# I'm Not Rappaport Study Guide

## I'm Not Rappaport by Herb Gardner

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# Introduction

Herb Gardner's *I'm Not Rappaport* was first published in 1986 in New York. Gardner first got the idea for the play when he was writing in New York's Central Park. He witnessed two animated old men, one white and one black, who would alternate between sitting quietly and yelling at each other. This strange friendship intrigued Gardner, who used it as the basis for *I'm Not Rappaport*'s two main characters, Nat and Midge. The play caused a stir when it was first produced on Broadway. The unique characters of Nat and Midge and their feisty resilience to the world around them, made the play a hit. These unlikely heroes try to mask the horrible realities of aging, mainly through the tall tales and deceptions that Nat creates. The play touched on several contemporary issues when it was produced, including society's treatment of the elderly and the dangers that lurked in urban areas like New York. Although Gardner has had great success with his many stage plays and screenplays, *I'm Not Rappaport* is one of his best-known and most popular works. It experienced a revival in New York in 2002, which once again featured Judd Hirsch in his original role as Nat.

A current copy of *I'm Not Rappaport* can be found in *Herb Gardner: The Collected Plays*, which was published by Applause Theatre Book Publishing in 2000.

# Author Biography

Gardner was born on December 28, 1934, in Brooklyn, New York. He attended New York's High School of Performing Arts from which he graduated in 1952. The same year, his first play, *The Elevator*, a one-act play, was produced. Gardner made a name for himself professionally as a cartoonist for the *Chicago Tribune* in the 1950s. Here, he created the comic *The Nebbishes*, which was a very lucrative enterprise. Around the same time, he published his first and only novel, *A Piece of the Action* (1958). Unsatisfied with these creative pursuits, he left cartooning to write plays full-time. His first full-length play, *A Thousand Clowns*, was based heavily on Gardner's own experiences, as it featured a man who abandons a lucrative career. The play was a huge success on Broadway and earned Gardner the "promising playwright of 1961-62" award from the New York Drama Critics. When Gardner adapted the play as a film three years later, it was nominated for an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay.

During the next two decades, Gardner wrote three dramatic works: *The Goodbye People* (produced in 1968, published in 1974); *Thieves* (produced in 1974, published in 1977); and the book and lyrics for a musical, *One Night Stand* (produced in 1980). As with *A Thousand Clowns*, Gardner wrote film adaptations of *Thieves* (adapted in 1977) and *The Goodbye People* (adapted in 1986). However, neither adaptation enjoyed the acclaim of *A Thousand Clowns*.

In 1985, Gardner produced his next play, *I'm Not Rappaport* (published in 1986), which won the Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award for best play (1986). Since then, the play has become one of Gardner's most popular and critically acclaimed works. In 2002, it experienced a revival in New York, which featured Judd Hirsch in the role of Nat—a role that Hirsch had played in the original 1986 production. Since then, Gardner has written *Conversations with My Father* (1993) and *Herb Gardner: The Collected Plays* (2000).

# Plot Summary

## Act 1

*I'm Not Rappaport* begins with Nat sitting on a park bench in New York's Central Park, where all of the action in the play takes place, wondering what he was talking about. His companion on the bench,

Midge, informs Nat that he has not been listening to anything that Nat was saying. Right away, the cantankerous interplay between these two eighty-year-old characters is established. As Nat and Midge continue their conversation, the audience finds out that Nat has been talking at Midge for a week, telling him stories that Midge thinks are tall tales. The first of these is that Nat is a spy who was chosen by the government to pose as an escaped Cuban terrorist. Despite himself, Midge is impressed by the story and starts to believe it. Nat says that he is in deep cover and that the government is probably planning on sending him on a mission in five years or so. Finally, Midge realizes that he has been had and gets very upset, threatening to beat up Nat. In his youth, Midge was a boxer, and he tries to demonstrate some of his old moves for Nat but ends up falling in the process. While Midge lies on the ground, Nat talks to him and helps him verify that he has not broken any bones.

Through their discussion, Midge reveals that he is employed as a superintendent in an apartment complex where he is the only one who knows how to run the building's ancient furnace. Midge also talks about how he pays off a local thug for protection—from the thug and others. Nat, a former social reformer, refuses to listen to talk like this just as he refuses to admit that he is old. Midge prepares for a meeting with his supervisor, Danforth, who comes by the park bench to tell Midge that he is being let go. However, Nat intervenes, posing as an attorney for a fake organization called HURTSFOE, which champions human rights. Danforth is frightened by Nat's convincing speech and agrees to see what he can do about letting Midge keep his job. However, Midge is concerned that Danforth will find out Nat is lying and that Midge will then lose the little severance pay that they were offering him.

Midge's thug, Gilley, arrives expecting his payment in return for walking Midge home. Midge dutifully prepares to do this, but Gilley sees Nat and tells Nat that he has to pay, too. When Nat does not follow Gilley, Gilley comes back and pulls a knife on Nat. Nat tries to fight Gilley but gets beat up instead.

## Act 2, Scene 1

Nat gets out of the hospital the next day and arrives back at the park, this time with a walker. Although he is physically slower, he is animated about his encounter with Gilley, which he considers a triumph, thinking that Gilley will not return. Nat's daughter, Clara, arrives at the park bench, and she is instantly concerned about Nat's injuries. She also

informs Nat that she is not going to be part of his schemes anymore. Nat says that he is concerned Clara is trying to put him in a home. Nat criticizes Clara for betraying her social activist heritage, and they revisit the real-life event that gave Clara her name. Nat met a brave teenager named Clara Lemlich at a union meeting, and her activism inspired him to name his daughter Clara. Clara notes the futility of activism in an apathetic society, and she and Nat argue. Nat tries to smooth it over by beginning an old game involving the phrase, "I'm Not Rappaport," and Clara is stubborn at first but eventually plays her part.

The game calms them down, but Clara is serious. She gives Nat three options for leaving the park and changing his living situation. Nat rejects all of them, and she threatens to take legal action to get him declared incompetent. Nat makes up a story about a fake daughter, whom he says he is going to live with, to stall Clara's plans for putting Nat in a home. When Clara is gone, Midge criticizes Nat for lying to his own daughter. However, their argument is interrupted by the arrival of the Cowboy, a drug dealer who comes to collect his money from Laurie, a drug user and artist who hangs out near the park bench. When she is unable to produce all of the money, the Cowboy beats her up and tells her to have the money by the next night and then leaves. Nat and Midge try to comfort Laurie, and Midge tells her she should leave town. However, Nat has a different idea.

## Act 2, Scene 2

The next evening, Nat and Midge sit on the park bench dressed up like the mob members that they are playing. Nat quizzes Midge to make sure he remembers all of the details and when the Cowboy arrives to collect his money from Laurie, Nat plays the part of a mob boss. He tries to act threatening, but it does not work, and the Cowboy sees through the act. He grabs Nat and starts to shake him, but Midge comes to Nat's rescue, brandishing the knife that Gilley dropped. The Cowboy backs off into the tunnel, where he waits unseen. When Midge goes walking through the tunnel to go home, the Cowboy jumps him.

## Act 2, Scene 3

Twelve days later, Nat sits alone on the bench, obviously changed. He is no longer animated and is very much acting like the old man he is. Midge returns from the hospital, and Nat tells him that he has given up telling stories because they are only hurting the people he loves, like his daughter. Midge tells Nat that he lost his job because Danforth found out that there was no HURTSFOE. Nat admits that Gilley has returned and that he has raised his protection fee. Nat is miserable as they discuss how all of his plans have failed. Still, Midge is proud of himself for taking on the Cowboy. Nat rises to leave and apologizes for causing Midge grief. He also tells Midge his real name and says that he has been living at an old person's hotel. He says that he is a nobody and starts to walk away. Midge accuses him of lying again and goads him into telling another tall tale because Midge obviously likes and needs to hear the interesting stories

that Nat tells—the truth is much too painful. Nat takes the bait, sits on the park bench, and launches into another story.

# Act 1

## Act 1 Summary

*I'm Not Rappaport* is a two-act play in which two old men, both in their 80s, Nat Moyer and Midge Carter, face the realities of aging in 1980s America. The setting is New York City's Central Park where Nat and Midge confront their own internal struggles as they witness society's battles as played out before them.

The play begins as Nat, an aging white man, converses with Midge, an aging black man, while sitting on a bench in Central Park. The two men have been friends for only a week, and Nat shares some outlandish stories with Midge, who does not yet know how to discern the fabrications from the truth. Today Nat tells Midge that he is an informant for the government, having been selected from all the people in line at the Medicaid office. According to the story, Nat will be sent on a mission in the next few years. Nat is so convincing that Midge almost falls for the ruse but catches himself in time to avoid any further embarrassment.

Midge has listened to too many of Nat's tall tales and threatens Nat with his fists, reminding Nat of Midge's successful boxing career as a young man. Midge's eyesight is failing, though, so he cannot hit Nat even if he so wishes. Midge falls and Nat makes sure Midge is alright, then takes the opportunity to explain an out of body experience he had during triple bypass surgery the previous year. Midge does not know whether or not to believe Nat, who has a tendency to exaggerate his stories. The men then lapse into silence.

The conversation between the two men resumes and turns to Midge's precarious employment as a building superintendent at an apartment complex. Midge has worked at the building for forty-two years and no one else knows how to operate the ancient heating system or understand the labyrinth of antiquated plumbing. Soon Peter Danforth, the head of the tenant's association at the apartment, jogs by and tells Midge he will be back soon so they can talk.

Midge shares with Nat that he is afraid that he will lose his job and Nat reassures his friend, telling Midge to let Nat deal with Danforth. Midge reveals to Nat that he has been paying a teenaged thug named Gilley to walk him home from the park every day to protect himself from hoodlums, including Gilley himself. This coercion infuriates Nat, who is even more determined to help Midge resolve some of his issues.

Soon a pretty girl named Laurie sets up an easel and begins to paint nearby, prompting Nat and Midge to reminisce about loves in their lives and the belief that romance is what is truly necessary to people, not just the physical part of relationships.

Nat offers Midge a drag of a marijuana cigarette, which Nat has been prescribed for his glaucoma. The two men smoke and continue to talk about love and Nat launches into

the "I'm not Rappaport" joke about completely mistaken identity, from which the play derives its title. The marijuana prompts more laughter than normal but the men enjoy themselves until Danforth returns with the news that Midge is being terminated and is to receive a pension and a small severance.

In spite of Midge's protests that he is the only one who can maintain the building and its ancient equipment, Danforth is steadfast. The building is to undergo renovations, so there is no further need for Midge's specialized expertise. There is one element of consolation for Midge in the form of an available apartment in a building inhabited by other senior citizens.

Midge's dignity is outraged and he declines the apartment. Midge does not have many options and is about to accept Danforth's severance terms when Nat, who is sitting on a nearby bench now, intervenes and acts as if he is Midge's attorney, threatening to bring an age discrimination suit against the apartment building should Midge be terminated.

In one of his creative stories, Nat throws out a false organization called HURTSFOE, the Human Rights Strike Force, which maintains that Midge must be retained on salary and employed as a consultant during the two-year span of renovations. Danforth is stalled by Nat's convincing arguments and agrees to investigate the matter of retaining Midge. Danforth leaves and Midge is concerned that Nat's false story will end up costing Midge what little benefits have been offered to him.

Gilley arrives for his daily payment from Midge and upon seeing Nat, demands payment from him, too. Nat will not be intimidated by this punk and refuses to pay, resulting in Gilley attacking Nat. Nat then falls to the ground and lies immobile. Gilley steals Nat's wallet and runs away, leaving Midge calling for help.

## Act 1 Analysis

The author addresses the important issue of aging in America in 1986, the year that the play is set. Nat and Midge symbolize the senior citizens who are living longer due to improved medical procedures and medications, yet are perceived as having little value to society now that their physical and mental prowess is diminished. One way that Nat's character deals with his own aging is the fabrication of stories, which take him out of his own life for a short while so that he can return to being a vibrant person at least in his own mind. Also, the lapses in conversation are indicative of the pervasive truth: these men are suffering from, and are aware of, diminishing mental and physical capacities.

Another reason for Nat's fabrications is that they are a way for the old men to address the social problems which assault them as they sit on the bench in Central Park, a microcosm for the problems related to violence and drug abuse. Gilley's character represents the gang violence that pervades the streets of New York and the pretty girl, Laurie, symbolizes the drug problem infiltrating the young people in American society, which will come to light later in the play. The author is quick to point out that the

marijuana use by Nat is for medical reasons and it at least provides some levity in the lives of Nat and Midge.

# Act 2, Scene 1

## Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

The attack by Gilley has landed Nat in the hospital, but he returns to the park upon his release the next day. Using a walker, Nat brags to Midge that the punk Gilley is not brave enough to return a second time, but Midge is not so sure. Midge moves himself to another bench to disassociate himself from Nat in the hopes of staving off any further trouble for himself.

Soon Nat's daughter, Clara, arrives and is outraged at having to hunt for her father all over Central Park. Nat had given Danforth Clara's phone number as the headquarters for the fake organization, HURTSFOE, and she does not want to be included in Nat's schemes anymore. Clara is concerned for Nat's welfare and offers some solutions for his care, all of which Nat rejects outright. Sensing that his time for options is nearing its end, Nat fabricates a story about an illegitimate daughter he fathered during a period of social activism in the 1950s.

This supposed daughter has been living in Israel and is returning soon to take care of Nat, which will relieve Clara of the burden. This startling news visibly upsets Clara, who leaves Nat with a plan to meet again on Friday. After Clara leaves, Midge chastises Nat for unnecessarily hurting Clara. The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Cowboy, a western-dressed drug dealer, who approaches Laurie. Apparently the envelope that Laurie hands over to Cowboy is seriously short of the amount she owes and Cowboy pummels Laurie, and then demands that she have the balance of the money by the next evening.

Nat and Midge try to console Laurie, who cannot possibly produce the money, and Nat launches a plan which will hopefully eliminate Laurie's problem.

## Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The author introduces the element of foreshadowing with Clara's character and her frustrations with Nat's continuing irresponsible behavior. Clara reaches the end of her tolerance level with her father, which hints at the imminent end of Nat's freedom. Nat will do anything to maintain his independence, but the lie about another daughter who will care for Nat hurts Clara deeply, as she is the only one of Nat's children who even maintains contact with him. The possibility of wounding another person, though, is clouded by Nat's intense need to stay free as long as possible. The battering of Laurie is yet more evidence that society's violence level has increased dramatically. As Nat and Midge note, Laurie is attractive, and the idea that a lovely young woman is susceptible to abuse is a sign of the decline of morality in America.

# Act 2, Scene 2

## Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

It is now five o'clock in the afternoon of the next day and Nat and Midge are dressed like gangsters as they wait for Cowboy to reappear. The plan is to pass off Laurie as Nat's daughter and surely Cowboy will have the good sense not to confront a gangster of Nat's caliber. When Cowboy arrives, Nat explains that Nat and Midge are part of the Los Angeles and New Orleans mob families known as "The Travel Agents" because they can arrange special one-way trips. Nat is prepared to send Cowboy on one of these trips if he does not stop bothering Laurie.

Suddenly Cowboy remembers having seen Nat and Midge in the park the day before, and the ruse is over. Cowboy threatens Nat physically if he does not reveal Laurie's location, but Nat will not give up any information. Cowboy begins to choke Nat with the scarf around Nat's neck until Cowboy sees Midge flashing the knife that Gilley had inadvertently dropped the day before. Finally, Cowboy relents and retreats to a nearby tunnel where he waits and attacks Midge as the old man walks home.

## Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The author introduces the subject of the Mafia, one more social problem existing particularly in New York City. Notorious for their intimidation prowess, the Mafia's reputation is reduced slightly by the author in the sad characterizations of Nat and Midge as mob leaders. The drug issue ultimately wins as Cowboy attacks the helpless Midge, representative of the eternal theme of good vs. evil.

Although the topics in the play are serious ones, the author introduces humor quite frequently in the dialogue and the situations in which Nat and Midge find themselves. It is easy to imagine how humorous these two old men must look as they perch on a park bench and pretend to be Mafia leaders in their borrowed suits. Despite the fazade and the ruse, Nat and Midge have only the best intentions and the humor soon dissolves into another painful reality.

# Act 2, Scene 3

## Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

This scene opens twelve days later, following Midge's release from a hospital stay as a result of Cowboy's attack. Nat greets his friend but it is clear that Nat is more subdued and even tells Midge that he has retired his mouth, meaning no more stories. The Mafia ruse resulted in serious harm to Midge and even Nat knows when it is time to stop. Nat also realizes that his fabrications have hurt Clara and that cannot continue.

Midge reveals that he has formally lost his job as building superintendent because Danforth has discovered that there is no such organization as HURTSFOE. In the time that Midge has been hospitalized, Gilley had reappeared and announced that his protection fee has risen from three dollars to five dollars, a fee which neither man is able to pay.

Nat compares Midge's brave attack on Cowboy to that of Custer's stand against the Indians. Midge feels it is a mixed compliment, given Custer's fate, but both men revel in the look of fear in Cowboy's eyes upon seeing the flash of the knife in Midge's hand. Midge produces and dangles a piece of fringed cloth torn from Cowboy's jacket, which he intends to keep as a souvenir of the encounter.

Nat rises to leave, as he is due at the Senior Center and Clara will know if he does not show up as she checks on him regularly. Before he goes, Nat apologizes to Midge for putting Midge in danger with Cowboy. Nat also reveals his real name to Midge - Nat Moyer, a former member of the Fur Workers Union. Nat also reveals that for the past forty one years he has worked as a waiter in a dairy restaurant but now he is nothing, a nobody.

Midge will not let Nat leave on this sad note and challenges him, saying that Nat is still not telling the truth about being a waiter. Nat contends that he was a waiter and Midge still refuses to believe it. Once more Nat replies that he was a waiter and knowingly, Midge replies that he does not believe it. Nat cannot resist the opportunity for one more story and sits down again, ready to regale Midge with the tale of his career in the motion picture industry in the 1950s. Nat begins to relate the issues surrounding the blacklisting of creative people in the film industry during the Communist scare and Midge leans in to listen attentively.

## Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

There are many important themes in this last scene as the author wraps up his messages. The reality of aging is a big issue that many face. Coming to terms with a failing body when the mind is not ready to submit is particularly poignant, as exhibited by Nat and Midge. There are so many social elements which surround the aging issue, too, in terms of financial problems, employment discrimination, and family relations.

Clara represents all sons and daughters who must balance a parent's sense of independence with that of the parent's physical welfare. There is also the emotional struggle played out between father and daughter as the struggle for power over the elderly man's life ensues. At the end, though, the author leaves the audience with hope that each day can be lived with joy and friendship in spite of physical and emotional restraints. The author also communicates that Nat's animation and joie de vivre should be emulated, not stifled.

# Characters

## Midge Carter

Midge Carter is an eighty-year-old man who works as a superintendent in an apartment building and spends his days in the park. When he first meets Nat, a week before the play starts, Nat tells Midge a number of tall tales. Midge gets frustrated at all of these false stories and repeatedly says that he is going to leave Nat alone and go somewhere else. However, Nat has a vitality that Midge cannot ignore, and against his better judgment, he stays and listens to Nat. On a certain level, Midge appreciates Nat's company, even though he does not express this until the end of the play. Nat has many of the same age-driven afflictions that Midge has and so can relate to him when they talk about cataracts, glaucoma, and other maladies. Midge is terrified about losing his job as a superintendent, but he does not want Nat's help in talking to his supervisor, Danforth. Unfortunately, he does not get a choice. Nat jumps in and poses as Midge's attorney, threatening to sue the apartment complex for trying to let Midge go. After Danforth leaves, Midge is worried about what will happen when Danforth finds out that Nat is not a lawyer. Ultimately, Danforth does find out he has been had and Midge is fired.

Despite this fact, Nat is a good influence on Midge. Without Nat, Midge would be content to wile away his time as an old man. However, Nat's stories help Midge to forget, at least for a time, how old he is. In addition, Nat's schemes, which ultimately lead to both of them ending up in the hospital, puts Midge in touch with his more youthful side. Following his fight with the Cowboy, Midge is upset with Nat or so it seems. However, he is also exhilarated that he scared the Cowboy. Midge is a former boxer and after the incident with the Cowboy, he feels some of his old energy return to him. In fact, by the end of the play, when Nat is trying to stop telling stories for fear of hurting anybody else, Midge insists that Nat continue telling stories and providing diversions for them.

## Clara

Clara is Nat's daughter, who worries about her father's mental condition and health. From the moment she arrives, Clara makes it clear that she would rather have her father living with her or in a geriatric home where he will be physically safe. Nat tries to prevent this by creating stories that get him off the hook, but ultimately all of his stories backfire. Clara threatens legal action if Nat does not start coming to the Senior Center on a daily basis, and Nat finally agrees.

## The Cowboy

The Cowboy is Laurie's drug dealer. When Laurie fails to pay him his money, he beats her up and threatens her. When he comes back at the appointed time to collect the

money, Laurie is not there. Instead, Nat is there, and he acts like he is a mob boss to scare away the Cowboy. Unfortunately, his scheme does not work. When the Cowboy becomes violent, Midge threatens him with Gilley's knife. However, the Cowboy ultimately beats up Midge, who lands in the hospital for almost two weeks.

## Peter Danforth

Peter Danforth is Midge's supervisor, whom Midge has never met in person until the play starts. Danforth hears that the nearsighted Midge has been running into walls while working in his job as an apartment supervisor. He decides that it is time to let Midge go from his job, especially since they are converting the apartment building into a co-op and there is no place for Midge. When Danforth comes to tell this to Midge, Nat jumps in, saying he is a union lawyer. Nat terrifies Danforth with his story in which Nat makes it seem as if Danforth will have a nasty and public lawsuit on his hands if he tries to let Midge go. However, this ruse only works temporarily and eventually Danforth fires Midge.

## Gilley

Gilley is a sixteen-year-old thug who makes his money by forcing old men to pay him a protection fee. He does this with Midge, but Nat refuses to pay Gilley any money and gets beat up in the process. Although Nat assumes that the fight has deterred Gilley from coming around anymore, Gilley does come back eventually and he charges more money now.

## Laurie

Laurie is a young artist and drug user who tries in vain to get her life back in order. Laurie comes to New York's Central Park to draw, which is where Nat and Midge see her. They both appreciate the attractive Laurie, especially while they are stoned on marijuana. During this scene, they look up at Laurie and she becomes for them all of the girls that they have loved in their respective lives. When Laurie's drug dealer, known as the Cowboy, comes to collect money from her, she does not have enough, and he beats her up. Nat tries to help Laurie by posing as a mob boss, but the ruse fails, and Laurie is afraid to show her face in the park again for fear of being killed by the drug dealer.

## Nat Moyer

Nat Moyer is an eighty-year-old retiree who tries to mask his age by telling elaborate tall tales. He is a good storyteller and is able to draw many different people into his tales. This is most true with Midge Carter, another octogenarian who occupies the same park bench as Nat. Although Midge tries to ignore Nat, Nat is persistent in his efforts to tell Midge stories and to help him through his problems. Nat can relate to Midge, because Nat has many of the same age-driven afflictions as Midge. Nat is a social activist, who

was very involved in workers' rights and other causes as a young man. In fact, he tries to remain involved, but many of his efforts, such as attacking a butcher for his high meat prices, are futile and misguided. In the beginning of the play, Nat is not above duping anybody, even his own daughter, when she threatens to throw him into a geriatric home.

Over the course of the play, Nat tries to deceive others, including Midge's boss and a drug dealer known as the Cowboy, but both of these schemes fail. In fact, all of Nat's schemes have negative consequences, either for himself or others. Despite this fact, both Nat and Midge need his stories and schemes. Without them, Nat and Midge would be constantly faced with the fact that they are old. At the end of the play, frustrated that his schemes have backfired, Nat resolves to give up telling tall stories. However, Midge insists that Nat continue telling stories and providing diversions for them.

# Themes

## The Power of Illusions

From the very beginning of the play, Nat reveals himself to be a master of illusions. He is able to make Midge, Midge's boss, and even his own daughter believe the tall tales that he is telling. Despite himself, Midge gets caught up in these stories because Nat knows how to tell a tall tale without making it seem like one. For example, in his first story, Nat says that he is a spy for the government and that they add money to his social security check every month for doing nothing. Nat says, "Fact is, I think they got me in what they call 'deep cover.'" Nat gives a long explanation, and Midge starts to believe him: "MIDGE. (*nodding*) Yeah. Deep cover. I hearda that." Unfortunately, the power of the illusion does not last long, and Midge soon realizes that he has been had. "MIDGE. (*suddenly*) Bullshit! (*sits upright*) Bullshit. Lord, you done it to me *again*!" Nat repeats this pattern throughout the play.

## Age Discrimination

Midge is not the only one who is susceptible to Nat's captivating stories. In a brilliant improvised speech, Nat assumes the identity of a lawyer and takes on Mr. Danforth, Midge's boss, when Danforth announces that they are going to be letting Midge go from his apartment superintendent position. Midge, whose vision is somewhat impaired, was spotted walking into a wall in the apartment building. During his speech, Nat writes this off as racial imbalance, something that Danforth does not believe at first. Danforth says, "Racial *imbalance*? The man was walking into *walls.* For God's sake, the man's an easy *eighty.*" By this comment, Danforth reveals his bias and the fact that he wants to let Midge go because he is too old. Nat says as much: "What you'd like is for Carter to be nice and cute and quiet and go away. But he won't." With this convincing act, Nat is able to save Midge's job, at least temporarily.

Nat also repeatedly fools his daughter, Clara, who believes he is too old to be on his own. In fact, the deceptions and tricks that Nat plays on his daughter are a defense against her intentions to restrain him. He tells her that he is especially afraid of her "test questions to see if I'm too old." As Nat says to her, "One wrong answer you'll wrap me in a deck-chair and mail me to Florida; *two* mistakes you'll put me in a home for the forgettable." Nat fears losing his freedom and being forced to live in a home or with Clara. For Nat, this is age discrimination. He knows that he may have to do this eventually, especially if he does go senile, but in the meantime, he wants to try to pursue his life as he always has.

## The Reality of Aging

Unfortunately, as the play progresses, Nat loses both his illusions and his freedoms and must come to terms with the fact that he is an old man. In the beginning of the play,

when Midge pushes him to tell the truth, Nat does get serious, at least for a minute. Nat says, "The *truth*? What's true is a triple By-Pass last year at Lenox Hill, what's true is.... a Social Security check that wouldn't pay the rent for a chipmunk." These are some of the harsh facts of aging that Nat tries to ignore by telling stories. He also tries to act in ways that go against his frail condition. When he tries to rationalize with the mugger, Gilley, and it does not work, Gilley threatens Nat with his knife. As the stage directions note, "(*NAT makes a sharp underhand move with his cane, hitting GILLEY's wrist; Gilley drops the knife, holding his wrist in pain and surprise.*)" Although this throws Gilley off at first, the thug soon regains his senses and promptly beats up Nat, who has to go to the hospital. By the end of the play, incidents like this, in which he is not able to back up his intentions with the physical force that is a hallmark of youth, Nat reluctantly succumbs to living like an old man. However, he still retains some of his old self by continuing to tell stories to Midge.

# Style

## Setting

The story is set in Manhattan's Central Park, which is essential to the story. The entire play takes place on a park bench that Nat and Midge share. Though Gardner could technically have chosen any park bench in any park, he chose Central Park—and for good reason. Throughout the play, Nat and Midge demonstrate their resilience against a young urban society that includes thugs and drug dealers. During the 1980s especially, New York was often synonymous with drugs and crime in many minds. Gardner knows this and so chooses to set his play in Central Park, where he can realistically expose his main characters to these types of secondary characters.

## Dialogue

Although the setting is important, it works in a subtle manner. Most audience members will not focus on the setting because the dialogue is much more prevalent. Essentially, the play is a series of conversations between two old men on a park bench, with some dialogue between the two men and other, secondary, characters thrown in. However, if this simple explanation were all the play had to offer, it would not be as popular as it is. The play is noted for the interplay between Nat and Midge, whose cantankerous dialogue is engaging. The play starts out with Midge antagonizing Nat and saying he will not listen to him anymore. When Nat asks Midge why, Midge says, "Because you're a . . . liar. I'm not listening to you anymore. Two days now I ain't been listening." By this comment, Midge reveals that, as much as he does not like to admit it, he has been listening to Nat; otherwise, Midge would not know that Nat has been making up stories. Therein lies the formula that Gardner uses for the rest of the play. Nat does most of the talking and aggravates Midge enough to produce some spirited retorts but not enough to make Midge want to leave.

## Foreshadowing

Although Nat's stories and deceptions are entertaining, Gardner gives clues that this cannot possibly last forever. At several points in the play, he foreshadows or predicts events that happen later. For example, when Nat's daughter, Clara, is introduced, she is upset that she has had to cover for Nat with Danforth. Clara says, "I came to tell you it's the last *time*! No more calls—" Without Clara helping Nat by assuming the various identities he pins on her, it is only a matter of time before his many stories start to unravel. In addition, Clara threatens legal action to get Nat restrained. Clara says, "According to the lawyer I've got more than enough evidence to prove that you are both mentally and physically incapable of managing yourself or your affairs." When Clara springs this on Nat, he immediately creates another story, saying that he has another daughter that was conceived during an affair and that she is going to take him with her

to Israel. He fabricates this story with the intention of having Laurie, the drug user and artist, pose as his daughter. However, when Nat is unable to deceive Laurie's volatile drug dealer as he intends, Laurie does not show up as planned, and Nat's carefully laid plans start to unravel. All of these signs predict the ultimate ending, when Nat is forced to abandon many of his freedoms and attend regular meetings at the Senior Center. Nat says, "The day begins at noon there. I must be prompt; Clara checks up. . . . Also weekends in Great Neck. I am seldom in the park anymore."

# Historical Context

## Spies and Terrorism

In the play, Nat makes up many stories and changes identities frequently. In one such identity, he pretends to be a spy. When Gardner first produced the play, this would have resonated with audiences, who were living through the last years of the cold war. This political conflict between democracy and communism—and more specifically, between the United States and the Soviet Union—lasted more than four decades. Unlike previous wars that featured physical battles, this conflict was highlighted by a nuclear arms race and rapid advances in the methods and technology of military intelligence. Each side recruited spies whose job was to try to gather whatever information they could about intelligence or weapons while both major superpowers remained ready to launch a nuclear Armageddon, if they deemed it necessary. Although much of the period was technically spent in peacetime, the pervasive feeling of suspicion and paranoia that was generated by this clash of superpowers made many feel that they were fighting a war—hence the term "cold war."

American and Soviet spies were not the only political aggressors during this era. The world community also suffered from many politically motivated attacks by terrorists. Terrorist attacks came in many forms—including hijackings, kidnappings, bombings, and murder—and could be perpetrated by any number of terrorist organizations from around the world.

## The Mafia

Nat also poses as a Mafia boss in one scene in the play. At the time when Gardner was producing the play, the Mafia, especially the New York Mafia, was in the news. On February 26, 1985, Rudolph W. Giuliani, Manhattan's prosecuting United States attorney, indicted nine suspected Mafia bosses in a federal court. During the trial, one of the suspects, seventy-year-old "Big Paul" Castellano, reputed to be the head of the Gambino crime family in New York, was assassinated by three gunmen.

## Drug Use

In the play, Nat and Midge, who get their own highs by smoking some marijuana, also try to help a young woman, Laurie, who has gotten in trouble with a drug dealer known as the Cowboy. She does not have the money that she owes him and he gets very upset. The Cowboy says to Laurie: "Kept your nose filled and your head happy for a year and a half and look what you do." By this reference to Laurie's nose, one can tell that Laurie is a cocaine user. In the 1980s, especially in big cities like New York, cocaine use rose. Cocaine is a drug that is made from the coca plant. The most common form until the mid-1980s was cocaine powder, which could be dissolved in water and injected like heroin or snorted in its powder form. The latter method is the one generally

associated with cocaine users like Laurie. Cocaine is highly addictive and expensive, which limited its use. In the mid 1980s, however, a new form of cocaine called crack cocaine known commonly as crack, was developed. Crack was cocaine that had been processed with ammonia or baking soda so that it formed into chunks, known as rocks, that could be smoked. Crack was cheaper than powdered cocaine, and it quickly became popular in New York. Although law enforcement officers staged several successful raids on crack production facilities in the New York area, use of the drug spread to other cities and suburbs across the United States.

# Critical Overview

The initial reviews for *I'm Not Rappaport* were mixed. "There is something stealthily attractive and winning about Herb Gardner's rambunctiously funny play," says Clive Barnes in his review in the *New York Post.* Barnes says that it is "precisely the kind of play, full of middle-brow brilliance and crafty craft, that Broadway needs to survive." Likewise, in his review of the play for *Today,* David Shannon notes: "The jabbering of two geriatrics may not sound like electrifying drama. In this case it is." In her review of the play for *Sunday Today,* Francis Wheen goes so far as to say that, "Only someone with a heart made of reinforced concrete could fail to be affected."

Not every critic was completely enamored of the play, however. Some critics admitted that the play had some admirable qualities but that it was not for them. For example, in Julius Novick's review of the play in the *Village Voice,* he notes that the play "is not what I need or particularly want in my life, but it does no harm. . . . I hope it finds its audience." Other critics are not so nice and, in fact, try to discredit both the play and the critics who find the play good. In his review of the play for *New York Magazine,* John Simon notes that Gardner's "steady formula is as unalive and sticky as ever but has, this time round, a number of reviewers vying to pronounce it viable."

The play has fared well in the years since it was first produced. Though performance reviews—including the reviews of the New York revival in 2002—are mixed, the publication of *Herb Gardner: The Collected Plays* in 2000 met with a warm reception. In his review of the collection for *Library Journal,* Barry X. Miller notes: "F-i-n-a-l-l-y—Gardner . . . has been given his theatrical publishing due." Likewise, in his review of the collection for *Booklist,* Ray Olson notes, "The five plays and one screenplay in this handsome volume are all moving as well as very funny."

# Criticism

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

*Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses the structure that Gardner uses in his play.*

When one examines the structure of *I'm Not Rappaport*, something becomes immediately apparent. Whereas there are three separate scenes in the second act, the first act remains unbroken by scenes. It is one long section that runs continuously for nearly half the play. When a playwright makes a structural decision like this, it usually has some significance. In this case, Gardner is using this odd structure to underscore the theme of aging in the play.

Gardner uses this structure in two different ways. First, the structure influences the pacing of the play. Pacing refers to the speed at which a literary work unfolds. In the first act, the unbroken action automatically speeds up the performance, because it has no scene changes. Whenever a dramatic production switches scenes, it usually requires a fadeout. It can also require set and costume changes, which inevitably take time. Without these changes, there is nothing other than the dialogue that will slow the play down. In this case, the dialogue is fast-paced and witty, especially the dialogue of Nat, who has several rapid-fire speeches. For example, when Midge is lying on the ground after stumbling and falling, Nat comes to his aid and starts to feel various parts of Midge's body, making sure there are no broken bones. As he does this, Nat chats incessantly about his near-death experience, during which he says he died and left his body for six minutes. Nat says, "Meanwhile you're up on the ceiling, nobody sees you. Not bad for a little while, nice; you meet some other dead guys, everybody smiles, you hear a little music; but mostly boring."

Nat has several of these rapid-fire speeches in the first act, much to the disappointment of Midge, who tries to ignore Nat. However, even though Midge could just go to a different place in the park and ignore Nat, he is drawn to Nat and his elaborate stories—just as the audience is. Part of Nat's charisma comes from his encyclopedic knowledge. He can transform himself into any identity. When he is acting like a spy, he uses youthful slang words like "Bingos," or dollars, as if they are second nature to him. In this first act, he is particularly adept at creating these stories. As a result, Nat comes off as very youthful, despite his advanced age.

Therefore, it is significant that the first act ends with Nat getting beat up by Gilley and having to go to the hospital. Up until this point, Nat has appeared untouchable. He has successfully helped Midge to keep his job as a superintendent, at least temporarily, and has not let anything get him down. However, when Gilley arrives, suddenly Nat is out of his element. The punk tells Nat that he also has to pay Gilley a protection bribe, and Nat appears to agree, at first: "Nat hesitates; then picks up his briefcase and slowly, obediently rises, his head bowed." However, Nat is not beat yet. He tries to rationalize with Gilley about his bad choice in victims, saying, "Trouble is, you got the wrong supper here. Me and Midge, you're noshing on your own. We live in the streets and the parks, we're dead if we stay home; just like you, Gilley." However, all of this rationalizing only

makes Gilley raise his price. When Nat refuses to pay, Gilley beats him up, and the act ends on a negative note.

In the second act, the structural effects on the pacing are even more apparent. In this act, each new scene is shorter than the previous one. As mentioned before, the first act comprises roughly half of the play. The first scene of the second act is about half the size of the first act. This trend continues until the end. By telescoping the scenes like this, the play literally seems like it starts to run out of time. When the fade-outs of scene changes are far apart, as when two long scenes are juxtaposed next to each other, it is not as noticeable. However, when the fade-outs start to come more frequently, the audience begins to notice it. It gives the play a sense of urgency, since the scenes are coming at the viewer at an increasing rate. In fact, if one reviews this telescoping structure in terms of the aging theme, it becomes apparent what Gardner is trying to do. The structure mimics the process of aging. Over the course of his play, Gardner's characters slowly but surely realize that they are old men, who do not have much time left. When people get older, especially when they are in their eighties like Nat and Midge, they can feel as if they are literally starting to run out of time. By making the scenes increasingly shorter, Gardner underscores this effect, making it seem as if the play itself is running out of time.

In addition to influencing the pacing, Gardner's odd structure also highlights Nat's transformation from a daydreamer to a realist. In the beginning, Nat is totally absorbed in his tall tales. As Clive Barnes says of Nat in his review of the play for the *New York Post,* he "chooses to live in a strangely hard-edged fantasy world. When we first meet him he is explaining to his new acquaintance . . . that he is an undercover agent posing as a Cuban terrorist." This is one of many identities that Nat decides to adopt. However, just as with the pacing, the shift in structure from one long act to three increasingly shorter scenes also indicates a change in Nat's views on life. In the first act, he is free to daydream and does so in long speeches in which he tells fake stories such as the one noted above. The only person who challenges his stories is Midge, and Midge secretly likes Nat's wild stories. In fact, despite his better judgment, Midge begins to build a friendship with Nat. Just as with the pacing, one of the pivotal events that influence Nat's transformation is Gilley beating Nat up at the end of the first act.

From this point on, Nat starts to become a realist, as he is forced to deal with more realistic situations. Although Nat considers the fight with Gilley a victory, it triggers a reaction from his daughter, Clara, who ramps up her efforts to get Nat into a home or some other safe location. Clara says, "I've been irresponsible. You have to be watched. I'm not letting you out of my sight, Dad." This is the beginning of the end of Nat's freedom to daydream, even if he does not see it. The next major event, witnessing the Cowboy beat up Laurie, sparks the social activist reflex in Nat, just as Midge's problem with his boss did. However, for this situation, Nat is way out of his element. Although he has been daydreaming about being a spy, a Cuban terrorist, and other roles, he is not able to pull off the role of a Mafia boss with the Cowboy when it really counts because he has failed to realize that the Cowboy already saw Nat on the park bench the past two days. The Cowboy says, "I got an antenna picks up all channels, Dad; helps me not to wake up dead." The Cowboy is a realist and pays attention to his surroundings, unlike

Nat. Although Nat is great at adding the appropriate details into whatever role he is playing—and even tells Midge that "Details are crucial. I know my business"—Nat fails to pay attention to the details in the real world around him. He spends his days daydreaming, so he is unprepared when he must face real situations like the one involving the Cowboy.

In the last scene, following the failure with the Cowboy and Midge's trip to the hospital, Nat is very realistic. In this scene, the shortest scene of them all, Nat abandons all daydreams and vows not to tell any more stories or perform any more schemes. Nat says, "My mouth, a dangerous mouth; it makes you Missouri Jack and almost kills you, makes an Israeli family and breaks my daughter's heart. I have retired my mouth." Nat takes it one step further. Although he was strong and independent in the beginning of the play, during the strong first act, this final, ultra-short scene reveals his deepest insecurities as he tries to negate everything that he has made up. Nat says, "In other words, whatever has been said previously, I was, and am now, no one. No one at all."

Although Midge is at first glad to hear that Nat will not be coming around the park as much anymore, he is taken aback by Nat's startlingly honest confession. In fact, although he has denied throughout the play that he likes Nat's false stories, he now does not accept Nat's true confession. Instead, he asks Nat to tell him the truth, meaning that he wishes to hear another one of Nat's tall tales. So, despite the gradual slowing down of the pace and Nat's steady transformation from a youthful daydreamer to an old realist—two factors that are underscored by the telescoping structure—Nat and Midge are still able to salvage something positive at the end, and the audience is left with the knowledge that, whatever happens, these two will probably not succumb to their old age lightly.

**Source:** Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on *I'm Not Rappaport,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

# Critical Essay #2

*Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and focuses her published writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart considers the argument of idealism versus realism that underlies Gardner's play.*

The first reaction to or description of Herb Gardner's play, *I'm Not Rappaport* is that it is a dramatization of what life is like, at least in general, for two senior citizens. Even the recent revival of this play has reportedly been arranged to satisfy a shift in Broadway audiences, which have become in recent times, mostly made up of elderly patrons. However, to only focus on the fact that the two main characters are men in the later years of their lives, men who admit that they have become ghost-like in a society that "sees" only youth, is to miss one of the major themes of this highly successful play. Yes, the men are senior citizens who have a long list of gripes and ailments that have been brought on by their old age, but what gives these two characters life, and what drives this play, is the age-old argument between idealists and realists.

Plato was one of the first philosophers to create an argument for the Ideal, a perfected form that underlies every object in this reality. Later, German philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, continued the discussion, and the term *idealism* was applied to such philosophical discourses. At the turn of the twentieth century, idealism was interpreted through the arts. In literature, idealism was referred to as romanticism, and stories influenced by this movement usually ended happily. In painting, idealist artists were encouraged to use their imaginations in depicting the world, which they did by recreating aesthetically pleasing images rather than painting objects as a photographer might have captured them. Of course, as early as Plato's time, the opposing argument, that of realism, also developed. One of the arguments of realism stated that to strive for perfection was unrealistic, or worse yet, it was false. In philosophy, realists were considered more objective than idealist. Things of this world existed as fact, not as ideas in someone's head, they claimed. In literature, realism was manifested in stories that related all the dirty details of life—the failures as well as the victories; and artists who were influenced by realism created images that matched what their eyes could see, not what they could imagine. Generally speaking, for realists, idealists were dreamers who were not dealing with reality. For idealists, realists were too pragmatic and lacked insight.

From the opening pages of *I'm Not Rappaport*, Gardner hints at the theme of romance or idealism of his play, even before either of his male characters speak. The play is set in Central Park, an oasis of nature in the middle of a crowded, concrete city. The only sounds in the background are not those of honking horns and squealing car brakes, but rather the "distant sound of the Carousel Music." Central Park is an idealist view of New York City.

It is in this setting that Gardner introduces his two main characters. Of the two, Nat is obviously the idealist, but he is an idealist with a flaw. His heart is in the right place, but in pursuit of his ideals, he tends to go overboard with huge ambitions. Midge, on the

other hand, is a borderline idealist. He has the nature, it first appears, of a realist, but there is an idealist hiding somewhere inside of him. Although he argues with Nat's philosophy, it is the secondary characters that prove to be Nat's fiercest opponents.

Nat has become a fighter for idealistic goals, and he thinks he is ready for his antagonists. Whereas Midge prefers to hide from confrontation, Nat goes out of his way to find a fight. He lives to fight. He even raised his daughter in his likeness and was most proud of her when she stood up to a policeman and was carted off to jail. For Nat, it is the fight that keeps him alive. It should be pointed out that it is not necessarily the victory of the battle that most inspires him. For Nat, it does not seem to matter if he wins or loses.

Conversely, the most obvious realist in this play is Nat's daughter Clara. Her father may have raised her as an idealist, but she has spent most of her adult life trying to forget that. Clara was not a true idealist. There was a part of her that enjoyed the fight, but Clara, unlike her father, needed victories to authenticate herself, to encourage and inspire the fight. One day, Clara looked around and noticed that despite the hard work trying to realize her idealist dreams, she was not seeing anything changing for the better. Clara was an idealist not for her own sake but for her father's. She believed in his vision until she discovered that the dream was without a happy ending. As soon as she was old enough to come to her own conclusions, Clara realized that she was a very practical woman. She had practical needs and made a straight line toward satisfying them. Her needs were material. They were something that she could grasp. She no longer related to the abstractions of her father's idealism, his goal of seeking

perfection. She did not understand what inspired her father to continue, so she stopped and made a dramatic turn in her life. Once she turned, Clara no longer looked up to her father for his visionary philosophy of life. Instead, she saw him as a crazed man, a Don Quixote, searching for imaginary demons. Clara's new goal in life became the pursuit of saving her father, of bringing him to his senses, of transforming him into a realist.

Nat used to be a realist, of sorts, but he now refers to that period as a time when he was dead. He was bored with life and did not have the courage to change it. He worked unproductive jobs and married a woman he did not love. His wife, he claims, was a practical woman, and their relationship generated no passion. When Midge asks Nat when was the last time he made love to a woman, Nat responds with a precise date. When Midge then asks if Nat's wife was still alive at that time, Nat says: "I certainly hope so." Then he adds: "With Ethel it wasn't always easy to tell." Nat did, however, fall in love once. He was given one opportunity and he did not pass the test. He did not have the courage to speak to the woman for whom his heart called out and it is obvious that his indecision has haunted and affected him ever since. That loss of love was the most significant example of his lack of courage to stand up for something in which he believed. In her death, Hannah Pearlman, the young woman to whom Nat never spoke, became the Ideal Woman. Nat immortalized her in his mind, allowing her to become the perfect lover. She will never yell at Nat. He will never get angry with her. She will never grow old. He will never be tired of her. It could be argued that it was because of Hannah Pearlman and Nat's inability to realize his dream of love that he became an idealist. He

was driven after this experience never to lose courage in battle again. He comes close to stating this premise in a later dialogue with Midge.

Unlike Nat, Midge confesses that he was unfaithful in love. He was married several times and always had extramarital affairs. When he tells Nat about this, Midge states that he regrets what he did to his wives. "I cheated on them all," he tells Nat. "*Damn* my cheatin' soul." In contrast, however, Nat praises him. "This is the most courageous thing I ever heard about you," Nat tells Midge. "You dared and did, I yearned and regretted. I *envy* you. You were always what I have only recently become." When Midge responds to Nat's praise by putting himself down as "a dirty old man," Nat counters by calling Midge "a *romanticist.*" Nat then expounds on his definition of a romanticist; and the definition that he offers has the same characteristics as an idealist, of course. "A man of hope!" He then adds: "It's all in the head," referring to the idealist concept that objects in life are defined not by facts but by how they are perceived through the mind. Nat has learned this concept too late to save Hannah; but not too late to save the rest of the world. The important thing about life is the adventure of it all, and Nat, in his later years, plans on having as much adventure as he can find. He was dead before, but since he has embraced the philosophy of idealism, he has come to life.

By the end of the play, Nat has suffered many failures. He tried to save Midge's job and ended up making the situation worse. He also tried to save Midge from a young hoodlum, who extorted protection money from him every day, and Nat ends up physically wounded. Later, when Nat tries to protect the young female artist from a drug dealer, he almost gets Midge killed. These pressures of reality make Nat reflect on his philosophy. Maybe his way of thinking is flawed. Maybe he should listen to his realist daughter. Maybe his idealist world is dangerous. What good has it done, anyway? Nat still feels responsible for Hannah's death. He certainly does not want his idealist principles to cause another one. So, Nat decides that he will give up his fantasies. He will become a realist. He will join the senior citizens' community just as his daughter has suggested. He will also come clean with Midge. He will tell Midge the truth about himself. He will expose all his flaws. But what happens when he tries to do this? The idealist in Midge will not allow it.

In *I'm Not Rappaport*, Gardner explores the opposing worlds of the idealist and the realist. He exposes the strengths as well as the flaws in each philosophy. If he had ended the play with Nat recounting nothing but the facts and raw details of his life, if he had left Nat in the uninspired world of planned community programs for senior citizens, then he would have made the statement that the realist had won the argument. However, Gardner does no such thing. Gardner teases the audience with the idea of handing over a victory to the realists in this play, until Midge throws a lifesaving rope to Nat, the drowning idealist. Midge needs the dreams of the idealist. He needs something bigger than life to look up to. "You wasn't just a waiter," he yells at Nat, "you was *more* than that!" It is the word *more* that is important here; and that is why Gardner emphasizes it with italics. Life has to be more than just the details. There has to be a spirit, a dream, a hope that things will one day be better. Life, Gardner appears to be saying, needs its idealists.

**Source:** Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *I'm Not Rappaport,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

# Critical Essay #3

*Perkins is a professor of English and American literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines Gardner's focus on the power of the imagination in the play.*

In an interview with Hettie Lynne Hurtes for her article in *Back Stage West,* Gardner remembers growing up with people who would "sit and yell about Trotsky and about wars long since fought that were very vivid to them." These men, he recalls, still cared; "against all evidence to the contrary they had not given up an image of a better world. If they didn't argue about Lenin, they argued about the egg salad—both with equal passion." Gardner reincarnated these people from his past into the lead character in his play, *I'm Not Rappaport*, which first appeared on Broadway in 1985. The play focuses on eighty-year-old Nat Moyer who meets Midge Carter, an equally aged black man, every day on a bench in Central Park, where the two continually argue about the reality of their world. Most of their time is dominated by Nat's "alterations" of the truth of their world. Nat explains, "I make certain alterations. Sometimes the truth don't fit; I take in here, I let out there, till it fits." Throughout the play, Nat's vivid imagination helps him to cling stubbornly to his vision of a better life as a shield against an increasingly harsh and indifferent world that has little use for the elderly.

The setting of the play announces the condition of the two old men. They sit on a "battered" bench on an "isolated" path "at the edge of" Central Park. During their daily meetings, they, as Lisa Schwarzaum describes them in a review for *Entertainment Weekly,* rage "entertainingly . . . about the betrayals of old age," about the betrayals of their bodies as their eyesight weakens and their steps falter, and about the betrayals of the world as they are no longer regarded as having any value to society. Nat is unemployed and has been eluding his daughter, who has been trying to have him either move in with her so she can keep an eye on him or committed to a nursing home. Midge, whose eye sight is failing him, is about to be evicted from his apartment and let go from his position as building superintendent there.

The play begins in medias res or right in the middle of one of Nat's "alterations," this one about his being hired as an undercover agent for the government and told to pass himself off as Hernando, an escaped Cuban terrorist. Nat often provides himself with alter egos in an effort to prove that he has a purpose in life. His declining mental state becomes evident when he loses his place in the story and asks Midge to help him recall where he left off. Midge, however, does not appreciate Nat's fabrications and refuses to help or listen to him any further. Yet, as Nat adds more twists to his story, countering each of Midge's doubts, Midge finds himself pulled back into the fantasy, almost against his will, for it provides him with an escape from his harsh life. By the end of this alteration, Nat notes his own overwhelming need for escape when he admits, "That was nice . . . a nice long story, lasted a long time."

When Nat's imaginative visions become too unrealistic for Midge and Midge rails against the other man's "lies," Nat proves that he knows the difference between illusion and the difficult reality of their lives. Nat insists that what is "true" for him is a triple

bypass he underwent the previous year, the "grade Z" cuts of meat he must eat on his Social Security check, and his begging for food at the back door of the Plaza Hotel. His surgery, he determined was his "last fact." Since then, he combats these dark images of reality with his alterations, becoming an escaped Cuban terrorist or an Iroquois Indian, whose grandfather fought the cavalry. Nat demands of Midge, "Whatta you got left, five minutes, five months? Is this how you want to spend it? Sitting and staring, once in a while for a thrill falling down?" and then insists "No, wrong; you gotta shake things up, fellah; you gotta make things happen." Nat claims that through Midge's contact with him, Midge has "had a taste of revolution and will not be able to return to subjection, to living in an occupied country."

Nat's motive is not just to escape a difficult world, but to improve it. His way of shaking things up is to call on his old oratorical skills as the labor activist he once was when he tries to fend off Midge's eviction from his home. Passing himself off as Midge's lawyer, Nat presents a convincing case to the head of the tenant association that if Midge is evicted, the group will face legal action.

His fantasy, however, contains important elements of truth. As he upbraids Danforth, he insists, "There's nothing, I promise you, easy about eighty." Nat has a clear vision of the younger generation's attitude toward the elderly when he notes, the "old-ies . . . look like the future and you don't want to know." He warns the younger man, "We're the coming attractions. And as long as you're afraid of it, you'll be afraid of us; you will want to hide us or make us hide from you." Nat insists that Danforth can declare Midge "slow or stupid," but if he tells him that he is unnecessary, "that is a sin against life."

Sometimes, however, Nat's efforts to relieve the suffering in his world fail. His ruse to help Midge escape eviction soon falls apart when Danforth digs into Nat's claims, discovers the scam, and Midge is left without the ten months severance pay he had been promised.

At other times, Nat puts himself and Midge in harms way when he asserts his right to fight against injustice. When Gilley, the young hoodlum who is forcing Midge to pay him protection money, confronts Nat, insisting that he must also pay, Nat refuses. Midge warns him, "this kid, you run your mouth on him, he finish you, then finish me sure.... These kids is crazy; beat up old folks for exercise." Yet Nat will not back down and tries to convince the young punk that "the city lives by Darwin; this means everybody's on somebody's menu .... Trouble is, you got the wrong supper here . . . . You're noshing on your own." Gilley, however, is not persuaded and so attacks him, declaring that Nat does not "know the rules."

Gilley represents the hostile city life Nat and Midge must endure along with others, like the young junkie they try to protect. Nat's refusal to follow the rules of survival in this atmosphere again endanger his and Midge's life. Nat tries to convince a drug dealer, who is demanding money from Laurie that she cannot repay, that he is a mob boss and that Laurie is under his protection. He never convinces the dealer, however, who roughs up Nat and sends Midge to the hospital.

Nat's imaginative constructs also hurt his daughter Clara who, after she discovers that he has been attacked by Gilley, insists, "I can't let this happen anymore. . . . You have to be watched. I'm not letting you out of my sight." Her inability to appreciate his efforts to help Midge lead to an argument between them, spurred by Nat's accusation that she has "forgotten what a principle is." She says that what he has committed is fraud, not principle and complains that she always has to lie for him. She tries to make her father accept the reality that "the battle is over. . . . Nothing's happened, nothing's changed. And the Masses. . . . They don't give a crap." Nat, however, refuses to accept her position and her insistence that he move in with her, and as a result, concocts a story about fathering a child with another woman, whom, he claims, will take him with her to Israel. After Clara discovers the truth, Nat admits to Midge that his mouth is dangerous: "it . . . almost kills you; makes an Israeli family and breaks my daughter's heart" and so he determines to "retire" his mouth.

By the end of the play, Nat appears defeated. During the two weeks since Midge was placed in the hospital, Clara has relocated Nat to an apartment in the Amsterdam Hotel, subsidized housing for the elderly that even Midge admits is "ninety percent foolish people" and "the end of the line." When Midge meets Nat again on the bench, Nat "seems fragile, older—or rather he seems to be his own age, very much like any old man whiling away his morning on a park bench." Nat suggests the course his life has now taken when he tells Midge that his main occupation in his new home "is to learn more things about tuna fish than God ever intended."

During their last conversation, Nat finally reveals his true history to Midge, admitting that he worked for forty-one years as a waiter, concluding, "whatever has been said previously, I was, and am now, no one. No one at all." Ironically though, Midge refuses to accept this version of Nat's story. He demands that Nat tell him the truth, that he was "more" than a waiter. So, Nat complies, happy to allow himself to be pulled back into a comforting fantasy. The play closes with Nat noting that he took some time off from his work as a waiter to work a stint in Hollywood, as a movie mogul. The play closes with the two old friends settling back to enjoy another of Nat's stories.

Even though Nat's fanciful alterations often cause more problems than they fix, he and Midge recognize the value of his reconstruction of reality. They reflect the efforts of an old man, as Marilyn Stasio writes in her review of the play in *Variety,* "fighting to assert his identity and maintain his dignity in [a] hostile world." Both men, notes George Meyer in the *Sarasota Herald Tribune,* give into Nat's imaginative visions to keep "a toehold on life when everything around them has made them obsolete." *I'm Not Rappaport* maintains its relevance for modern audiences with its enduring insights into the aging process and its celebration of the indomitable strength of the human spirit, buoyed by the rejuvenating power of the imagination.

**Source:** Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *I'm Not Rappaport,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

# Critical Essay #4

*In the following review, Chernaik calls* I'm Not Rappaport *"the most amiable play about old age, father-daughter relations, and the terrors of life in New York to have surfaced recently."*

Herb Gardner's *I'm Not Rappaport* is certainly the most amiable play about old age, father-daughter relations, and the terrors of life in New York to have surfaced recently. It is not surprising that it won Broadway's Tony Award for Best Play, since New Yorkers like to think their city and its huddled masses retain at least a shred of humanity, grace and humour—qualities stressed in this cheerful production, to the exclusion, perhaps, of harsher realities. Autumn leaves are falling in Central Park, menace lurks in the bushes; but the human spirit survives: The audience loved it.

Two old men, one black, one white, share a park bench, trading jokes and insults, stories and memories. Herb Gardner tells us that he saw them one day in Central Park, "an old white guy and an old black guy . . . they were obviously friends, and getting a big kick out of hollering at each other." Here was the germ for a vignette of city life, which Gardner expands with a few extra characters, lightly sketched. He makes the "white guy" (Paul Scofield) a Lithuanian Jew and lifelong Communist, a dreamer and a liar (Walter Mitty with a dash of Willy Loman), and provides him with a stylish daughter (Susan Fleetwood) who works in Park Avenue real estate, having long since abandoned her student radicalism, and who proposes to put her dad in an old people's home to stop him from wandering the city streets. Midge, the "black guy" (Howard Rollins), is cast as an apartment house superintendent; a passing jogger turns out to be the Yuppie tenant-committee chairman, who has been charged with easing the old man out of his job and the basement flat which goes with it. Representing the larger New York world are a tough young white mugger, a cowboy drugpusher, also white, and a pretty girl with a sketchbook.

It is Paul Scofield's play, and he obviously relishes the challenge. Though neither his speech patterns nor his personality resembles those of the eighty-year-old New York Jewish socialist I happen to know best, he gives a flawless impersonation of a recognizable type, selfish but lovable, still nursing dreams of justice and equality. Indeed, the audience, mainly well-heeled, bursts into spontaneous applause when the old Trotskyist eloquently defends the liberal virtues of heart, spirit and imagination against capitalist predators, young and old. They also applaud when Rollins pulls a knife on the cowboy pusher, moving with dignity towards what can only be his death. He too is a beguiling and utterly natural octogenarian, straight man to Scofield's garrulous comedian; they play to each other with the clownish, self-mocking wit of the vaudeville teams they both remember so fondly.

It is all a pleasant exercise in wish-fulfilment, as winter closes in, and the bright lights of the city come on. Vicious as the young hoods are, their victims do not die, but return on walkers, relatively unscathed; the heartless daughter does not put her dad in a home, but instead, afternoons only, in a Senior Citizens' club. This is hardly Beckett's grim view

of old age, despite a few common elements; though Gardner's old men are half-blind and lame, they are not crawling towards death. Nor does Gardner share Arthur Miller's vision of the ruthless nature of American capitalism, and the true dimensions of American narcissism and bigotry (no apartment house on Central Park West would have hired a black superintendent forty or even ten-years ago). Again there are common elements, softened and neutralized in Gardner's benevolent version of old men on the dust heap. He is aware of the pathology of the city, and allows his play to approach or hint at it: the first act ends with Midge crying out to the invisible passers-by (and the audience) "Help!" over the prostrate body of his friend. But five minutes into the second act, we know the menace is not real, not tonight, anyway.

**Source:** Judith Chernaik, "With the Blunt End," in *Times Literary Supplement,* Vol. 4348, August 1, 1986, p. 842.

# Adaptations

*I'm Not Rappaport* was adapted as a film in 1996 by Universal Studios. The film was written and directed by Gardner and featured Walter Matthau as Nat and Ossie Davis as Midge. It is available on both DVD and VHS from Universal Studios Home Video.

# Topics for Further Study

Research the various ways that the elderly are discriminated against today. Find at least one organization devoted to supporting the elderly and write a description of this organization, including its mission statement, programs, and services.

Find another culture, from any point in history, in which the elderly were revered. Write a short report about this culture focusing on the ways in which the elderly contributed to their culture.

Find an older man or woman, from any point in history who made a significant contribution to science or technology. Write a short biography about this individual, including a detailed description of his or her specific contribution to society.

Research the various forms of geriatric care available today. Find economic figures that show how much Americans spend on these forms of care each year. Plot all of this on a large chart, including a description for each major form of geriatric care.

Research what life is like for the world's elderly. Imagine that you are an old man or woman. Write a journal entry depicting a typical day in your life, using your research to support your ideas.

# Compare and Contrast

**Mid 1980s:** During the final years of the cold war, several spies are convicted in high profile cases. One such person, Jerry A. Whitworth, is sentenced to 365 years in prison for his role in a Soviet spy network.

**Today:** Following the end of the cold war and the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the United States becomes the dominant superpower. However, it is still vulnerable to terrorist attacks. In 2001, the United States experiences one of the most devastating terrorist attacks in its history when hijackers use commercial airplanes to destroy New York's famous World Trade Center towers and also damage the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

**Mid 1980s:** The world experiences a rash of terrorist acts, including hijackings, bombings, kidnappings, and murder.

**Today:** The United States and its allies attempt to destroy terrorist networks around the world. As part of this effort, many suspected terrorists or terrorist sympathizers are arrested. However, the most high profile terrorist responsible for the 2001 attacks, Osama bin Laden, remains at large.

**Mid 1980s:** Crack arrives in the New York area. Ecstasy also becomes popular and is put into widespread use at parties and dances known as raves.

**Today:** Crack is still a problem in many urban areas and many feel that America is losing the war on drugs. An aggressive anti-drug ad campaign highlights the negative and potentially fatal effects of the drug ecstasy.

# What Do I Read Next?

*If I Live to Be 100: Lessons from the Centenarians* (2002), Neenah Ellis discusses several stories from the National Public Radio series *One Hundred Years of Stories.* Ellis interviewed each of the respondents, all of whom were over one hundred years old. The stories range from men and women resigned to their old age to those who are old in body but refuse to grow old in spirit.

Like Nat and Midge in *I'm Not Rappaport,* the protagonist in Gardner's play *A Thousand Clowns* (1962) undergoes various forms of pressure from a society that wants him to conform to a normal, acceptable lifestyle.

Joan Rattner Heilman's *Unbelievably Good Deals and Great Adventures That You Absolutely Can't Get unless You're over 50* (2001) is technically a discount book for seniors. However, it also provides readers with an overview of some of the societal benefits that only come with age.

Marsha Sinetar's *Don't Call Me Old, I'm Just Awakening!: Spiritual Encouragement for Later Life* (2002) sounds like a nonfiction book. However, the book is actually more like a novel, since Sinetar frames her philosophies about old age within a series of letters between two imaginary friends.

# Further Study

Hales, Michael, *212 Views of Central Park: Experiencing New York City's Jewel from Every Angle,* Stewart Tabori & Chang, 2002.

Central Park is the main setting in the play. This book offers more than two hundred images of Central Park, helping readers to visualize the events in the play.

Lieberman, Trudy, *Consumer Reports Complete Guide to Health Services for Seniors,* Three Rivers Press, 2000.

Lieberman guides consumers through the complicated health-care system that services seniors. It also provides more information for readers who wish to see the flaws in the current system.

Thau, Richard D., and Jay S. Heflin, eds., *Generations Apart: Xers vs. Boomers vs. the Elderly,* Prometheus Books, 1997.

Thau and Heflin collect essays by and about members of Generation X, the Baby Boomers, and the elderly. In particular, the essays examine the ways these three generations interact with each other.

Torr, James D., ed., *The 1980s,* America's Decades series, Greenhaven Press, 2000.

This book contains several reprinted essays that address various topics relevant to the 1980s. These topics cover popular culture, politics, and science and technology, among other issues.

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Stasio, Marilyn, "Timing's Off for *Rappaport* Revival," in *Variety,* Vol. 387, No. 11, August 5, 2002, p. 29.

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BOOKRAGS

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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