Indiscretions Study Guide

Indiscretions by Jean Cocteau

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Indiscretions is the English translation of *Les Parents Terribles*, by the French playwright and poet Jean Cocteau, which was written and first performed in 1938. The play is available as *Les Parents Terribles (Indiscretions)*, translated into English by Jeremy Sams (1995). When it was first produced in Paris, the play scandalized audiences with its portrayal of diseased love infecting a bourgeois family in 1930s Paris, and it was subsequently banned from the publicly owned theater by the city authorities. It still retains its power to shock. In the play, Cocteau returns to the theme of incest, which he previously explored in the play *La Machine Infernale*, produced and published in 1934.

To show a young man's attempts to escape the suffocating love of his mother, *Indiscretions* draws upon the ancient Greek story of Oedipus, who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. While Cocteau's play shares the tragic inevitability and melodrama of the Oedipus story, its elements of farce, sense of the absurd, and hilariously comic dialog cause the audience often to laugh at the most emotionally fraught moments.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: French

Birthdate: 1889

Deathdate: 1963

The French poet, playwright, novelist, artist, and film maker Jean Maurice Eugene Clement Cocteau was born to a wealthy family on July 5, 1889, in the small town of Maisons-Lafitte near Paris, France. His father committed suicide when Cocteau was ten years old. Cocteau was attracted to the theater at an early age. He loved to see his mother dressed for the theater, created toy theaters, and staged productions with his siblings. He briefly attended school, but was expelled.

By 1916, Cocteau was associating with an avant-garde group in Paris which included the painters Amedeo Modigliani and Pablo Picasso; the writers Marcel Proust, André Gide, and Guillaume Apollinaire; and the Russian ballet master Sergei Diaghilev. Diaghilev challenged Cocteau to write a scenario for a ballet, and the result was the ballet *Parade* (1917). The music was composed by Erik Satie, and the sets and costumes were by Picasso. The first performance caused a scandal because of its modernist nature. The audience rioted, and Cocteau commented that had it not been for the presence of Apollinaire, who was dressed in his military uniform and had a war wound, the authors of the ballet would have been attacked.

Though Cocteau was exempted from military service in World War I, he went to the front as a volunteer and drove ambulances. His reputation for frivolity was not helped by the fact that he had an outfit designed by a couturier for him to wear there, but the war made a deep impression on him. He wrote about his experiences in his novel *Thomas l'Imposteur* (Thomas the Imposter, 1923). A friendship he formed during the war with the aviator Roland Garros inspired Cocteau's first acclaimed book of poems, *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance* (Cape of Good Hope, 1919).

Cocteau openly said he was a homosexual, though he also had relationships with women. In 1918, he formed a close relationship with the fifteen-year-old writer, Raymond Radiguet. When Radiguet died from typhoid in 1923, a traumatized Cocteau took refuge in opium, to which he remained addicted for most of his life.

Cocteau rejected naturalism and saw almost all his work as poetry. In the preface to his play, *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* (The Eiffel Tower Wedding Party, produced 1921), a satire on bourgeois values, he announced that he was trying to create a poetry of the theater, where meaning was not in the text but the action of the play. None of the actors speaks; they dance and mime their roles. However, in subsequent plays, Cocteau turned to traditional text-based forms. In *Antigone* (produced 1922), Cocteau updated Sophocles's tragedy, initiating a lifelong preoccupation with contemporizing Greek myths. *Orphée* (Orpheus, produced 1926), based on the ancient Greek story of

Orpheus, is among Cocteau's most admired works. It explores the role of the poet and his relationship to inspiration.

Cocteau also wrote several adaptations of the Oedipus myth. *Oedipus-Rex* (Oedipus the King, produced 1927) is an opera-oratorio on which he collaborated with composer Igor Stravinsky. The play *Oedipe-Roi* (produced 1937) combines many performing arts to evoke tragedy. Cocteau's most respected reworking of the Oedipus story is the play *La Machine Infernale* (The Infernal Machine, produced 1934).

In 1930, Cocteau's first film, *Le Sang d'un Poéte* (Blood of a Poet) was released. It created another scandal because of its surrealistic strangeness.

After the composition of *La Machine Infernale*, Cocteau's financial difficulties led him to produce work that was less original and more commercial. Doing so damaged his reputation with critics, but his fame continued to grow. Two plays were especially successful: *Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde* (The Knights of the Round Table, produced 1937) and *Les Parents Terribles* (produced 1938; translated as *Intimate Relations*, 1961, and as *Indiscretions*, 1995). Both plays starred the actor Jean Marais, who became Cocteau's lover and muse. Published as *Les Parents Terribles (Indiscretions)* (1998), this play is available from Nick Hern Books.

In the 1940s, Cocteau moved away from classical sources toward contemporary issues. His play *La Machine à Écrire* (The Typewriter, produced 1941) became the second of his plays (*Les Parents Terribles* being the first) to be shut down by the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy government. The reason was not the content of the play but the fact that the playwright was a homosexual and a drug addict.

By the late 1940s, Cocteau had shifted his attention to cinema. After *La Belle et la Bête* (The Beauty and the Beast, 1946), Cocteau produced a film version of *Les Parents Terribles* (1948). In 1950, he produced arguably his greatest film, *Orphée*, which won prizes at the 1950 Venice Film Festival and the 1951 Cannes Film Festival.

Cocteau never aligned himself with any artistic movement, though he was influenced by dadaism and surrealism. Both movements set out to shock and bewilder observers and to challenge bourgeois values, including rationality.

Cocteau was elected to the Académie Française in 1956. He died of a heart attack on October 11, 1963, in Milly-la-Foret, Essone, France, after hearing about the death of his friend, the singer Édith Piaf.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Indiscretions opens on a scene of panic in Yvonne's chaotic bedroom. Yvonne, a diabetic, looks close to death. Her husband George thinks she has taken an overdose of insulin. Yvonne's sister Leo and George guess that Yvonne has been driven to desperation by the failure of Michael, the son of George and Yvonne, to return home the previous night. Yvonne explains that she forgot to eat or take sugar to balance her insulin dose as she was worried about Michael. Leo gives her sugar dissolved in water, and she recovers.

Yvonne and Leo discuss their family. Leo says that an uncle left his fortune to her because she is the only orderly member of the family among a group of □raggle-taggle gypsies.□ She is happy to support them all, even George, whose fruitless research on an underwater machine gun she claims to admire.

Leo tells Yvonne that she suspects that Michael spent the night with a woman and suggests that he is glad to escape the mess of Yvonne's □gypsy camp.□ She adds that George, too, has sought refuge with another woman, and this is hardly surprising, as Yvonne gives all her love and attention to Michael. Yvonne cannot believe that Michael would have an affair because she still thinks of him as a child, but she shows no concern at the news that her husband is straying. Leo recalls that George was originally her fiancé, but she pushed him and Yvonne together as she believed they were better suited. Leo points out that Michael is not a child, despite Yvonne's attempts to keep him dependent upon her, for example, by preventing him from taking a job.

Michael comes home to a grilling from Yvonne and George, who want to know where he has been. Michael decides to tell his mother on her own first, and the two snuggle up on her bed. He says that he has met a girl called Madeleine. She works as a bookbinder and has helped Michael financially. She is involved with an older man but has decided to break off the relationship to be with Michael. Yvonne, furious, accuses the girl of being a scheming older woman who is exploiting Michael. She makes a terrible scene and demands that he break off his romance.

Leo rushes in to calm Yvonne, who hits her. George summons Michael to his room, and they leave. Yvonne tells Leo that her suspicions were right: Michael has fallen in love with a woman, and he no longer loves his mother. Leo rebukes Yvonne for her selfishness. She advises Yvonne to keep control of her feelings. She says that she herself has had to do this, since she has always loved George. Leo has sacrificed her life to stay near George. Again, Yvonne is unconcerned about this revelation about her husband.

George enters, looking shocked. Left alone with Leo, George reveals that he has discovered that Michael's girlfriend, Madeleine, is the same woman with whom he has

been having an affair. What is more, he has lied to Madeleine, using a false name and claiming that he is a widower who has lost a daughter who looks like her. Recently, Madeleine had claimed that her strict married sister had come to live with her, so she could no longer see George at her flat. George had borrowed money from Leo to rent a flat so that he could continue to see Madeleine. George realizes that the story about the sister was an excuse not to see him. Madeleine had arranged to meet George that evening; he realizes that this was to break with him so that she could pursue her relationship with Michael.

George feels hurt. Leo, feeling sorry for him, suggests that they all go to visit Madeleine, as Michael wishes. There, George must take revenge on her by threatening Madeleine that if she refuses to break it off with Michael, he will reveal all about her affair with him (George). George agrees that he will arrange to see Madeleine in private at the beginning of the visit and issue his threat. George and Leo rejoin Yvonne, who reluctantly agrees to accompany them to Madeleine's. Michael, unaware of Leo and George's plan, is delighted that they will meet his girlfriend.

Act 2

Act 2 opens in Madeleine's tidy flat. Madeleine is nervous about meeting Michael's family. Michael reassures her but wishes that she had first managed to break off her relationship with the older man (actually George). She says that she was about to, but the man called and postponed the meeting. She admits that she still loves this man, but not as she loves Michael.

Leo arrives at Madeleine's flat and admires its tidiness. She has come in advance of George and Yvonne to warn Madeleine and Michael that George wants to see Madeleine on her own first. Yvonne and George arrive. Madeleine is shocked to recognize George as her older lover, but says nothing. George asks Yvonne, Leo, and Michael to leave so that he can speak to Madeleine alone.

Left alone with Madeleine, George reflects bitterly that this coincidence is like something out of the books that Madeleine binds, except that the books are mostly tragedies, and this is a comedy. He accuses Madeleine of lying to him, but she replies that he also lied to her about his situation, claiming he was a widower. She says that she lied to protect him, because she cares about his feelings. She adds that she only realized what real love was when she met Michael. She expects George to stand aside for the sake of Michael's happiness, but George says he has no intention of doing so. George orders her to break off her relationship with Michael, using a made-up story of a third man (not George) with whom she is having an affair. If she refuses, George will tell Michael about Madeleine's affair with George. Madeleine is shocked that George would try to stand in the way of her and Michael. She believes that Yvonne and George have only taught Michael how to be idle; she means to change him and put him to work. George claims that he only has his son's future happiness at heart. Madeleine cannot bear the thought of Michael knowing the truth about her and George, so she reluctantly agrees to do as George wants.

George tells Yvonne, Leo, and Michael that Madeleine has confessed that she is involved with another man and cannot marry Michael. Michael at first does not believe him, but when Madeleine does not deny the story, he tells his mother that she was right about her. Yvonne is relieved that she has her son back in her clutches. Madeleine tells Michael to leave and collapses on the stairs. George leaves.

Leo sends Michael home with Yvonne and stays to look after Madeleine. Leo tells Madeleine that she has guessed that the third man is an invention and that George forced her to lie. Leo admits that before she met Madeleine, she had little confidence in George or Michael's choice in women. But now that she has met her, she likes her. She suggests that she and Madeleine join forces to fight Yvonne and George. Madeleine is not confident, but she agrees to try. Leo tells her to come to visit them at five o'clock the next day, when she will clean up the □mess□ that George has made.

Act 3

At Yvonne and George's house, George and Leo discuss Michael and Yvonne's responses to the catastrophe. Michael is distraught and Yvonne is triumphant, as she thinks she has won Michael back. George has told Yvonne about his affair with Madeleine, but she was not interested, caring only about any effects on Michael if he should find out. Leo tells George that what he did to Madeleine was unforgivable. George reminds Leo that it was her plot, and he merely did what she told him. Leo orders him never to repeat that to anyone. She adds that she was wrong about Madeleine and wrong to do what she did, but now she is going to put everything right. George is unwilling, but Leo tells him that he must make a sacrifice, as she did. She tells him that she has always loved him, but sacrificed herself to ensure his happiness. She now knows that it was the wrong decision. George warns Leo that Yvonne will never agree to Leo's new plan to reconcile the lovers, now that she has Michael back.

Leo explains her plan to George: they will tell Yvonne and Michael that Madeleine did not feel worthy of him and that she invented the third man to set Michael free. She says that their family is □a wreck□ but that she is determined to salvage something before it is too late. George, ashamed, agrees that she is right.

Yvonne reports that Michael is in such despair that she is almost ready to give Madeleine to him, but she cannot do this because the girl is morally loose. George tells Yvonne that Madeleine is innocent and that the third man does not exist. He confesses that he forced Madeleine to lie and that he was motivated by revenge. Yvonne rebukes George for endangering Michael. George says that they have all nearly killed Michael and Madeleine out of selfishness, but it is not too late to save them. Yvonne cannot bear the thought of allowing the marriage to go ahead, saying that Madeleine is not in their class. George reminds Yvonne that there is nothing admirable about their family, whereas Madeleine offers Michael □real possibilities and fresh air and open space.□ Yvonne is unwilling to agree to Leo and George's plan. Leo and George tell her that Madeleine is coming to visit soon and that she, Yvonne, must tell Michael the truth. Yvonne is plunged into fear and confusion.

Michael enters, apologizes to Yvonne for sending her away, and tells George that he plans to accept the job he offered him in Morocco. Yvonne, faced with the terrible prospect of losing Michael, is now eager to tell him to truth so that he has no reason to leave Europe and her. George announces that Madeleine is innocent and that she invented the story of the third man to set Michael free because she thought she was not worthy of their class. Michael says they must find Madeleine, and Leo reveals that she has been concealing the girl in her room. Michael faints.

Madeleine enters and is joyfully reconciled with Michael, who has recovered from his faint. George and Leo notice that Yvonne has vanished. Yvonne shouts from the bathroom that she is just doing her insulin injections. She stumbles in and collapses on the bed. As Michael is about to take Madeleine to see his room, Yvonne calls out in terror. Leo says that she has poisoned herself. Yvonne explains that she had seen Michael and Madeleine, and George and Leo, all together. She felt she was an encumbrance and wanted to die. But now, she regrets her action. She wants to live and see Michael happy. She even feels that she will grow to love Madeleine. Madeleine tries to leave, but Leo says that Michael will need her, just as George will need her (Leo). Yvonne overhears Leo and curses them all, saying that she will poison them just as she poisoned herself.

As Yvonne is dying, she threatens to tell Michael that George was Madeleine's lover. George tries to silence her by kissing her on the lips, and Leo ushers Michael and Madeleine out on the pretense that she needs them to telephone the doctor again. Yvonne veers between wanting revenge by telling Madeleine the whole truth and wanting to live and see the couple happy. Then she dies. When George tells Michael to pay attention to his mother, Michael stamps his foot like a child and denies that she is his mother; she is, he says, his best friend. Madeleine, horrified, exclaims that Michael is mad. Michael breaks down by the bed, and Madeleine comforts him. The doorbell rings. It is the cleaner. Leo tells her that there is nothing for her to do, as everything is in order.

Characters

George

George is the patriarch of the family, the husband of Yvonne, and the father of Michael. He is an ineffectual and immature man□Leo calls him □an overgrown schoolboy□□who reads comics and spends much of his time in his study working on a useless invention, an underwater machine gun. Ignored by his wife, he is, figuratively speaking, the archetypal castrated male. Perhaps in an attempt to rediscover a sense of manhood, George has an affair with Madeleine before she becomes involved with Michael. His tragedy is that he loses both of the women in his life, Yvonne and Madeleine, to Michael. George's tendency toward petty-mindedness is shown in his readiness to break up his son's relationship with Madeleine by forcing her to invent an imaginary lover. He does this out of a desire for revenge against Madeleine and jealousy of Michael. However, under pressure from his sister-in-law Leo, he redeems himself by admitting that he did wrong and declaring Madeleine innocent, thereby enabling the young lovers to be together. These actions make clear that he has an element of honesty and generosity that Yvonne lacks.

Leo

Leo is Yvonne's cool and calculating sister, who lives with her and George. She was previously George's fiancée before she pushed him and Yvonne together, as she thought her feelings for him were too cerebral to make him happy. She is, however, still in love with him. Leo is sensible, practical, and devoted to order. She was left the family fortune by a rich uncle and uses it to support George's family. She spends much of her time cleaning up after the messy Yvonne, George, and Michael, and rescuing Yvonne from various crises. Leo's motivation is not at first pure, in that she is driven by her illicit love for George. To make his life easier, she concocts a plan, which George carries out under her orders, to destroy the romance between Michael and Madeleine. However, when she meets Madeleine, she recognizes a kindred spirit of orderliness and realizes that the love between Madeleine and Michael must be supported. She admits that she was wrong to try to divide them and goes on to put right all the wrongs that have been done to the young couple by George (albeit under her direction) and Yvonne. In this respect, she becomes the family's figurative as well as literal cleaner. Her actions show that there is one thing that is more important to her than her love for George, and that is love itself.

Throughout the play, Leo acts as a foil to the other characters, in that she is the sane, grown-up one with whom the audience can identify. She is a wise and sardonic commentator on the actions and motivations of the other characters.

Madeleine

Madeleine is a beautiful young woman with whom Michael falls in love. She is three years older than Michael and is much more practical than he is, earning her own living as a bookbinder and living in her own very tidy flat. Unknown to Michael, she is also his father's mistress. Madeleine hates disorder and lies, and she contrasts with Michael's chaotic family. In the spirit of honesty, she tells Michael the truth about her older lover from the start, but he does not recognize his father in her description because George has lied to Madeleine about his name and situation. It is Madeleine's tragedy that though she has a pure motivation, she is forced to lie by George, who makes her invent a third lover in order to break off her relationship with Michael. Madeleine is saved by Leo, who, out of respect for her orderliness, becomes her ally. Through Leo's intervention, Madeleine is in the end joyfully reconciled with Michael. Signs that their future is bright include Madeleine's remark to George that she intends to put Michael to work, which meshes well with Michael's determination to break away from his mother and take up a job, even at a point when he thinks he has lost Madeleine.

Michael

Michael is the twenty-two-year-old son George and Yvonne. He is dominated by his mother and suffocated by her all-consuming passion for him. Yvonne treats him as a child whom she can mold to her will, but at the same time, as her lover. She has never let him get a job because she wants to keep him dependent on her, and this has made him impractical, idle, and immature. Madeleine refers to him as □a child.□ Nevertheless, Michael is relatively untainted by his mother's dark obsession. He is an innocent character whose motivation is pure: he wants to break away from his mother and marry Madeleine, whom he loves, and he pursues this goal honestly. He welcomes Madeleine's ethos of orderliness and hard work, which suggests that he will cast aside his mother's influence and become an adult.

Yvonne

Yvonne is the darkest character in the play and the center of its disorder and uncleanness, both on the physical and psychological levels. She is primarily responsible for the □gypsy camp□ quality of the family's existence. She is as emotionally dependent upon her savage and all-consuming passion for her son as she is physically dependent on her insulin (she is a diabetic). She lives in a darkened, gloomy, messy atmosphere, seldom rising from her bed. She ignores her husband and is unconcerned about Leo's revelations that he is having an affair and that Leo is in love with him: all she cares about is Michael.

Yvonne opposes the romance between Michael and Madeleine from the start because it threatens her ownership of him. Selfishly, she threatens suicide and verbally attacks Madeleine, whom she views as a rival. She is the most dishonest of all the characters, never intentionally admitting her true motives. This is shown in the absurd reasons she

gives for disapproving of Madeleine as a match for Michael: throughout the play, she claims that Madeleine is a scheming old woman, but after she meets her, she changes her story, saying "she's too young . . . compared to me." Unwittingly, she has revealed her true conviction: that only she can be the lover of her son.

Yvonne's inability to face the truth about herself makes her irredeemable, in that the only way that the right order can be restored and the young couple marry is for Yvonne to die. Her near-suicide at the beginning of the play foreshadows her actual suicide at the end. What would be a tragic event in one of the ancient Greek plays to which Cocteau was referring in his borrowing of the Oedipus story, however, is undermined by absurd farce. Yvonne keeps changing her mind about whether she wants to die or live to see the young couple be happy, and Leo and George frantically try to silence her in any way they can as she tries to tell Michael that Madeleine was George's mistress. It seems emblematic of Yvonne's disorderly nature that her death is the final mess that her long-suffering family is forced to clean up.

Themes

Perverted Love

Indiscretions explores the chaos and confusion of destructive family relationships in 1930s Paris. In his introduction to Jeremy Sams's translation of the play, Simon Callow quotes Cocteau as writing in the program of the original production: □Here . . . is the Rolls-Royce of families, uncomfortable and ruinous.□ In the play, Leo comments:

this family is a wreck, a hopeless, hypocritical, middleclass mess, hanging on desperately to its false values as it rolls inexorably to its inevitable doom, like some dreadful juggernaut, crushing everything in its path□hopes, dreams, possibilities, everything.□

The relationship between Yvonne and Michael is based on a lie, a refusal to see the reality of the situation, as the two do not acknowledge each other as mother and son. Michael hardly ever calls Yvonne mother, but uses a pet name, Sophie. Yvonne, for her part, does not treat Michael as a son, but as a lover. She has ejected her husband George from his rightful role and is unconcerned about revelations of his infidelity except insofar as it could affect Michael. The sexual element of the relationship between Yvonne and Michael is never made explicit. It cannot be said with certainty that physical incest occurs, though it is suggested: she cuddles up with Michael on her bed and touches up her makeup when she hears him coming home. The abuse that Yvonne perpetrates on Michael is emotional. She creates a terrible scene when Michael tells her of his love for Madeleine and sets herself up as a rival to Madeleine, implying that Michael has to choose between them. In a revealing turnabout, Yvonne claims during the first two acts that Madeleine is unsuitable for Michael because she is a scheming old woman, but in act 3, scene 2, as honesty begins to permeate the family, she changes her story to □she's too young . . . compared to me.□ In fact, Madeleine is just three years older than Michael, whereas Yvonne is over twice his age. In Yvonne's unnatural, ingrown world, only the mother is a fit lover for the son.

The diseased nature of this relationship infects others in the family. The sidelined husband George has an affair, which happens to be with Madeleine, which in turn makes George and Michael into rivals and leads to a determination on George's part to end Michael's romance with Madeleine. Michael is less tainted by this unhealthy love than Yvonne. He is protected by his natural innocence, which prompts him to want to break away from his mother to live with the orderly, honest, and psychologically healthy Madeleine. In all of these twists on family relationships and sexuality, Cocteau explores the oedipal connections between parent and child and how these are threatened as the adult child turns outward to the world to find an appropriate sexual partner.

Order and Disorder

Throughout the play, the external disorder and order associated with the characters reflects their psychological state and their effect on other people. Yvonne is the center and source of disorderliness, living in a darkened room amid piles of dirty linen and other mess. Leo, in contrast, is □obsessive about order□ and is constantly cleaning up the mess made by Yvonne, of both the literal and figurative sorts. Madeleine is also a force for order, as is obvious from her tidy flat. Michael, though superficially tainted by Yvonne's disorderly ways, has a fundamental □cleanness,□ to which Madeleine is attracted. She means to clean him up even further by encouraging him to work and make something of himself. George stands between disorder and order, in that he becomes drawn into Yvonne's disorder when she is determined to split up the young lovers, but finally he is persuaded by Leo to become her ally in the restoration of order and the union of the lovers.

Purity of Motive

In her book *French Drama of the Inter-War Years*, Dorothy Knowles quotes Cocteau's comments on *Indiscretions*: □Two of the roles create the balance of the order and of the disorder which motivate the play. The young man whose disorder is pure, and his aunt whose order is not pure.□ Cocteau means that though superficially Michael has acquired some of his mother's disorderly living habits, he is at his center innocent. His motive, to marry Madeleine, remains clear, and he is honest about it.

In contrast, while Leo is the personification of order, her motivation is not pure because she has long been secretly in love with George. Her plot to separate the lovers stems from a hidden desire to make George's life easier and her lack of faith that George or Michael would make a good partner. While she redeems herself in her rapid realization that Michael's union with Madeleine must go forward, the question of whether Leo could have prevented Yvonne's suicide remains unanswered. An even darker question is hidden beneath Leo's calm exterior: is her determination to reconcile the lovers at all motivated by the knowledge that doing so will destroy Yvonne, enabling Leo to unite with George? When George asks Leo whether she loves Yvonne, she only replies, □Don't dig too deep in anyone's heart.□ She warns Madeleine, too: □Don't try and understand me. Don't look too deep; God alone knows what lurks in the rag and bone shop of the heart.□ It is clear that Leo believes that her motivations are not fit to be examined. Nevertheless, she is instrumental in restoring the right order of things, thus becoming a positive force that transcends the twists and turns of her personal motivation.

Style

Symbols

Indiscretions is rich in symbols that serve to draw attention to the family dynamics. Images of outward disorder at Yvonne's house, such as the blocked bath and piles of dirty linen, symbolize her emotional stagnation and chaos, as well as the disordered and unnatural relationships that she generates. Leo calls the house □a gypsy camp,□ a metaphor that to Cocteau's audience would suggest messiness and a lack of responsibility, as well as pointing to the tendency of this family to live outside the general social norms. Leo cleans up Yvonne and George's mess, both literally and figuratively (when she reconciles the lovers he has separated). Madeleine's tidy and well-functioning apartment, in contrast, shows her healthy and honest approach to life.

Cocteau uses sound, too. Stage directions indicate doors are slammed, symbolizing the indirect and nonverbal expression of anger within this family. The effect on the audience may be jarring, just as the interactions between the family members are emotionally jarring.

Darkness and light are used symbolically to indicate the degree of psychological health or sickness of the characters and the degree of truth that they can tolerate. Yvonne lives in a claustrophobic atmosphere of darkness, suggesting a womb-like or sinister state in which she tries to envelop Michael. The fact that George seeks a lighter and healthier atmosphere is symbolized by his attempt to turn on the lights in act 1, scene 3, though he is prevented by Yvonne, who says, □I like the darkness.□ This shows that Yvonne has no interest in changing or in facing the truth. It is no surprise that George flees to the □real possibilities and fresh air and open space□ offered by Madeleine. When Madeleine is about to arrive at Yvonne's house, a stage direction mentions that it is getting lighter, a reference to Madeleine's positive influence on the family. After George's lies about Madeleine having another lover take hold of Michael, he lies face down in the dark, symbolizing that he is (temporarily at least) back in Yvonne's grasp. When he finally emerges from his room, it is no accident that he has decided to take a job in the sunny country of Morocco, a sign that he is not prepared to retreat into the darkness of his mother's womb once again but has chosen the light. This is also a sign that he truly deserves Madeleine, a creature of the light.

The underwater machine gun that George works on alone in his study is an obvious and comic phallic symbol. The fact that it is a useless invention that will never leave the drawing board symbolizes his castration by his wife, whose object of passion is her son not her husband.

Yvonne's diabetic dependency upon insulin, and her inability to manage even this vital aspect of her life efficiently, is a symbolic reference to her dependency upon Michael and the emotional disorder that this causes. Her relationship with Michael is as much an illness as her diabetes.

Boulevard Theater

In the program of the original production of the play, as Simon Callow quotes in his introduction to Jeremy Sams's translation of *Indiscretions*, Cocteau wrote, □with this play, I'm resuming the tradition of boulevard theatre.□ The boulevard theater movement sprang from the popular plays that were performed in the theaters of the Boulevard du Temple, a street in Paris, from the last half of the eighteenth century. The boulevard theater became known for crime stories and melodramas, as well as farces and comedies based on the conventions of infidelities and mistaken identity, and the location of these theaters provided the name to an entire subgenre of drama. Cocteau consciously used boulevard traditions in *Indiscretions*. The melodrama is seen in Yvonne's excessive responses to Michael and her suicide. The boulevard comedic conventions are exactly reflected in Cocteau's plot. George's discovery that his mistress is also his son's fiancée is the obvious example. George himself comments to Leo, □My God, you could put it in the silliest Boulevard farce and it would be dismissed as being a little far-fetched.□ But where Cocteau's play differs from conventional farce is that George's discovery is marked as much by pathos and tragedy as by humor. George says, □It'll break my heart.□ Similarly, Cocteau subverts the expected tragedy of Yvonne's suicide with the farcical element of having George and Leo use desperate tricks to try to stop the dying Yvonne from revealing the truth about George and Madeleine to Michael.

Cocteau's major innovation in this play was to combine a boulevard dramatic style with the tragic inevitability of the ancient Greek Oedipus story. The combination enables him to draw attention to the tragedy within the absurd and the absurd within tragedy.

Distancing

In this play, Cocteau makes use of a dramatic technique known as *Verfremdungseffekt* (translated as distancing effect or alienation effect). The technique formed an important part of epic theater, a theory about theater that was pioneered by the influential German playwright and poet Bertold Brecht (1898-1956). Brecht was a communist. He believed that a play should not cause spectators to identify with the characters and action on stage or to undergo an emotional catharsis (purging). Instead, a play should encourage spectators to retain a critical distance that enables them objectively to identify social problems highlighted in the play, reflect on them, and then take action to change the world for the better. He tried to achieve this aim through various methods, including having the actors hold up explanatory signs to the audience or address the audience directly. The effect was to remind the audience that the play is a construct and can be changed, just as society can be changed.

One Brechtian distancing method taken up by Cocteau in *Indiscretions* is a reminder to spectators that they are watching a play. In act 2, scene 3, after Leo has recited a melodramatic passage from one of Madeleine's books in order to test whether people upstairs can hear people downstairs, Michael tells Leo that she could have been an

actress. The audience will pick up on the irony that the woman playing Leo is indeed an actress. There is an additional, deeper message that Leo is lying about her reasons for checking the soundproofing in the flat: she does not want George's attempts to persuade Madeleine to lie to be overheard. Thus, the character Leo is also an actress. While Cocteau is not primarily trying, in the political sense, to encourage the audience to criticize social ills, the effect of the distancing technique in this case is to encourage the audience to stand apart from Leo and to remember that at this point, her motivation is not pure. Like an actress in a play, she is trying to create an effect. In this way, Cocteau deconstructs the illusion of reality which the stage presents.

Dramatic Irony

Cocteau uses irony to draw attention to the gap between normal family relationships and the twisted relationships in this play. For example, In act 2, scene 1, Madeleine tells Michael about her older lover: □I was as fond of George as I would be of your father, as I will be of your father when I meet him.□ Neither she nor Michael knows that her lover, in fact, is Michael's father, but the audience knows. This technique, where the audience knows something of which the character is unaware and which would transform his or her attitude if he or she did know, is known as dramatic irony. There is another example of dramatic irony in the same scene. Michael tells Madeleine about his mother, □Sophie's told me so often that she's my best friend, I could hardly hide anything from her, could I?□ Michael's innocence is both amusing and touching, as the audience is aware that Yvonne is acting as his bitterest enemy. Dramatic irony permeates Sophocles's play, *Oedipus Rex*, and the technique here is a fitting parallel.

Historical Context

The Parisian Artistic Community between the World Wars

In the period from 1918 to 1939, between World War I and World War II, Paris was famous for its cultural and artistic communities. The city became a vibrant meeting place for artists from other European countries and the United States, including exiled Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, Spanish painters Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, and various writers, such as the Irish James Joyce and the Americans Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Cocteau was at the center of this group of artists and formed many fruitful collaborations. For example, with Picasso, the Russian ballet master Sergei Diaghilev, and the French composer Erik Satie, Cocteau produced the revolutionary new ballet *Parade* (1917).

Many aspects of this artistic community were characterized as *bohemian*, a term derived from the French word for *gypsy*. The term comes from the association of gypsies with Bohemia, which during these years was the westernmost province of Czechoslovakia, later redrawn as the Czech Republic. From the mid-nineteenth century, the term was used for certain artists, intellectuals, and writers who rejected social conventions and chose non-traditional lifestyles. Bohemian communities formed in places where people could live cheaply, such as the Montmartre in Paris. This village within the city of Paris is on its highest hill and was a gathering place for painters and other artists in the 1920s and 1930s. Bohemians gained a reputation for unorthodox marital relations, lack of cleanliness, and a tendency toward drug use, as well as literary and artistic creativity and innovation. The term carries a suggestion of privileged knowledge or extraordinary artistic ability.

In *Indiscretions*, Cocteau satirizes pretensions to bohemianism in the character of Yvonne and her family. Yvonne, as Leo points out in act 1, scene 2, has all the less admirable aspects of bohemianism□the messiness and confused family relationships□yet none of the artistic distinction. Leo calls the family □The middle class gypsies. 'Cos, let's face it, we're not artists, we're not bohemians, not remotely.□ She points out that at the first sign of independence on Michael's part, the bohemian façade falls away, exposing Yvonne's narrow bourgeois (property-owning middle-class) values and petty snobbery.

The Oedipus Story and the Oedipus Complex

The Oedipus complex is a theory developed by the Austrian founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud believed that young boys go through a developmental stage in which they unconsciously wish for the exclusive love of their mother. Since they see their father as a rival for their mother's love, they feel jealous of him and unconsciously wish for his death. Freud named this pattern of behavior the

Oedipus complex after the ancient Greek story of Oedipus, who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother.

The Oedipus story held a great fascination for Cocteau, who revisited it in various works. The story gave him the opportunity to explore one of his favorite themes, the devouring female who suffocates a man with her love and impedes his maturation or artistic development. Another attraction of the story for Cocteau is that it portrays man as fate's plaything, helpless in the face of destiny and doomed to suffering. This sense of tragic inevitability is never far from the surface in Cocteau's works. In *Indiscretions*, Yvonne's fate is marked out from the play's first scene□featuring her failed suicide attempt.

Decadence and the Rise of Communism

The French Communist Party (*Parti communiste français*, or PCF) was founded in 1920 and attracted many intellectuals and artists in the 1920s and 1930s. The growth of communism and socialism in Europe drew strength from the Wall Street stock market crash in 1929 and the subsequent economic depression. It was thought that economic liberalism had failed, and alternatives were sought.

It should be noted that Cocteau was not a communist. He believed that poets, among whom he numbered himself, existed in a realm apart from politics, and he criticized other artists, including André Breton, the leader of the surrealist movement, for allying themselves with communism. However, the growing disapproval of the bourgeois class, which was perceived as self-absorbed and non-productive, was part of the *zeitgeist*, or spirit of the age, and was picked up by political and artistic thinkers alike. This was partly an effect of World War I (1914-1918), in which whole sections of society who had never done manual labor were mobilized into the workforce, laborers were seen as heroes who helped win the war, and the value to society of inherited wealth and nobility was increasingly questioned. In *Indiscretions*, Cocteau satirizes pretensions to nobility in Yvonne's hypocritical contempt of Madeleine for not having a maid, when Yvonne herself does not have one, and in her references to the supposed inferiority of Madeleine's family, when Yvonne's only claim to family distinction is a grandfather who counted the semi-colons in the work of a great writer.

The disorder, idleness, and chaos that characterize Yvonne's family would have been seen by the many communists among Cocteau's artistic Parisian contemporaries as symptoms of the decline into decadence of the bourgeoisie. In his review of *Indiscretions* for the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby notes that □the play is . . . a spookily revealing artifact from a society grown soft and corrupt.□ He points out that when the play was written, the Nazis were occupying France, and □Frenchmen willingly assisted the Germans in rounding up other Frenchmen and sending them off to the camps.□ The character of Madeleine represents the capacity for honest hard work that was viewed as the mainstay of a well-functioning society by the communist and socialist movements.

Critical Overview

Indiscretions, under its original title *Les Parents Terribles*, was first produced in 1938 at the Théatre des Ambassadeurs, which was owned by the Municipal Council of Paris. Though the play was popular with the public, it was accused of immorality due to its portrayal of an incestuous family relationship and was banned by the Municipal Council from the city-owned theater. It reopened the following year at the Théatre des Bouffes-Parisiens, where it continued to play to packed houses. By the time the play was revived in 1941, the Nazis had occupied Paris, and France's Vichy government was collaborating with them. Attacks on the play's supposed immorality escalated, and members of France's fascist party, the *Parti Populaire Francais*, threw tear gas at the actors. The Germans closed the play.

Critic Raymond Bach, in his □Cocteau and Vichy: Family Disconnections□ (1993), argues that the play's portrayal of disorderly and diseased family relationships threatened the model of the ideal family propagandized by the Vichy government. In particular, the play was at odds with the public image of the head of state, Marshal Pétain, who was portrayed as a hero and father of the nation.

Critics tend to be divided on Cocteau's work in general, and their views on *Indiscretions* are no exception, despite its popularity with the theater-going public. Some critics have attacked the rhetoric and melodrama of the piece, and the caricatured quality of the characters, while others object to its reliance on what they consider to be a discredited theory, Freud's Oedipus complex. Supporters of the work point to the innovative concept of updating an ancient Greek tragedy to shock and surprise modern audiences. The perceptiveness with which the dynamics of the □terrible parents□ are drawn, the tightness of construction, and the ebullient wit and humor of the play have also been praised.

Jeremy Sams's translation of the play was first performed at London's National Theater in 1994. The production, directed by Sean Mathias, was so successful that it was moved to the Barrymore Theater on Broadway the following year. The role of Michael made an overnight star of the actor Jude Law, who made headlines with his leisurely nude entrance. The production ended in a spectacular effect whereby the entire set fell into rubble, reflecting the collapse of the family under the onslaught of truth. The production was enthusiastically received and earned Tony nominations for the director, designer, and most of the actors.

Eileen Blumenthal, reviewing the production for *American Theater*, notes the juxtaposition of tragedy and farce in the play, though she sells Cocteau short when she writes, □The triumph of Sean Mathias's direction is that he realizes□even more, it would seem, than Cocteau himself did□how fundamentally this tragedy is a farce.□ Writing in the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby calls the play Cocteau's □remarkable, brilliantly bent boulevard comedy,□ and a □lethal if often hilarious farce about the darkest neuroses of familiar comic characters.□ He also hails Mathias's production's □breathtaking panache.□ Referring to the fact that Cocteau wrote the play in just eight

opium-fuelled days, Canby notes that it has □the eerie seamlessness, the tight construction and the density of a work composed in one spontaneous rush of the imagination.□

Mathias's production, according to Robert Hurwitt in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, □played for over-the-top outrageousness,□ which, however, □tended to mute some of the play's darker themes.□ In her 2001 production at the Marin Theater in Mill Valley, California, director Amy Glazer downplayed the more farcical elements in favor of clarity. This, Hurwitt remarks, highlighted the shallowness of the characters and produced a plodding effect in places. He comments that □Glazer's version could use more of the same febrile energy□ as the production done by Mathias. On the other hand, Glazer's production succeeded in retaining the play's □fever of sharp spikes of comedy and tragedy□ and □delivers a darker, more disturbing impact in the end□ than Mathias's production.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Robinson has a Master of Arts in English. She is a writer and editor and a former teacher of English literature and creative writing. In the following essay, Robinson examines the journey from disorder to order in Jean Cocteau's Indiscretions*.*

Indiscretions explores the chaos engendered in a bourgeois family by a mother's obsessive love for her son. The mother, Yvonne, is determined to keep her son, Michael, for herself and so seeks to destroy his burgeoning romance with the young Madeleine. The destructive nature of the love that Yvonne feels for her son is summed up by her husband George when he says, □She'd rather hold his corpse than see her son in someone else's arms.□ This is a love that is more allied with death than with life.

Yvonne's internal disorder is reflected in the external disorder she creates, both on the literal and emotional levels. As far as the literal level is concerned, she lives in a darkened room amid piles of dirty linen, lounging on her messy bed and creating dramas of various kinds. On the emotional level, Yvonne manufactures life-or-death crises out of what should be the everyday business of life. She is diabetic and depends upon timely doses of insulin and sugar for survival but cannot manage even this vital aspect of her life. The play opens with her narrow escape from death after forgetting to take sugar to balance her insulin; this fit of distraction stems from Michael's failure to come home the previous night. Yvonne repeatedly has to be rescued from her manufactured crises, and in a normal family, this task would fall to her husband, George. But Yvonne has shut George out of her life; she lavishes all her passion and attention on her son. George is emotionally and physically absent, sequestered in his study. Therefore, Yvonne is rescued, time and again, by her sensible sister Leo.

From the point of view of dramatic convention, too, Yvonne is the enemy of order. The natural order of comedies, which *Indiscretions* follows, demands that the young fertile couple marry and have children. The role of older people is to support them in this process, not to oppose them. But Yvonne disrupts this natural order. She tries to prevent the marriage between Michael and Madeleine. What is more, her neglect of George drives him to seek affection from a mistress, who happens to be Madeleine, a woman who is young enough to be his daughter and who intends to marry George's son. George, his feelings hurt by Madeleine's desertion, joins his wife in opposing the marriage. In the context of drama, these confused relationships are perversions of the natural order and must be put right before order can be restored. All of them have their origin in Yvonne's diseased and disorderly passion. When George tells Yvonne that it is the natural order of things that children grow up and take the place of older people like them, Yvonne replies, □I wouldn't know□order's not my forte.□

The great force of order in the play is Leo. Her character is diametrically opposite to Yvonne's. She is □obsessive about order□ and spends much of her life cleaning up Yvonne's mess on both external and internal levels. It is Leo who rescues Yvonne from her initial overdose of insulin, and Leo who, from the start, tries to persuade Yvonne not to oppose the marriage of Michael and Madeleine. Her passion for order is only

overshadowed, temporarily, by her long-hidden love for George. When George discovers that his son's girlfriend is also his own mistress, he feels hurt and vengeful and wants to separate the young lovers. Faced with the prospect of losing both of the women in his life to his son, George begins to express something of his wife's destructive and suffocatingly possessive passions. Leo too is drawn into George's desire for vengeance, for a brief moment, because she feels sorry for him. But once she meets Madeleine, she is struck by the tidiness and order of her flat and her life and recognizes a kindred spirit of order. (In this play, the stage sets elucidate character and tell a story.) Leo's loyalty to order proves stronger than her loyalty to George. She forms a new alliance with Madeleine□□let's call it order versus disorder□□and hatches another plot to reconcile the lovers. Leo draws attention to the symbolic link between external and internal disorder when she insists that she is helping Madeleine primarily because □the mess made here today, by George, offends me. A horrid heap of dirty linen.□

Madeleine's role as a force for order is underlined by the symbolism of the audience's first sight of her. Michael has a bath at her flat as the bath at his home is blocked up□a symbolic reference to the unhealthy stagnating emotions generated by Yvonne's influence. Madeleine's bath, naturally, is never blocked. Furthermore, her cleansing influence will save Michael from following his mother into decadence and regression. When she tells Michael that she loves his cleanness and that he is not really dirty but □grubby, like kids are grubby,□ symbolically, she is saying that he has picked up his mother's disorderly ways but that he is pure and innocent at heart and, therefore, redeemable.

The theme of order and disorder is reflected in the carefully planned structure of the play. In her book *The Esthetic of Jean Cocteau*, Lydia Crowson points out that the play is constructed on three triangular relationships. While in the visual arts, triangular forms may create harmony, they generally do the opposite in human relationships, as *Indiscretions* graphically proves. The first triangle consists of George, his wife Yvonne, and Leo, who has always loved George. This triangle generates the action of the play, since Yvonne has separated herself from George, enabling George and Leo to become allies. Leo's devotion to George makes her plot with him to separate Madeleine from Michael, but subsequently she changes her allegiance to the young lovers, whom she unites. The second triangle is the tragic Oedipal one of George, Yvonne, and their son, Michael. Yvonne's suffocating love for Michael excludes everyone else, even her husband. The third triangle, involving George, Michael, and Madeleine, builds on the other two and precipitates a crisis in the family. George takes a mistress, Madeleine, who, unknown to him, is also his son's girlfriend. This triangle involves the sexual mix-ups typical of farce. It also has Oedipal echoes, because George is soon to be the father-in-law of his mistress, Madeleine, and also, though Michael does not marry his mother, he marries someone who occupies his mother's place in his father's life.

For order to be restored, these unruly triangles must be destroyed and a rightful order of couples established□a young couple and an older couple. This is in line with the comedic tradition in which older people must stand aside and allow a young couple in love to marry.

Adults behaving like children is part of the theme of disorder that runs through the play. It is against the natural order of things and, in Leo's terminology, a mess that has to be cleaned up. As may be expected, it is another perversion of the natural order in which Yvonne and her family excel. Early in the play, Leo tells Yvonne:

There are two distinct tribes in this world, children, and grown-ups. I, alas, fall into the latter category . . . you . . . George . . . and Michael . . . you belong to the former. Children who will always be children, and as children do, commit the most appalling crimes, apparently thoughtlessly.

Leo is a grown-up because she does not get involved in the childish antics of the rest of her family. She stands apart, cleaning up their messes and advising them on the right thing to do.

Yvonne is childish in that she is too bound up in her own obsessive world to consider others, leading to irresponsible behavior. Leo tells her, □you do damage without even noticing.□ George, faced with Yvonne's inability to treat him like a man, behaves like a small boy, playing with useless inventions and reading comic books and science fiction. When he tells Madeleine that he has no intention of allowing her to marry Michael, Madeleine tells him that he is □a child□: □Someone's broken your nice toy, so you want to break theirs.□ Madeleine also recognizes that Michael is a child, but he is partially excused by his youth. Moreover, he is eager to change, and she intends to encourage him to grow up and shake off his immature irresponsibility, just as he washes off his grubbiness in her bath.

Through Leo's intervention in pushing forward the marriage, all but one of the childish characters grow up. Michael is able to take his place beside the already adult Madeleine (though, with an ambivalence typical of Cocteau, in her desire to change Michael, she is also acting like a parent to Michael's child□albeit a far more benign and healthy parent than Yvonne). Only Yvonne, unable to mature, continues her childish selfishness in the ultimate destructive act, suicide. This act, prompted by Leo's plot to enable the reconciliation of the lovers, frees George, or so the audience can speculate, to enter an equal relationship with Leo.

The process of restoring order depends upon the revelation of certain truths. These include Michael's announcement that he is in love with Madeleine; George's discovery that she is also his own mistress; and Michael's discovery, brought to light by Leo, that the story about Madeleine's having another lover is false. George and Leo both change during this process, adapting their attitudes and motivations as they acknowledge the rightful order of things (Michael's union with Madeleine) and the injustice of their obstructing it. But Yvonne is not sufficiently self-aware or mature to adapt to the new climate of truth, so order can only be restored by her death. It is significant that after she dies, the cleaner rings the doorbell but is sent away by Leo: □I told her that there was nothing for her to do . . . that everything was in order.□

Source: Claire Robinson, Critical Essay on *Indiscretions*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

Indiscretions, under its original title *Les Parents Terribles*, was adapted as a French-language film in 1948. Jean Cocteau wrote the script and directed. The film stars Jean Marais as Michael, Yvonne de Bray as Yvonne, Gabrielle Dorziat as Leo, Marcel André as Georges, and Josette Day as Madeleine.

A second French-language television adaptation was released in 2003. This version was directed by Josée Dayan and stars Jeanne Moreau as Leo, Nicole Garcia as Yvonne, François Berléand as Georges, Cyrille Thouvenin as Michael, and Ariadna Gil as Madeleine.

As of 2006, the 1948 version (with English subtitles) was available from www.inetvideo.com. The 2003 version, in French, was available from www.glowria.fr.

Topics for Further Study

Choose an ancient story, myth, or legend from any culture and create a short story, mini-play, poem, film, or dance that updates it to the present time. Whichever art form or mixture of art forms you choose, this assignment should culminate in your reciting aloud or performing your work in front of a group. Make some written notes for your audience about which aspects of your source story were easy to carry over into the modern age, which were more difficult, and why.

Create an original work of art for performance that uses two or more different art forms. Possible forms include poetry, narrative, drama, painting, costume design, dance, film, and mime.

Research the work of an artist or writer who lived and worked in Paris at any time between 1900 and 1945. Trace the development of his or her work during a time period of your choice, identifying any influences from certain artistic movements or other artists or intellectuals.

Write a short story, poem, or play about a destructive relationship.

Research an aspect of incest and write a report on your findings.

Watch one of Cocteau's films and write a review of it. Give reasons for your responses, whether positive or negative, or a mixture of both.

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Paris is the hub of a vibrant artistic and intellectual community, many members of which are expatriates from other countries, including the United States and Russia. Cocteau is at the center of this community, interacting with writers, painters, composers, and ballet choreographers, with whom he sometimes collaborates.

Today: Increased global mobility and technologies, such as the Internet and television, enable artists from many different cultures to interact and exchange ideas without gathering necessarily in one location.

1930s: Performed in the original French, *Les Parents Terribles* shocks Paris audiences with its portrayal of an incestuous family relationship and is banned, in part because it is perceived as immoral.

Today: While artistic works dealing with previously taboo subjects such as incest and child abuse are relatively common and widely accepted, some works of art continue to be censored. Reasons given are more often a fear of giving offense to certain religious or ethnic groups than immorality. Works that are thought to encourage pedophilia because of the way they present children are still vulnerable to censorship.

1930s: Sexual and covert or non-sexual incest are taboo. On the rare occasions when victims speak out, they are frequently ignored or vilified; often they are not believed. Incest is not considered acceptable subject matter for artists and writers, though this taboo is broken within the safer genre of pagan myth, by the German composer Richard Wagner in his opera *The Ring Cycle*. In most industrialized countries, incest is forbidden by law, though a surprising number of incest laws only cover sexual penetration of a minor. Covert incest is impossible to restrict by legislation.

Today: Incest is taboo, though it does form the subject matter of various works of art. Twentieth-century novels which feature incest include Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969) and J. R. R. Tolkein's *Silmarillion* (1977). Many support groups exist to help victims and perpetrators of incest, though they frequently have to overcome the wall of silence that surrounds the practice.

1930s: Freud popularizes his concept of the Oedipus complex, claiming that it is universal and applies to girls (in whom it is called the Electra complex) as well as boys.

Today: Many modern psychologists question the universal application of the Oedipus complex. Some contend that the sex drive is not as important a factor in childhood development as Freud believed.

What Do I Read Next?

Cocteau revisited the Oedipus story and the theme of incest in several works. The greatest among these is widely considered to be his play *La Machine Infernale*, first produced and published in 1934.

The source for Cocteau's Oedipus works is the ancient Greek play *Oedipus Rex*, written in 428 b.c.e. by the tragedian Sophocles. It is well worth reading for its compelling story, emotional power, and extraordinary influence on writers and thinkers up to the present day. The 2006 Cambridge University Press *Sophocles: Oedipus Rex*, edited by R. D. Dawes, gives readers lots of support in its excellent introduction and analyses of the play's language.

Thomas Mann's novel *The Holy Sinner* (1951) is a story based on the medieval legend of St. Gregory. It highlights the spiritual consequences of incest and describes redemption through forgiveness.

The novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), by Indian author Arundhati Roy, features a set of twins who have a cathartic sexual experience. The novel shows how the small things in life build into bigger things that govern the fate of individuals.

Silently Seduced: When Parents Make Their Children Partners Understanding Covert Incest (1991), by clinical psychologist Kenneth Adams, explores the problem of covert parent-child emotional incest, as opposed to overt sexual incest. Adams argues that covert incest, while seldom identified, is deeply harmful to children, as it denies them proper parenting, betrays their innocence, and places unfair demands on them to deal with their parents' needs.

Further Study

Paini, Dominique, and others, *Cocteau*, Center Pompidou, 2004.

This book is a collection of fascinating essays on Cocteau's life and art. The authors, some of whom knew Cocteau personally, argue that he has been severely undervalued because of his overt homosexuality and his involvement in many art forms, including plays, poetry, novels, drawing, painting, scenery design, film, and ballet (leading some to brand him a dilettante).

Seigel, Jerrold, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

This book examines the part played by artists, writers, and intellectuals in the development of the bohemian counterculture in Paris. Featured figures include Cocteau, Émile Zola, Édouard Manet, and Arthur Rimbaud.

Steegmuller, Francis, *Cocteau: A Biography*, David R. Godine, 1992.

This popular and well-written biography makes clear why Cocteau is one of the most influential people in French art and literature. The book also gives a sense of Paris during Cocteau's lifetime.

Van Derbur, Marilyn, *Triumph over Darkness: Understanding and Healing the Trauma of Childhood Sexual Abuse*, Beyond Words, 1991.

This book is a collection of writings and drawings that provide first-person accounts of incest, rape, and other forms of abuse. Seventy women share their experiences and describe how they overcame their trauma.

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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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