Jesus Christ Superstar Study Guide

Jesus Christ Superstar by Andrew Lloyd Webber

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Jesus Christ Superstar, a two-act rock opera, gave opera a radical facelift through its use of vibrant rock music for a solemn topic. Andrew Lloyd Webber (music) and Tim Rice (lyrics) created a new kind of Jesus, a prophet / rock star whose appeal stems as much from the crowd's energy as from his own inspirational message. The album of songs, released a year before the first stage production of the play, created a market for the dramatic version, which opened to sold-out audiences who were already familiar with its songs. The play is a baroque fusion of styles, rock rhythm with ballad narrative, dramatic characterization with rollicking choreography, and operatic star performances that together paradoxically succeed in communicating a humble theme of love and acceptance. Sacred themes are fused with ancient political history and modern sensibilities into an entirely new form of theater art. To some critics the mixture was balanced, taut, and spectacularly successful, but to others, it was a travesty. Leaving out the Resurrection was considered both blasphemous and brilliant, bringing pick-eters to the streets to protest the play, while critics raved its genius. Jesus is portrayed as having human qualities, doubts, and faults, yet his crucifixion becomes all the more poignant for it. The play was unique in its genesis as well, having begun its life as a record, thus putting initial emphasis on musicality over plot and staging. The first Broadway musical to have started in this way, it remains an innovative work of drama and music that has weathered well with a production nearly always taking place somewhere in the world.

Author Biography

The two young men from Britain had collaborated on earlier works before their successful enterprise with *Jesus Christ Superstar* and each had an impressive career in music. Andrew Lloyd Webber was born in 1948 in London of musician parents, his father a composer and the Director of the London College of Music and his mother a piano teacher. Webber followed in their footsteps from an early age, learning the piano, French horn, and violin. By the time he was six, he was designing toy theatrical productions on the playroom floor, and at age nine he published his first composition, an opera based on Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. At twelve, he met his idol Richard Rodgers after sending him a fan letter. He attended the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and then the Royal College of Music. After one term at Oxford Univer sity, where his intention was to study architecture, he returned to London and met Tim Rice, a lover of classical music who was singing with a contemporary music group, the Aardvarks.

Rice, who was born in Amersham, England, in 1944, had attended the Sorbonne in Paris and had studied law in London, but was now a singer and lyricist, having just published his first song the year he met Webber, 1965. A mutual teacher friend asked them to collaborate on a new musical that his students could produce. The result was an early *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat,* which went on to be produced at Central Hall in Westminster. There a London *Sunday Times* drama critic praised it, and the pair repackaged the play in 1972 for the London stage, where it earned them a wider audience and still more praise.

The duo's next musical was *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Since they could not find a sponsor for a full production, they recorded one song, Judas's "Superstar," and released it to local underground radio stations in Great Britain and the United States. It became a hit single, so they recorded the entire, elaborate two-record album at great expense, making it, according to one critic, "the most expensive demo record ever." The album, too, succeeded wildly (except in Great Britain), so that with a demand waiting for them, they were able to produce the stage rock opera to sold-out crowds and mostly enthusiastic critics. The pair went on to produce more hits together, including *Evita* (1978). Webber has earned six Tony awards, four Drama Desk awards, three Grammys, and five Laurence Olivier awards, mostly for best score and best musical. In 1992 he was knighted for his service to the arts. He was the first recipient of the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers Triple Play award. In 1995, Webber was inducted into the American Songwriters' Hall of Fame and also given the Praemium Imperiale Award for Music. In 1997 he was elevated to the peerage as The Lord Lloyd-Webber of Sydmonton. Tim Rice has earned Grammy, Tony, and Academy Awards for his lyrics. Rice wrote the lyrics for the Disney feature cartoon *The Lion King* and worked with Alan Menken to produce the lyrics for Disney's *Aladdin,* among others. Rice has published over 30 books on British pop music, and runs his own book publishing company, Pavilion Books, which he established in 1981. He is also the United Kingdom's chairman for Sports and the Arts. He was knighted in 1994 for his work in the arts and sports.

Plot Summary

Act I

The play opens with the actors arriving in a desert, laden with their costumes and props. In the film version, a battered bus slowly makes its way across the desert into the foreground. The actors ready themselves, slipping into costume and character, preparing to give a performance of the last seven days of Christ's life, as much for their own sakes as for the pleasure of the audience. The largest, most awkward piece to unload is the heavy wooden cross. Judas observes these preparations from afar, edgy and already aloof from the rest of the group.

Act I: Heaven on Their Minds

As Judas watches the others, he begins to formulate and to articulate to himself just what is bothering him about Jesus: his superstar status, his moving from a vehicle of God's message to a show in and of himself. The followers think "they've found a new Messiah," and Judas worries about their anger when they discover Christ is just a man. Meanwhile Jesus shares his peaceful message to an adoring crowd.

Act I: What's the Buzz

At the house of Simon the Leper, the apostles press a tired Jesus to tell them where their group will go next, to begin a political and religious revolution, demanding, "When do we ride into the Jerusalem? " The apostles fail to notice that Jesus needs to withdraw and rest, but Mary Magdalene offers solace, saying "Let me try to cool down your face a bit." Christ tells them that only Mary knows what he needs.

Act I: Strange Thing Mystifying

Judas cannot stand that Jesus lets a former prostitute ("a woman of her kind") attend to him, but Christ hurls back, "If your slate is clean, then you can throw stones / If your slate is not, then leave her alone." Mary sings "Everything's Alright," but Judas continues to prod, saying that the money for her "fine ointments ... could have been saved for the poor." Jesus admonishes Judas and the apostles not to waste their precious time, since he knows he will not be among them for long.

Act I: This Jesus Must Die / Hosanna

The next morning, the Jewish Priests convene to decide what to do about the "rabble-rouser" whose mad mob can be seen and heard singing "Hosanna! Superstar!" in the background. Annas, father-in-law of the High Priest Caiaphas, emphasizes the danger,

since the Romans, who occupy their land, will surely punish all Jews for the revolutionary behavior of one man and his band of wild followers. Caiaphas decides that "like John before him, this Jesus must die." Jesus addresses Caiaphas and the priests gently, explaining that "nothing can be done to stop the shouting," while the ecstatic followers wave palms and joyfully anticipate their triumphant entrance to Jerusalem.

Act I: Simon Zealotes

The now rather large crowd moves in choreographed rhythm with Jesus, asking to be touched, kissed, acknowledged. Simon sees that this powerful force of "over fifty thousand" has political potential. "Keep them yelling their devotion," he advises Jesus, "But add a touch of hate at Rome." Perhaps they can oust the Romans and regain their land. Jesus responds with a simple gesture of peace.

Act I: Poor Jerusalem

As Jesus begins to sing, the crowd quiets and sits in a circle around him. His song expresses his worry that his followers, although they chant their adoration, do not truly understand power and glory. The end of the song shifts inward, when he both realizes and explains that "to conquer death you only have to die."

Act I: Pilate's Dream

Pontius Pilate is a Roman Governor disturbed by a dream he has had, in which a Galilean is martyred and he, Pilate, takes the blame. Pilate is a man usually comfortable with his station and power, but the dream leaves him unsettled.

Act I: The Temple

Moneylenders, prostitutes, wine-, goat-, and carpet-sellers have taken over the temple. Christ strides up to them and angrily turns over tables, protesting, "My temple should be a house of prayer." After shouting for the "den of thieves" to "get out," Jesus sinks into a reverie, summing up his three years on earth, but even in this private moment he is besieged by the sick and poor, who crowd him until he screams at them, "Heal yourselves!"

Act I: Everything's Alright (Reprise) & I Don't Know How to Love Him

Mary Magdalene once again soothes Jesus to sleep, and then goes into her own reverie about her conflicting feelings, both platonic and romantic, for this man.

Act I: Damned for All Time

Meanwhile, Judas, in anguish but armed with resolve, offers to betray Christ's whereabouts to the priests, who give him thirty pieces of silver for his service. The priests plan to have Jesus arrested and turned over to the Romans for execution.

Act II: The Last Supper

The apostles indulge in the Last Supper as a meal and not as sacrament, until Jesus sings, "This is my blood you drink / This is my body you eat." But their blank faces tell Jesus that they will forget him after he dies. His announcement that one of them will betray him raises protests from all but Judas, who takes it up as a challenge to do so. Judas departs, the apostles drift off to sleep, and Jesus sinks into lonely contemplation. He begins to question his fate, to question God and his own earthly mission. As his resolve fades, he accuses God, "You're far too keen on where and how but not so hot on why." But getting no cosmic encouragement, he steels himself for the ordeal to come, so that he can see God at last. At the end of the scene, Judas kisses Jesus on the cheek, and Jesus asks him, "Judas, must you betray me with a kiss?"

Act II: The Arrest

As the Roman soldiers arrive to arrest Jesus, the apostles struggle awake and sleepily retrieve their swords. Jesus calms them and goes willingly with the soldiers, who shove him along. On his way, a crowd surges around him, including Annas and Judas. Some taunt, "Now we've got him," while others quiz the prisoner like copy-hungry television reporters hounding a film star, "What would you say were your big mistakes?" Caiaphas confirms the arrest with the gravity of a judge, sending the prisoner on to Pilate, who alone has the power of sentencing to death.

Act II: Peter's Denial

A maid and her grandfather recognize Peter as one of the prisoner's followers, which Peter three times denies. Mary reminds him that Jesus had predicted his behavior.

Act II: Pilate and Christ

Pilate reluctantly interviews the prisoner, realizing that he lost a measure of his control due to the crowd's zeal to kill this man. He finds Christ's calm amazing and wants not to hurt him. As a way of avoiding responsibility, Pilate then sends Christ on to King Herod (who was half Jewish), since Herod has legal jurisdiction over the Jews, "You're Herod's race! You're Herod's case!"

Act II: King Herod's Song

King Herod is an overweight, self-indulgent, and corrupt king surrounded by sycophants and living in depraved luxury. In a tightly choreographed ragtime song and dance, he taunts Christ to perform a miracle on demand, and when Jesus does not stir, he angrily sends him away. Meanwhile, Mary and Peter sing, "Could We Start Again, Please?"

Act II: Judas's death

Judas, wracked with guilt, accuses Annas and Caiaphas of hurting the victim he turned over to them. They repulse him, and his anguish increases as he sings an apology to Christ, shifting to his own rendition of Mary's song, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." Realizing too late his own guilt, he hangs himself. The choir chants, "So long Judas / Poor old Judas."

Act II: Trial before Pilate

Caiaphas brings Jesus back to Pilate for a definitive execution. Still Pilate feels it too heavy a duty, and his interview of the prisoner seems like an attempt to find any excuse to release him, "I'll agree he's mad / Ought to be locked up / But that's no reason to destroy him." Jesus once again fails to supply anything but further proof of his divine immunity. Pilate agrees to flog Christ with thirty-nine lashes, an extreme torture. Afterwards, Pilate tenderly lifts the broken man, but when Jesus tells Pilate he has no power, Pilate goes into a rage and allows Christ's "great self-destruction" to take place.

Act II: Superstar

Judas, somehow resurrected, presides over the walk with the cross and preparations for crucifixion, assisted by three choirs of "angels" who sing the "Superstar" reprise. Judas asks Jesus whether he shouldn' t have staged this show in a better era, since "Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication." Christ dies simply, on the cross.

Act II: John Nineteen Forty-one

The show over, the actors repack and variously board the bus, some in a brisk businesslike manner and some, like Mary, casting a last wistful glance back at the set. The curtain falls.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The movie version of this rock opera opens at night with the camera panning a tall concrete wall covered with spattered blood and graffiti signs and words including "hate," "love," "peace," a peace sign, a cross with the word "revolution" across it in large capital letters, "Jesus loves us," and a cross with "Jesus" inscribed across it. An African American male is leaning on the wall as a Caucasian male writes on it. As the camera pans, we see more symbols and graffiti in different languages. A dancer runs and warriors, clad head to toe in black armor, enter and arrest the African American male. More dancers and Jesus' disciples enter, then walk along the wall, climb down hand-holds on the pillars to the stage below and begin to pass out guns. Graffiti can be seen adorning the pillars as well as many guns, including machine guns, being passed from person to person. A cross design made up of three lines of light bulbs horizontally and vertically to illustrate the cross lights up on the back wall. The title of the opera, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, then illuminates the space.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

This summary and analysis is based on the 1970 libretto *Jesus Christ Superstar*, with lyrics by Tim Rice and music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, and the movie version of 2000. Graffiti was common to the 1960s and 1970s anti-Vietnam War movement, and the updating and staging of the story of the last days of Jesus is both spectacular and moving. The storyline is fairly consistent with the biblical story taken from the Book of John and portrays parallel events. Jesus as a fully human "superstar" was a common description of Jesus's role in history as interpreted in the 1960's and 1970's, but Jesus as human and undivine has been one of the concepts of Jesus' life throughout history. The use of a racially-mixed cast would have been politically correct during that time but is not historically correct because Jesus and the disciples were of Jewish heritage.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

A Caucasian male with receding hair line and dressed entirely in black leather with a red t-shirt, Judas descends wide steps to a large room. Jesus is behind him, reclining on a railing at the top of the stairs. Judas is concerned about himself and his life as well as the future of Jesus' followers as he sings "Heaven on Their Minds." Judas wants to strip the "myth from the man" and see where they all will be. He emphasizes that Jesus started this movement as a man and the movement itself has turned into a revolution that has "gone sour."

A slight Jesus with long brown, curly hair, enters wearing a sleeveless white t-shirt, casual tan jeans with large pockets and worn tennis shoes. Judas tries to insist that Jesus listen to him and claims he has been his right-hand man from the start. He is concerned about what the followers will do when they find out Jesus is not the new King of the Hebrews and that he does not intend to overthrow the Roman Empire. The controversial teachings of Jesus and what he had said about the overthrowing are never stated. Judas believes Jesus should have stayed in Nazareth and been a carpenter. More of Jesus' followers enter, and Judas wants them all to live and not have too much "Heaven on Their Mind."

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Both Judas and Jesus would have been Jewish. Jesus and the disciples were born in Asia, not Europe. They would have been thin, with dark skin and black hair. According to the Gospels, written centuries after the events portrayed and in the style of but not by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Judas was Jesus' treasurer who betrayed Jesus to keep the other disciples from finding out he was pilfering from the collections. As treasurer of the movement, he would have been Jesus' right-hand man. The issue presented is whether Jesus as Messiah intends to overthrow the Roman Empire now and establish the Kingdom of God on earth, restoring the glory of the Hebrews in Jerusalem to what it was under David and Solomon, or whether the establishment of the Kingdom of God means something entirely different. Throughout history, Hebrews have waited for the conquering Messiah who will re-establish the earthly kingdom as prophesied repeatedly in the Old Testament.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

The group is at Bethany, 50 miles from Jerusalem, on a Friday night six days before the Jewish celebration of Passover. The disciples enter, all males of various races and most with spiked or dyed hair, followed by Mary Magdalene and other women. She is an attractive African American woman wearing a red slinky full length dress with black net sleeves. She massages Jesus' shoulders, and dancers continually climb up and down the hand-holds on the pillars. They want to know when they ride into Jerusalem and when the revolution starts.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

He selected male disciples because men were the authority figures during his lifetime, and all of the disciples would have been Jewish in appearance. The racial mixture of the rock opera was updated by the writers to be politically correct for the 1960's. The portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute is unfortunate and dates back to when an early pope confused her with the prostitute at the well.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

As he calls Mary Magdalene a prostitute, Judas says that her presence does not help Jesus's image. The authorities need only a small excuse to arrest all of them, allowing us to now see a very human and self-centered Jesus. He replies that if Judas's slate is clean he can throw stones. He rebukes the disciples as shallow, thick and slow men who do not know or care if he comes or goes. Judas does not deny this, but the other disciples do.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

Throughout the story, Judas is concerned with his own fate and with that of the disciples and other followers of Jesus. Jesus begins as a man "inspired" by God, but to do *what* is never clear. If Jesus is indeed just a man, then he can come across as human and prone to human frailties and sexual desires. The story is really that of when the Pharisees confront Jesus with a woman caught in the act of adultery. The Pharisees, who were sticklers for the laws of the Old Testament, tell Jesus that in the law, Moses commended Hebrews for stoning prostitutes. What did Jesus have to say about this? He answered in a famous saying, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." The Pharisees leave and Jesus tells her to go and sin no more.

The disciples are men of their times and are not especially seen as shallow, thick and slow men who care nothing for Jesus' fate. However, their actions immediately before and after his betrayal indicate a self-centered concern for their own fates instead of Jesus' welfare.

Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

Mary Magdalene tries to sooth Jesus' cares and helps him rest by singing "Everything's Alright," which comes across as also an attempt to seduce him. Jesus begins to lie down and rest as Judas grabs the jar of ointment out of Mary Magdalene's hands. Judas tells both of them that the 300 silver pieces the ointment cost should have been used to help the poor instead of being wasted on Jesus's hair and feet. Jesus becomes very human and self-centered in his reply that they do not have the money to save all the poor people, and there will always be more. He reminds the disciples to appreciate him while he is here, because they will be lost and sorry when he is gone. Jesus sinks to the floor and appears to be tired, dizzy and have a headache.

Then, Mary Magdalene continues to sing to Jesus to help him calm down and sleep and urges him to close his eyes and relax. Jesus finally lies down and goes to sleep, and Mary Magdalene covers him with a light throw.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

The Mary who anoints Jesus with costly perfume was actually the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. In this famous story, she anointed Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. This story also raises the issue that Judas wanted the 300 pieces of silver to replace what he had stolen from the coffers. Jesus did say that the poor would always be present even after he is not.

Act 1, Scene 6

Act 1, Scene 6 Summary

It is Sunday in Jerusalem, and the governing Council of Jewish Priests, five adult males of diverse race, are meeting in a darkened room fenced by high windows with bars across them. They sit around an elongated table, illuminated by stripes along the edges and circles in the center. Caiaphas, the high priest, is African American. Annas, a bald Caucasian male, is Caiaphas's father-in law, also a high priest and council member. All are dressed in black and are menacing in appearance and demeanor. They are seated around the council table watching the crowd follow Jesus through the streets on television screens. Jesus, being carried on two follower's shoulders. is dressed in a white gauze top and beige pants. The outside light surrounding him is a sharp contrast to the darkness inside the council room. One-page fliers promoting Jesus fall from the ceiling and through the windows, soon covering the council table. The council members all fear that their jobs will be eliminated and Jesus will become the carpenter king. He must die just as John the Baptist died before him.

Act 1, Scene 6 Analysis

The Council of Jewish Priests would have been adult males of Jewish appearance. The darkened room adds to their obvious sinister plans and desires to have Jesus killed for their own reasons.

Act 1, Scene 7

Act 1, Scene 7 Summary

Outside the council chambers, Jesus's multitude of followers, including children, sing "Hosanna" as they wave signs that say "Jesus" at the top, with his picture in the middle, and "rule" at the bottom. As he is held up by his followers, Caiaphas and Annas appear on the second level and ask Jesus to disperse the crowd. He replies that if the crowd were quiet, "the rocks and stones themselves would start to sing." Judas is seen leaning against a wall, shaking his head. Jesus, on the ground now, cannot stop the adoration of the crowd. He is surrounded by children, then climbs to the upper level with Mary Magdalene and Judas and Peter as the followers sing "Hosanna," asking Jesus to fight for his followers as "Superstar."

Act 1, Scene 7 Analysis

The word "Hosanna" is Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. The Greek and Hebrew translations of the word are "save, we pray." The writers of the Gospels chose to use the word without translation. The sight of a multitude of people following Jesus and singing, "Save, We Pray" would have terrified the Jewish high priests. Again, Jesus appears quite human and full of his own grandiosity. Judas is envisioning what will happen to all of them when the revolution is crushed, as many have been previously. The crowd here is obviously asking Jesus to start the revolution as their "Superstar" and savior.

Act 1, Scene 8

Act 1, Scene 8 Summary

The heavily-armored Roman troops and Annas appear on the main stage to disburse the crowd, and Peter takes Mary Magdalene away. Simon Zealotes, a young, strong Caucasian male with spiked, frosted hair, gives out guns and will lead the group of rebels and followers who repel the soldiers. Jesus tries to quiet his now-armed followers. Judas looks at Jesus with a look indicating his thoughts, "I knew it," and "Oh, no." Simon, wearing a blue camouflage t-shirt and holding a machine gun, climbs up to the second level. Simon joins Jesus, Mary and Judas on the upper level. He wants to lead Jesus's 50,000 followers in an armed revolution against Rome, then Jesus will have the power and glory forever in a present kingdom. Jesus's followers are ready to start the revolution. Judas is still on the balcony. Jesus pushes away Simon's guns and climbs down to be in front of the graffiti-covered wall.

Act 1, Scene 8 Analysis

Once Simon Zealotes and his armed troops disperse the Romans, he is ready to start the armed revolution against Rome, thereby establishing the Kingdom of God in the here and now with Jesus as the triumphant, long-awaited warrior Messiah. Judas is appalled, since he clearly does not want to be a martyr. Jesus pushes away Simon's guns to indicate that he does not intend to start an armed revolution of any kind, but matters have gotten out of Jesus' control.

Act 1, Scene 9

Act 1, Scene 9 Summary

Bemoaning his disciples' lack of understanding, Jesus says that Simon, the 50,000 followers, the Romans, the Jews, Judas, his disciples, the priests and the scribes and the residents of Jerusalem do now grasp that "to conquer death you only have to die." Judas is there, behind a pillar, showing by his actions and facial expressions that he does not want to die and that Jesus's followers are out of his control.

Act 1, Scene 9 Analysis

He is clearly upset that his disciples do not understand his purposes, one of which appears to be to demonstrate that there is life after death, although this is not expressly stated except by this brief phrase. Judas also demonstrates his alliance with Jesus.

Act 1, Scene 10

Act 1, Scene 10 Summary

The Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, an African American male, awakens from a bad dream. Alone in a large bed with a purple coverlet, where he has slept with a golden crown and a visored helmet, he has dreamed that thousands of millions of people were crying and blaming him for the death of a Galilean. He is visibly upset by the dream.

Act 1, Scene 10 Analysis

As the Roman Governor of Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate was all powerful but did not have this dream. His wife did. She told Pilate to have nothing to do with Jesus because she suffered greatly in a dream because of him. According to legend, she became one of the first Christians.

Act 1, Scene 11

Act 1, Scene 11 Summary

The scene changes to the Temple at Jerusalem. Jesus first confronts a money changer at the front iron gates and pushes him aside. As he enters, he sees three scantily-clad female dancers suspended above him in a cage and men dressed in stylized Arabian head gear selling bombs and other weapons, sex and drugs. There are also many slot machines, slabs of meat, magicians blowing fire, belly dancers, people smoking opium pipes and televisions showing army planes flying. The sights and smells are overwhelming. Jesus picks up a television and smashes it to the ground to get everyone's attention, then tells them all to leave.

He slides to the ground. The sick, all dressed in gray or a very drab green, approach him from everywhere asking to be healed. As he walks away from the temple, the sick emerge from holes in the ground. Jesus hugs and touches them, attempting to heal them all. They finally crowd him and lift him up until he screams, "Heal yourselves," as he is being physically crushed and his power drained.

Act 1, Scene 11 Analysis

This is the Temple of God in Jerusalem which is supposed to be used for worshipping God and paying tributes to God. Jesus was appalled at its desecration, and threw all the money changers and animal sellers out of the temple and overturned their tables. The money was used to buy animals to be given as sacrifices to God. This is a very dramatic scene, one obviously updated to present an anti-Vietnam War message. The story of Jesus healing the sick everywhere is very dramatic but did not necessary follow the cleansing of the temple. The gospels tell that Jesus healed every sick person he could who believed in him, and that he could feel power of some sort draining from himself.

Act 1, Scene 12

Act 1, Scene 12 Summary

Back with his disciples and Mary Magdalene, Jesus is trying to sleep. She reprises "Everything's Alright" and comforts Jesus until he lies down. Then she sings, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," as Jesus is sleeping on a mat on the floor. She cannot resolve her inner conflict between Jesus as God, which scares her, and just another man she can seduce. She covers him with a blanket, and is in the process of kissing Jesus on the side of his mouth when Judas enters.

Act 1, Scene 12 Analysis

The continuing conflict of believing in Jesus as God or man is presented once again, as is the continuing conflict between Judas and Jesus.

Act 1, Scene 13

Act 1, Scene 13 Summary

As Judas nuzzles Mary Magdalene, she tries to slap him. Jesus awakens and Mary leaves, leaving Jesus and Judas to confront each other with their eyes. Judas exits and runs to the council in front of the graffiti-covered wall, which now presents a red background. All there are dressed in black, including Judas, who now wears a black t-shirt. The spotlight is on the five council members. Judas tries to weasel out of what he has planned by saying he did not come here for himself, but because Jesus cannot control his followers. He grovels before the council to get a commitment to not damned for all time as he kneels on a lighted floor grate with steam rising from it. The council offers to pay him in silver for telling them where to find Jesus on Thursday, but Judas replies that he does not want their blood money. Caiaphas tells him that it is just a fee and that he can donate it to the poor. He holds the silver in a black leather sack over Judas's head, and Judas slowly reaches up to take it. He tells Caiaphas that Jesus will be in the Garden of Gethsemane on Thursday night.

As the Council members walk back up the stairs, a chorus of anonymous people, all in black, sing, "Well done, Judas. Good old Judas."

Act 1, Scene 14

Act 1, Scene 13 Summary

Judas has apparently decided to betray Jesus to save himself and to stop the movement that Jesus cannot control. Judas is concerned only about himself and his future and does not want to be damned to Hell. Everything in the council room once again reflects a black, sinister appearance. It is not clear why the council cannot keep up with Jesus's whereabouts, or why he must be betrayed and pointed out by a disciple.

Act 1, Scene 15

Act 1, Scene 14 Summary

Judas has returned to be with Jesus and the disciples. He drinks a beer while Mary Magdalene washes Jesus's feet. Jesus is now dressed entirely in a white gauze robe and white pants.

Act 1, Scene 14 Analysis

This is a quiet, pensive scene before the continuing physical action of the next Act.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

The disciples gather and set up for dinner in the big hall with the graffiti-covered pillars. They want wine so they can forget their trials and tribulations and are feeling sorry for themselves because of all they have been through. They anticipate that their rewards will come when they retire and write the gospels so people will talk about them after they die.

The spotlight is on Jesus, who enters and pours the wine as the disciples gather and sit around the table. Peter is to Jesus' left, and Judas is in front of the table and to the far right. Jesus again berates the disciples, telling them that the end is harder when brought about by friends. For all they care this wine could be his blood and the bread, which he breaks, could be his body. He wants them to remember him when they eat and drink. The disciples appear disgusted and appalled at the thought of eating and drinking what are now looked at as symbols of Jesus's body and blood. Jesus decides no one will remember him and his name will mean nothing to the disciples ten minutes after he is dead.

He predicts that one of them will deny him and one will betray him, but the disciples again all vehemently deny this. He adds that Peter will deny him three times in a few hours. Judas confronts him again and their mutual hatred is obvious in their eyes and actions towards each other. Judas says he admired Jesus but now he despises him, while Jesus tells Judas to hurry up and betray him. Judas calls Jesus a common criminal who let everything that he had so carefully managed and planned get out of hand, then leaves without finishing communion.

The disciples repeat the song about all their trials and tribulations, then fall asleep.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

There really were no apostles until the church was established in the Book of Acts, even though the writers of this rock opera call Jesus's followers apostles. The disciples are feeling self-pity because of all they have been through and are looking forward to dinner with sine so they can relax. They envision themselves becoming famous and remembered for writing the Gospels.

When he presides at what is called the "Last Supper," Jesus gives those attending instructions on remembering him as they eat bread and wine. He predicts Peter will deny him three times before morning, and that one of the disciples will betray him. By offering Judas the morsel of bread, he is following the Middle Eastern custom of demonstrating special friendship. It is thought that by this act, Jesus was showing his love for Judas. Judas runs back to the council without completing communion. It is also

possible that Jesus has worked out his betrayal with Judas, so that Jesus alone will give up his life for his friends.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Now in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is alone with God. He tries to get Peter, John or James to stay awake with him, but no one does. Jesus talks directly to God. He first says he does not want to die. He has changed since "we" started, when he was inspired, and now he is sad and tired. He has tried to spread God's message for three years. Surely, that is enough to ask of any man. He asks God whether his actions will make any difference. Will his death make what he has said and done matter more versus if he were more noticed? He wants to know what his reward will be and whether his death would be in vain. He asks God to show him a little of his omnipresent brain his reason for wanting him to die. Jesus says pointedly to God, "You're far too keen on where and how and not so hot on why."

Jesus appears dizzy, as if he has received an answer, and falls to the floor. He stands up and says he will die, but to hurry up and kill him before he changes his mind.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Jesus's humanity is now clear. Instead of talking in the familiar parables, he gets personal with God. He says he had changed since the beginning, when he was "inspired." The meaning of that word is not expressed, nor by whom or what. He is tired and has tried to spread God's message for three years, and feels his death should make no difference. Jesus clearly does not want to die and asks what his reward is. After Jesus receives his "answer," which is not stated, he is willing to die.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

The Roman soldiers and Judas enter the scene. Judas is not wearing his leather jacket but is wearing a black t-shirt. He walks over to Jesus and kisses him, and Jesus asks why Judas must betray him with a kiss. They embrace, Jesus again tries to forgive him, and Judas leaves.

The disciples, including Peter, awaken and ask what is happening. Peter pulls a knife, which Jesus takes away from him. He says that it is all over and that Peter should stick to fishing. Jesus is arrested and taken by Roman soldiers to Caiaphas, the high priest.

As he leaves, a black-dressed crowd surrounds him and asks questions. How do you feel? Do you plan to fight? What were your big mistakes? How do you view the outcome of your trial? They refer to him as God and say that he will escape in the final reel. Judas and Annas are part of the crowd.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

By now, the council members should know what Jesus looks like and be able to describe him to the Roman soldiers, who should also know which person is Jesus. Nevertheless, Judas walks over to identify Jesus by kissing him. The reason for this is unknown except that it was part of his deal with the high priests. Peter then awakens and decided to fight the Romans. Jesus calms him and tells him to go back to fishing.

On his way to Caiaphas, Jesus is surrounded by a mob of questioners, similar to paparazzi stalking a celebrity. Jesus answers none of their questions.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

The scene shifts to the hall with the graffiti-covered pillars and steps leading up to the wall. A woman poised next to a fire accuses Peter of being with Jesus, and Peter denies this. Peter is accused twice more of being with Jesus, once by a soldier and then by an old man. He screams his last response, "I don't know him!" Mary Magdalene asks Peter if he realizes what he has done. Peter replies that he does not want to be killed, and Mary ponders how Jesus knew this would happen.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

His humanity is clear, as he does not want to die to that point that he denies any relationship with Jesus. Mary now realizes how Jesus was able to predict this. The conflict between Jesus as fully human and Jesus as the son of God who knows the future is presented.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

It is Friday. Jesus, in the spotlight, now is in a many-sided prison room with the screaming mob kept away from him by bars. Fully-armored Roman police enter, followed by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor. He first asks who the unfortunate prisoner is. A soldier replies that he is Christ, King of the Jews. Pilate notices that Jesus is a small person. He asks if Jesus is indeed King of the Jews. Jesus answers, "That's what you say." Pilate becomes angry when Jesus will not answer his questions. He decides that since Jesus is from Galilee, his fate should be determined by Herod, the ruler of Galilee.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

He never answers a question with a direct answer. This angers Pilate, and rightfully, as he wants to help this man. Since Jesus is from Galilee, he is under the jurisdiction of King Herod. Pilate passes the decision of what to do about Jesus since it is not his to make.

Act 2, Scene 6

Act 2, Scene 6 Summary

He is taken to Herod's castle, which is actually Herod's Casino and Dance Hall, which resembles a cabaret. The front door is shaped like a giant lighted mouth. Herod, followed by three female cabaret dancers dressed in red sequined dresses flared at the knees, come out of the giant mouth and walk down lighted stairs to meet Jesus. Male dancers follow the women as Ragtime music plays in the background. The three female dancers take Jesus to sit on a grand piano bench while Herod reclines on top on it. Herod's hair is greasy and he is wearing a tuxedo, but still appears slimy. He demands proof of Jesus's claims and demands that Jesus change Herod's water into wine or walk across the water in his swimming pool. Since Jesus does not reply, he calls Jesus a fraud and tells the soldiers to take Jesus back before the council.

Act 2, Scene 6 Analysis

Herod's Casino and Dance Hall is a wonderfully imaginative creation by the writers. Herod makes no decision and sends Jesus back to the Council of Jewish High Priests.

Act 2, Scene 7

Act 2, Scene 7 Summary

The scene returns to the disciples in the hallway in front of the wall of graffiti, and Judas is watching them from behind. All of the disciples appear bedraggled and are trying to decide what to do. The scene cuts back and forth from the disciples to Jesus, who is back in prison and is being beaten. Mary Magdalene sings plaintively, "Could we start again?" Peter says Jesus has gone too far to get his message across.

Act 2, Scene 7 Analysis

He predicted that the disciples would be lost without him, and they are. Mary Magdalene now realizes the enormity of what has happened and wants to try again. Peter realizes that Jesus is going to die for his teaching.

Act 2, Scene 8

Act 2, Scene 8 Summary

Judas, now dressed in dark jeans, a dark t-shirt and boots, returns to confront the council in their meeting room. The council has a death warrant for Jesus, and Judas is upset because he realizes what he has done and wants to save Jesus. Annas replies that he does not understand why Judas is filled with remorse. Caiaphas says that Judas has saved Israel and will be remembered forever. He begs them as he crawls down the council's table. The council refuses to listen to him as they throw him out onto a lighted grate in the street.

Act 2, Scene 8 Analysis

Judas now realizes what he has done and wants to give the money back. to stop Jesus' execution. The Council now has Jesus' death warrant ready and throws him out of their meeting room.

Act 2, Scene 9

Act 2, Scene 9 Summary

He is on the lighted grate, where he sings, "I Don't Know How to Love Him" and the stage background turns red. He climbs the hand-holds to the upper level, where he denies the divinity of Jesus and blames God for using him and choosing him to commit this crime. God knew about this all the time, so it is not Judas' fault. A noose is lowered in front of Judas. As red steam rises, indicating that Judas could be in Hell, Judas exclaims that God murdered him as he puts the noose around his neck.

The crowd, dressed in black, gathers to watch and sing, "Poor old Judas. So long Judas," as they watch his body fall from the balcony. The crowd walks past Judas' body into the red backstage light. The hanging body becomes Jesus hanging, tied from ropes, in front of the wall covered with graffiti.

Act 2, Scene 10 Analysis

Judas again presents the conflict between Jesus as man and Jesus as God. He denies the divinity of Jesus and blames God for selecting him to betray Jesus, that way it is not Judas's fault. He hangs himself and apparently goes to what the writers present as Hell. Although Hell is discussed sporadically in the Bible, Hell itself as a place of eternal torment and fire was actually created by the writer Dante in "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained."

Act 2, Scene 10

Act 2, Scene 10 Summary

The scene now changes to the hall in front of the steps. Jesus is once again brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, who is angry that Jesus in that place again. Council members Annas and Caiaphas are there. Caiaphas explains that they must look to Rome for the death penalty. A soldier cuts Jesus down from the ropes and Pilate demands proof of a crime. The mob, held back behind iron railings, demands that Jesus be crucified.

Pilate tried to help Jesus, who has been brought here manacled and beaten by his own people. He asks Jesus where his Kingdom is. Jesus replies that he has no Kingdom in this world and his activities are through. There may be a Kingdom for him somewhere, but he does not know where. Pilate asks if Jesus is a King. Jesus replies, "It's you that say I am." The mob demands that Jesus be crucified because they have no king but Caesar. Pilate finds no evil or harm in Jesus and orders that he be flogged thirty-nine times to pacify the crowd. Pilate counts each stroke, then he again asks Jesus why he remains quiet and will not help Pilate save him. Pilate is now visibly upset. The suffering Jesus crawls across the floor. Pilate, disgusted, tells Jesus he can self-destruct and be a martyr if he wants. He washes his hands of Jesus' death and leaves, thereby fulfilling his own prophecies in his nightmare.

Act 2, Scene 10 Analysis

The crucifixion must be approved by Rome, so Jesus is brought back before Pontius Pilate. Pilate still is demanding proof of a crime and the mob demands that Jesus be crucified. Pilate calls Jesus a fool for not letting him help free him and has Jesus flogged to satisfy the crowd. When this does not work, he washes his hands of the whole affair.

Act 2, Scene 11

Act 2, Scene 11 Summary

A soldier places the crown of thorn on Jesus's head, which obviously hurts him. A new dark, wooded cross is lying on its side, and Jesus begins to move it towards the stairs. The crucifixion appears on a big projection screen. Judas has returned in formal attire, including red vinyl clothing with a shiny black top and pants, and is joined by similarly clad dancers, apparently devils. Angels with white wings and dressed in black leather caps, halter tops, shorts, stockings and boots appear on the stairs, which are now very light. The scene switches back and forth from Jesus on the screen to Jesus in person carrying the cross and then to a singing Judas. Judas still wants to know why Jesus let things get so out of hand and why he tried to proclaim his message in a backwards land without mass communication. Judas wants to know who Jesus is and what he has sacrificed.

Photographers and reporters crowd around Jesus and take pictures. Jesus climbs the stairs with the cross and reaches out to Judas as if to forgive him. Soldiers tie Jesus's hands to the cross and then nail him to it in front of the graffiti wall where the word liberte′ can be clearly seen. Judas, now alone on the stage, feels every pounding of the nails. Jesus asks God to forgive them because they do not know what they are doing.

The crowd raises the cross upright. The disciples, including Judas, gather once more, and Judas is back in tattered garb. Jesus, now in visible pain, is in a circle of light. He cries out, "My God, why have you forgotten me?" Then, "I am thirsty. It is finished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The bright white lights increase as Jesus dies. We see Mary Magdalene crying. Jesus' mother, Mary, is crying, and Simon Zealotes comforts her. Judas weeps and the disciples are crying.

Two strangers erect ladders and remove Jesus's body, while the cross itself remains standing. Jesus's cleaned body is on the steps and Judas stands over it. Jesus's mother, Mary, and Judas remain on stage with the body as the scene fades to white.

The stage is now lit with a brightly-illuminated white cross of three lines of light bulbs going across and three going up and down in a cross shape.

Act 2, Scene 11 Analysis

This is a very dramatic and physically demanding scene. The attire is that of the 1960's when the rock opera was written. The lighting is very dramatic, as is the presence of the women and disciples at Jesus' feet. None of them wanted this to happen. The rock opera ends without venturing in to the issues involving Jesus's resurrection from the dead. When Jesus dies and commends his spirit to his Father, he implies that God is his father, therefore making him the son of God. Otherwise, he would have sent his spirit to

God. Jesus's divine nature and resurrection are somewhat, but not necessarily, implied with the appearance of the angels and the bright lights.

The return of Judas places added emphasis on the never-ending question of whether Jesus was man or God.

Act 2, Scene 12

Act 2, Scene 12 Summary

The music being played, written by Andrew Lloyd Webber, is entitled, "John 19:41." This Bible verse reads: "Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been laid."

Act 2, Scene 12 Analysis

The story ends with Jesus's burial. The writers have no intention of going further into a much more controversial area.

When the end titles run, the cross is gold instead of wood.

Characters

Annas

The father-in-law of Caiaphas, Annas is a high priest ready for action. His warning that Christ's "half-witted fans will get out of control" (a phrase that could as easily apply to rock fans as apostles) has the desired effect on Caiaphas, convincing him to arrange the killing of this new radical religious leader, as he did John the Baptist. Annas reassures the distraught Judas that he has done the right thing by turning Jesus in; since the mob turned against Jesus, it seems clear to Annas that Judas had "backed the right horse." The moral implications of Judas's act seem lost on Annas.

Caiaphas

Caiaphas is the High Priest of the Pharisees, or Jewish priests. He wants to get rid of Jesus, in fear that the Romans will punish all Jews for the ruckus caused by Christ's followers. The Jews are in a precarious relationship with Rome; the priests have to tread a middle road between pleasing the Roman government and guiding their own people by upholding Jewish law and tradition. Caiaphas cannot afford to have Jesus erode his authority with a new religion. Therefore, he decides to eliminate this new leader around whom the Jews are "foolishly" assembling.

Jesus Christ

The Jesus of this rock opera is as much a rock idol as he is a religious leader. He exudes peace, proclaims peace, lives peace, but is otherwise a rather human "son of God," since he has human doubts. Jesus displays human emotion on several occasions: irritation at his apostles for their unceasing demands on him, anger at the merchants and moneylenders in the temple, and genuine fear and doubt just before his execution. The spell he casts over his followers comes partly from his pure simplicity and partly from their desire to adore him, make him the object of their piety; they seem to miss his point that devotion is due to God, not to him.One of his characteristic gestures is to stroke the cheek of his admirers, and his calm even in the face of Judas's anger is both inspirational and otherworldly, and, to Judas and Pilate, exasperating. It is his purity which prevents Jesus from recognizing that the precariousness of his political position (he is a threat to the Romans and Pharisees), more than the religious ideals he represents, that leads to his downfall. On top of his purity is another characteristic: his Superstar quality. Jesus is not just a man, but a "happening," an event, a center of power around which the apostles and devout followers revolve.

Female Apostles

The wives of the apostles dance with Simon in a frenzy of devotion, and also quietly serve food and drink when the group is resting.

King Herod

Herod is a self-indulgent, half-Jewish despot who rules all of Galilee, including its captive Jews. His court consists of a corrupt band of sycophants who serves Herod's lavish tastes. Herod makes a joke of Christ, as he probably does with any serious aspect of his kingship. The whipping of Jesus at first titillates his depraved side, but when the punishment goes too far, Herod is visibly disquieted.

High Priest

See Caiaphas

Judas Iscariot

Judas is more politically astute than Jesus; he sees Jesus turning into a cult figure whom the crowd accepts as the new Messiah. Judas is too practical a man to allow the possibility to enter his mind that Jesus truly is the Messiah. He only sees that if Jesus continues his self-indulgence, he will bring trouble to himself and his followers, since the Romans and Jewish Pharisees will not abide this threat to their authority. Unlike the other actors, Judas begins the play in character: even before getting into costume, he is aloof and temperamental. His mood of impatience and frustration stems from what he sees as a good thing "gone wrong." He allows his disappointment in the mission to cloud his doubts about betraying Christ. After the guards take Christ away, however, Judas realizes the enormity of his betrayal, and sees that he will for all time "be spattered with innocent blood." Therefore he hangs himself, although he later appears, resurrected it seems, to sing a final tribute to Jesus Christ, Superstar.

Maid by the Fire

The young maid, sitting around a fire for warmth with her grandfather and a Roman Soldier, recognizes Peter as having been with "that man they took away," which Peter denies.

Mary Magdalene

Mary is a former prostitute who has joined the band of apostles and wives and serves Jesus. In fact, her attraction to him is more than platonic; it is also the same kind of physical attraction with which she is very familiar, and yet, the combination of these

attractions, along with her awe of this holy man, make her afraid of her own feelings, as she describes them in her song, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." Of all of Christ's followers, Mary best understands his need to stay "calm" and unworried, to take time for himself and to pace himself so that he will not break down under the demands of the crowd. She is empathetic to Peter, too, even when he betrays Jesus as predicted. Mary is the female embodiment of Christ's message of love and acceptance. She gives the impression that, even more than the work of the apostles, it will be those with her faith in Jesus the man that will fuel the survival of Christianity.

Male Apostles

The male apostles follow Jesus and sing a song that indicates their awareness that they could gain a kind of immortality from their association with this leader, "so they'll all talk about us when we die." They get caught up in the atmosphere of adoration, dancing and singing, not noticing that Jesus does not want such excessive devotion. The apostles seem to love the Jesus "happening" more than the man, although they protest their loyalty when Christ confronts them at the last supper. They also love their wine, drunkenly falling asleep just when Jesus needs them most, rousing briefly when the Roman Guard arrests him but easily talked out of fighting the guards when Jesus tells them to put away their swords.

Merchants and Moneylenders

These take over the temple to sell their wares and are dismissed by an uncharacteristically angry Jesus.

Old Man

The Maid's grandfather is the third to accuse Peter of association with Jesus, prompting Peter's third denial.

Peter

Peter is a loyal apostle who considers ridiculous Christ's prediction that he will betray him three times. But he does exactly as Jesus predicts, and when Mary points this out to him, Peter defends himself, saying that he had to lie to protect himself. However, Peter realizes the harm he has done to their cause, and he wants to turn back time, giving him a chance to protect his leader instead. He sings with Mary Magdalene "Could We Start Again Please?"

Pontius Pilate

Pilate is the Roman Governor to whom Jesus is first brought for punishment by the Jews, and who refuses to appease the crowd, due at least in part to a dream he has had portending his own incrimination if he does. He defers by sending Jesus on to King Herod instead, on the grounds that only Herod, as King of Galilee, has the authority to condemn a Galilean to death. When the Pharisees' guards bring Jesus to Pilate for the second time, Pilate reluctantly has the young zealot flogged, as a measure to appease a crowd that could easily turn against him. Pilate endeavors to elicit any kind of concession from Christ, attempting to find an excuse to dismiss him unharmed. Pilate recognizes that he is contending not with Jesus but with the crowd demanding a crucifixion. Jesus does not play into Pilate's game; Pilate's anger gets the best of him, and he condemns Christ to die on the cross, fulfilling his prophetic dream.

Priests

The Priests are the Pharisees, who perch like vultures on the stark improvised scaffolding that serves as their temple. They are the council convened by Caiaphas to decide what to do about "Jesusmania," which threatens the entire Jewish community, for the Romans do not make distinctions within the group and would punish all Jews for Christ's actions.

Roman Soldier

The Roman Soldier recognizes Peter as a friend of Christ's and prompts Peter's second denial.

Stage Manager

The stage manager sees to the unloading of props and trunks of costumes and gets the band of young actors ready to produce the play, which seems to be produced as much for their own sakes as for the viewing pleasure of the audience.

Simon Zealotes

Simon's surname Zealotes comes from the Greek word "zeal," meaning enthusiastic devotion. It is Simon's "zealous" goal to urge the Jesus cult to revolt against Rome. He tells Jesus to turn the mass of followers against Rome so that the Jews can accomplish ousting the Romans, as well as establishing their new religion. "There must be over fifty thousand," he tells Jesus, "and everyone of fifty thousand / would do whatever you tell him to." Simon shows himself quick to battle in the encounter of the Last Supper, but when Jesus tells him to put away his sword, he obediently does so.

Themes

God and Religion

Jesus Christ Superstar is not simply a portrayal of the historical figure of Jesus, a rabbi who promoted the idea of loving one's enemy, but an exploration of the star status of Jesus, who gathered around him a following of devoted disciples and had a timeless, worldwide impact. According to critic James R. Huffman in the *Journal of Popular Culture,* works like this one "ask the right questions, but allow each individual to provide his own answers. " One of the questions it asks is what kind of relationship one should have with God and/or Jesus. A range of responses is portrayed, from Mary's loyal, personal devotion that threatens to border on physical passion, to Judas's skepticism and betrayal. Mary's relationship represents the person who embraces the values of Christianity and wants a personal connection to God but cannot achieve it: Mary doesn't "know how to love him." Judas represents the classic doubter, one who realizes too late what really matters. However, most of the followers are just part of the crowd, like the "over 50,000" that Simon Zealotes sings about. This crowd sees Christ as a fast track to salvation ("I believe in you and God, so tell me that I'm saved"). The disciples, on the other hand, are mere buffoons, more interested in their own glory than in appreciating the profound event taking place before their eyes. The line, "always hoped that I'd be an apostle, knew that I would make it if I tried" is an ironic comment on their misguided aspiration, and the lines that follow it drive the point home, "Then when we retire we can write the gospels, so they'll still talk about us when we've died." The apostles prove of little use to Jesus at the Last Supper, since they fall asleep when their leader needs them most, and then foolishly offer to fight for him once it is too late to save him. Significantly it is not the apostles or those closest to Jesus□Mary, Judas, Simon, or Peter□but the anonymous crowd whom Jesus helps, touches, and heals. Jesus thus is seen as healing others, confirming their beliefs, but not confirming those of the characters with whom the audience most identifies. Religious commitment seems simple, somehow, for others, but vexed with doubts and insecurity for oneself. In this way, *Jesus Christ Superstar* hits a nerve with its postmodern audience, many of whom share both Mary's desire for a passionate connection to a higher power and also Judas's jaundiced belief that such faith would be naive and, ultimately, misplaced. The fact that Judas later repents and discovers that Christ loved him too also resonates to the skeptic's fear of "missing out."

Doubt

Jesus himself provides an exploration of religious doubt. While his followers either accept his divinity blindly or, like Judas and the Priests, fear the political consequences of his impact while ignoring his mission, Jesus alone understands that his mission is serious and vital. In fact, he will undergo the ultimate test of faith, by willingly accepting his own death. This fate he seems to ignore until the time draws dangerously close. In this respect he is no different from any human who ignores or maintains a surface faith

as long as things are going well. When Christ comes face to face with the fact that he truly must die, it shakes the foundations of his faith, and he asks himself "Why am I scared to finish what I started?" But then realizes in mid-sentence that it is not his plan he was following but God's. Now skeptical, he demands proof and becomes angry with God when it is not given. "God, thy will is hard," he accuses his heavenly father, "But you hold every card." By the time he reaches Pilate for the second interrogation, Christ has mended his breach of faith and faces his trial with new resolve, telling Pilate, "Any power you have comes to you from far beyond. / Everything is fixed and you can't change it." Christ's acceptance of his crucifixion dissolves his doubt.

Style

Rock Opera

Tommy (1969), hailed as the world's first rock opera, broke with the tradition of the musical stage production by incorporating rock music into the classical opera genre. *Tommy,* an album released by The Who, told through its songs the story of a deaf mute who becomes a guru because of his pinball skill. The album was an immediate success, and was soon transformed into a live stage production that The Who took on a worldwide live tour, during which they recorded *Tommy Live* in front of record-breaking audiences. They also produced a film version, directed by Ken Russell. The rock opera is, like opera, a form that advances the plot through songs, with few or no spoken parts. The rock element pertains to the music and choreography of the piece, but in the cases of *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar,* it also contributed the theme and protagonist of the play in the form of the rock star. Operas feature both solo numbers and chorus or ensemble pieces, and both *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* follow this pattern. The rock opera as a genre has mostly faded away, having served its purpose to broaden the definition of the musical production and of the format of the rock album. However, the brief era of rock opera resulted in a number of song cycle or "plot rock" albums (albums whose songs tell a story), such as The Kink's *Preservation Act I* and *Preservation Act II,* Pink Floyd's *The Wall,* David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall ofZiggy Stardust,* and The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts' Club,* paving the way for the concept rock videos of the MTV era.

Point of View

The physical and emotional perspective from which the viewer is led to view the spectacle of a dramatic production is from afar, and this is especially true when the production is a musical. When viewing a dramatic production, the audience looks onto the stage as onto a miniature world, complete with furnishings and a false horizon peeping through the window, and the viewer has the sense of being outside of the events, judging them like a god. Only at certain moments is the viewer invited into the private world of a given character, and that is when that character muses aloud in a soliloquy, sharing private thoughts as though unaware of the audience listening to every word. The character might encourage this intimacy through facing slightly offstage, in a three-quarters profile, putting the audience outside the line of vision, giving the impression that eavesdropping will not be detected. The actor might speak quietly, almost in a whisper, further indicating the privacy of his or her thoughts. At this moment, the viewer's perspective can merge with that character's perspective, such that the events are seen through that character's point of view. Usually only one or two characters' thoughts are revealed in this way, and the play may privilege one character's perspective by focusing on that person's inner thoughts more than the other's. When the production is a musical, the sense of being outside of the action is enhanced through

the pageantry of the choreographed movements onstage, which are not at all like real life and thus remind the viewer of the artificiality of the performance.

Only when the characters sing a soliloquy, with a spotlight creating a temporary connection to the audience, does the viewer gain a sense of identifying with the characters. In a musical or opera, the solos shift the point of view from one soloist to another. Even though Jesus is the central character in *Jesus Christ Superstar,* the soloists, Judas, Mary, and Jesus, each have a different assessment of his mission, and the viewer's point of view shifts according to who is singing. Throughout most of the play the point of view lies outside of Jesus, in Judas's perspective, as he assesses this leader's impact on the crowd and tries to decide just how to take him. The perspective shifts to Jesus whenever he sings. Thus the viewer is led to consider not only who Jesus seemed to be to others, but what kinds of doubts and problems he himself had in his life and mission. The shifting point of view asks viewers to identify with Jesus as a man, and to identify with his followers, some of whom saw him as a superstar and others who doubted him. The fact that Christ's resurrection was excluded from the play leaves ambiguous the question which perspective to believe, thus the shifting point of view of the play contributes to the theme of doubt and faith.

Historical Context

The Biblical Story of Jesus

The story as told in the play *Jesus Christ Superstar* follows fairly closely what is known about the life and times of the historical Jesus. Jesus, a rabbi whose father apparently was a carpenter, worked for a time in that trade as well before developing a ministry based on loving one's enemy and a more holistic attachment to God than simply complying with religious law. Jesus went out to preach to the people rather than wait for them to come to him in a temple, as did most other rabbis of the time. It is speculated that Jesus was a member of the Pharisees, a progressive, democratic Jewish sect that interpreted the Torah more liberally than did the more conservative Sadducees. Jesus preached mostly in Galilee and apparently took the rather dangerous step of going into Jerusalem to preach as well, as the play delineates. Here he met with more difficult adversaries than he had in Galilee, with Jewish leaders who considered his teachings controversial and with Romans who feared a rebellious uprising. Jesus may have been a "marked man" in the sense that there were those who wanted to remove this threat to the authority of the Romans and the Pharisees, the high priests of the Jewish community. Knowing that he would not be suffered to live and preach much longer, he held a farewell meal on the eve of Passover and was arrested in the garden of Gesthemene by Roman soldiers. Jewish authorities first tried him, found him guilty of high treason (for pretending to be the Messiah, although there is no evidence that Jesus made this claim), and sent him to Pilate for execution. Nothing was recorded of him for the first forty years after his death, then the letters of the Apostle Paul (a Hellenized Jew born after the death of Jesus who introduced Christianity to the Greeks) refer to his ministry. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) probably written after the Pauline letters, tell slightly conflicting stories, but essentially also confirm the existence of a rabbi named Jesus who was crucified under Roman law.

The Theatrical "Happenings" of the 1960s and 1970s

Theater in the 1960s and 1970s was, to use the parlance of the time, a "happening," a word that implied energy, spectacle, and significance. Beginning with Hair in 1967, nudity and shocking language would become commonplace in the theater, and audiences came to expect to be shocked and challenged as well as entertained. That *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) committed the sacrilege of conflating religion with Broadway spectacle was almost par for the course, as was its celebration of the hippie style, a style that valued the personal expression of uniqueness and freedom. There was a movement toward less formality as well as fusion with other art forms. This was experimental theater, often entailing audience participation, anachronistic costuming and props, and extending the stage to the larger world. Thus the combination of rock music with ancient, biblical themes in *Jesus Christ Superstar,* although completely unique in itself, was consistent with the prevailing mood of the theater.

Critical Overview

Jesus Christ Superstar was the first Broadway musical to have begun its life as a record. The single record of Judas's song "Superstar," released in 1970, at first drew little notice from the listeners of the underground rock stations that played it, but over the next few months the song gained attention in the United States, if not in Great Britain, where it was produced. One form of this attention was pure outrage, for the song, especially when taken out of the context of the play, seemed to many religious listeners blasphemous when it asked "Jesus Christ, Superstar, do you think you're what they say you are?" Although it finally received a good response, it never rose above the top 80s in the Billboard listing. Nevertheless, the single record sold over 100,000 copies by May, 1970. Based on this success, Rice and Webber recorded the full rock opera and packaged it in a two-record boxed set purposely designed to look like other recorded operas. On October 21, 1971, the New York opening performance (on tape) of the rock opera was held in a church, coordinated with a slide presentation of religious paintings. The invited reviewers and the rest of the audience gave the record a standing ovation. Then the album was released to radio stations, whose reviewers loved it. Scott Muni of radio station WNEW called the song, "an out and out smash." By February 6, 1971, it climbed to the top of the *Billboard* list of hot songs in the United States. *Billboard* predicted, "It is destined to become one of the most talked about and provocative albums on the pop scene." Two weeks later, the albums made it to the top of *Cashbox*' s list, which hailed it as "a powerful and dynamic rock score of sweeping melodies." Jack Shadoian of *Rolling Stone* raved that "many of us rockheads ... have been sitting around waiting for something extraordinary to happen. This is it." Although some reviewers disliked the fusion of rock sound in opera format ("When it isn't dead-boring, it's too embarrassing to hear," quipped the Cue reviewer), others, such as Derek Jewell of the *London Sunday Times,* saw it as*Yvonne Elliman as Mary Magdalene in a scene from the stage production* the herald to a new art form, with music "more moving that Handel's *Messiah* ... a work on a heroic scale, masterfully conceived, honestly done, and overflowing with splendid music and apt language." The music derived its unique blend of styles from many varied sources. William Bender wrote: "Webber and Rice do not outdo the Beatles or the Rolling Stones or the Edwin Hawkins Singers, Prokofiev, Orff, Stravinsky or any other musical influence found in their work. But they have welded these borrowings into a considerable work that is their own." The record set became the bestselling two-record album of all time, grossing over $15 million in the year of its release.

The first London stage play was performed at a West End theatre with Paul Nicholson as Jesus. It ran for eight years (3,358 performances) and became West End's longest-running musical up to that point; it currently ranks as the fifth longest running musical in West End history, behind three other Andrew Webber musicals, *(Cats, Starlight Express,* and *Phantom of the Opera)*. In the Spring of 1971, before the play reached Broadway, the album set had sold 2 million copies in the United States and *Life* magazine featured photos of one of the many improvised performances being staged across the country, many of which were produced in violation of the play's copyright.

Life attributed its popularity to music and lyrics that "bridge the generation gap," being at once "both secular and reverent." The opening of the official Broadway production was delayed by sound problems, but the show, starring Ben Vereen as Judas, Jeff Fenholt as Jesus and Yvonne Elliman as Mary Magdalene, got underway to the admiration of both the critics and the public. The Broadway run took in almost $3 million, ran from 1971 to 1973, and won the 1971 Drama Desk Award.

The 1973 film version starred rock singer Ted Neely as Jesus, Carl Anderson (Ben Vereen's Broadway understudy) as Judas, and Yvonne Elliman as Mary Magdalene. Many critics panned the film; however, it won British Academy Awards for Best Sound Track and Best Cinematography and grossed more than 10 million dollars at the box office. Both the film and the stage production have enjoyed wide popularity worldwide since its release.

A twenty-year anniversary tour garnered large audiences across the United States in 1993, and London's West End produced a twenty-fifth anniversary production in 1998. James R. Huffman of the *Journal of Popular Culture* points to one reason for the play's appeal: "Works like *Jesus Christ Superstar,* which asks the right questions' but allow each individual to provide his own answers, will be appropriated by nearly all the atheist, the agnostic, and the believer. Only the indifferent will remain unimpressed; only the devout and the aesthetically critical may be offended."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is a Humanities teacher at Cary Academy, an innovative private school in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay she discusses the portrayal of Jesus as a rock star phenomenon in Jesus Christ Superstar.

In a recent interview Tim Rice admitted that from an early age he was fascinated by the character of Judas. Without Judas, he said, there would be no Christianity, since it was Judas who directly caused Christ's martyrdom and thus gave the world a tragic heroic figure around whom a whole religion would coalesce. Rice wanted to put Judas on the stage, by taking the sketchy, known "facts" about him and hypothesizing a set of logical reasons and a psychological make-up that could have led to his devastating betrayal. That Rice succeeded in his endeavor is without question. His Judas has a clear, if not forgivable, motive, and his tale of emotional remorse and suicide ring truer to life than the dispassionate reporting of the Bible, which merely states that Judas repented and hung himself. Rice's Judas realizes that his soul is forever tarnished with his act, that his name will forever be "dragged through the slime and the mud." *Jesus Christ Superstar* begins from Judas' s point of view and ends with his observations on the Christ phenomena; however, to make Judas the character come to life, Rice also needed to create a viable Jesus as his protagonist. Rice eschewed the persona of Jesus familiar in Biblical stories and the art these stories have inspired over the ages, since that persona of pure goodness makes any opponent appear foolhardy and heinous for martyring the messiah. The Jesus of familiar artistic renderings is a ghostly, divine figure, whose perfection and goodness exude through his otherworldly bearing and patient suffering with eyes confidently cast heavenward. Rice needed a different kind of Christ, a flesh-and-blood saint, an imperfect martyr, whose activities would *not* be above reproach. Therefore, to suit the Judas of his imagination, Rice created a Jesus complete with doubts and frailties, a worldly saint far removed from the ideal figure of Renaissance paintings. The Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a fallible human.

The story of Jesus's anger at the sellers in the temple market is a commonplace; Rice has him shriek, past the edge of self-control. Rice also portrays a healer who runs out of patience with the endless demands of the sick and poor, who claw at him and enclose him, chanting, "Won't you touch, will you heal me Christ?" The superstar Jesus also regrets having accomplished little in his life, and feels show-stopping doubt when faced with sacrificing his own life and can only rouse himself through spite and anger, "Alright, I'll die! See how I die!" Although fallible, Jesus is a charismatic leader, who draws to him an immense and loyal crowd. To this crowd and to his disciples, he is the messiah, the savior for whom the Jews waited for centuries, whose coming was prophesied in Isaiah and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Being a charismatic savior who nevertheless grapples with human faults made Rice's Jesus a "flesh-and-blood human being," as Clifford Edwards of *Catholic World* observed. Those closest to this human Jesus, such as Judas, see that he has faults and that he is not a blameless god. Mary Magdalene even momentarily wonders about falling in love with him, a speculation that seems impossible to have about the Jesus of, say, Michaelangelo's "Pieta" or Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper." A flawed Jesus then, raises the possibility that he is yet another

false messiah, who will lead the Jews to destruction, not heaven. His very popularity increases the risks for the Jews if Jesus is not what he thinks he is, since, as Judas points out, the crowd is "getting much to loud" and "they'll [the Romans will] crush us if we go too far." It is in this way that Rice's version of Jesus provides Judas with a clear and defensible motive for betrayal: to avert the wrath of the Romans, which the priests anticipate as "our elimination because of one man." In this sense, Rice has fashioned the classic conflict, one that contains within it the seeds of two conflicting outcomes, a hopeful one salvation for the Jews and its opposite, their destruction.

The play opens with Judas's apprehensions, instantly shifting the focus away from cliched reverence for Christ's goodness to the more complex concern over success that might swell the unconventional rabbi's head or turn him into a "superstar. " Unlike Christ's other followers, who idolize a messiah as the road to their own salvation, Judas is more skeptical, and less innocent. Judas resents Mary Magdalene's use of costly ointments to soothe the tired prophet because it diverts money from the poor; possibly this symbol of messianic status (messiahs alone warranted anointment) offends him as well. Judas accuses Jesus of immodesty, chiding him that "You've begun to matter more / than the things you say." Jesus is too popular, and his "followers are blind, too much heaven on their minds" to see the danger they are in. Caiaphas, too, objects to Christ's popularity, for it draws followers away from his sphere of control. Even so, Caiaphas begrudgingly has to admit that Jesus is a smooth operator, "No riots, no army, no fighting, no slogans / One thing I'll say for him Jesus is cool."

To be "cool" in 1960s parlance meant that one could win respect without making any overt effort. The word "cool" connoted being "hip," or fashionable, smart, and impressive; a "cool" person could maintain the aura of outward calm, while generating excitement in others, like an Elvis Presley or other rock star. A successful rock star appeared disinterested while the crowd went wild. Rice's Jesus epitomizes coolness: he is a "superstar" with a winning style, who draws large audiences, yet his inner calm rarely ripples. As such, he inspires both jealousy and disdain from Judas, who goads himself into action by calling Jesus "a jaded mandarin," a fallen idol. The Christ of *Jesus Christ Superstar* is not simply a humble saint or martyr, but a rock star, whose star status is buoyed up and defined by *and* dependent upon the crowd's enthusiasm. This novel re-fashioning of Jesus was the *coup de grace* that launched the album and later the stage production into the public eye. The concept of a rock star Jesus seemed to many a contradiction of terms, for how could a saint be hip or cool, how could a humble martyr be nonchalant or even suave? Religious leaders were affronted by the rock Jesus. It was an invasion of territory Jesus fit the mold of the classical symphony hero, but not the mold of the heathenish rock musician.

According to Reverend Billy Graham (who occasionally used the *Superstar* music in his revivals) to ignore Christ's divine status in this way "border[ed] on blasphemy and sacrilege." Frank Garlock, a minister and music theory chair at Bob Jones University (a Christian school) rankled at comparisons between the *Superstar* opera and great classics of reverent music, saying "This comparison is so ludicrous that it is absurd. The opera is certainly not talking about the Lord Jesus Christ in honor of whom Handel composed the *Messiah* and for whose glory Bach composed some of the greatest

music known to man." Others found the comparison refreshing, as did Derek Jewel of the *London Sunday Times,* who found *Superstar* "Every bit as valid as (and... often more moving than) Handel's *Messiah."* The worlds of classic opera and rock music were as opposite as they could be: the one a marker of highbrow, conservative taste and the other a kind of "in your face" protest against conventionality. *Jesus Christ Superstar* offended by yoking divine content to a profane medium. It recast a revered saint as a dubious rock star, thereby presuming to raise sacrilegious rock music to the level of respectable classical music. In doing so, Rice and Webber recreated the shock and excitement that Jesus must have engendered. Jesus achieved "star status" in his short life; he was the Biblical equivalent of Prince, Elvis, or Madonna. Rice and Webber's use of rock music is a profound statement about the tremendous impact he must have had in Galilee. The composers of *Superstar* suggest that the Galileans responded to the Christ "happening" as the contemporary world would respond to the meteoric rise of a new rock superstar.

Rice explains, "It is undeniable that Christ made more impact on people than anyone who has ever lived an impact of colossal proportions." They re-contextualize Christ's controversial appearance in terms that reflect modern sensibilities, thus revitalizing the worn cliche of the icon called Christ. At the same time that their Christ is brought squarely to earth, such that "A common reaction to *Superstar* is 'It was the first time I ever thought of Jesus as a real person," he is also a superhero. Although his divine status is stripped away, Christ is catapulted to superstardom. As Yeats observed in "The Second Coming," the religious center did not hold; Rice and Webber suggest that pop culture as culture's core can hold. With religion shoved to the margins, the twentieth century still seeks sacred heroes. Herod speaks for the swarms of groupies who exist from show to show, waiting to bow down to the next pop hero. With Herod, the modern being beseeches each new pop star to rise beyond human frailty to star status, saying, in the words of the *Superstar* libretto, "I'm dying to be shown that you are not just any man." Perhaps, as Judas complains at the end of the play, Christ appeared in the wrong century after all; "Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication," no way to honor a star of Christ's magnitude. Judas chides Jesus, "Why did you choose such backward land and such a strange place?" Rice and Webber plunk him down into a happening place, and, ironically, their Christ and their Judas succeeded where their historical counterparts failed: they "reached a whole nation." However, Jesus Christ Superstar the rock opera reached those nations not by the path of faith but by the route of rock.

Source: Carole Hamilton, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Boyd assesses Rice and Weber's musical, basing it against traditional religious doctrine; the critic's conclusion is that the play trivializes the events of the Bible.

Can Jesus survive "*Jesus Christ Superstar*" ? Sometimes it is "Love Story" in Jerusalem. Other times it is only "The Greening of the Box Office."... But is it a serious work of art? And how does it deal with the Passion of Christ?...

In a myriad of details gone wrong, the show bears little resemblance to the New Testament. Yet, what is most important, Jesus' mission got misplaced somewhere from drawing board to Star Chamber.

Is this the Jesus of a significant counter-culture? Not at all. For we see him reject the sick and distressed victims of society who come to him for help. We see a restless and tired "star" Jesus arrogantly send Judas away to do the work of betrayal. Fatigue and introspection could have legitimately been portrayed. But despair looms too centrally in Christ, conveying a sense of mission lost and purpose forgotten. (p. 1)

[There] is clearly the absence of a cross rooted in earth in *"Jesus Christ Superstar*." Such lack of specificity leads to those quasi-religious fantasies which obliterate detailed truth. I am not one of those purists who decry the show's bypassing of the resurrection. After watching Jesus hang on a Daliesque golden triangle (an avant-garde symbol of the cross?) for a glamorous simulation of the crucifixion, I offer thanks to the pantheon of gods that we were indeed spared a resurrection. But in its failure to come to terms with the sacrifice of a Christ-figure, or the Passion of Christ, "*Jesus Christ Superstar*" also fails to become a seriously motivated and constructed rock opera.

It is several things: a Rockette operetta, a Barnumian put-on, a religioso-cum-showbiz pastiche, and a musicalized "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Judas Song." The Jews seem to be guilty, once again, of causing Jesus' death.... We are thrust against energy without exuberance, torture without tragedy, in this collage-in-motion. .. . (pp. 1, 7).

The sharp intrusion of sex□again and again and again□into the show can only focus attention on Jesus' own sexuality. Is he Gay? Bisexual? Straight? Asexual?...

The sexuality of Jesus will undoubtedly comprise the Exhibit A controversy about the show. He and Mary Magdalene fondle and kiss each other; I felt an implicit acceptance of the fact that they have enjoyed intercourse. The exposure of this side of Jesus' humanity drew cheers from the audience, perhaps in reaction against the celibate Jesus of churchianity who has been used traditionally as a major argument against sex outside of (and before) wedlock as well as against homosexuality.

Jesus as a human being (as well as the Son of God) with sexual feelings may be far overdue in our puritanical, sexually hypocritical society. Yet I feel that his sexuality was not handled sensitively or with taste in this gaudily inhuman parody.. . .

The show gives us a confused, tired but plucky Jesus who is going to the cross even if it kills him. Mary Magdalene is a cool, mod and sincere chick who digs Jesus but senses that he is very different from other men whom she has known. She sings a gentle ditty about the love for him that she feels. However, it is clearly not sufficiently deep a love to bind her to him through his torture and death. . . .

Judas' feelings about Jesus provide the real basis for the utterly fictional story line that links the musical numbers. Judas feels that he is trapped in a terrible role, one scripted by God and directed by Jesus.... Judas' acceptance of a predestination to damnation smacks unappetizingly of Calvinism with bitters. So Judas plays a role instead of being himself.

It is an absurd irony that a simplistic success. . . has come out of the ambiguity and violent paradox of Jesus' Passion, presented here with all dimension flattened. Even the controversy of Jesus, intellectu ally ignored in this show, is made marketable in a plastic-ware production. It doesn't have a soul. (p. 7)

Source: Malcolm Boyd, *"Jesus Christ Superstar□Two Views: APriestSays, 'It Doesn't Have a Soul',"* in *New York Times,* October 24, 1971, pp. 1, 7.

Critical Essay #3

In this review of the original Broadway show, Barnes appraises the musical merits of Jesus Christ Superstar, *stating that the show had "the best score for an English musical in years."*

Nothing could convince me that any show that has sold two-and-one-half million copies of its album before the opening night is anything like all bad. But I must also confess to experiencing some disappointment [with] ' *'Jesus Christ Superstar."* ...

It all rather resembled one's first sight of the Empire State Building. Not at all uninteresting, but somewhat unsurprising and of minimal artistic value....

Mr. Rice's intention was clearly to place Christ's betrayal and death into a vernacular more immediate perhaps to our times. His record sales would presumably indicate his success in this aim, but he does not have a very happy ear for the English language. There is a certain air of dogged doggerel about his phrases that too often sounds as limp as a deflated priest.

It is surely unfortunate, even bathetic, to have Christ at his moment of death remark solemnly: "God forgive them! They don't know what they are doing." The sentiments are unassailable, but the language is unforgivably pedestrian....

The music itself is extraordinarily eclectic. It runs so many gamuts it almost becomes a musical cartel.... [Mr. Lloyd Webber] has emerged with some engaging numbers.

The title song, "Superstar," has a bounce and exaltation to it, an almost revivalist fervor that deserves its popularity. I also much admire the other hit of the show, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." This also shows Mr. Rice at his best as a lyricist, although it is perhaps surprising to find this torch ballad sung by Mary Magdalene to Jesus Christ even a Jesus Christ Superstar. There is a certain vulgarity here typical of an age that takes a peculiar delight in painting mustaches on the "Mona Lisa" and demonstrating that every great man was a regular guy at heart....

[This] is not an important rock score in the manner of "Tommy" by The Who. It is, unhappily, neither innovative nor original. . . .

For me, the real disappointment came not in the music which is better than run-of-the-mill Broadway and the best score for an English musical in years but in the conception. There is a coyness in its contemporaneity, a sneaky pleasure in the boldness of its anachronisms, a special, undefined air of smugness in its daring. Christ is updated, but hardly, I felt, renewed.

Source: Clive Barnes, "Christ's Passion Transported to the Stage in Guise of Serious Pop" in the *New York Times,* October 13, 1971, p. 40.

Critical Essay #4

Edwards offers a mixed appraisal of Jesus Christ Superstar, *complaining that the play is willing to "raise hard questions while refusing to supply simple answers"; the critic also assesses the play as a new gospel for the counter culture of the late-1960s and early-1970s*.

[In *Superstar* the] Christ of faith gives way to the Jesus of history. Rice and Webber have acknowledged modern scholarship's discovery that the New Testament picture of Jesus is colored throughout with propagandistic interpretation more intent on convincing the reader that Jesus is the divine God-man than in giving an historically accurate picture of the flesh-and-blood man of Galilee. (p. 218)

Rice and Webber attempt to dramatize the lifestyle of the historical Jesus in the midst of the lifestyles and forces at work around him.

Is there any value in bypassing ecclesiastical propaganda to seek out this life-style? To an emerging culture suspicious of the establishment's propaganda, it allows a new and honest attempt to stand where the first hearers did, feel for oneself the impact of the Galilean's style, and answer for oneself, "Who do you say that I am?" ... *Superstar* attempts to dramatize Jesus' life-style in the midst of competing life-styles, and then leaves one with questions rather than with answers.... (pp. 218-19)

Although the "opera" has no single, obvious climax, musically and dramatically the climax seems to be Judas' disintegration and death at the beginning of record four.... Judas and his life-style are of special significance.

How is one to characterize this Judas? He can perhaps best be described as the "Uncle Tom" of the Jesus movement, the personification of a "failure of nerve" within the emerging life-style, a failure of nerve which turns back in fear and betrays the emerging culture to the existing power structure. .. .

[The] very strength of *Superstar* is its willingness to raise hard questions while refusing to supply simple answers. The complexity of personal motives and the tangled consequences of our actions in real history become evident in Judas. No only are we uncertain of Judas' real motives and culpability, but we become aware that Judas is uncertain of his own motives. He protests too much that he is not betraying Jesus for his "own reward." He sulks because Jesus does not give him his due as "right hand man." At the Last Supper he seeks to blame what he is about to do on the requirements of Jesus' own "ambition." Before he dies, Judas realizes that the consequences of his betrayal have been hastened along by forces beyond his own control.... [There] is the recognition that complex forces in society magnify the consequences of our actions, that demonic powers can be set in motion far beyond our intentions and cannot be called back....

The important place given Judas in *Superstar* contributes a problematic or ambiguous quality to the "opera," for who knows how far one should trust the observations of a Judas. It is this ambiguity which leads the audience toward the realization that it must arrive at its own interpretation of the figure of the Historic Jesus.

Mary Magdalene suggests the life-style described in Timothy Leary's advice: "Turn on and drop out." Whether the instrument of her turning on is acid, pot, yoga, or zazen, the end result is a detached, euphoric quality.... Jesus accepts the Magdalene's ministrations and defends her against Judas' criticism, but her oceanic feeling that "everything's alright" is transcended by the passion of his own search for "truth" or "God," and by the dramatic forces already unleashed. However, as with Judas, the portrayal of the Magdalene has its complexities. In a second solo, "I Don't Know How to Love Him," she sings of her consternation that Jesus should so disturb her "cool." ... Apparently the oceanic feeling can be shattered by an encounter with Jesus. Lest one be tempted to make too much of the Magdalene's relationship to Jesus, it should be noted that Webber and Rice have Judas wail this same love song to Jesus. For both the Magdalene and Judas, and we suppose for their spiritual descendants today, an encounter with Superstar is pictured as engendering love, fear, and mystery.... (p. 219)

In stripping away "the myth from the man," Webber and Rice find no profound philosopher, enlightened reformer, or heroic leader. The great strength of their portrayal of Jesus is their recognition that apart from the myth we have only the whisper of a voice and the outskirts of the life-style of a man. The triumph of *Superstar* lies as much in what Webber and Rice have not done as in what they have done. They have refused to create a fictional character to fill the void....

Where does the portrayal of Jesus focus? On Jesus as a flesh-and-blood human being. Even the outskirts of Jesus' life-style reveal his real humanity. Having his face cooled "feels nice, so nice," he joins the crowd in a happy "Hosanna, Heysanna," screams at the temple merchants, and admits "I'm sad and tired" and "scared." ... A common reaction to *Superstar* is: "It was the first time I ever thought of Jesus as a real person." The phantom-like portrayals of an otherworldly Christ on decades of funeral-home calendars and Sunday School walls apparently makes the focus on Jesus as a real person a remarkable revelation to this generation....

The words he speaks are drawn largely from the Gospel pronouncements, with very few original contributions by Tim Rice. He advocates living in the present, claims that he could give "plans and forecasts" unfathomable to those around him, and admits that earlier he was "inspired" but now is "sad and tired." He defends the Magdalene, cleanses the temple, and sings "Hosanna" with the crowd one moment while screaming at it to "Heal yourselves " at another. At critical moments Rice supplies Jesus with the lines "To conquer death you only have to die," and "I look for truth and find that I get damned." These along with a Gethsemane prayer, are the closest Rice comes to providing Jesus with a summary of his life and mission. In Gethsemane Jesus pleads: "I'd wanna know my God,... I'd wanna see my God," and this possibility encourages him to accept the death his God seems to require. It is suggested that his death might make all he has said and done "matter more," but its full meaning is not revealed. (p. 220)

After Judas' death, the events involving Jesus seem almost anticlimactic as he maintains a near-silence through the trials and speaks essentially the traditional words from the cross. As if to fill this vacuum, the voice of the dead Judas returns to raise the questions we might ask of Jesus.... (pp. 220-21)

Superstar concludes with two minutes of tranquil music ("John 19:41") suggesting the garden containing Jesus' tomb. The audience is left to decide for itself whether this is the quiet following an honest man's death or the peace of a new Eden prepared by a greater Adam for his descendants.

Superstar is a conservative attempt to express the counterculture's interest in Jesus, and its very conservatism has prepared a solid foundation for more creative and imaginative works in the future. It has avoided cliches, sentimentality, and mere fictionalizing, presenting Jesus' real humanity forcefully while allowing the audience great latitude for personal interpretation. (p. 221)

Source: Clifford Edwards, *"Jesus Christ Superstar:* Electric Age Messiah" in *Catholic World,* Vol. CCXIII, no. 1277, August, 1971, pp. 217-21.

Adaptations

A re-mastered version of the original cast recording is available from MCA Records, as is the original soundtrack from the film *Jesus Christ Superstar,* starring Ted Neely (Jesus), Yvonne Elliman (Mary), and Carl Anderson (Judas). A 20th anniversary production in London is also available on CD, through RCA Records. In 1994, a group of Atlanta-based rock musicians rerecorded the work as *Jesus Christ Superstar: A Resurrection,,* with Amy Ray singing the part of Jesus. The recording is available on Daemon Records. The BBC produced a 20th anniversary radio production around 1992, but has not released the recording. The original song lyrics and music score are widely available.

Topics for Further Study

How does the character of Jesus Christ respond to and reflect values prevalent in the 1970s when the rock opera was produced? How does this characterization compare to the Biblical representation of Christ?

Is sacred or religious material appropriate for a rock opera? Why or why not?

Research the political situation of the Jews in the time of Christ. Compare the play's portrayal of the Pharisees and the Zealots to your findings.

Why was Herod reluctant to execute Jesus?

Webber and Rice have been criticized for their sympathetic treatment of Judas Iscariot. How has the portrayal of Judas changed over the centuries, and what might account for any shift in sensibilities toward him?

Why does the play leave out the Resurrection of Christ?

Compare and Contrast

Time of Christ: Jesus was a rabbi with a devout following, but he did not himself promote the idea of "Christianity." This was a later development that arose out of the Resurrection experience and the Easter tradition that merged the legend of Jesus's rising with an ancient, existing myth of rebirth and renewal of a holy leader. Jesus was not a cult figure, but a charismatic religious leader of the Jews. Christianity during his life was neither a religion nor even a concept, although some of its precepts were developing.

1970s: Christianity had flowered and was beginning to wilt by the time that Webber and Rice wrote their rock opera of Jesus. Although churches flourished in numbers, religious belief had eroded since the medieval period. Even so, some devout Christians were offended by Webber and Rice's portrayal of Jesus as a man with human weaknesses, while others delighted in a refreshing look on a time-warn symbol. When the album was first released, churches all over the world incorporated its songs into their services, including some catholic churches, the Pope had just recently overruled the Church's ban against playing music in services.

Today: Christianity continues to grow across the globe, in a resurgence of fundamentalism that exists side by side with widespread secularism, atheism, and skepticism.

Time of Christ: Women did not preach or hold any kind of office in the church, and did not attend services in the Jewish synagogue, because their presence was considered a potential distraction for male worshipers.

1970s: The women's liberation movement sought greater equality for women in all walks of life, although actual change was slow in coming. Liberal Jewish synagogues allowed women to attend services, and a woman rabbi was ordained in 1935; however, orthodox synagogues were not as progressive.

Today: There are women preachers in many religions, although the Catholic church still does not allow them, and liberal and reformed synagogues have female rabbis and free seating for all worshipers. Some Orthodox synagogues have recently installed special one-way screens allowing women to hear the Torah being read and to observe other services, yet remain invisible to the male worshipers.

Time of Christ: Judaism was the religious faith of a group of persecuted people who held tightly to their customs and beliefs. It required following exacting rituals and extreme devotion.

1970s: Judaism had become more important to Jews as a sense of shared cultural and historical experiences than a shared system of beliefs. The religion had split into four main factions (orthodox, reformed, liberal, and conservative), and many Jews did not regularly attend services.

Today: Only about 20% of Jews attend regular synagogue services, and being Jewish still consists of one's familial cultural heritage as much or more than one's religious beliefs.

What Do I Read Next?

Stephen Schwartzs's *Godspell,* first performed in 1971 and made into a movie in 1973, is a more light-hearted musical version of the Jesus "event"; this time Jesus is once again surrounded by a troupe of carefree young people.

The novel *Ben Hur: A Story of Christ* (1880) by Lewis Wallace, as well as the 1959 film version *Ben Hur,* starring Charleton Heston, portrays the time period from the angle of a young Jew who is sent to the galleys on a false charge, escapes, and converts to Christianity.

The Greatest Story Ever Told (1949) by Fulton Oursler is a fictionalized biography of Jesus, told in a compelling style.

Quo Vadis (1897) by Nobel prize winner Henry K. Sienkiewicz (translated by W. S. Kuniczak) describes the historical times, focusing on Roman culture at the time of the birth of Christianity.

Webber and Rice collaborated one other work with a religious theme, *Joseph and the Amazing Colored Dream Coat* (1969), which they originally wrote for a children's production and revised after the success of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

The film version of *Tommy* (1975), directed by Ken Russell and written and performed by the rock group *The Who,* tells the story of Tommy, a deaf mute who becomes a superstar because of his skill at pinball.

Further Study

Anthem PD. "Jesus Christ Superstar" on http:// www.jesuschristsuperstar.com/1998, March 18, 1999.

An Internet site promoting the 1998-1999 UK tour of the rock opera. It also includes background with audio clips of Rice and Webber describing the play's genesis.

Daemon Records. *"Jesus Christ Superstar:* A Resurrection" on monsterbit.com/daemon/jcs.html, March 18, 1999.

An Internet site promoting the Daemon Records recording of the songs of *Jesus Christ Superstar* and the live Seattle production of 1996.

"Jesus Christ Superstar" on http://www.reallyuseful.com// Superstar/1999, March 18, 1999.

A promotional page for a theatre troupe production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* complete with play reviews and a summary of the twenty-five-year history of the rock opera.

McKnight, Gerald. *Andrew Lloyd Webber,* St. Martin's Press, 1985.

A biography of Webber's rise to fame as a composer of hit musicals.

Nassour, Ellis, and Richard Broderick. *Rock Opera: The Creation of* Jesus Christ Superstar *from Record Album to Broadway Show and Motion Picture,* Hawthorn, 1973.

A step-by-step description of the writing and publishing process of the play and film.

Walsh, Michael. *Andrew Lloyd Webber: His Life and Works: A Critical Biography,* Harry N. Abrams, 1989.

An updated biography that describes the composer's recent works as well as his early life and career

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Duncan, David Douglas. *"Jesus Christ Superstar"* in *Life,* Vol. 70, no. 20, May 28, 1971, pp. 20B-26.

"Jesus Christ Superstar Anniversary Page" on http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/2596/index.html, March 28, 1999.

Jewison, Norman, and Melvyn Bragg. Screenplay of *Jesus Christ Superstar,* based on the music and lyrics of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, Universal Pictures, April 3, 1972.

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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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