Idiot's Delight Study Guide

Idiot's Delight by Robert E. Sherwood

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Idiot's Delight Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....4

Author Biography....5

Plot Summary....6

Act 1....9

Act 2, Scene 1....11

Act 2, Scene 2....12

Act 2, Scene 3....13

Act 3....14

Characters....16

Themes....21

Style....24

Historical Context....26

Critical Overview....28

Criticism....30

Critical Essay #1....31

Critical Essay #2....34

Adaptations....40

Topics for Further Study....41

Compare and Contrast....42

What Do I Read Next?....43

Further Study....44

Bibliography....45

Copyright Information....46

Introduction

Robert E. Sherwood's *Idiot's Delight* takes place at a resort in the Italian Alps at an undetermined time, soon before the start of World War II. In the play, passengers on a train bound for Switzerland are prevented from leaving the country because war is going to break out. Tensions are high, as nobody, including the local authorities, knows which country or countries will attack which. The interesting characters who are detained at the hotel include a German doctor who is close to finding a cure for cancer; a British couple on their honeymoon; a French Communist who is returning from an international labor conference; a mysterious Russian countess and her companion, an arms merchant who has inside knowledge about when the fighting will begin; and a company of American showgirls, led by a manager who is a seasoned show business professional and confidence man.

The situation described in the play is fictional—Sherwood describes World War II starting with Italian planes bombing Paris, though in fact the war did not begin until three years after the play was produced, with Germany's invasion of Poland. Still, the situation that he concocted for this play puts audiences right into the difficult situation in Europe in the thirties, when war really was expected at any moment. The play also includes performances of singing and dancing and a plot line about long-lost lovers reuniting at the final moments of their lives. Sherwood won his first Pulitzer Prize for drama for *Idiot's Delight* in 1936.

Author Biography

Robert Emmet Sherwood was born in New Rochelle, New York, in 1896. His writing career began early, when at age seven he edited a magazine called *Children's Life.* His mother was an artist and illustrator, and she encouraged his writing throughout his whole life.

After graduating from Milton Academy in Massachusetts in 1914, Sherwood entered Harvard, where he became editor of the internationally famous humor magazine *Harvard Lampoon.* His college career was cut short when he went to fight in World War I with the Canadian Black Watch. His service in the war was to have a lasting effect on Sherwood's writing: most of his plays, like *Idiot's Delight*, reflect a sense of the horrors of warfare and its devastating effects on community.

Returning from Europe in 1919, Sherwood secured a job as drama critic for *Vanity Fair* magazine. There, he became associated with some of the greatest humorists of his time, who met regularly for lunch at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City. The famed Algonquin Round Table group included, along with Sherwood, Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, George S. Kaufman, and Heywood Broun. In 1924, he became editor-in-chief of *Life.*

Sherwood's career as a playwright was successful from the start. His first play, *The Road to Ruin*, about Hannibal crossing the Alps to attack Rome, received both critical and popular support, allowing Sherwood to give up his magazine work and concentrate entirely on writing for the stage. Other important plays from his early period include *Waterloo Bridge* (1929), *Reunion in Vienna* (1931), and *The Petrified Forest* (1935). The film version of the last, starring Bette Davis, Leslie Howard, and Humphrey Bogart, is considered a classic of American cinema.

Idiot's Delight opened on Broadway at the Shubert Theater in 1936 and ran for three hundred performances. It received the Pulitzer Prize for drama that year. Sherwood's next play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, also won the Pulitzer, in 1939. He was to win a third Pulitzer for drama, in 1941, for *There Shall Be No Night*.

In 1940, Sherwood reversed his earlier opposition to war and joined a group that supported America's entry into World War II, which was already going on in Europe. As a member of the Committee to Aid America by Defending the Allies, he spent $42,000 of his own money to take out newspaper ads calling on America to 'Stop Hitler Now!' His political action was noticed, and he was hired as a speechwriter for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. During the war, from 1941 to 1944, he ran the overseas branch of the Office of War Information, with a staff of eighteen people under him and a budget of $20 to $30 million dollars. After the war he received a fourth Pulitzer for his 1948 biography *Roosevelt and Hopkins*, about the president and his closest advisor. He wrote two more plays, but the postwar world showed little interest in his dramatic themes, and they closed quickly. Sherwood died in 1955 of cardiac arrest.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Idiot's Delight takes place at the cocktail lounge of the fictional Hotel Monte Gabriele in the Italian Alps near the borders of Austria, Switzerland, and Bavaria. Next to the hotel is an airfield for Italian bomber planes. It is set in a time before the beginning of World War II when the inevitability of the coming war was on everyone's mind. Act 1 begins with Donald Navadel, an American expert who has been hired by the hotel to attract tourists to Monte Gabriele for winter sports, entering the lounge. He notices that there are no guests and tells the orchestra to take a break. Pittaluga, the hotel manager, enters, angry that Don has overstepped his authority. Captain Locicero, the commander of the Italian headquarters, comes in and explains that the air field at Monte Gabriele will be important when war begins, although he does not know specifically who the enemy will be.

The train that is supposed to pass through on its way to Geneva is detained at Monte Gabriele because the border has been closed. Disgruntled passengers filter into and out of the lounge, in their attempts to book rooms: Dr. Waldersee, Mr. and Mrs. Cherry, and a troupe of showgirls, led by their manager, Harry Van. The doctor is German, but he needs to get to Austria to continue his experiments, which he is sure will yield a cure for cancer. The Cherrys, a British couple, were married days before in Florence. Quillery enters and sits down at the bar to have a drink with Harry. He explains that though he was born in France, he does not think of himself as having any nationality at all, identifying himself as a laborer. Quillery tells Harry that he is a pacifist, that peace will prevail. Harry responds that he once had an insight, while on cocaine, that everyone is addicted to something: "false beliefs—false fears—false enthusiasms."

Quillery races out when he hears some Italian soldiers in the bar say that the war has begun. Dumptsy, the bellhop, strikes up a discussion with Harry, explaining the local political situation: Monte Gabriele was part of Austria up to the end of World War I. With the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the mountain was transferred to Italy and renamed. Citizens had to learn the new language, and gravestones were erased and rewritten in Italian.

Irene enters, followed soon by her companion, Achille Weber. They assure the people there that there will be no war. Harry is fascinated with her and, when she leaves, starts playing the Russian folk tune "Kak Stranna," unaware that he associates it with Irene. They see bomber planes leaving from the air field, and there are rumors of war between Italy and France, but nothing is confirmed.

Act 2

Scene 1 takes place that evening. The hotel staff says that they can get no news of any war on the radio. Quillery enters and says that Weber, who is a major arms dealer, will know if there is going to be a war or not. He and Dr. Waldersee argue about the way that the Nazi party runs Germany; then he argues with Cherry because the English are too comfortable and wealthy to fight.

Harry enters after Quillery and the Cherrys leave and expresses interest in Irene. He also suggests that his girls can put on their show at the lounge that night to help ease the mounting tension.

Irene and Weber enter, and secretly he tells her that the planes that left the airfield were off to bomb Paris. When he leaves, she tells the Cherrys a story about being a countess, part of the Romanoff family, and being chased out of Russia by Bolsheviks, only to be saved by English soldiers. At the end of the scene, she admits to Mrs. Cherry that she has seen Harry Van perform before.

In scene 2, Captain Locicero reports that he cannot get any news on the radio about whether or not there is a war. He leaves when some of the bomber planes return to the airfield, and Weber and Irene speak frankly with one another, professing their disdain for the people who will be killed in the war. Weber senses that Irene is going soft, becoming a little too sarcastic about the wholesale slaughter of people. Harry Van's troupe gives a show, which is interrupted when Quillery comes in and announces that Paris has been bombed. Harry tries to calm him, but Quillery becomes enraged with a patriotic fury, shouting at the Italians in the bar, telling them that France, England, and America will stand up together against them, although Mr. Cherry and Harry, representing the latter two, apologize for his outburst. The scene ends with Quillery, who previously said that he was a citizen of no country, being dragged away shouting, "Vive la France!" (Long live France!).

Scene 3 takes place later that night. Irene tells Harry another one of her made-up stories about how she escaped from Russia during the revolution. As she goes on to describe what a well-respected man Weber is, he stares at her, trying to place her. The subject turns to her career, and, mentioning that he once worked a mind-reading act, Harry remembers a young redheaded Russian girl named Irene with whom he'd had a one-night stand in Omaha, Nebraska. It dawns on him that this Irene is that girl, although she denies it.

Act 3

The following afternoon, Captain Locicero announces that he has received permission from the government to let most of the people from the train leave and cross the border. Harry announces to his girls that the act will be better when they get to Geneva if he does not sing or dance. Don comes in and announces that he is leaving the hotel, too—going back to California—in part because he was in town earlier in the day when

Quillery was executed before a firing squad. Mrs. Cherry reflects on how her husband will probably join the war and might end up bombing Venice, where they were married days earlier. When the captain tells the Cherrys that their passports have been released by a technicality—that the approval for them to leave came just seventeen minutes before Britain declared war on France—Mrs. Cherry repeats Quillery's damnation of the Italians, while her husband tries to quiet her. Dr. Waldersee says that he is giving up his cancer research and returning to Germany, even though it will probably mean that he will be put to work making chemical weapons.

Irene's passport is not approved, but the captain is willing to let her go because she is with Weber. Weber says that he will not be responsible for her, leaving Captain Locicero no choice but to detain her. Harry stays with her until the last minute, with his girls and Don calling him to the train. As he leaves, she tells him that it actually was she who spent a night with him in the hotel in Omaha, and to prove it she tells him that the room they were in was room 974. A few minutes after the train leaves, Harry comes back and tells her that he will leave with her the next day, that he will take her on as a partner and teach her the secret of the mind-reading act that he had promised to teach her in Omaha. As French bombs start dropping on and around the air field, in retaliation for the previous day's raid, Harry is at the piano playing Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," but Irene asks if he knows any hymns. The play ends with bombs exploding and both of them singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Idiot's Delight is set at the Hotel Monte Gabriele, a fictional location in the Italian Alps near the borders of Switzerland and Austria in the late 1930's. The hotel is an upscale boutique-style establishment under the ownership of an Italian named Pittaluga. Pittaluga has employed an American outdoor enthusiast, Don Navadel, to provide winter sports lessons and activities for the guests.

Pittaluga is especially pleased that the hotel is refined. It is small and slightly remote, but it incorporates elegant touches such as live orchestra music and a formally dressed wait staff.

The specter of war has been looming large and the hotel has suffered from the lack of tourism in the area. Don left a secure position in America to accept this one. His talents for outdoor sports are grossly underutilized, and he is particularly disgruntled. No one could have predicted the political climate and the unfortunate turn of events for the hotel, least of all Pittaluga, who tries to maintain a positive outlook for the sake of the staff as their few guests.

However, tonight brings unexpected guests to the hotel from a Switzerland-bound train that has been stopped at the border due to the suspicion that war has broken out. A local military captain in the bar is soon joined by a German, Dr. Waldersee, who is extremely distressed that he has been denied passage into Switzerland that night. It becomes clear that the doctor is a cancer researcher who feels that his research efforts are in jeopardy if he doesn't make it into neutral Switzerland.

Don is escorting a smartly dressed man named Harry Van, who is accompanied by six blonde girls. Harry manages and promotes their act as "Les Blondes." The girls are Americans who have been performing in the Balkan countries and are on their way to a booking in Geneva. Hearing that the train is detained, Harry asks the captain about alternate ways into Switzerland. Unfortunately, the captain informs him that the borders have been closed to all types of traffic because of the war rumors.

Harry is an amiable sort and resigns himself to the situation. He makes room arrangements for the girls, who are delighted to stay in a comfortable hotel rather than a train car for the night.

A honeymooning couple from Britain, Mr. and Mrs. Cherry, seem delighted by the hotel's magnificent scenery and ambience. They seem very much in love and oblivious to the others gathered in the hotel's bar and lobby area as they head out for a walk.

The appearance of several Italian soldiers in the bar area quiets the other guests momentarily. They expect a formal declaration of war at any moment, but the men are out for an evening of fun and ignore the others in the hotel.

Harry strikes up a conversation with another bar patron, Quillery, a French labor union leader who is returning home from a meeting. Quillery remarks on the assortment of people passing through the hotel that evening. He considers this to be appropriate, given that the building's original function was a Swiss sanitarium for the insane.

Quillery prefers the concept of revolution over war. He believes people-power is ultimately stronger and longer lasting than the force of guns and bombs. His conversation is cut short, however, when the Italian officers are seen hurrying from the bar, and Quillery thinks that he heard them say that the war has begun. Leaving the country immediately is of primary importance to Quillery, and he exits the bar with high hopes of crossing the border.

Pittaluga is suddenly very animated and excited as another guest, a beautiful Russian model named Irene, creates a stir as she enters the room. Don escorts her to the main window, from which four countries can be seen. She exclaims that she must tell all her friends in Paris about such a wonderful little find. Her companion, Achille Weber, is a well-dressed executive who is not as overwhelmed by the accommodations.

Finally, the captain announces that there is a strong rumor that Italy is now at war with France. There is speculation that Germany has mobilized, and it won't be long before all-out war is declared. Harry, always the entertainer, plays the piano and sings and makes his own declaration that doubt can claim the night, but truth owns the light of day. The orchestra plays, and the guests dance.

Act 1 Analysis

The hotel guests represent all the countries that will have an impact on the imminent war. The Americans, Don and Harry, are assertive and optimistic. The British couple is very reserved. The Italians are hospitable, but also a threat in the form of the soldiers. The French Quillery is dark and brooding. The German doctor may foreshadow Nazi experimentation, and the Russian actress is cool and aloof.

It's as if Sherwood is playing out his own version of a war room in this isolated hotel on the border of neutrality, and the characters embody the traits identifiable with those countries. Their actions are all held in limbo by the cloud of war that keeps them fixed in this place.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

The Cherrys are enjoying cocktails before dinner, and their conversation turns to the possibility of war. They discuss the unfortunate problem that the rest of the world does not have the intelligence of the British people, who won't tolerate such foolishness. Harry joins them in the bar, and they reveal that they were married two days ago in Florence. They're disappointed that their skiing holiday may be interrupted by war.

Quillery returns, not having been allowed to cross the border, and his passions are higher than when he left a few hours ago. He confides to Harry that Achille Weber, Irene's companion, is an arms industry organizer, a true merchant of death. He states that it is the poor working man who will pay for this industry and fatten the coffers of the industrialists of the world.

Dr.Waldersee thinks Quillery's theory is pure Marxism. Quillery calls the doctor's cancer research worthless now that the good doctor will soon be a pawn of the Nazi regime. The men are able to get their arguments in check, and Harry offers a performance by Les Blondes at the hotel to entertain the guests.

The mood of the room changes when Irene enters, surveys her surroundings and orders vodka straight up. The men are still fascinated by her self assurance and exotic accent. When she asks about the planes that took off earlier that afternoon, Weber informs her that they are on their way to bomb Paris, which means that the airfield from which they departed is vulnerable to retaliation by air raid.

Irene's reaction is gleeful at the prospect of seeing bursts of ice crystals and snow exploding and thinks it would be a grand idea to be in Paris with the excitement of the bands and the soldiers. Weber departs on more pressing business, and Irene entertains the Cherrys with stories of her royal English and Russian relatives.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The Cherrys symbolize the stereotypical British arrogance and imperialistic attitudes attributed to the country. Their concern for their skiing holiday is out of context with the imminent horror of war. The mere possibility of war is unthinkable them because of its incivility. Quillery's passions represent the global greed that feeds on the sons of those not privileged to be in the industrialist war business, while the good doctor symbolizes the well-intentioned scientists and healers whose skills will soon be used for horrific tasks. The eternally optimistic American, Harry, offers a diversion in the form of the girls' revue in hopes that the night will pass more quickly, and that tomorrow won't be the doom that the others predict.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Weber and Irene's discuss the business of war and Weber's profits from it. Irene praises him for his skill, but he acknowledges that God really deserves the credit for instilling fear in men. Irene comments that God must play a game called Idiot's Delight, His own version of solitaire. He plays by himself and leaves the humans to their own devices.

The others soon join them in the bar where Harry and Les Blondes entertain. They are interrupted by Quillery, who reports that the Italian soldiers who sit with them that evening have bombed Paris. His outbursts continue as the captain arrests him and leads him away. Harry, in typical emcee fashion, orders the orchestra to begin again, and the remaining guests dance under the colored lights.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Irene and Weber's partnership seems to be based on more than a romance, and he seems to view her as another weapon in his arsenal, but her real purpose is not yet clear. Quillery's arrest by the Italians reflects the invasion of Paris by the Italian air corps earlier in the day. The rest of the guests dance in denial.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

Harry and Irene sit alone in the bar, and he listens to the story of her childhood with interest and a bit of skepticism. Her tale of being wounded by the Bolsheviks, of dragging her dying father through the snow and of their final rescue by daring Americans seems a bit too dramatic for this woman.

He studies her face throughout their discussion, and she comments on his rudeness. It finally occurs to him that he has met her before. She had been in the audience of several performances he gave with a Russian mind reader in Omaha, Nebraska several years ago.

It is Irene's platinum hair that has confused him. Her hair had been wildly red when he knew her back in the States. She had wanted to know the tricks of his act so desperately that she had gone to his hotel room one night and made love to him. Harry hasn't been able to forget about her.

Irene laughs at the improbability of such a story and is rescued when Weber enters the bar. He tells her that it is late and she needs to retire to her own room.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Irene's purpose with Weber may become clear sooner than either one of them anticipates. Harry's recognition of her may betray her cover. His love for her could protect her real identity, but there is a possibility that her secret will be revealed, perhaps putting Harry at risk as well.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

Harry and the girls rehearse in the bar to pass time until the captain approves their passports and their departure on the next train out, which is scheduled to leave in an hour. Don and the Cherrys are also packed and ready to go. Weber's passport has been approved, but the captain tells him that Irene's has been flagged for her unclear nationality. She is free to travel if Weber will vouch for her.

Weber, however, informs the captain that Irene is not traveling with him. His refusal to escort her will detain her for at least day. When Irene learns of her fate, she's incredulous that Weber is doing this to her. She realizes that she has outlived her usefulness to him and must be destroyed for her knowledge. She resigns herself to her fate.

The doctor has changed his mind. He will return to Germany to offer his services instead of going to the life he had planned in Switzerland. His country is at war, and he is a patriot before a scientist.

Harry is shocked when he learns about Irene's situation. The captain assures him that she will be released within a few days. She smiles at Harry's naiveté and tells him that she won't leave this place. The Italians have too many reasons to keep her. Harry offers his assistance, but his train is scheduled to depart very soon. Touched by his kindness, Irene confesses that she was the red haired girl he loved in Omaha, and she has always loved him too.

Harry must leave or the others waiting for him in the car will miss the train. Irene's bags are returned to her room. She asks for a bottle of champagne and sits as the hotel is evacuated. Irene thanks the captain for his kindness and acknowledges that her situation is not his fault. She sits at the piano and cries. Suddenly, Harry enters the bar, determined to stay with her.

They talk about what they will do in Geneva and plan to develop an act. The captain begs them to hide in the cellar because the French planes are coming. The noise increases and the bombs begin to explode, but Harry and Irene continue to drink champagne and philosophize about the futility of war until the noise overwhelms their voices.

Act 3 Analysis

The war begins, and the characters in this tiny hotel symbolize the conflict of the world. Weber and his peers who create war for profit have achieved their ultimate objective. The little people as symbolized by the executed Quillery are exterminated for their dissension and cries of revolution. They will pay the literal and figurative price for

Weber's war and contribute to the wealth which will develop the next one. The cycle never ends, but decent people like Harry represent those who have the courage to act nobly in the face of horrific danger and the almost certain anonymity of their heroics.

Characters

Auguste

Auguste is an employee of the Hotel Monte Gabriel.

Mr. Jimmy Cherry

A painter who has been in Australia painting a mural for the government, Cherry was married just a few days earlier in Venice. He is an Englishman, and when war is declared, he is enthusiastic to fight, but he also goes out of his way to be cordial to the German doctor and Italian commander who will soon be his enemies.

Mrs. Cherry

Recently married to an artist, Mrs. Cherry works at a store named Fortnum's, as she says, "wearing a smock, and disgracing my family." After hearing the news that Quillery has been executed for speaking out against the Italians, she becomes angry enough to face the same kind of punishment: "Don't call *me* your friend," she tells Captain Locicero, "because I say what Quillery said—damn you—damn your whole country of mad dogs for having started this horror." Her husband calms her and gets her to apologize before they leave.

Edna Creesh

Edna is one of the girls in Harry Van's troupe.

Dumptsy

The fortyish bellboy of the resort, Dumptsy has lived in that area since it was a province of Austria. It was ceded to the Italians at the end of the First World War, and overnight Dumptsy and his family became Italian citizens. Explaining this to Harry, he laughs and says, "But it doesn't make much difference who your masters are. When you get used to them, they are all the same." In the last scene, he appears in an Italian army uniform, having been drafted into service.

Bebe Gould

Bebe is one of the girls in Harry Van's troupe.

Irene

She pronounces her name "Ear-ray-na," which is one reason that Harry Van does not recognize her as the girl he once knew named Irene. She presents herself as a member of the Russian royal family, the Romanoffs, who were exiled from the country when the Communists took over in 1917. Her story about escaping from Russia changes, depending on whom she is talking to. Sometimes she says that she rode a sled across the ice, pursued by Bolshevik attackers; at another time she is on a raft at sea, rescued by English soldiers. In the end she confesses to Harry that she is not a Romanoff but that her real origin is still left a mystery. Irene likes to give the impression that she is an important personage, as evinced by the way she drops the name of the Maharajah of Rajpipla when she first arrives, referring to him with the familiar name "Pip."

Irene is traveling with Achille Weber. They are not married, and the implication is that she is his mistress. When they are alone, she is quite ruthless and graphic about imaging the carnage that the war will bring. Her description is so gruesome that it tips Weber off to the idea that the young British honeymooners might have "touched a tender spot."

Since she has traveled around the world throughout her life, Irene has no definite nationality, only a passport issued by the League of Nations. After Italy declares war, it no longer recognizes the League of Nations. Captain Locicero is willing to let Irene leave the country without a valid passport, as a companion of Achille Weber, but he refuses to take responsibility for her.

Harry Van says that he recognizes Irene as a member of a traveling Russian troupe who played at a theater in Omaha with him in 1925: he was working in a mind-reading act and the Russian girl came to his room to learn how his act worked and they spent the night together. At first, Irene denies any knowledge of it, but when she has been abandoned by Weber and Harry is leaving, she tells him that she remembers the exact room number they were in that night. He returns to her and says that he will teach her the secret of the mind-reading act and that together they can tour with his dancing girls. She chooses the exotic name "Namora" as her stage name, but the French start bombing Mount Gabriele just as the play ends.

Shirley Laughlin

Something of a lieutenant to Harry Van, Shirley is the member of "Les Blondes" that Harry speaks to most often. She is the one who oversteps Harry's authority to show Beulah how to do the "Maxie Ford" dance step. When Harry decides to stop performing with the troupe, he gives Shirley his singing part, which, along with her natural assertiveness, implies that she will be their leader when he leaves them.

Captain Locicero

As commander of the Italian headquarters, the captain's must detain all of the passengers from the train before they can leave the country, as war is being declared. He is civil and courteous to all, even though they are citizens of countries that have become Italy's enemies. When Weber leaves Irene to face death, the captain detains her, as is his duty, apologizing to her, but he does not blame Weber, showing himself to be concerned and responsible.

Francine Merle

Francine is one of the girls in Harry Van's troupe.

Elaine Messiger

Elaine is one of the girls in Harry Van's troupe.

Donald Navadel

Donald is the hotel's social director. An American, he was hired away from another resort in the hope that he would attract other Americans to come there. He is discontented because no guests come to the resort, but he is unwilling to leave before his contract is up in March. After the war starts, he does decide to leave Italy and return to California after seeing Quillery shot.

Orchestra Leader

When the play opens, the orchestra is playing to an empty room, and Donald Navadel gives the orchestra leader permission to stop playing.

Pittaluga

The proprietor of the Hotel Monte Gabriele, Pittaluga feels that Don Navadel is too presumptuous in giving orders around the hotel and invites Navadel to break his contract and quit.

Quillery

A labor organizer from France who is returning from an international Labor Congress in Zagreb, Yugoslavia, when the train is stopped at Monte Gabriele. He does not acknowledge any nationality. "Perhaps if I had raised pigs," he explains, referring to his family's business, "I should have been a Frenchman, as they were. But I went to work in

a factory—and machinery is international." Later, however, after receiving word that Paris has been bombed, Quillery becomes enraged at the Italians in the hotel, shouting at them, "Down with Fascism!" He identifies himself as a French citizen. When he is executed, he dies like a patriot, shouting, "Long live France!"

Signor Rossi

Signor Rossi is only mentioned twice and only speaks in Italian. He is a consumptive. Before medical advances, people used to go to resorts like Monte Gabriele to treat consumption, which is known today as tuberculosis. The resort was once a sanatorium for treating consumptives, but, as Dumptsy explains, "the Fascists—they don't like to admit that anyone can get sick."

Signora Rossi

Signora Rossi walks through with Signor Rossi, speaking with him in Italian.

Beulah Tremoyne

Beulah is one of the girls in Harry Van's troupe, "Les Blondes."

Harry Van

After an inconspicuous entrance, Harry turns out to be the play's main character. He is the manager of a troupe of singing and dancing girls and is responsible for their physical and moral well-being. Harry has a long history in show business. At one time, he sold a patent medicine remedy that was supposed to cure cancer, among other things. He was a "stooge" in a vaudeville act with "Zuleika, the Mind Reader," in the Midwest. He has played piano accompaniment to silent movies. He has been a drug addict, taking cocaine "during a stage in my career when luck was bad and confusion prevailed." And he has toured Europe with his girls.

Harry is an outgoing person, willing to agree with any perspective. As he sits at the piano in the lounge, different characters come by and talk with him, telling him their stories. He is intelligent, which he explains as being a result of having been an encyclopedia salesman in college: he ended up buying a set of encyclopedias and reading them while on the road. Another reason he gets along with people so well is that he likes just about everyone. As he explains, "All my life . . . I've been selling phony goods to people of meager intelligence and great faith. You'd think that would make me contemptuous of the human race, wouldn't you? But—on the contrary—it has given *me* faith."

He is interested in Irene from the moment that she comes in, but it is not until he is in the middle of a conversation that he recognizes her as a redheaded girl from another

act in vaudeville. He lured her up to his room one night, at the Governor Bryan Hotel in Omaha in the fall of 1925, promising to teach her how the mind-reading trick worked, and they slept together, but they went separate ways soon after. Irene denies having known him.

When Irene is abandoned to stay in Monte Gabriele, Harry is hesitant to leave her, but at the last minute she admits that it was she in Omaha. He leaves but then returns after the train has left, touched that their night together so long ago meant so much that she remembered the room number. When bombs start dropping on the Hotel Monte Gabriele, Harry keeps playing the piano and drinking champagne, being brave in the face of death.

Dr. Waldersee

Dr. Waldersee is very anxious to get out of Monte Gabriele and get to Zurich, Switzerland. He is German, but he is working on a cure for cancer, completing the work of a Dane named Fibiger. If he stays in Germany during the war, he knows that he will be forced to work on chemicals for warfare, to kill instead of cure people. When the war starts, though, the doctor becomes so disillusioned with mankind that he decides to return to Germany and be just as much of a bloodthirsty maniac as everyone else.

Achille Weber

Weber is the only truly sinister person in the play. He is an arms dealer, and Sherwood strongly implies that it is men like him, not the politicians or the citizens of the nations involved, who are responsible for war. In public, he hardly speaks, but in private he tells Irene that the planes from Monte Gabriele are headed for Paris, which is news that not even the local authorities know. When she suggests that his sister might be in Paris, he snaps that they are in Montbeliard, indicating that he has known about this raid long enough to check on the safety of his family members.

Alone, Irene congratulates Weber on "all of this wonderful death and destruction." He neither accepts her praise nor is horrified by it but responds in an even more frightening way: he takes her emotionalism to be a sign that she has "turned commonplace." Before the bombing, the Italian authorities say that they cannot allow Irene to leave alone but that, out of respect for Weber, they will let him take her with him, and he refuses, leaving her to die.

Themes

Love

Although the situation of *Idiot's Delight* revolves around the political situation in Europe, the play is ultimately a love story, with two lovers who spent a night together ten years earlier realizing that they are still in love. The years have changed both Harry and Irene, to such an extent that they do not recognize each other immediately. From their very first meeting, Harry does not know who Irene is, confused by her changed hair color and her strongly Russian pronunciation of her name; still, he is fascinated with her and shows excessive interest in her relationship with Weber. It is not until act 2, scene 3, that they have some time alone together, and Harry explains that she reminds him of the redheaded girl he knew in Omaha. "I was crazy about her," he tells Irene. "She was womanhood at its most desirable—and most unreliable." Even when he is certain that "Eye-ray-na" is the "Irene" that he once knew, she does not acknowledge having met him before. The audience knows that she is lying, that she earlier told Mr. Cherry that she had seen him perform before.

The casual approach that these two lovers have toward one another melts away in the face of death. When Irene is left at the hotel, probably to die in an air raid, she tells Harry that she remembers him from Omaha and gives the number of the room they stayed in. The fact that she remembers such an irrelevant detail after so many years is an indication of how much their affair meant to her. Harry gives up his life to be with her, facing the expected bombing raid because she did remember. He does nothing to deny it when Irene says, "All these years—you've been surrounded by blondes—and you've loved only me!" In the end, Irene, who had denied knowing him, tells Harry that she has loved him ever since that night they spent together. Together, in love, they face death.

Fatalism

The characters in this play all know that war is coming and that it will affect their lives. At first, they each come onto the stage expressing their urgent need to get out of the war zone before the fighting begins. When it has been confirmed that bombs have been dropped on Paris, though, they all realize that their lives are going to be subject to circumstances beyond their control.

The mildest case is Donald Navadel. Early in the play, he expresses his wish to stay at the Hotel Monte Gabriele through the end of his contract, but he also had good reason for wanting to leave. In the end, after he has seen Quillery executed, he knows that Italy will not be a decent place to live any more, and so he knows he must leave.

Dumptsy accepts the unpleasant fact that he must fight for the Italian army, even though he does not think of himself as an Italian. By the same token, Mr. Cherry and his wife

know that he must fight for England, even if it means dropping bombs on the beautiful country where they chose to celebrate their wedding just days earlier.

When Irene is left behind by Weber, she does not complain, accepting it as just the kind of fate that befalls a woman like her. Harry accepts that Irene is his fate, and he returns to the hotel, even though the odds are good that he will die there, in order to be by her side.

The most extremely fatalistic character is Dr. Waldersee. Early in the play he is full of hope, determined that political events cannot be allowed to stop him in his search for a cancer cure. After the bombs start falling, though, and he sees the pacifist Quillery turn into a raging nationalist, the doctor realizes that his efforts to cure people are futile in a world bound to destroy itself with war. "Why should I save people who don't want to be saved," he asks, "—so they can go out and exterminate each other? Obscene maniacs!" With such a fatalistic view of humanity, he returns to Germany to work on developing chemical weapons.

War

This play presents a rare case in which war is actually used as a theme more than as a plot point. Although every action in the play revolves around the coming war, there is really little involvement in the war until the very end. The guests are stranded at the hotel because of the rumor that war is coming, and as they talk in the first half of the play, the idea of war is very abstract and theoretical. When, in the middle scene of the middle act, confirmation comes that the war has begun, the personalities of all those gathered begin to change. The Cherrys, for example, who came to Monte Gabriele oblivious to anything but their love for each other, realize that they will soon be separated under life-or-death circumstances, and they both become short-tempered. The doctor changes from thoughts of life to thoughts of killing. Quillery quits identifying himself as a worker and instead sees himself as a Frenchman. Weber carefully scrutinizes his companion, Irene, for any weakness or sensitivity about killing, and she in fact does become more aware of the brutality of war once it becomes real and is no longer theoretical. Only Harry seems able to retain a stable personality once war becomes a fact of their lives. He continues to joke and play lighthearted songs. His long career of trying to cheat people has left him immune to shock about human depravity. War does not stir fear, pity, or anger in him. What it does is make Irene vulnerable, so that, faced with no future, she opens up to Harry, who, in turn, places himself in danger of falling bombs.

Patriotism

Sherwood seems to be making the point in this play that, given extreme circumstances, almost anyone will become patriotic. The most obvious examples are Quillery and Dr. Waldersee. Early in *Idiot's Delight*, Quillery refuses to call himself a French-man. He identifies the French with pig farmers, as his father was, while he sees himself as

belonging to a new breed of industrial workers. If he has any political affiliation at all, it is with Communist party leader Nikolai Lenin, the leader of the Russian Revolution. After the assault on Paris, however, Quillery identifies himself as a Frenchman. He seals his own doom by cursing the Italians for what they have done to his country, and he goes to his death shouting patriotic slogans. Dr. Waldersee falls into patriotism as a negative reaction to the war. He loses hope in saving the world from cancer, and, hopeless, he realizes that he is at heart a German citizen.

Sherwood makes his case for patriotism most clearly when he has his characters called by their nationalities, as Quillery is confronting the members of the Italian army. The scene works because it is consistent with the characters of Harry and Mr. Cherry to try to intervene in the barroom scuffle, and Quillery draws attention to the symbolic union by calling them by the names of their respective countries: "You see, we stand together! France—England—America! Allies!" The patriotism of the moment is deflated when Harry tries to distance himself from the equation, using Quillery's technique sarcastically, shouting, "Shut up, France!" He is trying in vain to save Quillery from being punished for his patriotic enthusiasm, more concerned with the human before him than in nationalistic posturing.

Style

Polemic

A polemic is an argument for or against one side of a controversy. Artists are very seldom successful when they engage in polemics in their works, because doing so usually means the work is guided by the lesson that the artist wants to teach rather than by artistic principles.

Idiot's Delight is a work by a pacifist, and it espouses pacifist ideas, but the ideas are not forced into the work. There is enough diversity in the characters for Sherwood to address the issues that he wants to with a sense that they would naturally come up among these characters in this situation. For example, the German munitions dealer, Weber, is clearly the villain of the piece, and Sherwood underscores his villainy by making him cold and merciless, willing to double-cross his lover and leave her to die. Still, it is not Weber who talks joyously about destruction, but Irene, giving her impression of the sort of gruesome talk she thinks he might appreciate. Weber himself is quiet about what he thinks. This serves to make him a chilling character, but it also saves the drama from having to oversell his viciousness. He does not even openly accuse Irene when he suspects that she is too sentimental to be trusted but instead gives her his argument in favor of the poison gas business, saying that the people who buy from him deserve what they get. If Sherwood had gotten carried away with his polemics, this character would have been much more unconvincingly despicable.

The same holds true for the hero and heroine of this work. Harry and Irene are both flawed individuals, both accustomed to taking advantage of people through lying. Sherwood does not try to make angels of them but instead trusts audiences to recognize that their observations about the war are true even though their personal lives have been based on falsehood. No other characters feel the effect of the war as much as these two, and they are only able to bear the horror of the final shelling because they have each other. Even though they have the insight to see the world as Sherwood wants to present it, they are not made to seem unbelievably righteous.

Setting

There are two aspects of this play's setting that make it the perfect place to show off the ideas that it deals with. The first is the geographic location in the Italian Alps. Several times, characters point out the fact that one can see four countries from the hotel: Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and Bavaria. This point is significant because it reflects the diversity of the people who are passing through Monte Gabriele. There is an inherent tension in a border town during wartime, with enemies of the government trying to escape and the government trying to restrain them so that they cannot return to their homelands to aid the fight. That tension is real enough along a single border, but it is especially pronounced when several countries with different allegiances come together.

The specific setting of the play is the lobby of a hotel that was once a sanatorium for tuberculosis sufferers but that has lately been trying to attract a recreational crowd. Hoping to emphasize winter sports, the management has hired an American social director, but his good spirit is wasted on the people who are forced to stay at the Hotel Monte Gabriele against their wills. A hotel is a good setting for showing off an international cast of characters: it is a public place, and so it is likely that any of them could show up there. It is also generally a relaxed vacation spot, an expectation that helps to highlight their tension about being detained.

Mood

Sherwood manages to keep audiences interested in the events onstage by playing two conflicting moods off each other. As a drama set in the first days of the war, *Idiot's Delight* has elements of deadly seriousness about it. Subjects such as curing cancer, nerve gas, and execution serve as reminders of just how terrible the world can be. On the other hand, there are many light elements presented. The girls from "Les Blondes" never seem to grasp the dire circumstances surrounding them, and audiences can laugh at their shallow perception. Don Navadal's argument against his employer, Pittaluga, is funny because neither of them is serious enough about their disagreements to fire the other or quit. To add to the lighthearted aspects, Sherwood includes a time in the middle of the play when audiences can temporarily forget the important issues being discussed by watching a show-within-a-show, with singing and dancing that has no more purpose than pure entertainment. The mix of these two moods, serious and whimsical, prevents audience members from becoming too complacent or making assumptions about what the play has to say to them.

Historical Context

Fascism in Italy

During World War I, Italy was a part of the Allied forces, which included Britain, France, Russia, and the United States. They were gathered against the Central powers, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria. When the Allies won, the Treaty of Versailles decided upon a reorganization of territories that were held by the defeated countries. In *Idiot's Delight*, Monte Gabriele is in an area of the Alps that had been part of Austria but that was ceded to Italy by the Treaty of Versailles.

At the end of the war, the Italian political system was in disarray. Socialists, Communists, and Fascists all tried to gain control of the country. Fascism was a new form of political system, supported by armed bands of nationalists. The Italian term, *fascio,* which refers to a bundle of axe-headed rods that symbolized the ancient Roman Republic, had been used in Italy as early as the 1870s to describe the new radical organizations that sprang up around the country. As World War I ended, these separate bands gathered together as a unified national party called *Fascio di Combattimento.* This new party promoted action, modernism, and a strong sense of national identity. At its onset, the Fascist Party was primarily a left-wing organization.

Within three years of the party's formation, Benito Mussolini had worked his way up within its ranks to become the country's premier, and almost immediately he began cutting off democratic means of political change, so that by 1925 he ruled Italy as a dictator. The Fascist Party under Mussolini became increasingly right wing, so that its primary objectives were to keep order and to control Italy at any cost. Fascists invented the term "totalitarianism" to describe their goal of keeping total control on all aspects of life.

In 1935 and 1936, Italy fought a war to annex Ethiopia (which Harry refers to in act 1 when he says, "You mean—that business in Africa?"). After their success, Adolph Hitler sought out Mussolini to make an alliance. When World War II began in 1939, Italy was unprepared, and the social cost in lives and money made the people turn against Fascism. Mussolini was driven from power in 1943, though he and a small band of Fascists were supported by Hitler in northern Italy as the Italian Socialist Republic, which waged a civil war against the rest of the country. In the meantime, the new democratic Italian government changed sides during the war and fought against Germany. In the final days of the war, Mussolini tried to escape to Switzerland, but he was caught by the Italian government and executed.

The Start of World War II

In this play, an armed conflict begins, which the characters recognize to be the start of a second world war. In reality, though, World War II did not begin until 1939, four years

after *Idiot's Delight* was written. During that time, the tensions were so obvious to an observer of international affairs like Sherwood that another war of global proportions seemed inevitable.

The causes of World War II grew out of the way that the world was left when the Treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919. The treaty marked the end of the most terrible, widespread international conflict the world had ever known, with thirty-two countries eventually involved. Germany was the most prominent nation on the losing side of that conflict, and the treaty extracted a heavy price, both to punish and to make sure that Germany would not have the means to assemble a powerful army again. In addition to forfeiting millions of dollars in money, ships, livestock, and natural resources, it had to give up much of the land that it had acquired as a result of the war. All of these losses caused great economic hardship in Germany, especially when a worldwide depression began in the 1930s. Inflation in Germany reached triple digits, making the money earned from working worth less by the time it was spent.

In their misery, the Germans sought out a strong leader who felt that the treaty had been unfair and was willing to fight about it. In 1933, they elected Adolph Hitler, a charismatic candidate who made Germans feel good about themselves by promoting military strength and by playing off racial prejudices. After being elected chancellor, Hitler turned the government into a dictatorship and began a program of military aggression.

Other countries were also unhappy with the Treaty of Versailles. France and England were left in the uncomfortable position of having to rebuild their own economies after the war and to enforce the treaty as best as they could. Instead of staying with the wartime coalition, the United States began a new program of isolationism after the war, which meant political isolation from the rest of the world. Italy, which had been aligned with the winning Allied powers, felt that they had not received a proper share of the land that was divided up by the treaty: when Mussolini rose to power in the 1930s, he began a program of armed aggression, starting with the Ethiopian campaign in 1935. The Japanese military also created a dictatorship that was reaching out to conquer other nations.

When the play was written, the international situation was clearly volatile, changing weekly, but the world war that Sherwood anticipated still did not happen. Germany, Italy, and Japan signed treaties in 1936 and 1937, and each continued to conquer smaller countries. Reluctant to become involved in another terrible conflict like World War I, France and England accepted Germany's moves, even though they broke the Treaty of Versailles. When Germany annexed Czechoslovakia in 1938, threatening Poland; Britain and France signed a pact promising Poland's defense. After Stalin agreed to leave Germany alone, which meant that Hitler would not have to defend the country's east border, Germany invaded Poland in 1929, and France and Great Britain declared war soon after. Eventually, most of the countries in the world were involved in the conflict.

Critical Overview

Idiot's Delight was a hit when it first appeared on Broadway in 1936. The play appeared at a time when Robert E. Sherwood's career was at its creative and popular peak, and its stars, Alfred Lunt and his wife, Lynn Fontanne, were two of the most popular Broadway stars of the 1930s and 1940s. Sherwood had come naturally to writing for the stage, having been a drama critic and film critic and having closely associated with such successful Broadway writers as George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly as a part of the social group that gathered regularly at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City throughout the 1920s. Sherwood's first professional play, *The Road to Rome*, a clever version of the story of Hannibal's assault on Rome, was a smash hit in 1927, establishing Sherwood as a talented, reliable playwright and giving him the chance to leave his position as literary editor for *Life* magazine. After that, Sherwood's name became a constant and familiar sight on Broadway marquees with a string of clever social comedies and love stories, each alluding in one way or another to the horrors of war.

The 1935 drama *The Petrified Forest* was the first to show Sherwood at his philosophical, serious best, and it anticipated the structure that was to appear again in his later work, *Idiot's Delight*. In it, a group of strangers passing through a Nevada gas station are detained and threatened by a sinister presence, an escaped gangster. In *Modern American Playwrights,* Jean Gould refers to an anonymous critic of the time who accused Sherwood of "perpetuating hokum of the highest type on the American public." Gould also includes a reply by Burnes Mantle, who praised the playwright as "a melodramatist who, in place of pretending to despise the hokum of our theatre, boldly embraces it with noble purpose and to fine effect." Gould goes on to add her own thoughts about the subject: "Hokum or no, *The Petrified Forest* was chilling melodrama bordering on true tragedy, and was an overnight success when it appeared on Broadway in early January, 1935."

If *The Petrified Forest* prepared audiences to accept Sherwood as a serious, committed playwright of ideas, it was *Idiot's Delight* that fulfilled that promise. The play had the commercial elements that made the clever comedies of Sherwood's earlier career appeal to the masses, including songs and music and romance, performed by the ever-popular Lunts. Sherwood himself recorded his responses to reviews of the play in his diary, as noted in John Mason Brown's biography *The Worlds of Robert E. Sherwood—Mirror to His Times, 1896-1939:*

Mar. 25. Read Notices. First I read was Atkinson's in the *Times* & it was lukewarm. The others seemed not much better. Disappointed. Anderson's in the *Eve. Journal* was marvelous, & so was Lockridge's in *The Sun.* General opinion was that all notices were superlatively good for box-office—but except for the last two mentioned they're far from satisfying me.... why do they deliberately close their ears to everything of importance that is said in a comedy? You'd think it was a crime to state unpleasant truths in an entertaining way.

In spite of Sherwood's disappointment and perhaps owing to the worsening of the conditions in Europe that he predicted in *Idiot's Delight*, the play grew in critical esteem during its run. He was rewarded for daring to state "unpleasant truths" with the Pulitzer Prize for drama for that year. He also won the Pulitzer for his next play, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, which showed the president's growth from a pacifist in the 1840s to the commander in chief of the Union Army in the 1860s. Sherwood's third Pulitzer was for the next play in succession, *There Shall Be No Night*, a pro-war play that served to fulfill the doubts about pacifism that began showing themselves in *The Petrified Forest*.

During World War II, Sherwood worked for the government, and after the war he found that his award-winning plays held no more interest than dated newspapers. Though his craftsmanship has never been questioned, his artistry has never been overtly praised either. Without being able to relate *Idiot's Delight* to current events, audiences can only see it as a slick piece of antiwar propaganda. Sherwood's plays have continually appeared in anthologies of best-loved plays because they capture a particularly ambivalent aspect of the American culture, but they seldom appear in anthologies of best-written plays.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an adjunct professor of English at the College of Lake County and Oakton Community College in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly examines how the two American characters in Idiot's Delight *can be used to understand Robert Sherwood's pacifist ideals.*

Robert Sherwood's play *Idiot's Delight*, set at the brink of an imagined world war, features characters from all over the Western world, representing an array of perspectives. They tend toward stereotype, but Sherwood usually manages to humanize each role. The German doctor, Waldersee, is a good example: stern and nationalistic, he originally bucks the tired generalization during Hitler's reign that Germans were soulless barbarians, with his hope to improve the world by defeating cancer. By the end, though, under the pressure of the war, he becomes the barbarian stereotype and returns to his homeland to produce nerve gas instead. Mr. and Mrs. Cherry are as gung-ho about duty as cartoon British people tended to be, but Sherwood softens some of the brittleness of their stereotype by making their love deep and fresh and by having Jimmy Cherry be an artist. As Mrs. Cherry puts it, "We're both independent," and even thinking that they are spares them from being stereotypical Brits. The Frenchman is hotheaded; the Austrian is resigned; and the Russian woman is mysteriously superior: all of these stretch beyond the functions of their particular characters to stand as representatives of their governments' attitudes toward war.

With this pattern established, it seems unnecessarily repetitive that the play has two American men, especially when it could so easily have made the social manager of the Hotel Monte Gabrielle a representative of another European nation. Apparently, Harry Van does not tell audiences all that Sherwood thinks they need to know about America's position in the international situation of the time. Since there are, in fact, two Americans, it The essence of this play, as with all of Sherwood's pre-World War II writing, is his basic assumption that war is an avoidable mistake that humanity commits again and again, but does not need to. In the "Postscript" to the original publication, Sherwood explains why he does not think war is inevitable, but why, nonetheless, it will probably go on: "I believe," he writes, "that the world is populated largely by decent people, and decent people don't want war." The problem decent people face is that "they are deluded by their exploiters, who are members of the indecent minority." In the play, both Harry and Don are decent people, but only one seems ripe for exploitation. The defense that Sherwood offers against becoming "intoxicated by the synthetic spirit of patriotism" is to face the fear-mongering political leaders with "calmness, courage, and ridicule." Harry Van is a model of these qualities, and one senses that, if he were to survive the air raid that comes at the final curtain, he would be immune to the allure of war. Donald Navadel, on the other hand, presents the audience with just the sort of qualities that the purveyors of war can exploit.

Don is the first character that audiences get to know in *Idiot's Delight*. In the stage directions at the beginning of the play, he is described as "a rather precious, youngish American, suitably costumed for winter sports by Saks Fifth Avenue." These facts

present Don as an interesting enough character, given his situation. He is a classic "fish out of water" character—a wealthy, young American in the thick of Europe's twisted political situation at a time when Americans were particularly notorious for their ability to ignore the rest of the world's troubles. The situation Don is in at the opening curtain could keep an audience's attention throughout *a* whole play, but not this play. It turns out, after opening on him, that the play is not about Don at all.

It is worth noting, given the fact that he is on stage so little during the play, that Sherwood supplies Donald Navadel with a compelling back-story and a distinct personality. He draws viewers' attention in the play's first few minutes, and then he virtually disappears. When he is there, though, he is loud and aggressive, not at all the image of the successful sportsman that his Saks Fifth Avenue "costume" would belie. "I'm fed to the teeth, personally," he tells his employer, Pittaluga, after telling the band to "Get out!" and ordering Dumptsy "Do as you're told!" Without the impending danger of war behind them, his sharp comments might seem to be the cries of a young man of promise who was hired away from a thriving situation to be stuck in a dead-end job. Within the context of war, though, his lack of composure identifies him as a part of the system that keeps international conflict alive.

Don is prey for the purveyors of war because he takes himself seriously. His pride is wounded because he does not like the situation he works in and he feels that someone must be to blame. He immodestly refers to his own career as "conspicuously successful"; by contrast, he calls the place where he works an "obscure tavern" and "a deadly, boring dump." His indignation is the kind that drives people to wars to defend their national honor; his anger is exactly the kind of fuel that the world expected to ignite in Europe in 1936.

Harry Van, on the other hand, exudes the kind of self-control that Sherwood clearly admired. He is not presented as having a superior personality, as a model of the sort of person who could eventually lead the world to peace. He seems like an ordinary, slightly bright man, who has been made wise by the circumstances of his life, so that he takes nothing for granted. Sherwood introduces Harry as an "American vaudevillian promoter, press agent, book-agent, crooner, hoofer, barker or shill, who has undertaken all sorts of jobs in his time, all of them capitalizing on his power of salesmanship and none of them entirely honest." In the course of the play, Harry describes a few of his former careers, ranging from the dangerously dishonest selling of useless medicine to the winking dishonesty of participating in a phony mind-reading act to the self-dishonesty of playing background music for silent films when he is actually an accomplished classical performer.

It is Harry's dishonesty that makes him able to accept human weakness. He is capable of falling in love with Irene, the only character in the play more insincere than himself. He is, in fact, able to put up with the foibles and pretentions and self-deceit of anyone he meets at the Hotel Monte Gabriele. Audiences come to know the background stories of these characters because Harry Van is always there, ready to let them talk without passing judgment. As Mrs. Cherry tells him at the start of act 2, "I can't tell you what a relief it is to have you here in this hotel."

In his later scenes, it is even more obvious that Don Navadel, the professional winter sportsman, is too intolerant to stand up to the social forces leading toward war. This becomes particularly clear in the scenes that Don and Harry share, where their different temperaments can be easily compared. When Achille Weber, the arms manufacturer, has been introduced, Don is dead serious and "impressed," whereas Harry hardly notices the impressive man because he is fascinated with the mysterious woman, Irene. In an earlier scene, Don is particularly impatient with Harry: "It may be difficult for you to understand, Mr. Van," he tells the man who is fifteen or twenty years his senior, "but we happen to be on the brink of a frightful calamity." Harry responds blithely that the Italians would not start a worldwide conflict because they are "far too romantic." When Harry brings up the idea of putting on a show at the hotel, he works his way into it by asking Don his job description, likening it to "a sort of Y. M. C. A. secretary"; Don's reactions in this conversation grow from "impatient" to "simply furious," according to the stage directions.

Harry Van is, because of his optimism, a model for the virtues that Sherwood believes are needed to resist the temptations of war—as he outlines in an often-quoted speech. In taking advantage of "suckers," he has experienced their faith: "Faith in peace on earth and good will to men—and faith that 'Muma,' 'Muma' the three-legged girl, really has got three legs." Instead of making him more cynical, humanity's ability to constantly come up with more faith has given Harry his own sort of faith—"It has made me sure that no matter how much the meek may be bulldozed or gypped they *will* eventually inherit the earth." His faith is the source of the "coolness, courage and ridicule" that Sherwood prescribes, keeping Harry detached from the mounting fear and anger that draws the others, and their respective nations, to war.

The differences between the two Americans in this play become clearest at the end. Don concludes his employment at the Hotel Monte Gabriele with the line, "What a relief it is to be out of this foul place!," as he launches into a description of the Frenchman's execution. After that, he passes through the play to show a devotion to punctuality. "Four o'clock. Correct!" he answers when Harry asks the train departure time, and later Don appears, shouts, "We can't wait another instant!," and goes. Harry leaves the security of a train to Geneva and steps right into the war zone, fully aware of what he faces. Don is anxious to get on the move; Harry, staying with danger all around him, is calm.

Source: David Kelly, Critical essay on *Idiot's Delight,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Shuman explores the anti-war sentiment in Idiot's Delight *and how Sherwood renders the message in the play.*

Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings wrote *What Price Glory?* in 1924 and concluded it with the words, "What a lot of goddam fools it takes to make a war." Twelve years later, when news of the Spanish Civil War and of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia occupied the headlines, and when Hitler was rattling his saber ominously over his neighbors in eastern Europe, Robert Sherwood presented audiences with *Idiot's Delight* which reflected the growing anti-war sentiment in the United States in the mid-1930's. Sherwood's message is somewhat different from that of Anderson and Stallings. In the postscript to his play he writes, ". . . let me express here the conviction that those who shrug and say, 'War is inevitable,' are false prophets. I believe that the world is populated largely by decent people, and decent people don't want war. Nor do they make war. They fight and die, to be sure—but that is because they have been deluded by their exploiters, who are members of the indecent minority." This sentiment represents a mellowing from the attitude expressed implicitly in *The Petrified Forest* in the characterization of the blood-thirsty Legionnaires, who have "fought to make the world safe for democracy," who love to shoot and kill, and who care little whether they are shooting at the just or the unjust.

It is clear that the sentiment in *Idiot's Delight* is that human conflict is largely the fault of those who make it possible, in this specific case, the munitions manufacturer, Achilles Weber. His Russian mistress, Irene, realizes this fact; and, when war finally erupts, she cries out to Weber: "All this great, wonderful death and destruction, everywhere. And you promoted it!" But Weber, who whimsically declines to take all the credit, retorts: ". . . But don't forget to do honor to Him—up there—who put fear into man. I am the humble instrument of His divine will." And again Weber declines to accept the full responsibility for his part in bringing about conflict when he asks Irene, ". . . who are the greater criminals—those who sell the instruments of death, or those who buy them, and use them?" The question of responsibility, of course, is the compelling question of the age, and it recurs in such works as Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy,* Arthur Miller's *All My Sons,* Paul Green's *Johnny Johnson,* Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset,* and a host of other plays of the 1930's and '40's. By shifting responsibility, the foul deed can be done, yet everyone involved can be exonerated. The "indecent minority" is a minority of faceless buck-passers.

One of the major points of *Idiot's Delight* had been made ten years earlier in *The Road to Rome*, when Amytis deflated Hannibal after he had stated that he had been motivated in his conquests by the voice of his god, Baal, and she had replied: "That wasn't the voice of Baal, Hannibal. That was the voice of the shopkeepers of Carthage, who are afraid that Rome will interfere with their trade.... Hatred, greed, envy, and the passionate desire for revenge—those are the high ideals that inspire you soldiers, Roman and Carthaginian alike." In *Idiot's Delight*, Baal is dead, and the ancient god of the Hebrews has been reduced to a ". . . poor, lonely old soul. Sitting up in heaven, with

nothing to do, but play solitaire. Poor, dear God. Playing Idiot's Delight. The game that never means anything, and never ends." This is the God of a skeptical age, and this is life in Spenglerian terms or in terms of the philosophy of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land* or in *The Hollow Men,* where life *does* end, but with a whimper rather than a bang.

Harold Clurman has called the sentiment which led Sherwood to write *Idiot's Delight* cogent. He has very astutely and perceptively noted that the play ". . . echoes the American fear of and profound estrangement from the facts of European intrigue which led to war," and he supports this contention by reminding readers that Sherwood's French pacifist, Quillery, is cast as a Radical-Socialist who venerated Lenin; but, in reality, the Radical-Socialists of pre-war France were the small businessmen who hated Lenin. But Clurman praises the play for giving ". . . us an inkling of the moral climate in our country" during this period of crisis. Clurman also makes the point that during this time ". . . the attitude of our dramatists, generally speaking, was fundamentally moral rather than, as some are now inclined to believe, political."

This, of course, is a disputed point, and Casper H. Nannes presents a case for *Idiot's Delight* as political drama in *Politics in the American Drama,* in which he claims, quite validly, that Sherwood's anti-war bias reached its peak in *Idiot's Delight*." Actually Sherwood's stand in regard to war is much easier to understand and to accept as a moral rather than as a political stand. Surely the attitude which he is working toward in *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* and which he finally achieves in his propagandistic *There Shall Be No Night* is a moral stand. The fact that both of these plays are closer temporally to audiences than was a play such as *The Road to Rome* can easily mislead them into seeing the more immediate political implications of what Sherwood is saying than the moral implications. However, it is clear, especially in the case of *There Shall Be No Night*, that had the play been fundamentally political rather than moral, Sherwood could not in good conscience have rewritten it in 1943 and changed the nationality of the chief contending parties in the action from Finnish to Greek. And those critics who castigated him for "dumping the Finns" were obviously insensitive to the underlying purpose of this play, and perhaps of all of his plays which dealt with the problem of war.

Sherwood managed to put more tension into *Idiot's Delight* than he was able to achieve in many of his other plays. The uncertainty that the people assembled in the Italian *pensione* will be permitted to cross the border into Switzerland pervades the play and causes the characters to show tension in their various ways. The tension is enhanced by the sounding of air raid sirens, and it reaches a peak with the execution of Quillery. However, John Mason Brown understates a very important point when he writes that "The tension in Europe added to the tension of *Idiot's Delight*." The play capitalized on this tension increasingly at every performance. It opened in New York two days after Italy had invaded Ethiopia; it opened in London less than a week after Hitler's forces had marched into Austria. It played amid constant international tensions, and even its most successful revival came in 1951 at a time when an undeclared war was being fought at great cost of human life in Korea.

Sherwood had to exercise considerable control to make *Idiot's Delight* as serious a play as he did. More than any other Sherwood drama, this play has a message. It was

written with great intensity, indeed with such great intensity that its author wrote on one occasion until well past midnight, went to bed, but couldn't stand not knowing the outcome of the second act; so he arose again at three and continued writing until dawn. The play, which was written and presented to the Lunts in a period of two weeks, was not entirely ready for Broadway in its original form. Sherwood had once said, "The trouble with me is that I start off with a big message and end with nothing but good entertainment," and *Idiot's Delight* is an especially apt case in point. At one of the early rehearsals, Lawrence Langner pointed out that the play seemed too light for its very serious content. This was a thoughtful observation for at this point, as Langner notes, the play "...had drifted perilously between the delightful story of a group of chorus girls lost in Italy, and the more serious implications of the oncoming war."

Lynn Fontanne, as well as Alfred Lunt and Robert Sherwood, agreed with Langner's analysis; and, after considerable pondering, Miss Fontanne suggested that Sherwood write into the play a significant scene for her—she played Irene—and Achilles Weber, the munitions baron. Sherwood did so, and the play took on a more serious tone, even though this increased seriousness was attained through means which did not detract from the play's initial humor and pleasing pace. Also, the irony of the play was increased by this change; and, through the increased irony, Weber's personality was projected more fully to the audience. His unchivalrous abandonment of Irene, an abandonment to almost certain death, is directly attributable to the fact that Irene expresses pacifist sentiments. The munitions manufacturer will tolerate no threat to his commercial interests in the form of such sentiments; by abandoning Irene, he shows himself unmistakably to be a man with no fundamental loyalties. One might compare Weber to Robert Murray in *Small War on Murray Hill;* Murray shows similar tendencies, although his personality in Sherwood's later play is just sketched in, whereas Achilles Weber is a more fully realized character in *Idiot's Delight*.

The microcosm which Sherwood creates in *Idiot's Delight* is suggestive of a diminutive *Magic Mountain,* translated into American terms. The characterization is of the utmost importance in Sherwood's play, just as it is in Mann's novel, for each character is a broad representative of a specific *Weltanschauung;* each speaks for a large class.

Harry Van is the prototypical "hoofer" and is virtually a master of ceremonies in the play. He represents American views much more fully than does the other male American in the play, Don Navadel. Van has a marked feeling of loyalty to his girls, but he also has a feeling of loyalty to Irene, the phony Russian countess, because he is convinced that he spent the night with her once in Kansas City, but even more so because she apparently remembers that they spent the night together and has some sentiment about it. Harry is the peacemaker, but this writer feels—with Grenville Vernon who reviewed the play for *Commonweal*—that Harry is artistically false. His chief function in much of the play is that of pace-setter. Harry denounces war, but he never really presents any significant arguments for doing so. He is statically pacifistic in his presentation. Further, his heroic action in coming back to the *pensione* to die with Irene is not convincing. He has not, like Alan Squier, shown a death wish. His death does not lead to anything greater. He is representative of meaningless action, as is the French pacifist, Quillery.

Harry Van's philosophy is never really expressed clearly. The closest he comes to expressing any sort of idealogical stand is in the first act when he says to Dr. Waldersee, "All my life . . . I've been selling phoney goods to people of meagre intelligence and great faith. You'd think that would make me contemptuous of the human race, wouldn't you? But—on the contrary—it has given *me* faith. It has made me sure that no matter how much the meek may be bulldozed or gypped they *will* eventually inherit the earth." The thinking in this passage is so confused and inconsistent that one can scarcely generalize about Harry's philosophy from it; yet this is typical of Harry's more serious utterances.

Quillery is often somewhat less than convincing in much the same way that Harry Van is. Having attempted to be a citizen of the world, Quillery very suddenly becomes a Frenchman again when war is declared. He is opinionated and dogmatic, but very insecure psychologically. He has fuzzy notions of how to bring about a better world, and he becomes an immature social boor when he begins to expand his hazy theories. He feels that the strongest force in the world is ". . . the mature intelligence of the workers of the world! There is one antidote for war—Revolution!"

Quillery is used to point the finger unquestionably at Achilles Weber. Having reached a frenzied state of anti-war sentiment, he tells Cherry, the Englishman, that Weber ". . . can give you all the war news. Because he *made* it. . . He has been organizing the arms industry. Munitions. To kill French babies. And English babies." In the following scene, Irene is to become even more graphic in describing the horror of what Weber is making possible when she speaks of what the war will be like: A young woman ". . . lying in a cellar that has been wrecked by an air raid, and her firm young breasts are all mixed up with the bowels of a dismembered policeman, and the embryo from her womb is splattered against the face of a dead bishop." As Irene's pacifism grows, it seems that she would be more appealing to Quillery than to Harry Van; and Sherwood might indeed have added credibility to the play had he spared Quillery rather than having him executed by the Fascisti. Had Quillery returned to the *pensione* to remain with Irene, the action would have been as convincing as was Boze's action in *The Petrified Forest* when he risked his life and grabbed Mantee's gun.

In many respects Quillery is suggestive of Boze. He is utterly lacking in objectivity and is very egocentric. He is a master of the hollow insult, as Boze was. His speech to Dr. Waldersee exemplifies this quality: "The eminent Dr. Hugo Waldersee. A wearer of the sacred swastika. Down with the Communists! Off with their heads! So that the world may be safe for the Nazi murderers." He then turns on the British couple, the Cherrys, and insults them by saying, "And now we hear the voice of England! The great, well-fed, pious hypocrite! The grabber—the exploiter—the immaculate butcher! It was *you* forced this war, because miserable little Italy dared to drag its black shirt across your trail of Empire."

Despite this tirade, Quillery tells the Italian officers later in the same scene that "England and France are fighting for the hopes of mankind." He then launches into the fanatical diatribe which costs him his life. He shouts, "Down with Fascism! Abbasso Fascismo!". He is placed under arrest by the Italians, who have very little choice but to do this, and

he shouts, "Call out the firing squad! Shoot me dead! But do not think you can silence the truth that's in me." These are brave, stirring words; but they are those of a person who has regressed to adolescence and whose idealism leads to nothing but death without meaning. The role is well depicted and, in itself, is credible. However, the play as a whole would have gained in credibility had Quillery been permitted to live and to fall in love with Irene. The reunion of the pathological patriot with the pathological liar would have been much more satisfying than was the reunion of the good-natured Harry Van with Irene.

The Cherrys are brought into the play for two reasons. In the first place, they represent the effect of war upon young love—always an appealing theme. But in a broader sense, they represent the English stand in regard to war. They are restrained and calm. They do not like what is going on, but they do not explode into action as might the more volatile French, represented by Quillery. In this regard, Harry Van represents his country, the United States. He shepherds his girls to the frontier, but he returns for personal reasons to stay with Irene. His involvement in the war is unofficial, but morality leads him to take a stand, even though the bases of this morality are personal and private.

Dr. Waldersee, of course, represents the dilemma of the scientist who is essentially dedicated to something far larger than nationalism, but whose blood tie with his country is great enough to divert him from his scientific pursuits for the benefit of mankind to scientific pursuits which will be quite the opposite. In reality, Dr. Waldersee is faced with the same sort of moral dilemma which faced Dr. Valkonen in *There Shall Be No Night,* and the solution of the conflict, on a moral level at least, is similar in both cases.

Idiot's Delight amazed audiences because Sherwood not only had foreseen the broad outlines of history, but also had dealt with specifics which were in time to be borne out by developments in international politics. The play continued to have a very definite appeal through the early years of the war; and, when it was revived in 1951, audiences were again to be much in awe of Sherwood's ability to prognosticate with such accuracy.

The areas in which *Idiot's Delight* appealed to audiences are as diverse as the areas in which *The Road to Rome* made its appeal. Grenville Vernon, writing a second review of the play six weeks after he had first reviewed it, felt that it ". . . is not all of one piece. It is perhaps even too shrewdly made for popular appeal. It is in its entirety neither comedy, melodrama, musical comedy nor propaganda play. It is by turns all of these . . . there are those who would have wished [Sherwood] had stuck a little closer to artistic unity."

The play's most severe structural flaw is obviously the ending. Bombs are falling, Harry and Irene are in the *pensione,* certainly doomed. Harry has been playing "The Ride of the Walküries." Irene asks him if he knows any hymns, and in jazz time he begins to play "Onward, Christian Soldiers." The irony of this is almost too heavy handed; and, for every critic who agreed with *Newsweek's* critic in calling the ending "a stirring bit of theatre," there were dozens who felt, like Grenville Vernon, that it was "hokum of a

peculiarly annoying kind." Sherwood's intention to represent in *Idiot's Delight* "...a compound of bland pessimism and desperate optimism, of chaos and jazz," is achieved in his ending; but the method to achieve it is so jarringly melodramatic that the impact is all but lost.

In *Idiot's Delight*, Sherwood's out-and-out pacifism is replaced by pessimism. Joseph Wood Krutch has noted that the author's main contention in this play is that ". . . men are too emotional and too childish to carry to a successful issue any plan for abolishing war." This is the first step away from the pacifism of Sherwood's earlier works. In *Idiot's Delight*, the author has not turned his back on pacifism, but he is not hopeful that men will be pacific. The thinking in this play leads directly into *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* and reaches its final culmination in *There Shall Be No Night* with its "Yes, but . . ." attitude.

Source: R. Baird Shuman, "Sherwood's Universal Microcosms," in *Robert Emmet Sherwood,* College & University Press, 1964, pp. 52-74.

Adaptations

Idiot's Delight was adapted as a film in 1939, starring Clark Gable, Norma Shearer, and Burgess Meredith. Robert E. Sherwood adapted the screenplay from his own drama. Directed by Clarence Brown, released by MGM, the 1991 video is available from MGM/UA Home Video.

In 1983, legendary lyricist Alan Jay Learner did a musical adaptation of the play called *Dance a Little Closer.* Charles Strouse did the music. This version closed after one performance. A 1987 compact disc of the music by the original Broadway cast is available from Topaz Entertainment Inc. and Theaterland Productions.

Topics for Further Study

Write a short play that shows what happened to some of the characters from this play: the Cherrys, for example, or Dr. Waldersee or Don Navadel or Harry and Irene, if they survive the bombing.

Examine what has become of the countries of this region since World War II. Which have been broken up? Which areas have become part of different nations?

Dr. Waldersee abandons his cancer research to return to Germany during the war. Research what sort of projects a biochemist may have been put to work on during Hitler's Nazi regime.

Harry Van promises to show Irene how to do the mind-reading trick that he once did with Zuleika. Find some information about how such vaudeville acts were accomplished and try to perform this trick with your class.

Signor and Signora Rossi are barely mentioned in this play, but Sherwood must have had some reason for including them. Find some descriptions of tuberculosis sanatoriums in the early twentieth century and explain why you think he wanted to include this aspect in the play.

Sherwood dedicated this play to Alfred Lunt and Joan Fontaine, who played the key parts in the Broadway production. Research their careers and explain how the information about the actors has changed your perception of the play.

In this play, everyone knows that there is going to be a war soon, but there is no real reason for the coming war except that the munitions manufacturers want it. Explain when, if ever, you think it is right for a country to go to war.

Compare and Contrast

1936: The world is in the middle of a global economic depression, which started with the stock market crash of October 1929.

Today: After record-breaking economic growth in the 1990s, supported by the spread of personal computers and the Internet, the world economy is softening into recession.

1936: News of events in other countries comes from those countries on short-wave radios.

Today: People all over the world are connected to the latest developments. Television news stations have bureaus all over the world, and many people get constant news updates via the Internet.

1936: The Great Purge begins in the Soviet Union. Over the next two years, 8 to 10 million people are murdered by Stalin's government.

Today: Ten years after the fall of Communism, Russia is struggling to create a viable, stable economy based on capitalist principles.

1936: The Japanese government is taken over in a mutiny by young army officers who established a military dictatorship, tilting Japan toward its eventual alliance with Germany and Italy.

Today: Japan is one of the world's great economic superpowers, with a government of elected officials that answers to the will of the people.

1936: A group of female performers traveling in a foreign country need a man to manage them and to chaperone them so that men would not take advantage of their naïveté.

Today: Old stereotypes have been broken, and women in most countries are respected enough to be able to travel without a male chaperone.

1936: There is fear that hostility between the world's superpowers could lead to years of conflict between ground troops.

Today: Most of the world's powerful countries have nuclear capabilities and are willing to try hard to settle disagreements diplomatically without resorting to nuclear weapons.

What Do I Read Next?

Sherwood's play *The Petrified Forest* has a similar structure and similar themes to *Idiot's Delight:* a mismatched assemblage of travelers is trapped together in a bus station in the West by a desperate gunman, whose violence threatens to destroy the social ideals of an intellectual pacifist. The play was first published in 1935 and is currently available from Dramatist's Play Service, published in 1998.

Those interested in Sherwood's life will want to read James R. Gaines's *Wit's End: Days and Nights of the Algonquin Round Table,* about the legendary social group that Sherwood shared with Dorothy Parker, George S. Kaufman, and other literary figures of the twenties and thirties. This book, considered the best on the subject, was published in 1977 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

During World War II, Sherwood worked for the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. His 1949 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *Roosevelt and Hopkins,* about the president's relationship with controversial aid Harry Hopkins, has just been re-released in paperback in December 2001 by Enigma Books.

Playwright Maxwell Anderson's name is often linked with Sherwood's; they both wrote at the same time and covered similar topics, often incorporating the war into their works. Anderson's *Winterset* was produced the same year as *Idiot's Delight* and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award that year. It is an experimental play written in verse about a young man out to clear the name of his father, who was executed. Dramatist's Play Service published a new version in 1998.

John Mason Brown is recognized as the preeminent Sherwood biographer. He has two books about Sherwood. *The Worlds of Robert E. Sherwood, Mirror to His Times,* published by Harper & Row in 1962, covers the playwright's development up to the start of World War II in 1939. *The Ordeal of a Playwright: Robert E. Sherwood and the Challenge of War,* published by Harper & Row in 1970, is about the war years and includes the text of Sherwood's Pulitzer Prizewinning play *There Shall Be No Night* seems a safe bet that examining the contrast between them will reveal more of the author's intent than one could see if there were just one.

Further Study

Auchincloss, Louis, "Robert E. Sherwood," in *The Man behind the Book: Literary Profiles,* Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996, pp. 192-98.

Auchincloss's brief overview of Sherwood's life is a good starting point for students.

Meserve, Walter J., *Robert E. Sherwood: Reluctant Moralist,* Pegasus Press, 1970.

Meserve focuses on Sherwood's hopes and fears for humanity, centering his book around the playwright's shift from pacifist to supporter of American involvement in war.

Morgan, Philip, *Italian Fascism, 1919-1945,* St. Martin's Press, 1995.

The last half of this study deals with the situation in Italy after 1933 and serves as clear and readable overview of the background of this play's politics.

Moses, Montrose J., "Robert E. Sherwood," in *Dramas of Modernism and Their Forerunners,* D.C. Heath and Company, 1941.

This introduction to *Idiot's Delight,* in an anthology published while Sherwood was at the height of his career, views his work as a more sustained and coherent body than contemporary critics usually do.

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Brown, John Mason, "Postscript," in *Idiot's Delight,* Charles Schribner's Sons, 1936, pp. 189-90.

———, *The Worlds of Robert E. Sherwood: Mirror to His Times, 1906-1939,* Harper & Row, 1962, p. 341.

Gould, Jean, "Robert Sherwood," in *Modern American Playwrights,* Dodd, Mead & Company, 1966, p. 107.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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