A Lesson from Aloes Study Guide

A Lesson from Aloes by Athol Fugard

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Athol Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* was first performed at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 1978. In 1980, it was performed at the Yale Repertory Theater, starring James Earl Jones. Later that year, the play opened on Broadway, gaining an enthusiastic public and critical response. This play, as is the case with many of Fugard's other works, focuses on the tensions that arose between whites and blacks living under the system of apartheid in South Africa. The plot of *A Lesson from Aloes* centers on a farewell dinner in 1963 given by a white Afrikaner for his good friend, a black activist who has given up the cause. During the course of the evening, the two friends confront issues of loyalty and betrayal and sanity and madness, as they struggle to make sense of their experience in an oppressive and divisive world and of the effect that experience has on human relationships.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: South African

Birthdate: 1932

Athol Harold Lannagan Fugard was born in the Karoo village of Middleburg, South Africa, on June 11, 1932, and grew up in nearby Port Elizabeth with his Polish Irish father and Afrikaner mother. He studied for two years at the University of Cape Town in South Africa before signing on as a merchant sailor. A few years later, he worked as a freelance journalist and law clerk. In 1959, he relocated to London where he became involved in the theater there, acting and writing plays that focused on racial tensions in South Africa. His first play, *Blood Knot*, was produced there in 1961. In 1962, after returning to Cape Town, he wrote a letter supporting a boycott of segregated theaters in South Africa, which, along with the controversial nature of his plays, resulted in the confiscation of his passport and the harassment of his family. He then involved himself in South African theater, and in 1973, he and his wife, Sheila, founded the Space Theatre there.

By 1982, his plays began to enjoy an international audience and have since been produced in South Africa, London, and New York. *A Lesson from Aloes* was published in 1979 and first produced in the United States in 1980. Published by Theatre Communications Group in 1981, this play won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Fugard's *Master Harold ... and the Boys* premiered in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1983, and was another big success.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, Fugard continued his successful career as a playwright and also became involved in film. He acted in the film versions of some of his plays, including *Boesman and Lena* (1976) and in other films, such as *Gandhi* (1982) and *The Killing Fields* (1984). In 1992, he directed the film version of his play *The Road to Mecca*, and in 2006, the film version of his 1980 novel, *Tsotsi*, won an Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

A Lesson From Aloes opens in the backyard of Piet and Gladys Bezuidenhout's home in South Africa in 1963. Piet is seated in front of an aloe plant, reading aloud from a book on the subject, trying to identify his specific plant but not having any luck. Gladys sits nearby. After he tells her that if this is a new species, he will name it after her, he then begins a brief monologue on the importance of names, quoting from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to help prove his point.

Gladys claims that time is passing slowly that afternoon as they wait for their friend Steve and his family to come for dinner. Piet asks if everything is ready in the kitchen for them, and Gladys tells him it is. He tells her to relax then and enjoy the lovely autumn weather, but she is worried about getting sunburned. When Piet returns with her sun hat, she appears anxious and goes into the house to confirm that she put away her diary.

Piet again turns his attention to his aloe, insisting that he must not neglect it. He asks Gladys whether they have enough food, noting that Steve is bringing his wife and four children. Her response that food is □not going to be the problem□ reveals her apprehension about their arrival. When Piet tries to calm her by reminding her that they are friends, Gladys claims that she is □out of practice□ and is worried about coming up with conversation, noting that they have been the first visitors since she has been back from the mental hospital.

Piet turns his attention to his plant again and reasserts the importance of naming, explaining that a name is the first thing people give a newborn and someone met for a first time. He is frustrated that he cannot find the right name for his plant and then discusses its qualities, describing its ability to survive in harsh terrain. Piet suggests that there may be a lesson in the plant's survival mechanisms for all of them, but Gladys refuses to identify herself with it and begins to get upset by their discussion. She claims that conversation with him always turns political, □a catalogue of South African disasters□ because he □seem[s] to have a perverse need to dwell on what is cruel and ugly about this country.□ She insists that she wants more out of life than just to survive. Although she is afraid of the country and the effect it can have on her, she is determined not to let it pass on its □violence□ to her. In an effort to lighten the mood, Piet shifts the conversation to the upcoming dinner.

Act 1, Scene 2

As they get ready for the dinner, Gladys tell Piet that she feels isolated there while he is at work since no one is nearby. She notes that during the almost seven months that she has been back from the hospital, not one of their friends has come to visit. When she

wonders whether they are avoiding her, Piet declares, □it's a dangerous time and people are frightened,□ citing all of the political and social unrest that has been occurring. Gladys insists that his explanation is too simple; she complains about people's □lack of courage and faith,□ alluding to the political activism in which they are no longer involved. Piet admits that he is frightened, too.

Later, Gladys proudly recalls every word from a quote by Thoreau about finding and following a purpose in life that Piet had recited to her on their first date. When he admits that he still believes in the sentiment, Gladys declares that she envies him that. She insists that she would be lost without her diary, which keeps her secrets. When she brings up the fact that her diaries were stolen from her, Piet tells her to try to forget, but she cannot. As she remembers the government officials coming into her room, she gets increasingly angry and agitated. Piet tries to reassure her that they will not come again, but she is not sure that she believes him.

When Gladys discovers that Piet still has the receipt the men gave him for the diaries, she demands that he rip it up so she can cancel those years. After Piet tears up the receipt, she calms down a bit, explaining how important the diaries were to her. But her hysteria returns when she thinks about how her trust in herself and in life has been shattered and declares that there is no safe place to hide her diary. She begins to attack Piet, blaming him for her □condition□ but then pulls back and apologizes. When Piet offers to cancel the dinner, she tells him that she will be all right and that she does not want to hide anything anymore. The scene ends with her telling Pier, □I am trying,□ suggesting that she is struggling to cope with her fragile emotional state.

Act 1, Scene 3

Piet declares that he owes Steve □more than anybody else in this world,□ since his friend gave him a sense of purpose. He explains that when he worked as a bus driver, he had no interest in politics. On the morning of a bus boycott, he was reassigned into the □Coloured area□ where he saw people □full of defiance□ over the penny increase the government demanded for bus fares. He wondered why they made such an issue over a penny, but then started listening to a man who was handing out pamphlets and speaking to a crowd on a street corner. Steve was that man, and he was soon arrested by the police, but the next day he was back on the corner.

Piet decided that he should hear what the man had to say and was surprised that the crowd welcomed him, which became, as he describes, □the most moving thing that has ever happened to me.□ Piet quit work that day, and a week later, he was handing out pamphlets with Steve on the same corner. Even though the bus company got their penny raise, Piet saw the boycott as a success since it □had raised the political consciousness of the people.□ Political activism like this, he was certain, could □make this a better world to live in.□

Piet then tells Gladys that Steve and his family are leaving for England and will not be able to come back. Although she is surprised, Gladys declares that they are very lucky

to be leaving. She knows that she could never convince Piet to leave and becomes cynical about the fight against apartheid that Piet and Steve were both so committed to now that it seems to have failed. She admits that she could never become as devoted to their cause because some of their goals, such as overthrowing the government, frightened her.

When Piet argues that the movement's slogans were not empty, that they, not their dreams, failed, Gladys notes that just one person, the informer, failed. Someone apparently told the police that Steve was going to break the order that banned him from meeting with his friends, and so he was arrested. Piet insists that he does not know the identity of the informer and tries to change the subject to the upcoming dinner, but Gladys presses the point, asking him if other people think that he is the informer. Piet admits that it appears that they do, but that Steve does not believe it was him. After Piet tells her how horrible it is to be considered an informer, Gladys asks, □it's not true, is it?□ Piet does not respond and turns away. Later, he announces that Steve and his family should be arriving soon.

Act 2

Two hours later, Steve arrives without his family, claiming that one of his daughters is ill. Piet is thrilled that Steve has arrived, sure that □he wouldn't have come if everything wasn't all right.□ When he and Steve toast the □good old days,□ Piet recites the quotation he found for the occasion. Piet later declares that he has been thinking a lot about his days on the farm when he had to help bury the child of a family that had worked for him. The child died of a stomach ailment since there had been no clean water on the farm. On that day, Piet admits, □a sense of deep, personal failure overwhelmed me,□ as the family waited for him to say a few words, and he was too overcome with emotion to speak. Three months later, he left the farm.

Gladys tells Steve that he is fortunate to get out of the country, and he asks her what England is like, thinking from her manners, that she has lived there. Gladys at first denies this, but then admits, □In a way I suppose I am from England,□ referring to Fort England Clinic, the mental hospital where she received treatment. Steve then shows Piet an old snapshot of him and his father on the day the latter caught a big fish, □the biggest moment in the old man's life.□ Soon after, however, the family was kicked out of their home, which had been declared a white area, after losing all of their money trying to fight the relocation. Steve notes that it □finished□ his father.

Steve wants Piet to admit that he understands why Steve is leaving, but Piet does not want to talk about the subject. Trying to justify his decision, Steve explains that he has not been allowed to work for four years and that he has to get his family out so that they can survive, insisting that he does not want to be a martyr to the cause. He asks Piet to name one thing they accomplished and to admit that they fought for a lost cause, but Piet cannot agree. Steve tells Piet to get out while he can and come to England with him.

When Gladys tells Steve that everyone thinks that Piet is the informer and asks Steve if he thinks so too, Piet tries unsuccessfully to stop her, which causes her to grow agitated. She declares that enough lies have been told and that Piet is the informer. After Piet refuses to defend himself, Steve tells about the mental torture he endured while incarcerated, and that eventually, he told them everything he knew about the group's political activities, information, ironically, that the police already had. Steve then asks Piet if he is the informer, noting that Steve's wife thinks that he is, but Piet still refuses to respond.

Gladys declares that she admires Piet's faith in himself and admits that she lied about his being the informer. When Steve asks her why she lied, she becomes angry and argues that he is not the only victim of their country and rails against Piet for not protecting her from the police and from the doctors who gave her shock treatments. She becomes hysterical when she remembers the treatments, insisting that they □burned my brain as brown as yours, Steven.□

After Gladys escapes into the house, Piet explains how after the police took her diaries, she became paranoid and thought that he was one of them. Piet then tells Steve that he did not deny her charge because there would have been no point if Steve had believed it. After Steve leaves, Piet goes in to Gladys, who admits that she tried to wreck his friendship with Steve and that she wanted to destroy the goodness in Pier, just like the country has done to its people. She decides that she has to go back to the clinic but will □go quietly this time.□ Piet gives her pills to help her sleep and goes into the backyard where he sits with his aloe.

Characters

Gladys Bezuidenhout

Gladys Bezuidenhout is a middle-aged white woman, living with her husband in South Africa. She spends the entire evening trying to hold onto her sanity, but by the end of the play, she recognizes that she will need to go back to the mental hospital. Gladys is eventually overcome by her fears about her safety amid the racial tensions of South Africa. These fears carry over into other areas as well, as when she gets nervous about whether she will be able to make conversation with Steve's wife, whether his son's boisterousness will upset her, and whether people are avoiding her. Her fears also transfer into an obsession with where to hide her diary so that no one can read it, although by the end of the play, Piet discovers that she has not been writing in it.

Gladys insists on setting herself apart from black Africans, which suggests that she has racist attitudes. She obsesses about getting sun burnt, although it is now autumn. When she explains, □Mommy was terrified that I was going to end up with a brown skin,□ she is speaking about her own fears as well. Her desire to protect herself from the sun so that she would not turn brown has been thwarted, however, by the shock treatments she received in the mental hospital, which, as she tells Steve, have □burned [her] brain as brown as [his],□ an admission that helps speed her descent into madness. Another way Gladys tries to keep herself separate is through her language. Steve notes that she talks like an Englishwoman, and she always uses a formal address for her husband and Steve, referring to them only as □Peter□ and □Steven.□

Piet Bezuidenhout

Piet feels a strong identification to his heritage and to his home. That identification, however, is problematic since Afrikaners are part of the apartheid movement in South Africa. Piet devotes himself completely to whatever he becomes involved in, farming, political activism, or raising aloes. He needs a clear sense of purpose, even if it is directed toward naming aloes. When he fails at one enterprise, such as his farm and his fight for the cause, he quickly finds another project, refusing to be consumed by a sense of defeat.

Sometimes that adaptability causes him to ignore reality, as is the case with his wife's emotional instability. He is accommodating of her needs, assuring her that what she has prepared for dinner will be fine and getting her a sunhat to alleviate her fears that she will be burnt. Yet he continually sidesteps the reality of her mental health, turning to his aloes rather than discussing the cause of her fears. He values his friendship with Steve but avoids the reality of the racial tensions that have affected it. He also does not comment on Steve's descriptions of the torture he endured or the fact that, as a result, he told the police all that he knew about his and his friends illegal activities. When he

ignores painful realities, Piet tries to sustain his comforting vision of his homeland and his place in it.

Steve Daniels

When Steve comes to dinner without his wife, who believes that Piet is the informer, he proves his loyalty to Piet and his trust in him. He shows his good humor when he first arrives, as he jokes with his old friend. Steve is honest enough to admit that he broke under torture, that he became an informant, and that he has □had enough□ of his difficult life in South Africa. He was devoted to the fight for equal rights in his country, but when he can no longer support his family, he decides to move to England for their sakes, even though it is difficult to leave his homeland.

Themes

Sanity and Madness

During the course of the play, Gladys struggles to maintain her sanity by pushing back her fears that she is not safe. At one point, she admits to Piet that she is even afraid of his aloes because, she claims: "they're turgid with violence, like everything else in this country. And they're trying to pass it on to me." Her mental state results from the governmental officials reading and confiscating her diaries, which made her feel "violated." Piet explains to Steve that after that incident, she became more and more paranoid to the point that she thought her own husband was a spy, and, as a result, she was sent to a mental institution.

In an effort to try to maintain her sanity, Gladys redirects her fear into anger, and Piet is her target. She insists that he is to blame for her "condition" since he is the one who convinced her to trust in herself and in life, and now she does not trust in anything, not even his ability to protect her. Gladys declares that the diaries contain intimate information that a woman addresses only in private dialogue with herself. Her loss of trust causes her to obsess about where to hide her diary so that no one will find it, but she cannot find any safe place, for her or her diary.

Her anger also causes her to accuse Piet of being the informer who was responsible for Steve's incarceration. But when Piet refuses to respond to her accusations, her anger is deflected and her fears return as she recognizes that Piet feels safer in their environment than she does. This recognition reinforces her own fears that by the end of the evening become so severe that she feels herself slipping back into madness. Gladys's inability to maintain her sanity reveals the profound effect that an insane political realm can have on the personal one.

The Consequences of Isolation

Both Gladys and Piet feel isolated in their home and community although Gladys is the only one to admit it. The streets around their community are relatively empty, due most likely to the racial tension that surrounds them. Also, their friends, who suspect Piet of informing on Steve, have been noticeably absent. Using avoidance as a coping mechanism, Piet fills his time tending to his aloes so that he will not dwell on the failure of his cause to which he has devoted himself so completely. The isolation, however, has had greater effect on Gladys, which is evident in her response to Steve's coming over for dinner. She exclaims: "I won't have any trouble finding something to write in my diary tonight. At last! Other people! Just when it was beginning to feel as if Peter and I were the last two left in the world." She tells Piet that during the day "it's hard sometimes to believe there is a world out there full of other people." The isolation helps push her further from sanity since she becomes more afraid when no one is home and when she has no one to help her face reality. Gladys's response to isolation illustrates

that the social as well as the political can have a great impact on emotional and psychological stability.

Style

The aloes in the play's title become symbolic of the situation of each of the main characters in the sense that they all must struggle to survive their harsh environment. The one □nameless□ aloe that Piet keeps returning to throughout the evening becomes especially symbolic of the characters' situation due to its anonymity. Piet notes that since the aloe is confined in a tin, its roots are □going to crawl around inside ... and tie themselves into knots looking for the space creation intended for them.□ Africa has become a tin for Piet, Gladys, and Steve, confining each of them in different ways. Steve's tin is created by the oppression of apartheid, which ultimately causes him to take his family and leave his country. Gladys's is formed by the fear generated by her husband's involvement in the cause to overthrow the system, which is brought to a peak when government officials raid their house and steal her diaries. Piet is restricted by the failure of his cause, which removed his sense of purpose and limited his activities to tending plants.

Fugard suggests that extra care must be taken with aloes and people alike when they are confined by their environment. Piet notes that the aloes will not survive if he neglects them. Gladys also will not survive if Piet does not stay vigilant in his attempts to reassure her that she is safe, and Piet will not survive unless he has the distraction of his plants, which takes his mind off of his failed cause and damaged relationship with his wife and best friend. Perhaps, Piet has the best chance of survival since he, like the plant, has developed a thick skin, a lesson he has learned well. Ultimately, however, the play illustrates how apartheid confines and isolates, an unhealthy, even dangerous system, against nature. Adapting and coping within the confines of this unequal system cannot be called living.

Historical Context

The Colonization of South Africa

Dutch colonists were an early group of outsiders to settle in South Africa. Calling themselves Afrikaners, they established Cape Town colony in 1652 and set up a rigid social and political hierarchy that gave them complete control of the government and the power to force most Africans into slavery. When the British seized control of the colony in 1795, they continued the system of racial segregation set up by the Afrikaners, appropriating land from South Africans and encouraging large groups of immigrants from Europe and Britain to settle there. Although Britain outlawed slavery in 1830, the South African government continued to enforce racial segregation. In 1910, the white minority institutionalized policies that disenfranchised Africans and legalized racial discrimination and segregation. A few years later, British troops forced hundreds of thousands of Africans off of their land, which was confiscated by the government; these displaced people were moved into restricted, separate communities that did not have adequate living facilities.

Some colonists suffered under this system as rural Africans were forced to urban settlements. Afrikaners, who were only one rung below the British in the established hierarchy, were especially hard hit as their farmers lost many of their cheap laborers. They feared that growing unrest in the black communities would further jeopardize their economic status if reforms were enacted that enabled blacks to gain political power. The Afrikaner Nationalist Alliance was subsequently formed in order to assist blacks in gaining a voice in the government. The alliance proposed a political and social system that would address the growing concerns of the white minority, which they called apartheid, an Afrikaner word for apartness.

Apartheid

The system of apartheid was based on the division of South Africa into four racial groups: the whites, predominantly British and Dutch descendants; the Africans, black descendents of indigenous Africans; the Indians, immigrants from Asia and India; and the Coloreds, South Africans of mixed race. The ideology of apartheid asserted the dominance of the white race because of its perceived racial superiority and granted it the power of governance in all areas. To ensure the effective control of the country, racial segregation was enforced. This system was adopted and put into effect in South Africa in 1950, after Afrikaners aligned themselves with the National Party, which won control of the country in 1948. The government passed the Group Areas Act, which restricted all persons of color to segregated living and work areas with substandard facilities.

In the 1950s and 1960s, black Africans, often aided by sympathetic whites, formed political groups that began to protest government policies through strikes, boycotts,

demonstrations, and riots. In the 1960s, some members of the international community also protested, which resulted in South Africa's withdrawal from the British Commonwealth. In 1985, Britain, along with the United States, imposed economic sanctions on the country in response to its apartheid policies. By the 1990s, the South African government, led by President F. W. de Klerk, began to reform the system, legalizing black political groups and releasing black political prisoners. By 1994, the system of apartheid was dismantled, and the country held for the first time, free general elections that resulted in Nelson Mandela becoming South Africa's first black president.

Critical Overview

The play received mostly positive reviews that applauded its treatment of race relations in South Africa as well as its dramatic structure. In his essay on Fugard's plays, Michael J. Collins insists that while *A Lesson from Aloes* lacks □the immediate political relevance□ of his earlier work, it manages □without ever ignoring or mitigating the horrors of life in South Africa, to move beyond the particulars of place and affirm, in a world of cruelty and suffering, the value and dignity of human life everywhere.□ He especially praises act 2, which he claims □is beautifully written, exquisitely paced and inordinately moving.□

Joel G. Fink, in his review in *Theatre Journal* of this □important□ play, echoes Collins's sentiments regarding act 2, arguing that □with the arrival of Steve, ... the evening's dramatic conflicts are truly engaged.□ He finds fault, however, with act 1 in which, he claims, □too much effort is focused on the introduction of poetic symbols.□ Overall, Fink concludes that □the play's theme and literary textures are strikingly and surprisingly akin to those of Chekov□ and that it □confirms that Athol Fugard continues to grow and mature as a dramatist.□ Gerard Molyneaux, in his review of the play for *Library Journal*, found it to be □honest□ but □not altogether dramatic.□

Sheila Roberts, in her article on Fugard, does not find the thematic import of the play compelling enough, suggesting that □no lessons are learnt.□ She concludes, □The aloes can only teach Piet to wait. But for what? The play doesn't tell us.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of twentieth-century American and British literature and film. In the following essay, she considers the importance of language in the play.

At the beginning of Athol Fugard's play, *A Lesson from Aloes*, Piet Bezuidenhout, an Afrikaner living in South Africa with his wife, Gladys, searches a book on plant species in an effort to discover the name of an aloe plant that he is growing. When Gladys questions his determination, Piet insists on the importance of the task, noting that a child is given a name as soon as it is born and the first thing people do when they meet is to exchange names. Adam, he claims, named his world as soon as he was created. Consequently, he declares, □there is no rest for me until I've identified this.□ Not finding an exact match for his □Aloe Anonymous□ frustrates him because, he admits, knowing its name would make him feel □that little bit more at home in [his] world.□ Having the right name or words for an object or an occasion has become important for Piet, since they also provide him with a sense of order and meaning, which are lacking in this world of great racial conflict. During the course of the evening, Piet uses the power of language to try to impose an order onto his world, but he ultimately discovers that there are some aspects of human experience that cannot be so easily named or understood.

Piet considers his aloe plant □a stranger in our midst.□ Naming it would immediately forge a connection between him and the plant and between him and the terrain of South Africa, where the species thrives. Establishing connections with the indigenous forms of life in this country is important to Piet because he knows the difficulties of living in a world of racial segregation and has been caught up in the fight to end apartheid. However, he hints at the complications he will face in his determination to use language as a connecting device when he quotes lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, a play about prejudice and the perceived need to keep opposing factions separate. He says, □'What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.'□ The stage direction notes, □*These lines, and all his other quotations, although delivered with a heavy Afrikaans accent, are said with a sincere appreciation of the words involved*.□ Yet when Piet declares, □Alas, it's not as simple as that, is it?□ he recognizes that naming does not necessarily bridge separations.

Piet has tried to impose a sense of order on his world by naming his home Xanadu, which means a place of beauty and contentment. Yet neither he nor Gladys has been content there as they are caught in tensions between blacks and whites in their country. Piet tries to make his home a safe place for himself and his wife, but the outside world, in the form of government officials who conduct raids on whites sympathetic to black causes, has invaded their home, leaving Gladys feeling violated and on the brink of insanity and Piet afraid for both of them. Their home is also the place where the tensions between Piet and his friend Steve erupt, damaging a relationship that had given both a sense of meaning and purpose.

Piet, however, insists that □names are more than just labels,□ as he struggles to maintain a sense of order and gain a clear understanding of his world and his

relationship to it. At one point, he paraphrases another part of Juliet's speech to Romeo, thinking about his own name, □trying to hear it as others do.□ He insists that there is a clear connection between his name and who he is. His name identifies his □face□ and his □story.□ While it may seem easier for Italians like Juliet to □deny thy father and refuse thy name,□ Piet declares that this would be a difficult task for Afrikaners: □No. For better or for worse, I will remain positively identified as Petrus Jacobus Bezuidenhout ... and accept the consequences.□ The consequences can be problematic for a member of a group of immigrants that exploited black Africans during their colonization of the country and helped the government establish the repressive system of apartheid. His name and his classification as an Afrikaner give him his identity but appear at odds with the cause of racial equality to which he is devoted, which includes the fight to overthrow the South African government and establish civil rights for all the country's inhabitants.

In conjunction with the function of naming, Piet uses words in the form of quotations to provide meaning to his experience. As he tries to impress on Gladys the importance of naming, he quotes Shakespeare to give his view more authority. Later, he finds what he considers to be the perfect quotation to express his feelings about Steve and their dinner together. Reciting quotations, however, can also be an avoidance strategy; he attempts to reestablish order when he reads the quotation for Steve, in effect trying to shift the conversation away from discussion of the informer. The reestablishment of order also becomes his motive when he repeatedly returns to his aloe during the evening. Gladys insists that the aloes give him a purpose, which he denies, claiming that they are only a pleasure to him. But Gladys understands his actions at times more than he does, declaring, □with your aloes, quoting your poetry ... in spite of all that has happened, you've still got a whole world intact.□

Piet discovers, however, that no words can offer meaning and comfort in certain situations, such as when a child dies on his farm. At the grave, he became so emotional that the words would not come, and eventually he had to walk away. He spent the next three months reading a book of poetry and stories, □looking for something [he] could have said out there in the veld,□ but he never found anything.

Piet also learns that words can create chaos. The word, informer, changes in the play. First, it is applied as innuendo to Piet by others, including Steve's wife, who think that he betrayed Steve to the authorities. Gladys then uses the word as a lie and a tool for revenge when she tells Steve that Piet is the informer. Ironically, this accusation causes Steve to confess that he informed on members of their group when he was tortured in prison.

By the end of the play, Piet and Steve have exposed the breakdown of their relationship with each other as well as the failure of the political cause that brought them together. Steve admits to Gladys that he and Piet have nothing left to say to each other by the end of the evening, so Steve leaves with no parting words. Yet Piet still clings to his belief that language can have a great deal of significance, and so turns at the end of the play to his unnamed aloe as Gladys drifts off to a troubled, drugged sleep. Instead of thinking about her return to the mental clinic, Piet tries to reestablish a sense of order

and comfort by continuing his search for a name for the plant that he is nurturing, working to ensure its survival in its inhospitable environment, along with his own survival in a harsh political one.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *A Lesson from Aloes*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

Read Fugard's *Master Harold . . . and the Boys* and compare its treatment of race relations in South Africa to those in *A Lesson from Aloes*. Does Fugard raise any new points in *Master Harold* about the tensions that arose between blacks and whites living under apartheid? Write a comparison and contrast paper on the two plays.

Fugard reveals the incident when the police took Gladys's diaries only as a memory. Write a new scene that could be added to the play that would depict this important event, noting Gladys's sense of betrayal and the beginning of her descent into madness.

Research the subject of race relations in the United States during the 1960s and compare your findings to conditions in South Africa during the same period. What do you think accounted for the differences? Present a PowerPoint presentation on your findings.

Write a poem or short story that focuses on the interaction between two people of different races.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The government of South Africa, in its second decade of the enforcement of apartheid, begins to crack down on protesters. During one protest near Johannesburg in 1960, police gun down sixty-seven Africans and wound nearly two hundred others.

Late 1970s and early 1980s: In 1982, the newly established Internal Securities Act attempts to contain escalating opposition to the government.

Today: The government under President Mandela desegregates schools and prohibits discrimination in the workplace.

1960s: The Pan Africanist Congress, a multiracial organization in South Africa, holds successful demonstrations against the government in the form of work stoppages.

Late 1970s and early 1980s: All levels of society, including Afrikaner business leaders, begin to recognize the failure of apartheid and to denounce the system. In 1983, six hundred South African organizations come together to form the United Democratic Front, which openly opposes the policies of apartheid.

Today: Protests against the government are ended but social problems, such as the lack of health care for AIDS sufferers, have not been adequately addressed.

1960s: In 1961, Nelson Mandela becomes one of the leaders of the African National Congress (ANC), a political group that forms to fight Apartheid. A year later, he is arrested and thrown in prison where he is to spend the next eighteen years.

Late 1970s and early 1980s: In 1980, Mandela issues a statement from prison, urging his supporters to continue the fight against apartheid.

Today: Mandela is released from prison in 1990. He is elected president in 1994 and serves until 1999, when he retires from the office. After that he continues his advocacy work for human rights organizations.

What Do I Read Next?

Ian Barry's *Living Apart: South Africa under Apartheid* (1996) examines the history of the implementation of the racist policies under apartheid and the effect that they had on black Africans.

Fugard's *Master Harold . . . and the Boys* (1982), another of his semi-autobiographical plays that condemns the racist policies of apartheid, centers on seventeen-year-old Hally, who is white, and his relationship with two middle-aged black men who work in his parents' tea room in Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

South Africa in Pictures (2003), by Janice Hamilton, includes photographs of the landscapes and people of South Africa throughout its troubled history.

The Poisonwood Bible (1998), by Barbara Kingsolver, focuses on the experiences of the Price family, who arrive in the Congo in 1959, emissaries of the Southern Baptist Mission League. The family struggles to adapt to and to survive in the harsh conditions in the Congo as their beliefs about racial relationships are challenged.

Further Study

Colleran, Jeanne, "Athol Fugard and the Problematics of the Liberal Critique," in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 38, 1995, pp. 389-407.

Colleran examines Fugard's depiction of liberalism in South Africa, including an analysis of its failure as depicted in *A Lesson from Aloes*.

Fugard, Athol, *Notebooks 1960-1977*, Knopf, 1984.

In these notebooks, Athol records autobiographical information, including his experience with people who inspired *A Lesson from Aloes*.

Mshengu, "Political Theatre in South African and the Work of Athol Fugard," in *Theater Research International*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1982, pp. 160-79.

In this article, Mshengu argues that Fugard's whiteness and privileged class have caused him to ignore in his plays certain realities of Africans' experience in South Africa.

Von Staden, Heinrich, "An Interview with Athol Fugard," in *Theater*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1982, pp. 41-46.

In this interview, Fugard talks about his ambivalent feelings toward South Africa and how those feelings emerge in his plays.

Wilderson, Frank, III, *Incognegro: From Black Power to Apartheid and Back*, Beacon Press, 2007.

The literary memoir of a revolutionary, this book tells the thrilling story of an African American who lived a double life during the years from 1991 to 1996, teaching in universities in Johannesburg and Soweto during the day, and at night participating in the armed branch of the African National Congress. The book gives one view of the political intrigue that marked the final years of apartheid.

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Collins, Michael J., "The Sabotage of Love: Athol Fugard's Recent Plays," in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 57, No. 3, Summer 1983, pp. 369, 370.

Fink, Joel G., Review of *A Lesson from Aloes*, in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 3, October 1981, pp. 398, 399.

Fugard, Athol, *A Lesson from Aloes*, Theatre Communications Group, 1981.

Molyneaux, Gerard, Review of *A Lesson from Aloes*, in *Library Journal*, June 15, 1981, p. 1319.

Roberts, Sheila, "'No Lessons Learnt': Reading the Texts of Fugard's *A Lesson from Aloes* and *Master Harold . . . and the Boys*," in *English in Africa*, Vol. 9, No. 2, October 1982, p. 33.

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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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