue. In an interview published by Jackson R. Bryer, Wilson contended that "writing is the process of understanding what you're feeling."

Writing also offers Wilson a chance to experiment with creating different ideas and different characters. In providing his characters with eccentricities, Wilson makes them more appealing. It is worth noting that the 1970s were a time of self-expression, of outlandish clothing, of experimentation with drugs, and of sexual adventures.

Wilson told Gene Barnett that he wanted to create characters who were more vibrant, exciting, and unusual. He wanted to move out of "that suburban rut that I'd gotten into."

The characters in *Hot L Baltimore* are especially unusual and vibrant. Millie's belief in the spirit world and her family history of eccentricity make her one of Wilson's most interesting characters. And the Girl's inability to pick a name echoes a common theme, often unexpressed beyond childhood, that each individual should be able to select his or her own name.

Each of the other two prostitutes is an individual, moving beyond conventional description into the extraordinary. April's candid descriptions of her customer's proclivities provide some of the funniest lines in the play. And Suzy's humanity inspires the audience's sympathy.

There is no reason for the audience to invest itself in one of Wilson's characters. None of them is what audiences would consider the star of the show. And yet, the audience is mysteriously drawn in and forced to care, even when it does not wish to do so.

In part, this is because there is a sort of timelessness about Wilson's play. The setting is 1970s Baltimore, but it could be any decade and any city. There have always been the poor, the downtrodden, the illicit members of any society. And they have always been the object of urban renewal.

Douglas Watt noted in his review of Hot *L Baltimore* for the *Daily News* that this "slice-of-life might have taken place 30 years ago but for the trivial facts that the clothes are different, the country music has a rock beat and April sends out for pizza instead of hamburgers or danish."

Yet in truth, these characters are representative of what city government often hopes to eliminate when they decide to tear down a seedy hotel, a tenement building, or

whatever else they consider an example of urban blight. These are the people who cannot afford something better.

Except for Suzy, whose quest for a better living arrangement may ultimately hurt her, Wilson never suggests a solution for his characters. They do not have to search for a place to live not yet. And the audience does not have to face the fact that in a month these people will be homeless.

In many ways, Wilson's play is as topical in 2000 as it was more than twenty-five years ago. The homeless clog big city streets, and the working poor are often only a paycheck away from sharing the same fate.

The inhabitants of Wilson's hotel share the audience's insecurities, but they also share their dreams and hopes for a better life. The hotel may be torn down, but life will provide for the people, and the audience is forced to cheer for their survival.

Source: Sheri E. Metzger for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the themes of loss and nostalgia in Wilson'splay.

Langford Wilson's play The *Hot L Baltimore,* set in the lobby of a soon-to-be demolished hotel, currently a flophouse, focuses on the interactions between a motley set of hotel tenants in exploring deeper themes of loss, death, and nostalgia. The setting of the play is itself steeped in nostalgia. Opening descriptions of the hotel, as well as the nearby railroad station, paint a picture of faded elegance.

Once there was a railroad and the neighborhood of the railroad terminals bloomed (boomed) with gracious hotels. The Hotel Baltimore, built in the late nineteenth century, remodeled during the Art Deco last stand of the railroads, is a five-story establishment intended to be an elegant and restful haven.

A description of the once-grand interior renders its imminent destruction sharply poignant: "Its history has mirrored the rails' decline. The marble stairs and floors, the carved wood paneling have aged as neglected ivory ages, into a dull gold. The Hotel Baltimore is scheduled for demolition." Wilson's description of the theater setting in which the play should be produced echoes this theme of decayed elegance: "The theater, evanescent itself, and for all we do perhaps itself disappearing here, seems the ideal place for the representation of the impermanence of our architecture." Later in the play, the Girl expresses nostalgia, not just for the Hotel Baltimore, as it once was, but for the city itself, as it once was: "Baltimore used to be one of the most beautiful cities in America."

Wilson sets the time period of the play as "a recent Memorial Day," and provides the directions that the music from the radio should "incorporate music popular during production." The playwright sets his story in a "recent" time, with contemporary music, in order to emphasize the immediacy of the moment, thereby rendering the sense of nostalgia for the past all the more powerful to the audience. Furthermore, characters in the play are continually asking, being informed of, and discussing the time of day. This preoccupation with the theme of time creates an atmosphere in which all of the characters are painfully aware of the passage of time. They learn that they have only one month left before they are evicted and the hotel is demolished. This literal anxiety about the passage of time echoes with the play's theme of nostalgia for a past which can never be recovered.

The Girl, the young prostitute who has not yet decided on a name for herself, seems of all the characters to have the strongest sense of nostalgia about both the decline of the railroads and the imminent demolition of the old hotel. The Girl is obsessed with the train schedule, continually listening for the sound of the trains passing which can be heard inside the hotel lobby. She is obsessed with the fact that the trains are always

behind schedule, and imagines that they once ran on time. This concern with time expresses both a nostalgia for the railroad system she imagines to have once been grand and precise, and a sense of anxiety over the passage of time, of time passed, of time lost which can never be recovered. Her interest in the past is expressed directly when she tells Paul that, in high school, "I was pretty good in history." The Girl's fascination with a lost past is expressed in her musings about the hotel's history: "We probably walk right under and right past the places where all kinds of things happened. A tepee or a log cabin might have stood right where I'm standing." This interest in the past takes on a strong aura of nostalgia when she concludes that, "Wonderful things must have happened on this spot."

The setting of Memorial Day provides a frame for the play's theme of death, loss and mourning. The title of the play, in fact, is derived from the loss of the "e" from the original "Hotel Baltimore" sign, so that it reads "Hot! Baltimore." The loss of the "e" establishes the theme of loss incurred due to the ravages of time. The character of Paul, who first appears in Act Two, most directly addresses the theme of loss of loved ones appropriate to Memorial Day. Paul, a young man, appears in the hotel lobby in search of his grandfather, not knowing if he is alive or dead. Mrs. Oxenham, one of the tenants, comments that "We're not a missing persons bureau." In questioning the hotel tenants and employees, Paul himself brings up the possibility that his grandfather may be dead, inquiring, "Would you remember if he fell dead in the lobby?"

The theme of loss is also brought up in several more or less minor elements of the play and offhand comments by various characters. Mrs. Bellotti, whose son lives in the building, mentions that her husband, who is a diabetic, has "lost" his leg, as it had to be amputated. After the Girl borrows Jackie's magazine, Jackie makes a point of getting it back from her, stating, "I don't want to lose that." Jackie later says, out of the blue, "Did you know the first two hours after you pick them, green beans lose twenty percent of their vitamin C?" The loss of objects and the loss of loved ones seem to pile up as the play goes on. When Mr. Morse accuses Jackie of stealing from him, he makes a direct association between the loss of his wife, who is dead, with the loss of her jewelry, claiming that Jackie, "Took my wife's things. That's all I have in this world." When questioned, he explains, "My things! My wedding cuff links and my necklace that belonged to my wife! And my mother!" The elision between the loss of objects associated with a loved one and the death of a loved one is suggested by Jackie's defensive response that, "Yeah, well, I didn't take his fucking mother."

Amidst the overwhelming sense of loss which envelopes these characters, they each struggle with what they do and don't have. As mentioned above, Mr. Morse exclaims that his wife's "things," her jewelry, are "all I have in this world." Jackie, accused of the theft, retorts that, "I have *dreams]*" But the Girl later points out to her that, "You have nothing," referring to the worthless land Jackie has been suckered into purchasing. The Girl, who herself has nothing not even a name is especially sympathetic to others who "have nothing." She tells Bill that she can't bear to think of people wanting things and not having them.

Death, loss and nostalgia are combined in the discussion of ghosts and spirits among the hotel residents. The Girl explains that Millie, a retired waitress, "sees things, knows things, she sees ghosts and auras and things." Millie later expresses a nostalgia for old buildings, akin to the play's expression of nostalgia for the old hotel, in describing her childhood home, "a huge old Victorian house outside Baton Rouge; an amazing old house, really." Millie goes on to describe, again nostalgically, the ghosts which resided there:

Millie: When you ask about spirits oh, well, you couldn't keep track of them all. Banging doors, throwing silverware, breaking windows. They were all over the house. There was a black maid slave girl, I suppose, and a revolutionary soldier and his girl, and a Yankee carpetbagger, and a saucy little imp of a girl who sashayed about very mischievously. She'd been pushed out of a window and was furious about it. Storming through the upstairs, slamming windows shut all over the house. It was quite an active place.

Millie later explains that "Spirits are very peaceful, of course. They don't act up unless there's tension in a household." The Girl, in keeping with her strong sense of nostalgia for the historical past, is the most fascinated and excited by the idea of ghosts. She exclaims excitedly that "I want them to come up with absolute scientific proof that there are spirits and ghosts and reincarnation. I want everyone to see them and talk to them. Something like that! Some miracle. Something huge! I want some major miracle in my lifetime!" Since a ghost represents a person who has died, yet still exists, the Girl's enthusiasm for, in effect, the return of the dead to some form of life, some "miracle," is an expression of a desire to negate the ravages of time and the inevitability of death, as symbolized by the demolition of the hotel, which have thrown all of these characters into crisis. Likewise, the mention of "reincarnation" expresses a desire for those who have died to come back in another life, and therefore never really be lost to the world. In the closing scene, the Girl again expresses the desire, or belief, that life can never really be lost, when she tells Paul, who has given up on finding his grandfather, that "Nobody vanishes."

While the Girl's expression of hope for the perpetual reparation of lost life, lost buildings, and lost time seems to be negated by all of the losses which emerge throughout the play, it is she who expresses the play's message regarding the themes of loss and nostalgia. Frustrated by Paul Granger's decision to give up on looking for his lost grandfather, the Girl blurts out, "That's why nothing gets done; why everything falls down. Nobody's got the conviction to act on their passions." This assertion rings poignantly true in the case of Bill, who is unable to "act on his passion" for the Girl. In the final moments of the play, as she is on her way upstairs to take a bath, the stage directions state that, "Bill looks off after her, aching." April, observing this, attempts to motivate Bill into action; she "Snaps her fingers lightly at him. One. Two. Three. Four," saying, "Hey. Hey." But April's attempt to get Bill to snap out of his torpor, and express his longing for the Girl, ultimately fails, and April concludes that "Bill, baby, you know what your trouble is? You've got Paul Grangeritis. You've not got the conviction of your passions." The urgency of the need to "act on the conviction of your passions" expresses the play's message of how to approach life in spite of the inevitability of

death, loss and decay, a piece of advice frequently summed up by the well-known Latin phrase (not used in the play itself): *Carpe Diem!* Seize the day!

Source: Liz Brent, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Metzger is a Ph.D., specializing in literature and drama at The University of New Mexico, where she is a Lecturer in the English Department and an Adjunct Professor in the University Honors Program. In the following essay, Metzger asks ifLanford Wilson's play Hot L Baltimore can correctly be defined as comedy, or if the urban theatre is a euphemism for tragedy.

At the conclusion of Lanford Wilson's Hot L Baltimore, the inhabitants face eviction, and for many of them, homelessness. Some of them face even more uncertain futures. Suzy, beaten in the first act by a customer, leaves the hotel to live with a new pimp. Pimps have abused her in the past, and there is every reason to suspect that this alliance will end in the same way. All three prostitutes face similar futures and the possibility of violence. Another resident, James, who is incapable of caring for himself, has been abandoned by his sister. James' sister, Jackie, has bought into a land swindle and is headed into a future that does not really exist, something she probably suspects. But her prospects are so bleak that she has no choice but to pursue this empty future. Other characters will leave the hotel with disappointed prospects and diminished dreams. *Hot L Baltimore* is comedy, and there are plenty of laughs, but the characters, their lives, and the bleakness of their futures all point to a play that is more tragic than comic in its presentation.

Traditionally, comedy was defined as drama with a happy ending, as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Later, in the evolution of comedic form, Shakespearean comedies concluded with a wedding, or even three, as in William Shakespeare's A *Midsummer Night's* Dream. The weddings in Act V provided a resolution to the story, granting a happy ending that tied up all the story lines and offered a blissful future for the characters. While part of the enjoyment of comedy comes from the near misses, the mistaken identities, and the incongruity of language, much enjoyment is also derived from the slapstick nature of physical comedy. Plays depend on performance to be completely understood. The audience needs to hear and see how the lines are delivered, since this delivery may convey as much meaning as the author's words. It is the body's movements, the expressions on the actor's face, and the intonations of voice that turn the play into comedy. But beyond the words is the subject matter, and the subject of Wilson's play is the plight of homelessness, the loneliness of the individual, the need for compassion, and a desire to hold onto a happier past. Comedy is designed to make the audience smile, to make us laugh, and to help create an escape from the real world. *Hot L Baltimore* manages the first two goals easily, but there is no escape from the reality of the world outside the theatre. The problems that plague large cities homelessness, crime, prostitution, and hopelessness are all present in the theatre and on the streets outside. Wilson's play brings the streets and their sometimes bleak future into the theatre. As a result, it is difficult to label *Hot L Baltimore* as comedy.

Wilson originally intended to write comedies, and he has said that even if his plays "didn't hold out much hope for the world and its people, at least they were a pleasant experience while you [the audience] were going through it." But, as his work has

progressed, Wilson's approach to theatre has changed. In an interview with John DiGaetani, Wilson notes that he doesn't want to think of his plays as comedies anymore, and while he still wants to entertain, he also wants to explore what he calls "darker themes." This exploration of darker themes is certainly evident in *Hot L Baltimore*, which is really on the edge of tragedy throughout the plot. Wilson is certainly reflecting changes in society, which will be mirrored in performance and theatre. Just as the 1960s and 1970s signaled a period of social unrest and a desire for social reform, theatre of this period could be used as a weapon to create social reform. Playwrights, like Wilson, used their plays to promote new goals and to illuminate the problems of the world. Wilson acknowledges that he recognizes that a play "impinges on the people." But the effect on the audience cannot always be determined until the play is performed; as DiGaetani observes, "you can see what works in the theatre." Because a play always needs revising, Wilson states that in his experience, "a play never seems to be really completed." Although Wilson is speaking strictly of rewrites, sometimes a play with no resolution can appear unfinished, without having been completed. This is the case for Wilson's play, since at the conclusion of *Hot L Baltimore* the audience is left wondering what will become of these characters. There is a feeling that Wilson has brought to life individuals who will have a life after the play concludes: their stories do not end, and the play is simply a brief episode in their lives.

Wilson has said that *Hot L Baltimore* derived from his brief experience as a night clerk at a hotel. Were the people Wilson met this lonely and this sad? Were they also abandoned and in need of one another? It is possible, but Wilson had other sources for his writing, as well. The inhabitants of the Hotel Baltimore are as dark as the society that Charles Dickens depicted in his nineteenth century novels. Wilson's director, Marshall Mason, has said that Wilson devoured Dickens during rehearsals for his play. In an interview with Philip Middleton Williams, Mason remembers Wilson reading "Dickens after Dickens," with characters immersed in greed and poverty, and moral stories that inspired the playwright. Dickens' novels are dark, often with an element of hope, but mostly depicting the exploitation of individuals. They are not comedies, and if Wilson used Dickens to inspire his work, as Mason alleges, than certainly Wilson's play will center more on the dark aspects of the world, rather than the happier ones. It is true, as Mason suggests, that "while Wilson created a cast of social misfits, he broadened their appeal with the comedic approach and nearly farcical staging." The characters are appealing. The audience wants to like them and wants them to succeed. In truth, there are comedic moments and physical humor to lighten the issues underlying the play, but the problems of prostitution, loneliness, and abandonment help to stifle the laughter. The audience likes the characters too much to permit complete surrender into laughter.

It is the characters who capture the audience's imagination and who evoke both laughter and tears. The wise-cracking April creates much of the laughter, but her laughter is also an attempt to ignore the reality of her life. She is the stereotypical whore with a heart of gold who populated so many Hollywood westerns of the twentieth century, now magically transported to 1970s Baltimore. Her familiarity makes it easy for the audience to identify her and to identify with her, and she makes it easy to laugh. The audience does not have to think about her occupation and the danger that prostitutes face on the street. The slow-witted James is an entirely different matter. At the play's

conclusion, April will take him into her arms and begin to dance with him. She is meant to appear as his rescuer, and so, the audience can leave reassured that he will be safe and perhaps they will all be safe, all of the characters who are soon to be thrown into the streets. But Wilson's world on stage deals with easy solutions. In the real world April will not protect James. The James of the world all too often end up as the homeless, lying on the streets. There is no resolution, no comedy at the play's conclusion. These characters drift in and out of the action, as the homeless drift in and out of our lives. The loss of one more derelict hotel will not move the city to rescue its poor, but Wilson does illuminate the seriousness of the problem, and in doing so, he moves Hot L Baltimore further from comedy and closer to social commentary.

Upon its debut*, Hot L Baltimore* was the first big hit for both Wilson and for the Circle Repertory Company. Critics and audiences loved the play, and it set an Off-Broadway record of 1,166 performances after first playing Off-Off-Broadway for a month. *Hot L Baltimore* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *the Best American Play* of 1972-73. It also won an Obie Award for best Off-Broadway play, an Outer Critics Award, and the John Gassner playwriting award, and was included in the Burns Mantle/Guernsey Ten Best American Plays volume for that season. *Hot L Baltimore* has continued to be very popular, with numerous productions staged every year. This play appears to speak to people, and perhaps it says something about our country and our past. But instead of advertising a Lanford Wilson comedy, perhaps this play might better be advertised as an urban drama, a play that explores modern city life. There is comedy certainly, and the audience will laugh and be entertained, but the inhabitants of the Hotel Baltimore will also evoke a thoughtful response to a problem that haunts many large cities. In the quest to tear down the past, what will take its place and where will those inhabitants of the past find their future?

Source: Sheri E. Metzger*, for Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Adaptations

Hot L Baltimore has never been made into a film, but the play was adapted to television in 1975 by ABC.

Topics for Further Study

Wilson is interested in what he considers to be an American disregard for the remnants of the American past. Research the history of the American city and decide if his concerns are warranted. Are cities too quick to tear down the past and modernize with new structures? Is there too little regard for historical buildings and areas?

Prostitution is often described as a victimless crime. In areas where prostitution is legal, is the occurrence of violent crime any worse? Or does ignoring prostitution free police for more serious crimes? Does prostitution encourage organized crime? Provide statistics to support your answer.

Investigate the history of prostitution. How have communities throughout history handled prostitution? Has the profession changed throughout time?

Determine the number of Americans who get conned by radio, television, and solicitations into buying worthless land each year. What kind of people choose to buy land they have never seen? What are the current laws against this type of con?

Compare and Contrast

1973: Senate hearings begin in Washington into the break-in at the Democratic National Committee Headquarters in the Watergate building. The hearings would eventually lead to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

Today: The nation is still recovering from the impeachment proceedings against President Bill Clinton. During the impeachment trial and its aftermath, televised coverage network, cable, and the Internet was continuous and comprehensive.

1973: The Arab oil embargo pushes the price of gasoline to new highs as severe shortages result in mile-long lines at the gas pumps. Consumers are encouraged to conserve energy, and alternate energy sources become more prominent.

Today: Oil is plentiful and inexpensive. As a result, gas-guzzling SUVs become a popular vehicle.

1973: The median sales price of an existing single-family home in the United States reaches $28,900.

Today: While the prices of new homes have stabilized in recent years, the median price of a new home now exceeds $130,000 in most areas. In part this results from an increased demand for larger homes.

What Do I Read Next?

Talley's Folly, one of Lanford Wilson's most successful plays, was first performed in 1979. Set in 1944, this play is about the romance between a Midwestern spinster and a Jewish tax accountant.

Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead* was written in 1965 and is set in New York City. It features characters who are considered outcasts: prostitutes, thieves, and the elderly.

Serenading Louie, Lanford Wilson's 1976 play, is about alienation, estrangement, and death. The focus is on two couples, neighbors who are enduring crises.

Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (1903) explores what happens when something old and beautiful is destroyed to create something new.

The Time of Your Life (1939), written by William Saroyan, is a series of vignettes about people doing ordinary things.

Further Study

Bryer, Jackson, ed. *Lanford Wilson: A Casebook, Garland,* 1990, 271 p.

This collection of critical essays examines several of Lanford's plays.

Busby, Mark. *Lanford Wilson,* Boise State University, 1987, 52 p.

Short biography of Wilson.

Dean, Anne *M. Discovery and Invention: The Urban Plays of Lanford Wilson,* Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994, 139 p.

Study of Wilson's work that seeks to prove the validity of his work as poetry and it place in the American literary canon.

Kahn, David and Donna Breed. Scriptwork: *A Director's Approach to New Play Development,* Southern Illinois University Press, 1995, 193 p.

A detailed sourcebook for producing plays. The forward is by Wilson and it contains an interview with him.

Williams, Philip Middleton. A Comfortable House: *Lanford Wilson, Marshall W. Mason and the Circle Repertory Theatre, McFarland & Company,* 1993, 211 p.

Examines the collaboration between Wilson and director Marshall W. Mason.

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Williams, Philip Middleton. *A Comfortable House: Lanford Wilson, Marshall W. Mason and the Circle Repertory Theatre, McFarland & Company, 1993.*

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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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