The House of Blue Leaves Study Guide

The House of Blue Leaves by John Guare

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Contents

Introduction

John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves* is his most popular and arguably most important play. It is based on the Pope's visit to New York City on October 4, 1965.

Since the debut of *The House of Blue Leaves* Off-Broadway on February 10, 1971, however, critics have been divided over the play's artistic merits. The story focuses on one man's desire for success as a big-time songwriter, which clashes with his demanding, middle-class family life. Some reviewers did not know what to make of the play's mix of black comedy, farce, realistic drama, and social commentary. They maintained that its come-dic elements undermined the serious issues of the play.

The critics that praised *The House of Blue Leaves* appreciated Guare's treatment of ideas. They also lauded the manner in which he depicted the dark underside of the American dream, especially his emphasis on the destructive nature of the media on people's dreams and personal lives. Several critics noted the skillful manner in which Guare portrayed the quest for personal success as defined by a shallow value system.

Despite the controversy, the play ran for 337 performances and garnered several prestigious awards for Guare, including the Obie and New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play. Revived on Broadway in 1986, it won more awards for him, including a Tony. Although critics were still divided over the value of *The House of Blue Leaves* during the revival, most appreciated the power and insight of Guare' s message.

Author Biography

John Guare was born in New York City, on February 5, 1938. He was the only child of Edward and Helen Claire Guare. Raised in a strict Catholic household, Guare attended mass daily with his mother. His father, Edward, worked in the Wall Street stock exchange as a clerk.

Guare was a voracious reader. He also went to the theater quite often and was fascinated by Broadway musicals. His mother's brother, Billy Grady, was a casting director at MGM studios. In the mid-1940s, Grady was casting a new version of *Huckleberry Finn*. Guare put on a show for him similar to the one described in *The House of Blue Leaves*.

Guare began writing plays at age eleven. After graduating from St. John's Preparatory School in Brooklyn, Guare earned his B.A. from Georgetown in 1960, then his M.F.A. in drama from Yale in 1963. His first play was produced in 1962.

After graduation, Guare served in the Air Force Reserves to avoid the military draft and spent the next several years in Europe. While living abroad, he managed to have a one-act play, *To Wally Pantoni, We Leave a Credenza* (1964), produced in New York City.

In 1965, Guare got the idea for *The House of Blue Leaves* while still in Europe. After a successful staged reading in New York City in 1966, he had numerous offers for production but could not produce a solid second act.

While Guare continued to work on the play, he churned out several successful one-acts, including *Muzeeka* (1967), which won him his first Obie Award. On the basis of these short plays, he was recognized as one of America's best young playwrights.

Yet Guare had a lot of trouble finishing *The House of Blue Leaves*. He returned to Europe for a short time, where he finally wrote a solid draft. When the play was produced Off-Broadway in 1971, it proved to be his first big success and his first successful full-length play.

The House of Blue Leaves garnered numerous awards; yet it also produced much critical controversy over his use of black comedy, farce, and social realism. It is regarded by many critics to be his best play.

After *House of Blue Leaves,* Guare continued to explore the danger of fame while living up to his billing as a great American playwright. In *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* (1973), for example, the main character, an astronaut, tries to live up to the reputation the media has created for him.

Not all Guare's plays were successful, nor did every critic like his dramatic style. His 1979 melodrama, *Bosoms and Neglect,* lasted for only four performances. In the 1980s,

after writing the Academy Award-nominated screenplay for *Atlantic City,* Guare wrote a trilogy of Civil War-centered melodramas, which were relatively unsuccessful.

After a successful revival of *The House of Blue Leaves* on Broadway in 1986, Guare produced another of his most successful plays, *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990). He also wrote the screenplay for the film version several years later. He continues to write both for the theater and film.

Plot Summary

Prologue

The House of Blue Leaves opens on the stage of the El Dorado Bar & Grill. Artie Shaughnessy sits at the piano and sings some of his songs. He is frustrated when he cannot get the house lights turned down and a spotlight to shine on him. His anger grows when the audience does not listen to his singing. He continues, but at the end of the show, when there is no applause, he quickly exits.

Act I

Act I opens late at night in Artie's shabby apartment in Sunnyside, Queens. As Artie sleeps in a sleeping bag on the couch, his seventeen-year-old son Ronnie breaks into the apartment. When the doorbell rings soon after, the fatigue-clad Ronnie runs into his room without being seen.

Artie gets up and answers the door. It is Bunny Flingus, Artie's plump girlfriend. She is extremely excited about seeing the Pope as he passes through Queens, but Artie does not share her enthusiasm. Bunny figures out that Artie performed during amateur night at the El Dorado and is both angry and supportive. During the exchange, Bananas Shaughnessy, Artie's wife, comes out of her bedroom and watches them for a moment, unseen, before returning to her room.

Artie begs Bunny to cook for him, but she wants him to get dressed so they can watch the Pope. Bananas calls Artie from her room; when she makes an appearance, Bunny hides in the kitchen. Obviously mentally unbalanced, Bananas gets hysterical asking Artie if he hates her and if he will leave her. Artie forces pills down her throat and tells Bananas that he is going to see the Pope. Bananas tells him that she cannot go see the Pope because her fingernails are different lengths.

Though Artie tries to stop her, Bananas goes into the kitchen. She begins to act like an animal. When Bananas finally sees Bunny, she addresses her politely, then scares her. Bunny tells the audience that she wishes Bananas was dead.

Despite Artie's protests, Bunny tells Bananas that Artie is leaving her. She urges Bananas to go to Mexico for a divorce. Artie tells Bananas that he found a hospital for her. Bunny tells Bananas that they are going to California to revive Artie's career as a songwriter using Artie's friend Billy, a famous director.

Bunny demands that Artie call Billy. Artie does so, telling Billy about the situation. When the conversation is over, Bunny is extremely pleased. She leaves. Artie decides to take a shower, and tells Bananas that he is tired of taking care of her.

Bananas recalls the point she started losing touch with reality. This touches Artie, and he asks her to come and see the Pope because a miracle might happen. They watch the Pope on television for a few moments. Artie hugs the television, and Bananas goes back to her room.

Bunny returns, announcing that the Pope has arrived. She goes into the kitchen when Bananas comes out, dressed in mismatched clothes and shoes. Bunny sees them together and becomes angry. They all leave to see the Pope. After they are gone, Ronnie comes out of his room holding a large, gift-wrapped box.

Act II, Scene 1

Ronnie proceeds to build a bomb. As he puts on the clothes of an altar boy, Ronnie describes the first time that he met Billy. Ronnie was so eager to play the part of Huckleberry Finn that he acted like an idiot in front of Billy, and Billy thought he was retarded. Ronnie believes that everyone is laughing at him. His monologue ends when Artie's key is heard in the door. Ronnie retreats to his room with the bomb.

As soon as Artie enters, Corrinna Stroller appears at the door. She is Billy's girlfriend and a former actress. Artie is surprised by her appearance, and when he leaves her for a moment, Corrinna reveals that she is partially deaf and needs hearing aids.

Bunny enters and fawns over Corrinna, telling her about Artie's career. Artie sings a tune. Three nuns appear at the window; it turns out they accidentally got locked onto the roof trying to see the Pope. Despite Bunny's protests, Artie lets the nuns in.

Artie introduces Corrinna and Bananas, and Bunny tries to make Bananas look bad in front of everyone. Bananas confirms the negative impression when she tries to cook brillo pads as hamburgers and burns herself.

Artie begins to sing for Corrinna. Bananas asks him to sing an old song, which he does, and then points out that the song is the same as "White Christmas." Humiliated, he makes Bananas take pills, which turn out to be the transistors for Corrinna's hearing aids. He also calls the mental institution and asks that they take Bananas away.

Finally, Ronnie makes an appearance. He tells his father that he is going to blow up the Pope with his bomb. No one, including Artie, listens to him. Corrinna informs Artie that she is moving to Australia with Billy. She almost leaves before she realizes that she has two tickets for the Pope's mass at Yankee stadium.

The nuns take the tickets. An M.P. makes an appearance, looking to arrest Ronnie for leaving the army without permission. Before Corrinna can leave, Ronnie hands her the gift-wrapped package. A few seconds later, the package explodes and Corrinna and two of the three nuns die.

Act II, Scene 2

Later that day, Artie and Billy watch the Pope's mass on television in the apartment. Billy has come to identify Corrinna's body; he is very upset and sobs over Corrinna and her lost career. Artie tries to comfort him while promoting his own career.

Bananas enters, dressed in an old gown. It is revealed that Billy gave Bananas her nickname. The surviving nun rushes in, upset because she cannot turn off the hot water. Bananas tells Artie that she wants to burn Bunny, who lives downstairs, so that Artie won't like her as much. Bananas appeals to Billy for help. The nun introduces herself to Billy, telling him her friends died in the explosion. This touches Billy, who makes a call to get Ronnie out of jail.

While Billy is on the phone, Bunny returns. He has taken care of Ronnie's situation, but it is revealed that he does not know who blew up Corrinna and the two nuns.

Billy realizes that he has two tickets for Australia and invites Bunny to come with him; she excitedly agrees. The nun tells them how she does not want to return to the convent. Billy gives her money to move into Bunny's apartment and help care for Bananas.

As Billy and Bunny leave, Artie makes one last effort to try his songs to his friend. Billy tells him that his life is with Bananas, not in show business. After they leave, Bananas acts like a dog. Artie chokes her to death.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

As the audience enters the theatre, Artie Shaughnessy sits at a piano, plays and sings. He repeatedly tries to get the audience to stop talking and pay attention, then shouts offstage for someone to give him the blue spotlight he was promised. When he's done, he gathers up his music, bows and leaves the stage.

Prologue Analysis

This brief scene performs several functions. Firstly, it introduces the central character, Artie and reveals that he's an amateur songwriter eager for attention and success. These aspects of his character play important roles in the play's dramatic and thematic action. Secondly, the scene introduces the convention of characters speaking directly to the audience, which all of the principal characters do throughout the play. This makes the audience not only viewers, but also participants in the story.

Thirdly, the scene introduces the symbolically important element of the color blue, which represents the way characters become imprisoned as the result of losing their grip on reality. The meaning of the symbol is explained more fully later in the play, but it's important to mention at this point because the blue spotlight represents the way Artie is already trapped in delusional dreams. What these dreams are is revealed as the action of the play unfolds, with Artie's attempts to bring these dreams into reality playing a key role in that action. The final moments of the play dramatize what happens when his dreams are taken away from him and he descends into madness.

Act 1, Part 1

Act 1, Part 1 Summary

In his cramped apartment in Queens, New York, Artie sleeps on his sofa, muttering the words "Pope Ronnie" over and over. His clothes lie on a nearby chair. As he sleeps, a young man, whom we find out later is Artie's son Ronnie, comes in through the window. As we see he's dressed in an army issue coat over fatigues, he takes milk and bread from the refrigerator and then runs into another room when the doorbell rings.

Artie wakes up, goes to the door and lets in Bunny Flingus, who wears a warm coat and boots and carries two cameras. As she stuffs newspaper into her boots to keep her feet warm, she berates Artie for sleeping in and for having no sense of history. Her long, chattering speech reveals that it's cold out but that people like Nuns, cripples and tourists from far away are nevertheless lined up on the street in the hope of miracles and blessings from Pope Paul, who's driving through Queens on his way to address the United Nations. Artie grumbles about the cost of the Pope's visit while he can't even afford to go to Staten Island. His bad temper makes Bunny realize that he must have had a bad night at the club at which he performed. When Artie tells her that the audience talked through the whole evening, we realize that they're referring to the events of the Prologue. Bunny tries to encourage Artie, saying that his songs are classics just waiting to be heard. Artie, however, gloomily says he's getting too old to still be waiting for a big break. Bunny changes the subject and goes back to chattering about the Pope's visit. Meanwhile, Artie's wife Bananas looks out of her bedroom to see who's talking, then goes back in. Neither Artie nor Bunny notices her.

Artie agrees to go see the Pope on one condition. Bunny immediately understands what the condition is without him actually saying it: he wants her to cook for him. As he tries to convince her to cook, Bunny explains that she has no problem having sex with him since she's lousy in bed, but for her to cook for him would be like giving up her virginity, the part of her that's truly special. As Artie resigns himself to having no breakfast and no fancy cooking, Bananas comes out of her room. Artie asks Bunny to leave, but Bunny goes into the kitchen.

Bananas' conversation with Artie reveals that he works at a zoo and that she is mentally and emotionally unstable. He forces pills down her throat and she calms down. Artie explains to Bananas that he and Bunny are going to see the Pope. Then he turns to us and explains that the Pope is addressing the United Nations in the hope of ending the war in Vietnam, which means that Artie's son Ronnie will be coming home from the war sooner, rather than later. Bananas protests that she can't go to see the Pope because her nails are all different lengths. Artie forces more pills down her throat, then tells her about a dream he had in which both the Pope and Ronnie rejected her. Bananas tells him that she dreams she wanders around the house all day crying because of how her life turned out and when she wakes up, she wanders around the house all day crying because of how her life turned out. She asks Artie which is real.

Act 1, Part 1 Analysis

It begins to become clear in this scene exactly what Artie's dreams are and how important they are to him. His conversations, when he can get a word in edgewise, reveal that he dreams of success as a popular singer and composer and also of a future with Bunny. This latter dream is also indicated by Artie's dream about Bananas, which suggests how much he'd like to be rid of her. This is also revealed by his casual cruelty towards her in telling her of his dream and in the way he forces her to take her pills. Artie's treatment of Bananas, who has clearly had some kind of emotional breakdown, illustrates how close to the breaking point he is, with his impatience and rough treatment of her reinforcing the idea that he's a man on the edge. The action so far leads us to believe that he's merely on the edge of divorce, but the end of the play reveals that he's actually on the edge of something much darker and more dangerous. Artie's behavior towards Bananas, therefore, foreshadows the emotional and physical violence to come.

Another of Artie's dreams is revealed in his comments to us about the Pope's visit, which show how he dreams about freedom from the army for his son. This last dream is ironic in that we've seen that Ronnie is already free from the army. It becomes even more ironic when we discover later how he became free and also how the army indirectly causes the chaos in the second act.

Bananas' dream, meanwhile, illustrates what happens when the line between reality and dreams becomes blurred. It's clear at this point that she's lost her grip on what's real and what's not and as such, foreshadows what happens to Artie when he loses his grip in the same way.

The Pope is a powerful symbol of hope in this play, such as in Bunny's insistence that the Pope will heal people in the crowd and Artie's hopes that the Pope will bring Ronnie home. These hopes both parallel Artie's hope for success as a songwriter. Later in the play, when the hopes of all the characters (including some we haven't met yet) for what the Pope will bring are dashed, it mirrors the way Artie's hopes are all dashed by Bunny's departure with another man, Ronnie's imprisonment and Bananas' deepening lunacy.

Act 1, Part 2

Act 1, Part 2 Summary

Artie improvises a song about the Pope's visit. Bananas tells him not to be disrespectful and starts going into the kitchen. Artie blocks her and says he'll make her breakfast. Bananas pretends to be an animal in the zoo and Artie throws food into her mouth. She catches it, eats it, then introduces herself to us. Bunny comments to us that when the Pope passes, she's going to pray for Bananas' death. Bananas tells us she had another dream, that we were talking to a fat woman with newspapers on her feet, then Bananas sneaks up on Bunny and startles her. Bunny then hands Bananas guide books to Mexico and tells her it's easy to go down and get a divorce. Artie tells Bunny that Bananas can't even go down the street without losing her way, then explains to Bananas that he and Bunny are going out to California to start a new life. He also explains that he's found a new place for Bananas to live, a big beautiful house on the East Coast surrounded by trees full of birds that look like blue leaves. Bananas asks worriedly whether there will be shock treatments and Artie promises there will be none. Bunny tells a long story about a movie star who had problems with her hair the night before her first day on a movie, says that this was real suffering and tells Bananas that Artie's suffered with her for years and that it's time for him to have a new life. Artie tells Bananas that's the kind of life he needs and Bunny says that until he met her he was afraid of life, saying that nobody takes a job feeding animals in the zoo unless he's afraid of dealing with people.

As Artie angrily protests he's not afraid of people at all and Bananas says that the bars can come off the windows since she's not going to jump after all, Bunny tries to convince Artie to call his friend Billy in California and tell him they're coming out. Bananas volunteers to make the call, saying that Billy was always more her friend than Artie's. Artie angrily protests that he and Billy have been friends ever since school and in a long speech details all of Billy's accomplishments as a movie director, including a film showing at the Museum of Modern Art and a Rock Hudson/Doris Day film. Bunny tells Artie that Billy can help him get work as a composer for movies and maybe help him win an Oscar. This convinces Artie to pick up the phone. He calls Billy, waking him up.

Artie explains to Billy that his marriage to Bananas is as over as Billy's is to his dead wife, tells Billy how he met Bunny (in a sauna where they had sex for the first time) and asks if he and Bunny can stay with him for a while when they arrive. He says that Billy can let them know later when would be a good time to visit, then hangs up. Bunny sings Artie's song about the day the Pope came to New York and Bananas throws rice at the two of them. Bunny asks Artie if they can get out of there, but Artie says Bananas is harmless. Bunny grabs her coat and goes out to keep their place on the street, promising to cook amazing meals for Artie when they're in California.

Artie improvises another song, this one about how great things are going to be in California. Bananas warns him to keep the noise down. As he continues to sing, Artie

tells Bananas he doesn't care about keeping the noise down anymore. He then tells her how he gave up on her years ago after rescuing her from a cold, snowy roof in the middle of winter and she came home and got on with life without a hint of a sniffle while he got pneumonia. As he sits at the piano and plays a couple of old standards, Bananas explains how she ended up on the roof. She says that she imagined herself in a cab that hit famous people, how they all ended up telling the story of what happened on late night television and how she imagined that all the people in America laughing at the story were laughing at her. She says she felt that she knew all those famous people better than she knew herself and that's why she went up on the roof.

Artie, suddenly gentle, asks her to come see the Pope with him and pray for a miracle that might heal her. Bananas says again that her nails are the wrong length and that everyone will laugh at her. Artie turns on the television so she can watch him that way and tells Bananas to pray. As Bananas prays to be made better, Artie urges her to ask to be made well so he can leave in peace, then suggests that she kiss the hem of the Pope's robe on the television. She does, then Artie does, suddenly praying for a miracle of his own. Bananas goes into her bedroom.

Bunny rushes in, excited about the Pope's landing and urging Artie to hurry. Bananas comes out of her room dressed to go out. Artie explains to an angry Bunny that he's going to help Bananas one last time, then leaves arm in arm with her. Bunny angrily grabs Artie's music, saying he's got to take it with him so he can get it blessed and runs out after them.

Ronnie emerges from his room carrying a large box, comes to the front of the stage and just stares at us.

Act 1, Part 2 Analysis

Artie goes through a considerable range of emotions in this section. He starts out frightened that Bananas and Bunny are going to fight, then becomes determined as he finally tells Bananas he's going to leave, angry at Bunny for suggesting he's afraid, elated when he finally calls Billy, nasty when he tells Bananas how long he's wanted to leave her and suddenly gentle when he sees, possibly for the first time, just how vulnerable Bananas is. This intense emotional movement essentially leads him deeper into himself, into the compassion and hope that he truly feels for his wife, in spite of everything she's put him through. These glimpses of what amount to Artie's heart and soul go a long way towards redeeming him in our eyes, making him seem less of a selfish monster. With all these emotions churning in him, however, we also start to wonder if he's truly sane and whether he really does have what it takes to turn his dreams into reality.

The truth of what the color blue means is revealed in this section when Artie describes "the house of blue leaves" where Bananas will live. The reference in this scene clearly illustrates the way that blue symbolizes how characters find themselves trapped in a world of unreality. Bananas is clearly, well, bananas, so the image of her surrounded by

the color blue suggests that at any other point in the play to which the color blue is referred, such as in the prologue and in the final moments of the play, the character in that particular situation is in the same state of mind as Bananas. We've seen the image at the beginning with the blue spotlight and we see it for the last time at the end of the play when Artie loses his grip and kills Bananas as blue leaves fall all around him.

Artie's long speech to Billy is important mostly because it's the first time he admits just how over his marriage to Bananas is and also the first time he takes real steps towards achieving two of his dreams; becoming a songwriter and marrying Bunny. This leads to Bunny's singing of Artie's song about the Pope, which suggests that she believes the Pope's visit caused Artie's decision to move on, that it's something of a miracle. Bunny's reaction, therefore, is another example of the way the Pope symbolizes hope.

More examples appear in the way that Artie and Bananas both kiss the hem of the Pope's gown on the television and the way that Bunny runs out with Artie's music in the hopes that the Pope's mere passing will bless it. Is it coincidence that "Pope" and "hope" rhyme?

Bananas throwing rice at Artie and Bunny has clear echoes of the ritual of throwing rice at a new bride and groom. In other words, she's behaving as though Bunny and Artie have just gotten married, which, on some level, they have. Bunny certainly reacts as though that's the case, which makes Artie's sudden compassion towards Bananas all that more shocking to her.

Finally, there are a couple of elements of foreshadowing in this scene. Bananas' story of how she ended up on the roof foreshadows, to a certain degree, the Nuns getting stranded on the roof in the second act. Ronnie's appearance with the box foreshadows both his appearance at the beginning of the second act and the mayhem that emerges from what the box contains.

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 1

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 1 Summary

Ronnie stands in exactly the same place as he stood at the end of Act 1. He takes two grenades out of the box, wires them up to Artie's alarm clock, sets the clock and places the bomb he's just constructed into the box and sets it down. Then he runs into his room and returns with another box, this one containing a choir boy's robes. He puts them on and tells a long story of how Billy came to town when Ronnie was a child, looking for the perfect boy to play Huckleberry Finn in a big-budget movie. He tells how Billy was inundated by boys who wanted to play Huck, how Ronnie decided he was the perfect boy and how he jumped into an elaborate singing/dancing/acting audition the moment that Billy walked in the door, hoping to find a little piece and quiet. He says that Billy called him "mentally retarded" and that this made him go into his room and not come out for the rest of the visit. Ronnie finishes his speech by saying that everybody from his father to his commanding officer laughs at him and thinks he's nothing, but by the end of the day everybody will know who he is. He hears a key in the front door and quickly runs out, taking the bomb and the other box with him.

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 1 Analysis

Aside from the thematic value of Ronnie's bomb as a symbol of hope's destruction, his story is simultaneously chilling in its violence and pathetic in its naked vulnerability and desperation. Beneath both parts of the story, the Huck Finn part and the building a bomb part, is a desperate need to just be seen, or known, or recognized. This need, this sense of having been ignored all his life, is completely understandable given what we've seen of Bananas' mental state and Artie's obsession with becoming a songwriter. If we look closely, however, we can see that the same need to be seen, recognized, or valued is behind the intense drives of all of the main characters - Bananas' psychological condition (as represented by her dream of being laughed at by celebrities), Artie's determination and Bunny's desire to be seen and blessed by the Pope. They all yearn to be noticed and appreciated, a thematic longing common to characters in a great deal of American dramatic literature, everything from early Eugene O'Neill to *Death of a Salesman* to *Fences* to *Wicked*. In the case of this play, Ronnie's longing leads him to an act of insane violence with materials stolen from the army; an act which both parallels and foreshadows Artie's murder of Bananas at the play's conclusion.

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 2

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 2 Summary

Artie hurries back in, looking for a particular song that Bunny wants to make sure gets blessed by the Pope. He comments to us that Bunny and Bananas look very nice holding each other up against the crowds and the cold, adding that it would be wonderful if the two of them fell in love and they could all stay in Queens together.

A beautiful young woman arrives at the door, telling Artie that Billy told her she should stop by for a visit on her way out of town. Artie recognizes her as Corrinna, a movie star who made one well-known movie, then retired. Artie runs out to get Bananas and Bunny, excited that there's an actual movie star in his apartment. Corrinna confesses to us that she's deaf and shows us her hearing aids.

Bunny rushes in, very excited about meeting Corrinna. She comments to us about how the best moment of Corrinna's performance in Billy's war movie was the moment when she was blown up by a grenade, then turns to Corrinna and asks why she didn't make any more movies. Before she can answer, Bunny tells Artie to start singing, saying that Corrinna can help him get his music into the movies and that the Pope's blessing has paid off. Just as Corrinna is saying she doesn't really have time to listen to any music, Three Nuns appear at the window. Corrinna is startled by them, drops her hearing aids and crawls around looking for them as Artie lets in the Nuns. They explain that they climbed onto the roof to get a view of the Pope, dropped their binoculars, got locked out, climbed down the fire escape and are desperate to see the Pope on TV. Artie agrees to let them watch and they settle in, asking for beer.

Bananas comes in, terrified and confused. Artie introduces her to the Nuns, whom Bananas mistakes for penguins. She thinks that Artie's brought work home from the zoo. As the Nuns bicker about whose fault it is that they missed seeing the Pope, Artie introduces Bananas to Corrinna and Bananas comments that Billy's girlfriends all make her feel so dowdy. Artie starts to sing for Corrinna, the Little Nun tries to talk with Corrinna, who can't hear her and Bananas starts to fry Brillo pads in the kitchen, thinking they're hamburgers. Artie hustles the Nuns and the television into Ronnie's bedroom, saying they're upsetting Bananas. One of the Nuns comes out and announces happily that there's a choirboy already in the bedroom, then goes back in. Artie comments happily to us that Ronnie must be home, then returns to his piano and sings a song for Corrinna, who still can't hear him. When he's finished, Corrinna, Bananas and Bunny applaud, then Bananas tells him to sing one of her favorites, one of the first songs he ever wrote. As he comments again that sometimes he misses Bananas, Bunny warns him that she still hasn't forgiven him for taking Bananas with them to see the Pope. Artie starts playing the song, then Bananas tells him to play "White Christmas." As he does, he realizes that his song has the same tune and angrily closes the piano lid on Bananas' fingers, accusing her of knowing they're the same song for years, but letting him make a fool of himself anyway.

Artie picks up the phone and calls the hospital where he plans to place Bananas. Bananas pleads with Corrinna to help her, then swallows Corrinna's hearing aids, thinking they're her pills. When Artie's finished on the phone, Bunny confesses that she's got a thousand dollars in cash downstairs that she'll use to pay their way to California. Bananas runs into her room, Bunny runs downstairs to get the money, Artie goes out to pack and Corrinna tries to leave. She's prevented from going, however, by the emergence of the Nuns, who talk cheerfully about how lovely a boy Ronnie is. Corrinna asks them to pray for her, explaining that she's going to Australia to have an operation done on her ears so she can hear. She also says that Billy is going with her to make a film and they'll be gone for two years. Artie comes in, hears this last part and can't believe that Billy isn't going to be in California when he gets there.

As the Nuns sing Ave Maria as a prayer for Corrinna, Ronnie comes in, wearing his fatigues, carrying his bomb and saying he's going down to blow up the Pope. As the Nuns snap pictures with Corrinna, Artie tries introducing Ronnie around and Ronnie keeps trying to tell him he's going to blow up the Pope. Artie pays no attention. Corrinna announces she's got two free tickets for the Pope's mass at Yankee Stadium. The Nuns and Ronnie rush her, Ronnie gets the tickets, the Nuns rush him and he runs into his bedroom.

An MP (Military Policeman) arrives. Corrinna thinks he's Ronnie and embraces him, but the MP hears the sounds of fighting coming from Ronnie's bedroom and goes in to investigate. The Little Nun comes out with the two tickets, followed by Ronnie being chased by the other Nuns, who are being chased by the MP. The MP arrests Ronnie, the Head Nun grabs the tickets and orders the Little Nun back to the convent and a Man in White arrives to take "Mrs. Arthur Shaughnessy" to the hospital. Bunny walks in the front door, announces herself as "Mrs. Arthur Shaughnessy" and is immediately grabbed by the Man in White. The Head Nun and the Second Nun run off with the tickets and Corrinna begins to follow, on her way to the airport. Ronnie throws the box with the bomb to her, saying it's a gift for Billy. Corrinna catches it and goes out. Artie tries to stop the Man in White from taking Bunny away, but it doesn't work. The Man in White and Bunny go out just as Ronnie's bomb explodes offstage. Bunny comes back in looking for Corrinna. She and Artie go out, Ronnie and the Little Nun wrestle with the MP and Bananas comes out of her room with a vacuum and starts to clean.

Act 2, Scene 1, Part 2 Analysis

In this section, the action of the play becomes farcical. In general, farce is a style of comedy in which characters find themselves in extreme situations and make increasingly extreme choices at an extremely fast pace because they're becoming increasingly desperate. In the case of this play, farce is an appropriate technical means to express an important thematic element: the way in which the hopes of many of these characters have been suppressed and denied for so long that they've all become desperate and are willing to do anything that will help them realize those hopes.

Artie is desperate to have his songs heard so he'll ignore his son and the Nuns for a chance to sing. Ronnie is desperate for attention, so he'll do anything to get the tickets so he can get close enough to the Pope to blow him up. The Nuns are desperate to see the Pope. Corrinna is desperate to hear, so the loss of her hearing aids and her determination to go to Australia are extremely important to her. Bananas is desperate to keep her husband, so she resorts to telling him a painful truth in the hope that it will shock him into accepting her love and need for him. In all these cases, the desperation backfires and everybody ends up worse off than they were.

Another point about farce is that it generally focuses on action; who does what to whom and who reacts how. About the only nonfarcical element of this scene is an element of foreshadowing, as Bunny's comment about Corrinna's death in the movie as a result of a grenade explosion comically foreshadows Corrinna's death in the play at the hands of Ronnie's bomb.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

As we hear the Pope's sermon at Yankee Stadium over the television, lights come up on Artie's apartment, which is now extremely messy. Artie is watching television and so is a sobbing man whom Artie introduces as Billy, who's come to retrieve Corrinna's body. Artie tries to calm Billy down by singing one of his songs, then telling him that Corrinna died quickly and painlessly. Billy isn't comforted and says that he won't go back to California since he feels he can't make movies any more. Artie pleads with him to go back, saying he can start over and that he (Artie) needs a place to stay.

Bananas comes out of her bedroom dressed in outdated clothes. Billy mistakes her for his wife, Georgina. As Artie compliments her on how beautiful she looks, Bananas says she put on a dress that Georgina had given her to remind Billy how beautiful his wife was. Billy laughs, says that Bananas is the best and we learn that Bananas is a nickname that Billy gave her years ago.

The Little Nun runs out from the bathroom saying she can't turn off the hot water. As Artie rushes about finding the tools to fix the taps, Bananas confesses to Billy that she messed with the taps so that hot water would flow into the apartment downstairs and burn Bunny. She then pleads with Billy to help her stay in her apartment where she's happy and also to help Ronnie. Billy says that Ronnie's in prison and can't be helped. Bananas begins flirting with him, but stops when Artie comes out and grabs the tap that Bananas has kept hidden in her hand.

The Little Nun comes back out of the bathroom and she and Billy talk about how they both lost friends in Ronnie's bomb blast. Bananas hands Billy the phone and asks him again to help Ronnie in the name of their all being friends and Billy calls a friend in the military. As the Little Nun goes back into the bedroom, Artie tries to get Billy to stop, saying to Bananas that Ronnie deserves what he gets. As Billy continues with his call, Bunny appears with a fabulous meal and complains about the water coming through her ceiling. When Billy's off the phone, she insists that he join in their meal. As they eat, Bunny tells Billy that life can and will go on and gets Artie to sing one of his best songs. When he's finished, Billy realizes he can indeed go on and invites Bunny to take Corrinna's ticket and go with him to Australia.

As Bunny considers the offer and Artie tries to convince Billy to take him to Australia instead, the Little Nun comes out of the bedroom wearing another of the dresses that Georgina had given to Bananas. She talks about what will happen to her when she goes back to the convent, but Billy suggests that she move into Bunny's apartment and take care of Bananas, giving her a handful of hundred dollar bills to live on for a while.

The phone rings and Bunny answers it. It turns out that all the animals in the zoo are giving birth at the same time and they need Artie to come down and work. As Artie talks

on the phone, Bunny tells us that she believes the Pope answered all her prayers. She promises to keep up Georgina's tradition and send Bananas all her clothes.

As Bunny and Billy go out, Artie tries to get Billy to listen to his songs. Billy tells Artie that Artie's the reason he makes movies, that when he's writing a script or setting up a shot, he imagines how Artie would react. When Artie says he could easily be at Billy's side the whole time and he wouldn't have to imagine, Billy tells him that it's more important that he imagines Artie in the movie theatre or at home, saying the most important thing in the world is to be a member of the audience. As Billy and Bunny leave, Artie desperately plays and sings one last time, then runs out after them. While he's gone, the Little Nun comments to us that life is like living in an orchard; that we walk through it and blessings drop upon us as we go. She flings away her habit and runs out, looking forward to her new life.

Artie comes back in, defeated. Bananas, very quiet and calm, tells him that things will be different now that they're finally alone together. She gets down on the floor and pretends to be a dog in the same way as she did earlier. After a moment, Artie goes to her, tickles her, embraces her...and then, as the light around him turns blue and takes on the pattern of blue leaves, he strangles her. A blue spotlight appears. Artie steps into the light and sings one of his songs, "The stage is filled with blue leaves."

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Some of the more farcical elements of the previous section of the play continue into this scene. The incident of the hot water in particular conforms to the previously described characteristics of farce: extreme situation, fast pace, desperation and extremity of choice. In general, however, the principal and driving source of desperation narrows down to Artie. Yes, Billy grieves desperately for Corrinna and yes, Bananas acts desperately in order to alienate Bunny. The focus of the action, however, is still Artie as his single-minded obsession with musical success continues to drive him to acts of desperation, even after his world has literally crumbled around him, both the physical world of his apartment and his emotional world as represented by Bunny. This means that the climax of both the play and the destruction of Artie's dreams is the moment in which he plays and sings one last time as Billy leaves with Bunny.

Once Artie realizes that all his dreams have been destroyed, the intensity of his desperation causes him to break away from reality in the same way that Bananas did years ago. His madness, as represented by the blue light in the same way as Bananas' madness was represented by the house of blue leaves, leads him to destroy his wife, the one person who continues to believe in him and the only person on whom he can take out his frustrated rage. His killing of Bananas plays out the foreshadowing in Ronnie's act of murder, while the play's final moments, in which Artie finally sings in the blue spotlight he demanded in the play's prologue, play out the ending of his story as foreshadowed in its beginning.

The near-tragic conclusion to Artie's story is poignantly contrasted with the new beginnings experienced by almost all of the other characters. Bananas, the Little Nun, Billy and Bunny all experience new hope for their lives and new beginnings. This makes it a significant irony that Artie, who wanted a new beginning more than any of the others, doesn't get one, a circumstance symbolized by the way he's unable to be at the zoo for the births (new beginnings) for all the animals. Artie remains stuck in his unresolved desperation. As the other characters stroll through the metaphorical orchard as described by the Little Nun and receive the blessings to which she also refers in that speech, Artie is left imprisoned in an orchard of another kind, confined by the blue-leafed trees of his madness.

Bibliography

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Characters

Billy Einhorn

Billy is Artie's childhood best friend. He has also known Bananas for many years and had given her that nickname. Billy is now a famous Hollywood movie director, and he is involved in a romantic relationship with Corrinna. At Bunny's urging, Artie gets Billy to help him revive his career as a movie songwriter, but that fails. When Corrinna dies, Billy convinces Bunny to go to Australia, leaving Artie alone with Bananas.

Bunny Flingus

Bunny is Artie's girlfriend and downstairs neighbor. Thirty-nine years old, she is an amazing cook and supportive of Artie's musical ambitions. Once Bananas is out of the way, she plans on marrying Artie and moving to California with him. She tries to control Artie's life and takes every opportunity to express her jealousy of Bananas. Yet at the first chance she gets□Billy's offer to move to Australia□she dumps Artie for a new, more exciting life.

Little Nun

The Little Nun is one of three nuns who get trapped on the roof of Artie's apartment building after the Pope drives by. She has not yet taken her final vows as a nun and is not enthusiastic about her chosen profession. After two nuns die in the explosion, the Little Nun decides not to return to the convent. Eventually she is hired by Billy to live in Bunny's apartment and take care of Bananas.

Artie Shaughnessy

Artie Shaughnessy is the protagonist of *The House of Blue Leaves*. Frustrated on a number of levels, Artie's life is at a turning point. His marriage to Bananas is empty; because of her mental illness, he feels little more than her caretaker. He has a girlfriend, Bunny, who is selfish and controlling.

He works in a New York zoo taking care of animals, but he is really a frustrated songwriter and singer. He wants to make it big but has done nothing to advance his career. Artie is also concerned about his son, Ronnie, who is in the Army. Like Bananas, Ronnie suffers from severe mental illness and has violent, paranoid fantasies. By the end of the play, Artie feels so helpless and trapped that he kills Bananas.

Bananas Shaughnessy

Bananas is Artie's wife; she has been suffering from mental illness for a long time. In fact, she has not left her apartment for several months. She fears going to a mental hospital and the treatment she would receive. Although ill, she provides lucid and insightful comments at certain moments of the action. Artie kills her at the end of the play.

Ronnie Shaughnessy

Ronnie is the teenage son of Bananas and Artie. He is in the army but has gone absent without leave to return home. His parents are unaware of his presence in the apartment for most of the play.

Suffering from severe mental problems, Ronnie builds a bomb to blow up the Pope. He almost has the opportunity to see the Pope at Yankee Stadium but instead uses his bomb to blow up two nuns and Corrinna Stroller. Ronnie is arrested, but Billy gets him released. Instead of jail, Ronnie will serve two weeks in the brig, then be stationed in Italy.

Corrinna Stroller

Corrinna is a famous actress and the girlfriend of Billy. Partially deaf from an accident that happened on the set of a movie, she has not worked since then. She is a very kind person.

Themes

Betrayal

Nearly every character in *The House of Blue Leaves* is betrayed by another□or by his or her own desires. Artie suffers from the most severe betrayals. His girlfriend, Bunny Flingus, spends most of the play encouraging, if not pushing, his career. She convinces Artie that Billy Einhorn is the key to his success. At the end of the play, Billy offers Bunny his extra ticket to Australia, and Bunny goes with him. She betrays Artie to ensure that she has a secure future.

Artie is also betrayed by his own dreams for success. These dreams are not based on reality, but on Bunny's ideas, which have been propagated by the mass media.

Artie betrays his wife, Bananas. She suffers from some sort of mental illness, and Artie is her primary caretaker. He has betrayed her by becoming involved with Bunny. Indeed, Bunny and Artie intend to marry and move to California, leaving Bananas behind.

Yet Artie's biggest betrayal of Bananas comes at the end of the play. After Bunny has abandoned Artie and his dreams are shattered, Bananas begins to act like a dog again and he strangles her to death. Entrusted to take care of her, he instead kills her. He gains only a false, probably short-lived sense of freedom by committing this act.

Success and Failure: Fame

The House of Blue Leaves features characters who define their success or failure based on the idea of fame. For example, Artie is unhappy with his life because he believes that he should be a famous songwriter. However, he is not particularly gifted. When his chance for success is gone, and his opportunities are limited, he strikes out and kills the focus of his rage, his wife.

Artie's definition of success is defined by Bunny, his girlfriend. She garners these values from movie magazines and television. Her obsession with seeing the Pope has little to do with his religious standing, but that he is a celebrity she can see in person.

The three nuns who appear in Act II share these values. They turn seeing the Pope into an event similar to the experiences of the Beatles in their first trip to the United States.Bunny's definition of success is also for her own benefit. She wants Artie to be a successful songwriter so that she can have a better life in California. When Artie's friend, the famous director Billy Einhorn, finally makes an appearance, Bunny realizes that Artie will not get his break.

Realizing that Artie will always be a failure, Bunny latches on to the already successful□and famous□Billy and leaves with him. Ironically, unlike Artie, Bunny is

basically successful. She reaches her goal of being involved with someone who is famous and rich but only by betraying her boyfriend.

Violence and Cruelty

There are several violent and cruel acts in *The House of Blue Leaves*. This violence emphasizes the superficial values the characters possess, and how these values negatively affect their actions.

For example, Bunny speaks and acts cruelly to Bananas because she is jealous and controlling. She also believes hurting Bananas will force Artie to become a success. For Bunny, cruelty is an acceptable way to achieve her goal.

Other characters commit violent acts. Ronnie, the disturbed son of Bananas and Artie, is hiding out at home. He has left the army and is building a bomb to blow up the Pope. He believes that everyone thinks he is a nothing. To make himself something□in his sick mind□he will assassinate the Pope.

Ronnie tries to tell his father of his intentions, but Artie does not listen. Ronnie's plans are interrupted when the military police come to arrest him. Instead of the Pope, Ronnie hands the bomb to Corrinna Stroller, a famous actress and Billy's girlfriend. She dies in the explosion, though, ironically, no one seems to know whose bomb it was. The violent quest for fame is not always successful.

Style

Setting

The House of the Blues Leaves is a dramatic farce set on October 4,1965, in New York City. The play opens on the stage of the El Dorado Bar & Grill, a little bar in Queens where Artie plays his songs to an unappreciative audience. The rest of the play takes place in Artie's shabby apartment in Sunnyside, Queens. Like the bar, one of the apartment's focal points is a piano. The apartment is cramped and messy; also, it seems transitory, as if the family has not unpacked for many years.

The fact that most of the action takes place in Artie's apartment underscores the claustrophobic nature of his life. Artie is stuck caring for Bananas and working at the zoo.

Parabasis

Parabasis is defined as characters directly addressing the audience. Nearly every major character in *The House of Blue Leaves* talks to the audience. This makes the audience part of the story; the audience is a participant rather than an observer.

In Act I, Bunny welcomes the audience to her home, though it is really Artie and Banana's home. Artie explains to the audience that he wishes they had more spoons when it comes time to eat. This would allow everyone to share in the meal.

Characters also share their secrets with the audience. Bunny confesses her desire for Banana's death, while Corrinna discusses her deafness. Even minor characters, like Ronnie and the Little Nun, recite extended monologues that provide insight into their characters and actions. The use of parabasis also emphasizes how the characters in the play are similar to their audience and, perhaps, share the same fantasy-based values.

Irony

There are many ironic situations in *The House of Blue Leaves*. For example, Artie wants success, partly to keep Bunny happy; Bunny wants him to be successful because that's the only way she figures she will be important in life. Yet Artie fails, and Bunny succeeds by becoming involved with Billy Einhorn, a famous Hollywood director.

Similarly, Bananas is supposed to be crazy and pumped full of medication, yet she often has profound insight into events at hand. Corrinna is deaf because of an explosion/accident on the set of a war movie, and she dies in an explosion from the bomb that Ronnie gave to her. Guare uses irony to underscore the play's themes and add to its black humor.

Animal Imagery/Symbolism

Throughout *The House of Blue Leaves,* numerous references to and imitations of animals appear. Animals represent purity□the opposite of the superficial values many of the characters possess.

For example, Bananas often acts like an animal. While this may seem crazy, it also symbolizes her virtuous and honest nature in the face of Bunny and Artie's shallow values. Even Billy Einhorn perceives this when he tells Artie that he should be happy with what he has.

Artie is employed at the zoo and apparently has a way with animals. It seems that his life is filled with animals, and he desperately wants to escape them. He tries to do this by strangling Bananas, but this act will probably lead to a prison cell□a cage for humans.

Historical Context

The 1970s were a tumultuous time in American history. One major reason for this was the troubled American economy. A worldwide monetary crisis contributed to the devaluation of the American dollar. Economic resources were drained by the war in Vietnam, as well as the Cold War arms race. An inordinate amount of money was spent by the government to pay for Vietnam, and the national debt ran in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

The American economy suffered from stagflation□rapid inflation and faltering businesses. Between 1970 and 1971, the cost of living increased 15%. In 1971, President Richard M. Nixon took several steps to improve the economy. He ordered a wage, price, and rent freeze for ninety days. Later that year, he signed a bill that ordered a $90 million tax cut. American currency was also taken off the gold standard.

These efforts were not completely successful, in part because of the demands of the Vietnam War. As a result, Nixon curbed American involvement in Vietnam in 1971. U.S. troops were gradually withdrawn, and by the end of the year, only 140,000 U.S. troops remained in Vietnam.

Because of the failing economy, many social programs of the 1960s, remnants of former President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society," were dismantled. Some taxpayers felt these programs were draining the economy. Yet with the deterioration of the economy and the elimination of many of these programs, there came an increasing difference between rich and poor. Moreover, there was an increase in unemployment and more people on welfare.

The reaction to these challenges varied: some people became politically apathetic; others demanded full protection under the law. Consumer activist Ralph Nader and his Center for the Study of Responsive Law collected public funds in 1971 to challenge the food industry as well as automakers and the aviation industry. Consumer complaints and concerns were addressed by the federal, local, and state governments. Even the television industry had to adjust to new regulatory demands. Parents demanded better television programming for children.

As far as entertainment, television was the most popular form in the early 1970s, especially situation comedies and detective shows. Yet television brought the Vietnam War into living rooms, so that Americans could see footage of the military action. As a result, more people joined the antiwar movement.

There were few new ideas in mainstream film, theater, and art; instead, the real artistic power in the early 1970s was in underground theater and film. Avant-garde art thrived and led to experimentation with other genres, such as film, theater, and television.

The early 1970s did see the emergence of several successful female singer-songwriters, such as Carol King and Carly Simon. There were many changes for

women in American society in general. In 1971 a group of women successfully sued *Time* magazine for sexual discrimination. Similarly, the Civil Service Commission banned gender-based job designations. The women's liberation movement and feminism became powerful, though controversial, forces in society.

Critical Overview

Since its first production in 1971, *The House of Blue Leaves* has been a controversial work. This controversy stems from that fact that Guare blends several, seemingly contradictory elements: black comedy and farce with drama.

For example, Henry Hewes in the *Saturday Review of Literature* maintained "John Guare's Off-Broadway hit *The House of Blue Leaves* ... outrageously yet responsibly depicts the doomed career of Artie Shaughnessy...." Later in the same review, Hewes contended, "Guare's comic facility is inextricable from an utter and moving emotional sincerity."

Hewes is representative of critics who perceive *The House of Blue Leaves* as a unique balance of these elements. Indeed, he concluded his review by asserting that "its delights are so great and its vision so essentially true that I find myself valuing it more highly than any new play this season."

Others critics appreciated the balance that Guare attempts to maintain but contended that he fails in one or more elements. Harold Clurman in *The Nation* asserted, "John Guare's most striking talent is for savage farce.... Still, the play remains unfulfilled. . . ." Clurman continued: "[S]omething disturbs it. That 'something'... causes Guare to inject elements of cruel sorrow into the proceedings. There is nothing at all mirthful about the madness of Artie's wife nor in the play's final moments when he strangles her."

Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* explained: "His play would have been better□and perhaps even funnier□had it been about something lending itself to more formulation than despair. There is a predictability and, at the same time, shapelessness of plot that is, in the ultimate count, unworthy of the macabre zaniness of the writing."

Edith Oliver identified the problem for many of the critics. She contended, "Actually, this play could be considered a whole series of shock treatments, and often I was as horrified at myself for laughing (which I did a lot) as I was at what I saw and heard on the stage."

Other contemporary critics found no merit to Guare's work. Julius Novick of *The New York Times* maintained, "Some of Mr. Guare's comic conceits are in themselves somewhat lame, but the essential problem is that the farce and the agony seem to violate each other instead of reinforcing each other." Novick concluded, "The author's attitude towards the human misery he has created often seems trivial and exploitative: let's go to Bedlam and laugh at all the funny lunatics."

The controversy raged once again when a revival of the *The House of Blue Leaves* opened on Broadway fifteen years later. William A. Henry III is typical when he contended, "Guare's satire may seem a bit less fresh and daring than it did 15 years ago, if only because it has spawned so many imitators, but in the joyous and all but

flawless revival at the Lincoln Center, his jokes break up audiences as dizzyingly as ever. So do the wrenching emotional scenes of a boldly tragicomic plot."

Michael Malone of *The Nation* concurred. He claimed, *"Blue Leaves* is dark and full of diamonds.... It's a marvelous, maniacal tragicomedy, full of waggish merriment, razor sharp in its mordant wit but never cutting out the hearts of its characters, or turning away from their keen aches."

Other critics, such as Leo Sauvage of *The New Leader* and Robert Brustein of *The New Republic*, were not as amused by the situations or the set-up. Brustein asserted, *"The House of Blue Leaves* is black comedy sense through rose-colored glasses. It ends with a shock.... But it's tough to accept a tragic climax after having been encouraged all night to regard murder, madness, physical affliction, adultery, and assassination as occasions for gags." Brustein compared the plot of the play to a television sitcom, an ironic touch considering the role television plays in *The House of Blue Leaves*.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Petrusso is afreelance writer and screenwriter. In this essay, she discusses the spectrum of women's morality in The House of Blue Leaves, and how this relates to the play's larger purpose.

Much of the critical attention paid to John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves* focuses on the character of Artie Shaughnessy. Artie desperately wants to escape his life in Queens and longs for fame. Unfortunately, he is unrealistic about his life and his chances for success.

Although many critics note that Bunny Flingus, his mistress, pushes Artie to revive his career and that Bananas Shaughnessy, his wife, impedes Artie's efforts, the spectrum of female characters is rarely analyzed on its own. Each of the female characters, two major (Bunny and Bananas) and two minor (Corrinna Stroller and the Little Nun), works to a specific end.

Bunny and Bananas are opposite ends of the spectrum. Bunny's life is defined by media-driven fantasy. Bananas is most in touch with reality, though she is suffering with mentally illness. Corrinna and the Little Nun fit in between them. Corrinna is the movie star; the Little Nun is oppressed by the reality of her chosen profession and is only freed from it because of the death of her two nun companions. This essay explores each female character and determines their role in the moral tug-of-war of the play.

One of the biggest ironies in *The House of Blue Leaves* is the fact that Bananas Shaughnessy seems crazy, yet speaks profound, sometimes moral insights into play's events. Her words may seem like ravings, but they are discerning and often insightful.

For example, Bananas knows that her husband is having an affair. She silently observes Bunny and Artie together in the beginning of Act I for a few moments. When she announces her presence, she knows that Artie is tired of dealing with her. She yells things like "You hate my looks□my face□ my clothes□you hate me," then a few seconds later she states, "I know you love me." While this may sound contradictory, it is also true. Artie does both hate her and love her. He wants to be free, yet he worries about her well-being.

Bananas tries to bring her husband back to reality in unusual ways. She acts like a dog a couple of times, but as she points out, "I like being animals. You know why? I never heard of a famous animal. Oh, a couple of Lassies□an occasional Trigger□but, by and large, animals weren't meant to be famous." She explains this to her husband because she wants him to stay with her and retain his job as a zookeeper.

Bananas does not like fame, essentially because after one encounter with celebrity in Manhattan, she became the butt of a joke broadcast on national television. She knows the reality of fame; in particular, the humiliation and hurt it can bring.

Bananas also has a sharp ear, which she uses to discourage her husband. When Artie "auditions" for Corrinna, Bananas requests one of his old songs, "I Love You So I Keep Dreaming." After a few lines, she demands that he play "White Christmas." She points out, and the stage directions confirm, that they are the same song.

This embarrasses Artie but demonstrates that Bananas has some fight left in her. She wants to hold on to her husband, and while this action ends up angering him, it is one of the only ways she can accomplish her goal. This action drives him to explore ways of finally getting rid of her so he can pursue his career and his mistress.

In the next scene, Bananas tries to burn Bunny by letting hot water seep into Bunny's downstairs apartment. Although this particular action fails, Bananas ultimately gets her way. When Bunny decides to live with Billy in Australia, Bananas lets her take the copper pot she admires. She knows she has won. Yet Artie cannot take this defeat and eventually kills Bananas at the end of the play.

Bunny is the opposite of Bananas. Bunny is focused on one thing: attaching herself to someone famous and successful. Bunny tells Artie at one point, "Billy will get your songs in movies. It's not too late to start. With me behind you!"

All of Bunny's values are formed by television and magazines. For example, Bunny views the Pope's visit as not a religious or cultural event, but as pure entertainment, like the opening of a movie or a play. At one point she excitedly exclaims, "I haven't seen so many people, Artie, so excited since the premiere of *Cleopatra*. It's that big." The fact that Artie might get his sheet music blessed or that Bunny could read the passing as kind of a blessing on her relationship with Artie is only secondary.

Bunny uses the same faulty logic in her treatment of Bananas, her rival. As soon as Bananas makes an appearance, Bunny begins to taunt her. She tries to convince Bananas to go to Mexico for a quickie divorce, but Artie points out that Bananas can barely leave the house.

Bunny also accuses Bananas of faking her illness, based on what she has learned from films. She tells Bananas, "I know these sick wives. I've seen a dozen like you in the movies.... You live in wheelchairs just to hold your husband and the minute your husband's out of the room, you're hopped out of your wheel chair doing the Charleston and making a general spectacle of yourself."

A short time later, Bunny compares Bananas's fear of shock treatments to something she read in a movie magazine about an actress's desperate need for curlers. Bunny makes such belittling comments throughout the play to humiliate Bananas in front of Artie.

Bunny tries to control Artie. She gets angry when she learns that he performed the night before at the El Dorado amateur night. Later, she is dismissive of his job at the zoo, accusing him of being "afraid" of success until she came along.

But Bunny's attempts to control the situation ultimately fail. She ignores the fact that Artie still has some feelings for his wife, and that Bananas is a bit more intelligent than she thinks. Bunny only sees her goal□being kept by a successful man□and does not perceive the complete situation.

Bunny ends up getting what she wants in an unexpected way. The Hollywood director, Billy Einhorn, steals her away with promise of two years in Australia and a glamorous lifestyle. Her departure leaves Artie humiliated and without emotional support and ultimately leads to him murdering his wife.

While Bunny inhabits one end of the moral spectrum, and Bananas the other, Corrinna Stroller and the Little Nun exist in the middle. They are more balanced people, but each represent different things.

Corrinna represents what happens when dreams come true; she is a successful actress and Billy's girlfriend. In the one movie she has appeared in, *Warmonger,* she lost her hearing because of an accident on the set. A sweet, polite woman, she seems to have handled success and tragedy very well. Unfortunately, Corrinna ends up having her hearing aid transistors disappear and dying in an explosion.

The Little Nun represents reality; a confused, unhappy young woman, she is one of three nuns that get stuck on the roof trying to get a good view of the Pope. She suffers at the hands of her sisters, because they treat her like a child. When she sees peanut butter, a food they are not allowed to have in the convent, she becomes excited. While she wants the peanut butter, the other nuns express their excitement over beer and color television.

Like Bunny, the Little Nun is influenced by the media. She claims to have watched the movie *The Sound of Music* thirty-one times and attributes much of her religious calling to that cinematic representation of the sisterhood.

After she manages to secure the tickets to the Pope's mass in Yankee Stadium, she is told to return home by her companions. This action actually saves the Little Nun's life, as the other two nuns die in the explosion. She realizes that her life as a nun is unsatisfying. Billy hires her to take care of Bananas and live in Bunny's old apartment.

Guare has maintained that the main theme of *The House of Blue Leaves* is humiliation. As this essay has shown, each of the female characters in the play are humiliated in one way or another, and, in the case of Bunny and Bananas, humiliate others. The moral spectrum that they represent is broad and divergent, but it determines the extent of their humiliation and ability to humiliate. Guare's focus on the quest for fame is just a means to an end.

At the play's core, Guare is really exploring how humans disregard each other and their feelings and how isolated humans are from each other. Artie's humiliations are related to his individual relationships with these women, from the crazy Bananas to the nun who will take Bunny's apartment and care for his wife. These humiliations drive him to murder his wife and open up the possibility for a whole new set of humiliations in prison.

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

Critical Essay #2

Malone reviews a 1986 production of Guare's play, finding that the play's irreverence and subversion are more readily accepted by today's mainstream theatregoers than when House of Blue Leaves debuted in 1971.

There is standing room only at *The House of Blue Leaves* these days. John Guare's black comedy about a Queen's songwriting zookeeper, his pathetically disturbed wife and preposterously complacent mistress is now enjoying a well-deserved successful revival in a brilliantly staged production at New York City's Vivian Beaumont Theater, which has itself been recently revived from darkness. *Blue Leaves* is the discovery of the season, the new hot ticket, although the play is neither new nor previously neglected. Sixteen years ago, *Blue Leaves* won the New York and Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle awards; since then, college, community and stock theaters have frequently performed it. But this year it has received eight Tony nominations, including one for the best play of 1986. To be eligible, a play need only have never been previously produced "on Broadway," which means of course that, with any luck, one of these days Aristophanes or Beaumont and Fletcher could grab the gold statue.

This ruling puts *Blue Leaves* in competition with Michael Frayn's *Benefactors* (already recipient of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Foreign Play), and with Athol Fugard's *Bloodknot* (a revival, now closed), but not with Joe Orton'sLoot orO'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh,* both of which are nominated for less prestigious Tony's as Best Reproductions. That *Blue Leaves* is no less a revival than these three, and no more on Broadway than Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* (recipient of the Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, but excluded from Tony consideration) has caused some flapdoodle among theater critics, whose dismay at the illogic of the Tony committee reveals a touching idealism that borders on the prelapsarian. Why should they expect prizes in the arts to be any more reasonable than prizes on *Let's Make a Deal?* Why, with theater attendance and box-office income so low, with only thirty-three openings this season (the lowest in Broadway history), should we do anything but rejoice at every good play, newborn or resurrected, that succeeds in getting itself soundly "clapper-clawed by the vulgar" ?

In a way, *Blue Leaves* is about prizes, about yearning for them. Its characters are all dreamers; they dream of fame and of the famous. They want what the famous have: laurel and loot, stardust and a place in the sun. This unending American dream (American tragedy)□that we all could have been, should have been, contenders for the only spot there is, the number-one spot□brings Artie Shaughnessy to the El Dorado Bar Amateur Night as the play opens, to sing his heart out ("I wrote all these songs. Words and the music ") in hopes of a blue spotlight. In the clichés of his lyrics we hear that dream. "I'm looking for Something." "I'm here with bells on. Ring! Ring! Ring!"

Then, on the Beaumont stage, behind the Shaugh-nessys' humdrum Queens apartment crammed with its tawdry gewgaws and totems of fame, in rhythm with the blare of Strauss' s "Thus Spake Zarathustra" (better known perhaps as the soundtrack from

2001, or as Elvis Presley's concert theme song), the glittering lights of Manhattan's skyline appear. The audience laughs; no doubt we're supposed to. But those bright towers of big-time success are as near and as far from Artie Shaughnessy in Queens as they were from Willy Loman in Brooklyn. As Guare has written about this play and its genesis in his Catholic boyhood in Queens, "How do you run away to your dreams when you're already there?" He holds his characters' failed aspirations and their absurd worship of celebrity up to a lampooning, madcap mockery that some have called cruel, but his contempt is reserved for the culture, not the creatures who have fed on its junk food of TV and tabloids. Indeed, the sadness of *Blue Leave*s centers, by Guare's account, on the cruelty of our national dream of success: "Everyone in the play is constantly being humiliated by their dreams, their lives, their wants, their best parts. . . .I'm not interested so much in how people survive as in how they avoid humiliation . .. avoiding humiliation is the core of tragedy and comedy and probably of our lives." For the truth is that Artie Shaughnessy is never going to win prizes, any more than Chekhov's three sisters are ever going to get to Moscow, any more than Williams's crippled Laura will ever find a gentleman caller or Willy Loman ever follow his brother Ben into the jungle that's "dark but full of diamonds " and walk out a rich man.

Blue Leaves is dark and full of diamonds, and I hope it wins all the prizes it can. It's a marvelous, maniacal tragicomedy, full of waggish merriment, razor sharp in its mordant wit but never cutting out the hearts of its characters, or turning away from their keen aches. Here, as in plays like *Landscape of the Body* and *Bosoms and Neglect* (also revived this season), Guare has the nimbleness to run up and down the scaffold of gallows humor, cap and bells on his head, the comic sock on one foot, the tragic buskin on the other, without tripping into either burlesque or bathos. According to him, the impetus for this tightroping came from seeing Laurence Olivier perform in *Dance of Death* and A *Flea in Her Ear* on successive nights. "Why," he decided, "shouldn't Strindberg and Feydeau get married [or] at least live together, and *The House of Blue Leaves* be their child?" To help him keep his balance, Guare has been blessed by strong direction from Jerry Zaks, wonderful sets and lighting by Tony Walton and Paul Gallo, and, most of all, by consummate acting from his cast, particularly Swoosie Kurtz as the fantastical wife and Stockard Channing as the garrulous mistress. The performances of both women are extraordinary□exquisitely evolved, perfectly sustained and played together in a duet of comic counterpoint that is dazzling to watch.

Blue Leaves takes place on a day in 1965 when the Pope drove through Queens on his way to the United Nations to help stop the war in Vietnam. (On that actual day, Guare□in an irony worthy of his drama□had finally achieved his nun teachers' dream of touring the Vatican.) While crowds gather on the sidewalks, more excited than they've been since the premiere of *Cleopatra*, Artie (played with great charm by John Mahoney) dreams of his son, a recruit bound for Vietnam, becoming Pope and making his dad Saint in Charge of Hymn-Writing. Bunny, Artie's deliciously tacky mistress, a strutting compendium of hackneyed sentiments and Dale Carnegie optimism, urges him to wake up, to go get his songs blessed by the Pope, go get his wife put in a mental institution and, most emphatically, to get the two of them to Billy, Artie's old friend, a movie big shot in California. There they will have a new life where dreams can come true. Then and only then will she cook for him; until they're legally wed, he will have to content himself

with sex, and with looking at photos of her dishes in a scrapbook hidden under the couch.

The scrapbook is hidden there from Bananas, Artie's mentally disturbed wife, who wanders eerily through the house she has been too frightened to leave since her suicide attempt several months ago. Its windows are now barred by an iron gate, because, like the mother in Guare's *Bosoms and Neglect,* like the mother in O'Neil's *Long Day's Journey*, like the mothers and wives in so many American plays and in so much of American life, Bananas bears the psychic burden of her family's failures; she feels the pain, screams the truth and for doing so has to be sedated with pills or sent away to an institution, the house of blue leaves (the leaves were really bluebirds that flew off and left the boughs bare). Through the luminous sensitivity of Swoosie Kurtz's portrayal, Bananas transcends the pathos of her delusions and stands at the play's center, quiet as grief, heartbreaking as honesty. She moves quietly in and out of Guare's hilarious, absurdist parade of deaf starlets, monstrous moguls, terrorist sons and a trio of madcap nuns who roar on stage like the Marx brothers in habits. Bananas stands there with the lucidity of madness and asks us to laugh and cry with her at all their□all our□lost dreams. Artie cannot escape her truth even by destroying her. Nor can we, no more than dreamer Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* (fled to cities that "swept about me like dead leaves, brightly colored, torn from branches") could escape the vision of his lost sister. The triumph of *Blue Leaves* and of its performers is that we cannot forget the sorrows that blue spotlights disguise. It is that knowledge that makes Guare not just the older but the wiser brother of tour de farce writers like Christopher Durang. If, as the successes of *Blue Leaves* and Orton's *Loot* suggest, audiences are now prepared to welcome this darker, zanier humor into the theatrical mainstream, then our theater is fortunate to have ready in the wings not only a master of laughter but a poet of compassion.

Source: Michael Malone. Review of*House of Blue Leaves* in the *Nation,* Vol. 242, no. 22, June 7, 1986, pp. 798-800.

Critical Essay #3

Calling the 1986 revival "infinitely better" than the original production of House of Blue Leaves, Oliver finds this new staging of Guare's play to be "deeper, sadder, more passionate."

The revival of John Guare's *"The House of Blue Leaves,"* at the Newhouse, in Lincoln Center, is infinitely better than its original production, fifteen years ago□and I had not thought anything could be. The play now seems deeper, sadder, more passionate, and even funnier, if that is conceivable. The actors□and what actors!□make clear much that might have been unnoticed before. *"The House of Blue Leaves,* " in case anyone needs reminding, is a satiric farce about a middle-aged zookeeper, named Artie Shaughnessy, who has a knack for writing imitations of cheap popular songs, and who is the victim of a number of American dreams, which finally destroy him. The place is his living room in Sunnyside, Queens; the time is October 4,1965, the day Pope Paul VI flew to New York to appear before the United Nations General Assembly to plead for an end to war□perhaps specifically the war in Vietnam (and perhaps, by blessing Artie's sheet music, to ease his way to Hollywood and an Academy Award). Artie lives with his wife, who has recently gone mad and is nicknamed Bananas; he wants to put her in a sanitarium (the house of the title), run off to California with Bunny Flingus, his downstairs neighbor and mistress, who is eagerly abetting him, and then get a job with his best friend, a prominent movie director. Bananas resists the hospital, because she is terrified of shock treatments. As I remarked in my original review, "this play could be considered a whole series of shock treatments, and often I was as horrified at myself for laughing (which I did a lot) as I was at what I heard and saw on the stage." The plot is wild and arbitrary and always outrageous. The other characters are a movie star, deafened by an explosion during the making of her latest picture, who is the director's girlfriend; the Shaughnessys' son, AWOL after twenty-one days in the Army, who arrives with a homemade bomb, his target being the Pope; three goofy nuns, who have been watching the Pope's motorcade from the roof of the Shaughnessys' apartment house; and, finally, the great director himself. The bomb misses the Pope, but it does go off, taking its toll of the assembled company.

Guare's marvellous comic writing, in which every word plays, and his ferocious high spirits glow more than ever in these drab days, but the performance, under the acute, sensitive direction of Jerry Zaks, is what makes most of the difference between the first production and this one. John Mahoney, who appeared as the older man in last year's "Orphans," is Artie Shaughnessy to the life, in all his loony optimism and desperation. But the phenomenal Swoosie Kurtz, as Bananas, in every line and monologue changes what might have been a merely pathetic character into a tragic figure, helpless and loving and demented, and smarter than anyone around her□all this without sacrificing any of the comedy. Stockard Channing is flint-hearted Bunny, and although the caustic tongue of Anne Meara, the original Bunny, is unforgettable, Miss Channing, padded to plumpness, makes the part her own from the moment she enters, stuffing strips of newspaper into her plastic boots against the cold and issuing orders. Christopher Walken, sporting an impeccable Queens accent, is the movie director. Julie Hagerty is

the beautiful movie star trying to conceal her deafness from her admirers. Everybody is good. But the true star is John Guare. The play has been well served by the designers: Tony Walton, who conceived that awful apartment; Ann Roth, who created the witty costumes; and Paul Gallo, who devised the lighting.

Source: Edith Oliver. "Old and Improved" in the *New Yorker,* Vol. 62, March 31, 1986, pp. 66-67.

Critical Essay #4

Simon reviews a 1986 production and finds that Guare's play retains much of its irreverent and absurdist power. The critic reserves particular praise for the trio of actors essaying the lead roles.

When John Guare's *The House of Blue Leaves* sprouted here in 1971, the theater of the absurd still enjoyed an American afterlife; Guare, moreover, was able to crossbreed American madcap farce with imported absurdism, as if Ionesco had collaborated with George Abbott. And he could introduce bits of true poignance into a blend that, even if it did not quite come off, offered, along with withering ironies and wistful clowning, passages of pure whimsy. A fair portion of this survives in the perky revival Jerry Zaks has mounted for the Lincoln Center Theater, although some timeliness, surprise, and bite are, perhaps inevitably, gone.

The basic situation is delightfully painful: A zookeeper, Artie Shaughnessy, pursues his dream of becoming a big Hollywood songwriter. Urging him on is his enthusiastic but silly mistress of two months, Bunny Flingus; holding him back, however passively, is his demented wife, Bananas, whom he can't bring himself to commit. Luring him on is a vague, extorted promise from his school chum Billy Einhorn, now a successful movie director; further enmeshing him is a whole human zoo that stampedes into his modest Queens apartment, notably his violently lunatic son, Ronnie, AWOL from Fort Dix and planning to blow up Pope Paul on his current visit to New York. Zaks's directing, however, is much better with the comedy than with the anguish; with the mad hokum, not the madness that hurts: Corrinna Stroller, Einhorn's mistress, who went deaf from an explosion in the first movie Billy couch-cast her in, was funny and moving as played by Margaret Linn and directed by Mel Shapiro in the original production; here, as performed by the gifted Julie Hagerty, she is only funny.

The comedy routines, though, flourish expectably under Zaks, who gets almost a whole comic act's worth from the mere prologue, in which Artie performs some of his dismal, but not much worse than average, songs at the El Dorado Bar & Grill in Sunnyside. That Artie is played by a superlative actor, John Mahoney, makes the milking of that scene as hilarious as it is harrowing, and casts the right tragicomic shadow over the rest of the play. Throughout, Mahoney inspiredly allows sadness to peep through his comedy and absurdity to puncture his pathos. He is brilliantly flanked by Swoosie Kurtz, whose Bananas lets you see what a serious business madness is, how heart-rendingly hard a nonfunctional mind must work to little avail, how shattering are the stray truths from the mouths of the cracked; and by Stockard Channing, whose Bunny is as earnestly philosophical as only certain very stupid people can be, and who delivers herself of her practical asininities for an asinine world with a wonderful mixture of modesty and pride.

Though nowhere near this sublime trio, the others will do, even if Ben Stiller makes the hapless Ronnie more one-stringed than called for. Billy Einhorn is an underwritten part, but Christopher Walken, giving one of his more zonked performances, further deflates it. He does, however, sport one of the most satirical hairdos I've ever encountered. Tony

Walton's set of a burrow under the Queensboro Bridge, surrounded by bristling urban blight, is smashing, and Ann Roth's costumes and Paul Gallo's lighting are right down there too. Only the final image, the apartment filling up with the blue leaves of insanity, is not brought off as well as the stage direction reads.

Source: John Simon. "Crazed Husbands, Crazy Wives" in *New York,* Vol. 19, no. 13, March 31, 1986, p. 72.

Adaptations

The House of Blue Leaves was filmed for television in 1987 and appeared on PBS. Directed by Kirk Browning and Jerry Zaks, this version features John Mahoney as Artie, Swoozie Kurtz as Bananas, Christine Baranski as Bunny, and Ben Stiller as Ronnie.

Topics for Further Study

Read August Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* (1901) and Georges Feydeau' s *A Flea in Her Ear* (1907)□two plays that inspired Guare while writing *The House of Blue Leaves*. How do these plays and their themes relate to *The House of Blue Leave s?*

Research absurdist theater, including plays like Eugene Ionesco's *The Chairs*. What aspects of *The House of Blue Leaves* are absurdist? What do these elements add to the play and its meaning?

How were mentally ill people such as Bananas Shaughnessy treated in the mid-1960s? Is the portrayal of her care at home accurate?

Research the events of October 4, 1965, the date that the play is set. Include information on the Pope's visit to New York City. What do these events say about society?

Compare and Contrast

1965: The United States increases its presence in Vietnam; in addition, bombing of North Vietnam intensifies. By the end of the year, there are 180,000 American troops in Vietnam, and antiwar protest begins in the United States.

1971: The United States begins withdrawing troops from Vietnam. There is widespread antiwar protest. By the end of the year, there are only 140,000 American troops left in Vietnam.

Today: For the United States, the experience in Vietnam is considered a traumatic event in recent history and serves as a measuring stick for involvement in world conflicts.

1965: There are five million color television sets in the United States, but only three networks.

1971: Television is the dominant cultural force in the United States. There are four networks, including public television, and programming is targeted to specific audiences, like children.

Today: With the explosion of cable and satellite television, the major television networks face stiff competition from cable networks. Programming is targeted to specific audiences□such as the Golf Channel and the Food Network□and there are several channels dedicated to celebrity worship.

1965: Unemployment in the United States is 4.2% and inflation is under control.

1971: The unemployment and inflation rates rise. The cost of living index increases 15% over the previous year.

Today: With a booming economy, unemployment and inflation are extremely low.

1965: President Lyndon B. Johnson pushes much of his Great Society (anti-poverty) legislation through Congress.

1971: President Richard M. Nixon dismantles many aspects of the Great Society as the American economy falters.

Today: Although the American economy is strong, there is resistance to increased social spending. There is a movement to move people off welfare and end dependence on social spending.

What Do I Read Next?

Guare's play, *Marco Polo Sings a Solo,* was first performed in 1973. The play, like *The House of Blue Leaves,* also deals with aspects of fame. The main character, a well-known astronaut, wants to be the hero the media has made him out to be.

Waiting for Godot, an absurdist play by Samuel Beckett, was written in 1954. The play focuses on two men waiting for a friend and discussing the meaning of life.

How to be a Mogul: For Those Who Know the Best Things in Life are Things is a nonfiction book published by Diane Hartford in 1986. Hartford shares antidotes about successful people.

A black comedy that chronicles a tragic family situation, *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little,* is a play by Paul Zindels. It was first performed in 1971.

Further Study

Bernstein, Samuel. *The Strands Entwined: A New Direction in American Drama,* Northeastern University Press, 1980, pp. 39-59.

Bernstein overviews the themes of and critical reaction to Guare's work, including *The House of Blue Leaves.*

Guare, John. A foreword to *The House of Blue Leaves,* Viking Press, 1972, pp. v-xi.

Guare discusses his inspirations for the play as well as its major themes.

Lyon, Warren. "No More Crying the 'Blue Leaves' Blues," in *The New York Times,* July 25, 1971, pp. 1, 5.

Chronicles the long process of getting the original production of *The House of Blue Leaves* off the ground. It is written by one of the play's producers.

Martin, Nicholas. "Chaos and Other Muses," in *American Theatre,* April 1, 1999.

In this interview, Guare discusses his use of language and the inspirations for his plays.

"The Art of Theater IX: John Guare," *Paris Review,* Winter 1992, p. 69.

This lengthy interview covers the whole of Guare's career including a discussion of *The House of Blue Leaves.*

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BOOKRAGS

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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

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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.

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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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