The Man Who Turned Into a Stick Study Guide

The Man Who Turned Into a Stick by Kobo Abe

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Introduction

The first performance of *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* was staged at Kinokuniya Hall in Tokyo in 1967. However, it was not until Kobo Abe directed the play in his own Kobo Abe Studio in 1976 that the play reached, in Abe's mind, a level of completion. Whenever Abe presented *The Man Who Turned into a Stick,* a short, one-act play, he joined it to two other short plays; but in the 1976 version, a new and more specific sequence came to Abe's mind, one he believed made the three-play set more comprehensive. The individual plays in the revised series were then given subtitles. The first play of the set, *The Suitcase, was subtitled Birth; the second play, The Cliff of Time*, was subtitled *Process;* and the third, *The Man Who Turned into a Stick was given the subtitle Death.*

Even with the subtitle suggesting a theme, *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* is not a play that is easily understood, and many people believe that that is exactly how Abe wanted it. Abe did not like to write plays for passive audiences. He wanted his audiences to work. He liked that his plays made people feel uncomfortable because he believed that it was through this discomfort that people would begin to question their own lives rather than perfunctorily accept their fate. *In The Man Who Turned into a Stick,* he not only presents obscure characters and dialogue that demand attention, he deliberately ends his play with one of the characters pointing directly at the audience and telling the people sitting there that they all resemble sticks. The audience must therefore participate in the play and consider its meaning on a more personal level.

Abe enjoyed complexities and ambiguities because he believed that it was through confronting uncertainty that people would break out of their rigid (or stick-like), preprogrammed thoughts. His plays are built upon dreamlike images, uneasy to grasp. As Abe told Nancy Shields in her book Fake Fish, "The more we become free from the framework of reality the more clearly we get the real experience which corresponds to the fake experience in a dream." That this statement is not easy to comprehend is also typical of Abe. In essence, however, these sentiments are the backbone upon which *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* was built. In Abe's metaphor, the rigidity of staunchly held beliefs that contradict one's existence causes people to turn into sticks. A stick is dead and inflexible. By taking the ordinary object of a stick and personifying it, Abe hoped to shake his audiences out of their "fake dreams."

Author Biography

On March 7, 1924, while his father was conducting research in Tokyo, Japan, Kobo Abe was born. Abe's father, Asakichi, a citizen of Japan and a physician, had a medical clinic in Mukden, Manchuria, where he would return with his family one year after his son's birth. Abe spent most of his youth living in a Japanese colony in Mukden with his father and his mother, Yorimi. According to Shields, who interviewed the playwright for her book *Fake Fish,* Abe remembered this city of his youth as a "terrifying place." Abe reportedly told Shields that there were no laws in the streets of the city, and "sometimes children were sold as slaves." This Manchurian city, as Abe describes, was made up of "barren spaces, city mazes, and solitary human figures." These images, thrown together inside high, dirty walls that were built to keep the drifting sand of the surrounding desert from overtaking the buildings and the people who dwelled inside them, would forever mark the imagination of this future author of surrealistic fiction and drama.

1931, when Abe was seven years old, Japan invaded Manchuria. Fearing for his family, Abe's father sent Abe and his mother to Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan. There, mother and son lived with Abe's maternal grandfather, while Abe's father accepted a medical grant to conduct research in Hungary. Upon his grandfather's death, Abe and his mother returned to Manchuria, which was still in the throes of war. It was in Manchuria, while Abe was still an adolescent, that he discovered the magic of storytelling. Abe tells the story of how the winters were so cold in Manchuria that the students could not go outside. At first to entertain himself and then later the whole class, Abe recited the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. When Abe ran out of Poe stories, he began writing his own. "That was the first time I began to write the kind of story that could entertain other people," he states in *Fake Fish.*

For his high school years, Abe once again returned to Japan. Upon graduation, he entered Tokyo University Medical School, partially as a response to following in his father's footsteps but equally in response to the war. "The specific situation in Japan at that time," Abe states, was that "those students who specialized in medicine were exempted from becoming soldiers." In 1944, before attaining a medical degree, Abe left Tokyo and returned to Manchuria to work in his father's clinic. A few months later, Abe's father died of typhus. Abe's last memories of Mukden were of a city "lined with coffin shops." Abe would return to Japan with his father's ashes and soon afterward complete his medical degree, which he would never use.

In 1945, Abe moved to a bombed-out part of Tokyo with his new bride, Machi Yamada, an art student and stage designer. In accordance with his pacifist views on war, Abe joined the Japanese Communist Party, believing that its philosophy matched his more precisely than any other political ideology. Although he would later denounce the Party for the disparity between its abstract principles and practical applications (as well as the censorship it placed on his creativity), his communist membership would later prevent Abe from gaining easy entry into the United States.

Abe is best known for his novels and short stories. His most popular and critically acclaimed work is *Suna no onna* 1962 (translated as The *Woman in the Dunes,* 1964), a story set in a nightmarish setting reminiscent of the barren Manchurian desert.

However, it was the writing of plays that consumed most of Abe's later years. In 1973, dissatisfied with the production of his plays, Abe founded his own theater group that was named the Kobo Abe Studio. It was here, in 1976, that Abe produced the more familiar version of his play, *The Man Who Turned into a Stick.* As with many of his other productions, Abe's wife created the set designs.

In Tokyo on January 22, 1993, Abe, at the age of sixty-eight, died of a heart attack. His wife died nine months later. He is survived by his daughter, Neri Mano, and three grandchildren.

Plot Summary

Beginning

The Man Who Turned into a Stick is a short, one act play. It is set on a busy city street in front of a department store in the middle of summer. Two characters are on stage, Hippie Boy and Hippie Girl. Abe's script directions suggest that the hippie couple may be shown sniffing glue. Suddenly, a stick falls from above. The stick is an actual stick as well as an actor who plays the man who turned into a stick. Abe indicates that the actor playing the stick should manipulate the actual stick upon its falling. Man from Hell enters stage-left and Woman from Hell enters stage-right.

Hippie Boy is startled when he realizes how close he came to being hit by the falling stick and declares that even standing on the sidewalk can be dangerous. Man from Hell and Woman from Hell recite poetic lines referring to fate and the fact that another man has turned into a stick while Hippie Girl reflects on the incident philosophically, almost as if reading a Buddhist text. "Which do you suppose is the accident—when something hits you or when it misses?" she asks. Then Man from Hell and Woman from Hell continue reciting their poetic verses.

Hippie Boy picks up the stick and begins to tap out a rhythm. Hippie Girl tries to guess the song that goes along with that rhythm, then she looks up and notices a child on top of the department store (where, in Japan, there often is a type of playground). Both Hippie Girl and Hippie Boy guess that it was the boy who threw the stick down, with Hippie Girl believing it was an accident and Hippie Boy thinking the child threw it on purpose, trying to see if he could hit someone with the stick. At this point, Stick speaks his first lines. It is through these lines that the audience realizes that the stick is the father of the boy and that the boy is calling to him.

Middle

Man from Hell and Woman from Hell continue to talk in poetic stanzas until they meet at center stage. They both begin to question Hippie Boy and Hippie Girl about the stick. They want to know where the hippies found the stick. The hippies in turn want to know if the man and woman are police. The man and woman assure them that they are not with the police and ask the hippies to give them the stick.

It is clear that Hippie Boy does not trust the man and woman. He calls them liars and accuses them of being the ones who threw the stick at him and now want to suppress the evidence. Hippie Girl intervenes, reminding Hippie Boy of the child on top of the roof. Woman from Hell confirms that there was a child on the roof and that the child was calling for his father. When Man from Hell attempts to explain why they need the stick and asks for the hippies' understanding, Hippie Boy replies: "I don't understand

nothing." To which Hippie Girl makes it clear that Hippie Boy is commenting on the gap between the two generations, then adds: "We're alienated."

While the man who turned into a stick bemoans his fate, the hippies and Man and Woman from Hell have a brief philosophical discussion on the topic of aims (or goals) in life. Man from Hell asks what Hippie Boy intends to do with the stick, to which the boy responds that he is "not interested in aims." Hippie Girls adds: "Aims are out of date." Man from Hell counters that since aims are out of date there is no reason for Hippie Boy to keep the stick. After circling around the theme of ambition to the point of confusion, Man from Hell concludes that it is "bad for your health to want something that doesn't really exist."

The hippies become distracted. To bring them back to the subject of the stick, Man from Hell offers them money for the stick. Hippie Boy refuses the offer, stating, "Me and this stick, we understand each other."

The hippie couple then begin a dialogue about Hippie Girl's sister, who has died. At the end of their conversation, Hippie Girl becomes confused and states, "Everything is wrapped in riddles." Man from Hell interrupts them, once again bringing them back to the stick. Woman from Hell, who had briefly left the stage, returns, urging Man from Hell to hurry because the child is coming. She also informs him that the child saw his father turn into a stick and has told the officials in the department store, although no one believes him. At this news, the stick begins a monologue, reflecting on how he fell and questioning why he turned into a stick. At the end of the monologue, Hippie Boy suddenly drops the stick and looks at it nervously. He claims: "It twitched, like a dying fish."

Woman from Hell points out the small child in the crowd. She tells Man from Hell that he is coming closer. Stick, speaking to himself, says that he can hear his son's footsteps. Hippie Boy, meanwhile, remains scared of the stick. He thinks the stick looks a lot like him. He is uneasy and finally tells Man from Hell that he will give him the stick for five dollars. Before Hippie Boy leaves the stage with his money, he tells Man from Hell that the only reason he is selling the stick is because he doesn't want to sell the stick. He then says: "That's a contradiction of circumstances. Do you follow me?" Hippie Girl then repeats: "It's the generation gap," and the two hippies leave the stage.

End

From this point on, Woman from Hell and Man from Hell discuss the forms and regulations that govern their investigation of yet another person who has turned into a stick. They write notes on the incident, contact their headquarters in Hell, briefing them on their findings. When Woman from Hell confesses that she feels sorry for the stick, she is told by the man that "sympathy has no place in our profession."

In the process of recording the event, the man and woman begin a philosophical conversation. The man refers to the stick as being capable and faithful. "In short," he

says, "the stick is the root and source of all tools." He later adds that, "A stick remains a stick, no matter how it is used . . . . You might almost say that the etymology of the word faithful is a stick." When Woman from Hell relates that this is the first time she has seen a specimen in the form of a stick, the Man from Hell reminds her that this is due to the fact that they never save stick specimens because they are so common. Then he continues by telling her that in the last thirty years the percentage of people turning into sticks, as compared to people turning into other objects, has increased. "I understand that in extreme cases," he adds, "98.4 per cent of all those who die in a given month turn into sticks."

The woman again feels an attachment to the stick when the man tells her to discard it. She wonders if it has feelings. She also thinks that maybe they should give the stick to the young boy so he can reflect on what has happened to his father. The man, contrasting her concerns, laughs at the thought of reflection on the part of the son. The man claims that the child is satisfied, as was his father, and that is the reason the father turned into a stick.

Man and Woman from Hell slowly leave the stage, on their way to another incident of a person turning into a stick. Stick then begins another monologue, with Man and Woman from Hell standing behind a curtain, seen only in silhouette. They return, once again, to speaking in poetic stanzas as Stick reflects on what has happened. Stick questions their presumptions that he was satisfied. Man from Hell then steps out from behind the curtain and points out that there is "a whole forest of sticks" in the audience. Woman from Hell goes over to Stick and tells him that he is not alone.

Suitcase (Birth)

Suitcase (Birth) Summary

K?b? Abe's *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* is a collection of three apparently unrelated plays. All three, nonetheless, heavily rely on the audience's imagination and on similar themes, particularly the theme of self-discovery - or, more accurately, the lack thereof. In the first play, two women attempt to discover the contents of a mysterious suitcase. This rather simple plot is complicated, however, by the fact that the suitcase is in fact a character played by a man. The second play, *The Cliff of Time (process)*, stages the inner workings of a boxer's coming to terms with the end of his career. Finally, the title play, *The Man Who Turned into a Stick (death)*, stages the investigation into a suicide case by two messengers from Hell.

Abe acknowledged that these three plays were not written to form a single work, but he also argued that together they form a cohesive unit. He recommended that the same actor play, respectively, the suitcase, the boxer, and the man who turned into a stick.

As this play opens, two women sit at a table in a sparsely decorated room. We learn that one, simply named Woman, is married. The other, referred to as Visitor, is not. Both women smile, sitting quietly. Setting the play into motion, a voice offstage apostrophizes Mona Lisa. This voice speaks of Mona Lisa's eternal smile as being able to withstand time and change better than metal, armor, or military. Congratulating Mona Lisa on her four hundred and ninetieth birthday, the voice fades out.

Woman gestures to Visitor, telling her that something that resembles the hair from a cat is stuck to her elbow. Visitor responds that she despises cats, and both women fall silent again. As the two women sit together, the offstage voice becomes audible once more, warning the women not to forget their smiles or to forget that their smiles are masks. "Nothing," the voice urges in a poem, "can intimidate/ The mask called a smile".

Woman once again addresses Visitor by making a comment about her husband. Noticing, however, that Visitor is not interested in conversation about marriage, Woman provocatively wonders aloud if she should confide in Visitor. Visitor does not seem to bite at Woman's attempt to pique her interest. She asks, instead, if Woman has supper to prepare for her husband. Assuring Visitor that pizza is to be delivered later and asking her if she can keep a secret, Woman exits the scene only to return carrying a suitcase. This suitcase, however, is no ordinary suitcase. In spite of the fact that it is described by Woman as having fittings and as being made of genuine leather, the audience sees that the suitcase is a man.

Woman confides in Visitor that this suitcase, which belongs to her husband, is a cause for concern. She claims that she has asked her husband to reveal its contents, but he has refused to tell her what is inside. Visitor speculates that the object might be a trap set for Woman, testing her faith and trust in her husband. Woman cannot imagine that

her husband would set her up in this way, but still she shrinks back a little from attempting to open it. Suddenly, the suitcase begins to emit noises that sound like muttering and scraping. The women look fearfully at each other, each seeking confirmation that the other hears the noises. Visitor states that whatever is inside the suitcase must be alive, and feeling that Woman might be withholding information, Visitor presses her for more.

Reluctantly, Woman admits that her husband told her his ancestors are in the suitcase. Visitor decides that this is utterly impossible and that Woman's husband must have been trying to convey a parable of some sort. Woman agrees that the story is unlikely, but she reiterates that her husband has not been forthcoming with detail. Rather, he has argued that so long as the suitcase does not upset his wife, its contents do not matter. At this moment, the suitcase's noises cease.

Woman asks Visitor whether it would be wrong to try to open the suitcase, to which Visitor responds that this task might be difficult in the absence of a key. Nonetheless, Visitor studies the suitcase, deducing that the lock could easily be picked. Woman, on the other hand, suddenly becomes hesitant. She says that she has not found the courage to open the suitcase. Visitor thinks that the matter is less about courage and more about basic rights, but her argument does not convince Woman, who is suddenly afraid and unwilling to proceed.

Visitor suspects that Woman's coyness is a ploy to persuade her to open the suitcase. She asks for one of Woman's hairpins, and attempts to open the suitcase. Woman repeats that she is worried, but Visitor continues to work when again the suitcase begins to emit noise. This time, various words and phrases are intelligible.

Visitor is nervous that insects, such as spiders, might explain the suitcase's strange noises. Woman argues that spiders are not insects as they have eight legs, not six. Mockingly, Visitor asks if Woman would prefer to call spiders a type of octopus. They continue to argue about how to categorize insects until Visitor states that her distaste for all bugs prevents her from continuing, and she abandons the suitcase. Woman proposes that they use insecticide on the suitcase, but Visitor worries that insecticide might harm or kill whatever is inside, and being unsure as to the suitcase's contents, Visitor asks if this is a prudent choice. She suggests that some religions uphold a belief reincarnation and that it is possible Woman's husband believes his ancestors are reincarnated as insects. Seeing Woman's indifference to this possibility, Visitor deduces that Woman's marriage must be falling apart.

Woman is offended by this charge, and she admonishes Visitor for her lack of understanding and compassion. Woman states that she has tried to ignore the suitcase, but she feels it is pervasive and asphyxiating. Visitor muses aloud why Woman finds this particular object so disturbing when there are so many other causes of disturbance in life, which prompts Woman to accuse Visitor of collaborating with her husband. At this moment, the suitcase becomes noisy again.

Visitor rises as if to leave, yet Woman implores Visitor to stay by asking her friend's opinion of her husband. Visitor remarks enigmatically that she feels the neckties of Woman's husband are revealing of his character: he ignores his wife, and Woman must confront her husband if she wishes to resolve the matter. Woman protests that confronting him is futile; he does not wish to concern himself - or to see his wife concerned - with the suitcase.

Visitor emphatically takes the can of insecticide, but before she can spray it, the suitcase's noises start up again, this time with a comprehensible diatribe about the infinite nature of the soul. Both women are somewhat intimidated by its speech, and they move away from the object. At the same time, the speech stops. Visitor remarks that, perhaps coincidentally, the suitcase responds to the women's conversation. Woman refutes this possibility, but Visitor is sure of herself, and she begins to provoke the suitcase. Woman, in turn, scolds Visitor for annoying her. All she wants, Woman says, is help in getting rid of the suitcase. Visitor disbelieves Woman, saying that she has only pretended to seek help.

Telling Visitor that the suitcase is nearly weightless, Woman attempts to persuade Visitor to take it with her when she leaves. At once, the suitcase finally opens, spontaneously and unexpectedly. Again, Woman seeks Visitor's counsel as to whether or not she should look inside. Visitor meaningfully tells Woman that the only remaining obstacle is in Woman's mind. As Visitor leaves, frustrated with Woman's indecision, Woman wonders if Visitor is jealous of her. She locks the suitcase, and telephones for pizza.

Suitcase (Birth) Analysis

As soon as this play begins, the offstage voice points toward one of the major themes: that things are not always as they appear. Speaking of the ability of Mona Lisa's smile to conceal the realities of both the past and the present, the voice foreshadows the fact that a tension between what appears to be true and what is true will underlie the play's action.

The interaction between the women proves early on that their friendship is not exactly as it seems. They deal awkwardly with one another, and their behaviors toward each other often shift from being attentive and supportive to being distant and hostile. Although they appear to be working together in the attempt to open the suitcase, their beliefs about the contents of the suitcase and their approach to opening the suitcase are very different. In fact, the existence of the suitcase ultimately drives the two women apart: Visitor is frustrated with Woman's indecision about whether or not to look inside, and Woman believes that Visitor does not understand her. In the end, their parting on bad terms marks the fact that the play reaches a climax but does not come to a resolution.

Perhaps what marks this lack of resolution more than anything else is Woman's refusal to look inside the suitcase. Despite the fact that the whole play centers on her desire to

see inside and to learn what her husband is concealing, she denies herself the opportunity once it arises. This is the highly ironic turning point of the play. Woman, as Visitor suspects, only pretends to want to know what is inside the suitcase. In truth, she prefers to remain oblivious to its meaning.

What the suitcase does symbolize is not entirely clear. The suitcase itself and the noises it emits are very mysterious from beginning to end. Regarded by both women in the play as an object, the audience clearly sees that the suitcase is played by a man, and the audience is left to question exactly what this gap between appearance and reality means. Is the suitcase merely an object? Is it a metaphor for Woman's relationships? For history? None of these questions has a definite answer, but what is more crucial to understanding the play is observing that whatever the suitcase is, Woman does not want to know. The play ends with her refusal to look inside and, consequently, her returning to her regular life no more enlightened than when the play began.

The Cliff of Time (Process)

The Cliff of Time (Process) Summary

Boxer, the only visible character in this play, opens the scene with a dramatic monologue that seems to be stringing together only loosely related topics. To begin, Boxer discusses his preference for good milk and for an adequate amount of resin on his shoes when he enters a boxing ring. Addressing his speech to an invisible character named Mr. Kimura, Boxer subsequently inquires about his boxing performance the previous day, and reminds himself that winning is crucial. Nonetheless, he finds that the lifestyle is taking a toll on him, and the athletic obsessions with food, exercise, and weight are restrictive. He admits that he dreams sometimes of eating steak.

Boxer changes the subject, telling Mr. Kimura about three fortune cookies he recently opened. All contained the same message: "A windfall is coming your way". Boxer pleads with Mr. Kimura to arrange another fight for him. At this moment, an unknown voice interjects, telling Boxer it is time for sparring practice and providing coach-like advice. Boxer appears to have heard something, but he does not register the sound as a voice. He suddenly snaps to attention, wondering why he is particularly forgetful today. He recalls that earlier in the day he rose for work in spite of the fact that he had been relieved of work duties.

Changing his train of thought once again, Boxer reminds himself why he enjoys the fight: life is clear-cut in the boxing ring. The main thing to remember, he says, is to keep one's opponent at a distance.

Boxer recalls that the time of the fight must be fast approaching, and his speech becomes disjointed again. Still speaking to Mr. Kimura, Boxer announces that he is wearing red socks for luck, that his body feels refreshed after a good night's sleep, and that his arms will not fail once he steps into the ring.

Round One- Boxer is in the ring. The whistle has blown, and Boxer readies himself for the fight. Trying to be both aggressive and cautious, Boxer hears a voice, telling him which moves to make. Boxer tries to ignore the voice, but he is preoccupied thinking about losing and about being a mere stepping stone for others to climb to the top. There is a gong, and the voice tries to calm Boxer before the fight resumes.

Round Two- Boxer attempts to convince himself that the fight is going well. He knows that if he loses again, he will lose his ranking. The voice interjects, coaxing Boxer to use his right hand and to circle around the opponent. Boxer's thoughts, however, shift to the diary he keeps faithfully. Daily, Boxer records what he eats and drinks and how much he exercises, works, and weighs. "A fight begins even before it begins," he says, gesturing toward the discipline he exerts in every area of his life.

A gong sounds once more, and the voice asks if Boxer understands the coaching advice.

Round Three- The voice recommends that Boxer take it easy and steady, but Boxer is still preoccupied with thinking about his sore body and inability to go on. His arms, he says, are beginning to numb, and his guard is coming down. Failing in this business, Boxer thinks, is a quick but very painful process.

Round Four- Boxer wakes up, disoriented, and figures he must have been sleeping. Suddenly he realizes he is on the floor of the ring, and that he has six seconds to pick himself up. He attempts to stand, but he finds he has little control over his body. Boxer resigns himself to the loss, and he resolves to eat, smoke, and drink whatever he pleases from now on. The scene ends with his call for help.

The Cliff of Time (Process) Analysis

The title of this play is very much indicative of its meaning. Although Boxer pleads with the invisible Mr. Kimura to arrange one more fight, he knows that he is at the brink of the end of his career. Boxer speaks almost frantically about a myriad of subjects, like milk and noise and resin, to keep himself from accepting the fate foreshadowed in the fortune cookies.

This whole play unfolds as one long dramatic monologue, spoken by Boxer. There are a few interjections, spoken by a presumably invisible voice (as in the first play), but this voice can reasonably be interpreted as an extension of Boxer himself. Speaking in a coach-like tone, the voice encourages Boxer to fight. The voice shares with Boxer exactly what to do in order for Boxer to win. Still, Boxer does not pay heed to the voice. While fighting, he reflects instead on his life and the disciplined routines he follows, including keeping a diary of every bit of energy he consumes and expends (symbolic of his rigorous discipline). Boxer believes that "a fight begins even before it begins," revealing the fact that he has faced life as one long process of preparation.

Ultimately, it is Boxer's desire to live - rather than only his preparation to live - that causes him to lose the match in the boxing ring, which is also the plot's climax. Realizing how tired his body is, his ability to fight is rather his unwillingness to fight. He ignores the voice's counsel until he is knocked to the floor and unable to rise again. Yet despite Boxer's resolve to change his life, to eat, smoke, and drink whatever he pleases from now on, the play ends ambiguously: with Boxer on the floor calling for help, the audience is unsure as to whether Boxer has been temporarily or fatally wounded. Considering, again, the title of the play, both interpretations are readily available.

The Man Who Turned into a Stick (Death)

The Man Who Turned into a Stick (Death) Summary

This play opens with a stick, played by a man, hurtling down from the sky and landing next to Hippie Boy and Hippie Girl. As Hippie Boy and Girl look casually for the stick's point of origin, they spot a young boy on the roof of a building, and suspect that the boy must have thrown the stick. In the meantime, a Woman and Man from Hell enter the scene and, in an aside, they remark mysteriously "once again, a man turned into a stick and vanished".

Woman and Man from Hell appear to realize that they are searching for this particular stick, and so they approach the two youth. Vaguely introducing themselves but not revealing their identities, they request that Hippie Boy hand them the stick. Hippie Boy refuses, accusing the man and woman of throwing the stick. While Woman from Hell exits the scene to check on the young boy, whom we discover is the son of the stick, Man from Hell resumes his appeal for the stick. Although Hippie Boy confesses he has no use for the stick nor any aim for it in mind, he refuses to hand it over. Instead, Hippie Boy and Hippie Girl employ the stick to scratch each other's backs.

Man from Hell tries a different tactic, offering Hippie Boy one dollar in exchange for the stick. Hippie Boy and Girl continue to ignore Man from Hell's questions, and instead they engage in playful banter, first about Hippie Boy's resembling the stick and second about nicknames Hippie Girl was called by her sister. Reminiscing about her deceased sister leads Hippie Girl to remark that the world is full of riddles.

Woman from Hell re-enters the scene, quietly telling Man from Hell that the child is approaching. This child claims to have seen his father turn into a stick as he fell from a building. The stick speaks, audible only to himself, and confirms that his son did in fact see his fall and his transformation.

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable with the looming presence of the Man and Woman from Hell, Hippie Boy agrees to sell the stick for five dollars. He argues that he is selling the stick precisely because he does not want to; Man from Hell replies that whatever the circumstances, Hippie Boy has sold himself along with the stick. Hippie Boy and Girl leave without acknowledging Man from Hell's words.

Seeing the child approach, Man and Woman from Hell conceal the stick. After the apparent danger passes, Woman from Hell admits that she feels sorry for the stick. Man from Hell urges her to do her job and not to get emotionally involved. Pulling herself together, she describes the stick to Man, pointing out the fact that the stick is well-used and even battered in some places. This evidence of use, asserts Man from Hell, attests to the stick's faithfulness in purpose.

Although she is still hesitant, Woman from Hell persists in her duties. Deciding that being a stick for eternity is punishment enough, Man from Hell calls into their headquarters to report the stick's status and to request information on their next assignment. Before moving on, Woman asks if they might give the stick to the child to serve as both a memento and a mirror. Man refuses her request and encourages her to move on: the dead - and the cursed - are not their concern, no matter what their feelings. While Man and Woman from Hell muse over the eventual fate of Hippie Boy and Girl, the stick reveals that he jumped from the roof. Man from Hell then turns to the audience and chides them for desiring to be sticks, and for not considering the possibility of anything else.

The Man Who Turned into a Stick (Death) Analysis

This play is a pointed allegory about the ramifications of both suicide and, more broadly speaking, of self-handicapping. In this respect, *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* corresponds thematically to both *Suitcase* and *The Cliff of Time*, in which characters also handicap themselves in some way. Yet the plays differ in that, whereas characters in the previous two plays made particular choices in order to go on living, the Man Who Turned into a Stick makes the choice to die.

The play offers a moralistic strain in that suicide is highly condemned. The Man and Woman who come to follow up on the case of the Man Who Turned into a Stick come from Hell. Furthermore, they come to decide on an appropriate punishment for the deceased. In the end, not only do they decide on a punishment but they also turn to the audience, warning the audience that everyone has the potential to be a stick, and that aspiring to be something else might be worth considering.

Ultimately, the Man Who Turned into a Stick is a metaphor for the person who allows himself to be used or abused by other people and who, in life, does not have any direction of his own. According to the diagnosis by the Woman from Hell, the Man Who Turned into a Stick was regularly "employed by people for some particular purpose" during his lifetime; as such, the Man from Hell explains that what was merely a living stick is now only a dead stick.

Characters

Hippie Boy

Hippie Boy Hippie Boy is standing on the sidewalk outside a department store when a stick falls, barely missing him. At first he is angry at whoever threw the stick down, then, as the play progresses, he becomes simultaneously attached to the stick and repulsed by it because it reminds him too much of himself. He thinks he looks like the stick and believes that the stick understands him.

In the beginning, Hippie Boy does not want to part with the stick, but in the end he sells the stick to the Man from Hell. Hippie Boy tells Man from Hell that the only reason he is selling the stick is because he doesn't want to sell it. Hippie Boy represents the alter ego, or opposite, of Man from Hell. He is a symbol of rebellious youth, and he makes decisions based on emotions.

Hippie Girl

Hippie Girl Hippie Girl is partnered with Hippie Boy, much like Woman from Hell is partnered with Man from Hell. She is somewhat subservient to Hippie Boy, who at one point tells her she is stupid and at another time tells her to shut up. Hippie Girl does not respond. She is also more emotionally involved with the little boy on top of the department store, whereas Hippie Boy is only angry with him, declaring that he hates kids. She also tries to explain Hippie Boy, in some ways, to the older couple. She reinforces Hippie Boy's thoughts, for instance, by explaining Hippie Boy's attitude by telling Man and Woman from Hell that the younger generation is alienated. At one point in the play, Hippie Girl asks Hippie Boy for a kiss, which he refuses. She then stands up for herself after the rejection, telling him that he needn't put on airs. She then asks him to scratch her back with the stick, which he does reluctantly. When Hippie Boy becomes upset about his resemblance to the stick, Hippie Girl is very consoling, showing her emotional connection with Hippie Boy.

Man from Hell

Man from Hell Man from Hell works with his partner, Woman from Hell, reporting cases of people turning into objects (apparently upon death). Man from Hell stresses rationality, and he appears to be a mentor of the woman, who is in training. In his communications with the hippies, Man from Hell comes across as a parent, or authority, figure. However, when Woman from Hell suggests that they give Stick to the young boy, Man from Hell expresses no sentiment whatsoever. He represents logic and discipline. He is detached from the people with whom he must associate. The only hint of softness in his tone occurs when he calls headquarters and asks the person on the other end of the line to deliver a message to his wife. It is Man from Hell who, at the end of play, stands before the audience and tells them that he hopes they don't think he is rude by

pointing out that they are all sticks. "It's just the simple truth," he says, "the truth as I see it." Man from Hell represents bureaucracy and the status quo.

Stick

Stick is the man who falls off the roof, leaving his son above, as he turns into a stick. He is dying. He displays his emotions when he thinks about his son, who has been crying out for him from atop the department store. Almost all his comments are emotional. He hears the conversations of Man and Woman from Hell as well as of Hippie Boy and Hippie Girl. When he observes what they are saying, he reacts emotionally. He does not understand why he has turned into a stick, or even why he fell off the roof. When Man from Hell suggests that Stick was satisfied, Stick questions this, claiming that he never felt satisfied.

When Stick is thrown into the wet gutter, he exclaims that he would be surprised if he didn't catch a cold, thereby acknowledging that he doesn't fully realize his own condition: first, that he has been turned into a stick; and second, that he is dying. He also questions his condition when his son almost discovers him in his new stick form. The stick asks: "There was nothing I could have done anyway, was there?" Woman from Hell describes a stick as something that is used by people for some particular reason. To this comment, Stick replies to himself: "That's obvious, isn't it? It's true of everybody."

Stick represents people who are too rigid, who get stuck in certain patterns in life and cannot break free of them. Stuck in this way, they might as well be dead, for they no longer experience life with a fresh view.

Woman from Hell

Woman from Hell Woman from Hell's job is to record, in an unemotional way, the occurrences of people turning into objects. Woman from Hell is in training and at times must be reminded what to do. Woman from Hell also tends to become emotionally involved with the people she studies, as contrasted with her partner and mentor, Man from Hell, who is pure logic. Woman from Hell empathizes with the man who has turned into a stick and with his son. She feels badly about throwing the stick in the gutter and wants to give it to the young son. When Man from Hell expresses doubt that he or she really exists, being no more than the dreams of dying people, Woman from Hell states: "If those are dreams, they are horrible nightmares." At the end of the play, Woman from Hell tries to comfort Stick, telling him (after Man from Hell points out an audience full of sticks) that he is not alone. "You've lots of friends," she tells him. Woman from Hell represents the formation of bureaucracy. She registers details but maintains empathetic relationships with the things she studies.

Themes

Alienation

Alienation is a theme that runs through most of Abe's work. In *The Man Who Turned into a Stick,* alienation is represented as Hippie Girl and Hippie Boy, the younger generation. Their alienation is specifically expressed by Hippie Girl when she declares that there is a generation gap between her and Hippie Boy and the man and woman from hell. Hippie Girl also delivers the line: "We're alienated."

These are obvious examples of Abe's theme. There are more subtle ones, however. There is the problem of communication between the father (the stick) and his son. The father has fallen away from the son and turned into something unrecognizable. The son calls out to his father, but the father cannot respond because he has turned into a stick.

As a stick, the man can hear the other characters speaking but they cannot hear him. When Man from Hell states that the man was turned into a stick because he was satisfied, Stick disagrees but cannot protest. Taking this further, Stick cannot elucidate a comprehensive evaluation of his life even to himself. He questions Man from Hell's assumptions, but does not offer any answers. This represents alienation in the sense of being separated from one's own thoughts.

This kind of alienation from self is also depicted when Hippie Girl tries to remember her sister and the nicknames her siblings called her. She becomes confused when she tries to bring up memories, suggesting that she is confused about her own identity. She says that everything is wrapped in puzzles, intimating that this also includes herself.

Another form of alienation is the conflict between inner and outer realities. This is conveyed in the dialogue between Man from Hell and Woman from Hell. Man from Hell is determined to record only the facts of reality. He trains Woman from Hell to take down the time of day, details of location, the identification number of the latest victim, and what he describes as truthful descriptions of the objects they examine. Woman from Hell, on the other hand, is torn between recording these rational descriptions in order to do her job well and expressing her emotions, which make her empathize with the people she meets in the course of her work. Man from Hell believes that her emotions are a distraction and that she should learn to control or eliminate them.

Satisfaction

Man from Hell states that people turn into sticks because they are satisfied. This suggests that Abe believes satisfaction to be a negative thing, as sticks are stiff and lifeless. For Abe, satisfaction represents the status quo or, worse yet, stagnation. It is a state of mind that is frozen, accepting things as they are without searching for improvement.

Whereas Man from Hell states that the man was changed into a stick because he was satisfied, it is interesting to note that the Man from Hell also appears satisfied. He is very rule-oriented and teaches Woman from Hell not to deviate from the rules. He does not question what he and she are doing and goes about his business with no inclination to change anything. While Man from Hell points at the audience and judges it as a forest of sticks, he does not consider himself to be part of it. Man from Hell also scoffs at the idea that either the man (who turned into a stick) or his son were capable of reflection, and yet there is nothing in the play that suggests that Man from Hell has reflected on his own life. If, on the other hand, he has, there are no signs that he is anything but satisfied with what he has seen.

Aimlessness

Hippie Boy and Hippie Girl launch into a discussion about aims in the play. They state that they have no aims. "Aims are out of date," states the girl. Man from Hell tries to use their aimlessness to his advantage by persuading the hippie couple to give the stick to him.

Having an aim is one of Man from Hell's more positive attributes. He has a job to do and his aim is to make sure that that job is completed according to regulations. Whether this is a positive attribute in Abe's mind is unclear. By his name alone, Man from Hell does not fit a positive description. Yet, it is Man from Hell who tries to awaken the audience by pointing out their lack of idealistic aims, thus assuring that they will be turned into sticks.

In the conversation with Hippie Girl, Man from Hell appears to contradict his own goal-oriented personality. He tells Hippie Girl that she is making too much of nothing when she starts daydreaming about the potential advantages of having aims (thus contradicting her original statement against them). Man from Hell refers to aims as "nothing." He then concludes, "it's bad for your health to want something that doesn't really exist." Rather, Man from Hell suggests, it is better to feel uncertainty and anguish about not having aims, for "they're a lot better proof that you are there, in that particular spot, than any aim I can think of."

Once again, it is unclear if Man from Hell is delivering this rhetoric for the girl's benefit or for his own. If he succeeds in confusing the girl, he might also succeed in attaining his aim, which is to gain control of the stick.

Death

Death Abe has subtitled this play Death. In the play, there is the imminent death of the man who has turned into the stick, but there is also an overtone of imminent mortality for everyone. It is through the awareness of death that Abe hopes to awaken his audience. Abe's own life was marked with many scenes of death, from the war in Manchuria to his father's death, and the aftermath of bombing raids on Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. His awareness of death prompted him to see life with fresh

eyes. Shields writes, "Abe's ability to see ordinary things in extraordinary ways enabled him to suggest to his audience that they could do likewise." By having a man fall off the top of a building and turn into a stick, and then have the audience watch as the man (now a stick) slowly succumbs to death, forces the audience to consider their own mortality. In considering their own deaths, people are compelled to look at the nature and condition of their lives, to reflect on the quality of their life choices.

Style

Abe's youth outside of Japan in the stark and war-ravaged deserts of Manchuria, his background in medicine, and his residence in a bombed-out section of Tokyo have all influenced the way he looks at the world, and thus the way he writes and constructs his plays. Unlike many of Japan's previously noted authors, as well as some of his contemporaries, Abe presents images that are urban, desolate, and somewhat distrustful of traditional Japanese society.

Much like a surgeon who must distance himself from his patients, Abe removes himself from the emotions of his characters to the point of seldom giving them personal names. Although Abe lived most of his adult life in Japan, his plays are written without specifically identifiable settings—they are non-descriptive and could occur anywhere in the world. In this respect, J. Thomas Rimer, writing in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* compares Abe's approach to the style of Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov, who, coincidentally, was also trained as a doctor.

There are many different descriptions of Abe's style of writing. It has been called avant-garde, which in his day referred to the alienated characters he created who were forever seeking meaning in a seemingly apathetic world. His writing has also been labeled science fiction, in terms of his creating futuristic settings that address questions that concerned him in the present. Early in his career, Abe became fascinated with the promises of Marxist philosophy, and his work was subsequently imbued with a propagandist tone. Abe's novels and his plays also possess absurd or surreal elements, creating hallucinatory, or dreamlike, images. He has also been called an existentialist, his works displaying, as Rimer states, "an ironic questioning of all established values."

A consistent pattern in Abe's work is the use of metaphor. Almost all of his narratives are built around a single metaphor and, as William Currie describes, "are developed with a kind of dream literalism." Abe presents the metaphor in somewhat realistic terms, but, as the play unfolds, the only thing that holds everything together is a sense of the irrational. "I [Abe] tend instinctively, in a sense, to make the ordinary the starting point of all my thoughts. But at the same time, I dislike that as well, so I create monsters, to surprise."

Later, in an interview with Shields, Abe mentions that he enjoys Anton Chekhov but believed that Chekhov's plays were also "satisfying as literature." They could be enjoyed without seeing them in performance. For Abe's play, this was not true. "I write novels, so I have the means of expressing what can be expressed in novels. I want to express on the stage something which is at once original and can only be expressed on the stage." Toward this end, Abe added elements to his plays that could only be presented in live performance. These components were added not only to enhance the flavor of a live performance but also to shock his audience. Often included were the sounds of someone going to the bathroom or the noises of a gurgling stomach. "Smells, too, are significant in Abe's oeuvre," writes Shields, "and tend to be disgusting."

Abe's style is not easy. His plays are puzzles that are difficult to understand; better yet, they are more like dreams that no one fully understands. Abe's philosophy of drama was not to present everyday images that would entertain his audiences. His style was to make his audiences think. "Unless the theater regains the power to realize on stage those more abstract things which are impossible to see in everyday reality," Abe tells Shields, "audiences will find theatrical productions more and more boring." Abe elaborates on this challenge in an afterword to the published script of his play: "In performance it is essential that the style, rather than the words, be emphasized."

Historical Context

Manchuria

During the almost twenty years that Abe lived in Manchuria (from approximately 1925 to 1944), Japan's imperialist expansion in Asia achieved one of its most infamous moments. Having defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the Japanese established themselves in China and began transforming Manchuria by first setting up a puppet Chinese government, then building an industrial and military complex there. By the end of World War II, Manchuria had become the most industrialized region in China.

This transformation was not a humanitarian effort. There were horrific atrocities that occured in a hostile take-over of one cultural group by another, with severe physical punishment and torture used to control dissent. Abe recounts one childhood memory of riding in a train, looking out of the window, and seeing a large dump ground that was surrounded by stakes on which heads of dead people had been placed as a reminder to others of what would happen if they were deemed criminals. Abe, in Shields's book, referred to these heads as "'anonymous figures,' whose stories would never be told." These images of death would stay with Abe, informing his plays as well as his life, by constantly reminding him of his own mortality. "I feel that both novels and the stage offer an opportunity to give voice to the shouts that I heard from the dump ground," Abe adds.

Japanese Theatre

One of Abe's contemporaries, Koreya Senda, once complained about the influence of traditional theatre on drama in Japan, stating, in Shields's book, that "all we had to work with was a group of actors who could only deliver lines in chanting, Kabuki fashion." This reference was made in the name of the traditional Japanese form of theatre, which was so different from Western drama to which Abe was most attracted. Japanese theatre is a very old tradition, going back to the fourteenth century, and the form is very rigid, especially when compared to modern European and American drama.

For example, the first Japanese theatre form, Noh, is a stylized and prescribed performance that combines music, dance, poetry, and drama. The characters in Noh plays, as well as their movements and gestures, are specifically dictated by an ancient form and structure. The actors are highly trained to represent an artistic expression of quiet elegance and grace, as they play out the roles of gods, warriors, beautiful women, and supernatural beings. Accompanying the actors is a chorus of eight people who sit to one side of the stage narrating the story, expressing the thoughts and emotions of the characters, and singing the characters' lines. Although not as popular as it once was, Noh theatre continues to flourish in Japan and around the world.

In the seventeenth century, a more relaxed form of drama evolved from the Noh tradition. Sometimes likened to vaudeville or burlesque, Kabuki theatre presents stories of larger-than-life heroes as well as ordinary people in more comic (and often more sensual) settings. As a matter of fact, sensuality became such a dominant theme that, in 1629, women were eventually banned from appearing on stage, as government officials noted that some of the actresses were using the stage to promote prostitution. Thereafter, young boys took on the female roles until 1652, when they too were banned for the same reason. After that point, only mature men were allowed to play all the roles, a practice that, although no longer enforced by law, continues into modern times. Kabuki remains very popular in Japan, with Kabuki actors enjoying the same popularity as Hollywood movie stars.

Although Kabuki plays have evolved to address more contemporary themes, with dramatists such as Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) adding modern innovations, the structure is still highly stylized and the elements of music and dance, exaggerated movements, and extravagant makeup confine the type of drama it produces. William Currie, in his article "Abe Kobo's Nightmare World of Sand," confirms the conflicts Abe felt in trying to adapt his style of writing to the traditional theatrical form: "in range, depth and style, the works of Abe Kobo represent a considerable departure from the writing of almost all the Japanese novelists and dramatists who preceded him."

Effects of World War II

Hiroshima lost over 200,000 people when the atomic bomb was dropped on August 6, 1945. Another 70,000 people died three days later, when an atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. These incidents marked more than the end of the war. They marked the people of Japan as helpless victims, both physically (in the form of radiation burns from the bombs) and psychologically (with the awareness of their own mortality).

Besides the devastation and destruction caused by the bombs, Japan also came under the cultural and economic influence of the United States. Western culture infiltrated Japan, causing the younger generation, which included Abe and his peers, to stray from the rites of traditional Japan and embrace the new—and more individualistic—concepts of the West. Along with the influence of Western culture came the anguish of alienation, the search for self-identity, and the sense of living the inauthentic life—concepts that were very foreign to traditional Japanese culture. After World War II, the experience of cultural dislocation and problems of identity were addressed by a new generation of leftist writers such as Abe, who used narrative and dramatic techniques developed from Western modernism.

Critical Overview

Abe's *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* received very little attention outside of Japan. Although it was not a hit with the traditional theatergoing crowds in Japan, the play did receive an outstanding reception, given its surreal and avant-garde themes, settings, and style, as well as it having its main production held in Abe's small studio that seated only sixty people. Despite the fact that the play was used by Abe at his Kobo Abe Studio "as a studio exercise by the most junior members of the troupe," it still played to over one thousand spectators.

Donald Keene, writing the Introduction to Abe's play *The Man Who Turned into a Stick,* states, "The play was a popular as well as an artistic success." Keene then relates, in a more general statement about Abe, that besides being respected as a writer

Abe's commitment to the theatre has gone far beyond creating plays of literary excellence; he is profoundly concerned with techniques of acting, the effectiveness of gestures and speech, even the mechanisms of stage lighting and sound effects[.] He is, in short, a truly professional dramatist.

There are no specific reviews of this play written in English. However, there are studies of Abe's work written by academics. J. Thomas Rimer, in his book *Modern Japanese Fiction and Its Traditions: An Introduction,* writes that "Abe has always been a fashionable writer. His early work, especially in the theater, shows the powerful influence of Marxism, so important in the Japanese intellectual scene during the early postwar years." Rimer also compares Abe's writing to Franz Kafka's and further states that it is "most conspicuously 'avantgarde,'" and adds that his "literary strategies emphasize wit and satire." Rimer, this time writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* credits Abe with not only changing the face of Japanese theatre but also, through his plays, attracting international attention.

Abe's protean literary activities during complex postwar times in Japan helped strengthen creative currents drawn from international developments in literature rather than from purely Japanese sources . . . [and] helped attract international attention to issues in postwar Japanese life.

However, Rimer also brings up the fact that, because Abe shed "too much of the Japanese literary tradition," Japanese audiences regarded him as an inauthentic mirror of their culture. Meanwhile, Western critics paid little attention to Abe's writing for basically the same reason: "Abe's concerns and obsessions resemble those of other contemporary writers around the world." In other words, Western critics expected Japanese writers like Abe to reflect a more specifically Japanese world. Rimer concludes his article by stating that, although Abe may not have received a lot of critical attention in his time, his influence is being felt in a new generation of Japanese writers, thus making Abe's work a "harbinger of a broad new Japanese sensibility."

Currie compliments Abe's use of metaphor. He writes that Abe

uses strong, universal metaphors in such a way that they become a basis for his narrative art. By using metaphors, Abe expresses complex ideas not by analysis, nor by making an abstract statement, but by a sudden perception of an objective relation. This relation is expressed in one commanding image.

Many of Abe's other plays received critical acclaim and won awards. One such play, *The Ghost Is Here* (1958, 1967), even traveled to East Germany where it played for two years. *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* was the first play that Abe himself directed.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and is a freelance editor and published writer. In this essay, she examines the dramatic and psychological techniques Abe uses in his play to enthrall his audience.

Kobo Abe's *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* is a play that, despite its idiosyncratic features, its nameless characters, and practically nonexistent plot, has the power to not only capture its audience but to touch upon issues that merit attention even forty years after it was written. There is something very personal about Abe's writing that makes members of his audience pay attention to every line and sometimes even squirm in their seats as they recognize themselves in his play. Abe is a master of knowing how to grab his audience's attention and then exposing some of their more intimate thoughts and emotions. He accomplishes this without their knowing what he has done or how he has done it.

Anyone who has read Abe or attended one of his plays does not have to be told that they are difficult to understand. However, in spite of the challenge of his disjointed plots and obscure meanings, his audiences tend to leave the theatre excited about what they have just seen. As Shields writes, "Abe's fervor infected everyone with a sense of contagious excitement. It did not matter if the actors, audience, or even Abe himself did not completely comprehend his creation." Abe's drive to create plays that are completely new, so new that even *he* might not understand their meaning, is an act of courage. That might be part of the reason why his plays attract attentive audiences, but there is more going on in his plays than new angles and perspectives, innovative tricks, and far-fetched characters. Although the overall ambiance of an Abe play makes the audience feel like they have entered a dream, Abe has put a lot of rational thought into the creation of his fantasies. He knows how to keep his audience tuned in to the action on stage. He is more than a writer. He is a combination of orchestral conductor, dramatist, and psychologist: wooing his audience with his charm, he pretends to entertain them while he divulges some of their deepest secrets.

Abe begins his play *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* with stage directions that suggest that the young hippie couple (Hippie Boy and Hippie Girl) could be shown sniffing glue. So the curtain opens with an image of rebellion, risk-taking, and somewhat disorienting recklessness. Granted, a gluesniffing scene in the twenty-first century might seem a bit tame, but modernize the element to a more radical, modern drug, or cheap high, and the impact is there. With this first image, before any dialogue has been spoken, Abe broadcasts more than could be explained in several minutes of conversation. Of course, Abe did not know how his audience might interpret this opening scene, but he knew it would grab their attention and set them on edge, ready for a night of theatre unlike any they had experienced before.

From this opening scene, Abe then has a fourfoot-long stick "hurtling down from the sky," and crashing to the stage, nearly hitting Hippie Boy. Not only does the stick startle the young hippie couple, it assuredly startled the audience. As the audience ponders

what the stick might represent, Man from Hell enters from stage-left and, in a poetic, chantlike voice, recites lines about the moon being a knife that is "peeling the skin of fate." Abe wastes no time garnering the audience's attention. Before easing his audience into a slightly more comfortable mode, however, Woman from Hell announces, almost like a town crier, the somewhat startling news that yet another man has turned into a stick. There is, in fact, a man (referred to as Stick) on stage who matches his movements, as best he can, to those of the real stick that is now in Hippie Boy's hands. With this introduction, Abe has arrested his audience's curiosity. They are now wide awake with anticipation. They are primed and ready for the drama to unfold.

Next, Abe eases back into his chair, allowing his audience to catch its breath, as the hippie couple exchange lines about the rhythm the boy is tapping on the sidewalk with the stick. Then the girl looks up and exclaims, "Look!" and points to a young (unseen) boy, on the roof of a tall building. She surmises that the boy threw the stick. Hippie Boy responds derogatively, stating that he hates all little boys, while Hippie Girl is concerned that the young boy might fall over the edge. Abe has caught the audience's attention again. He had lightened up for a couple of lines, but now he introduces more tension: first, the Hippie Boy's straightforward announcement that he hates little boys, an unpopular sentiment; second, there is the idea that the little boy might fall, arousing concern in the audience. At this point, with everyone looking up, hoping for the young boy's safety, Stick speaks. As his monologue progresses, the audience begins to relate to him. He is sensitive, concerned, confused, and loving. He is, in other words, like most members in the audience. He is the quintessential Everyman.

When Man and Woman from Hell meet at center stage (they have been slowly walking in from opposite sides of the stage) they begin a dialogue with the hippies. Through their exchanges, Abe hints at his themes of alienation, death, passivity, and aimlessness. He creates short conversations that focus on these themes, but he intersperses slightly off-balanced dialogues that don't make a lot of sense. For instance, immediately following a somewhat lengthy description of Man from Hell's sentiments about the benefit of uncertainty and anguish in one's life, Hippie Girl turns to Hippie Boy and asks: "How about a kiss, huh?" It is as if Abe wants to catch the audience off-guard. He has turned and caught them catnapping, something he cannot allow them to do. So he throws out a line that will again wake them up. After all, who can resist the mention of a kiss?

Apparently, Hippie Boy can—and does. Hippie Girl is put off, but offers a compromise. Why doesn't Hippie Boy scratch her back with the stick? By now, the audience has associated the male actor with the stick. The man has been talking for the stick and has matched the stick's motions as best he can. The audience has identified the stick with the man and must wonder how the boy will scratch the girl's back with Stick? Will he use the stick or the male actor? The audience must figure this out. Again, Abe lures the audience into the act, forcing them to think through the motivations of the characters and anticipate what the author has planned next.

The girl bends over in Hippie Boy's direction, implying that she is ready for him to scratch her back. Hippie Boy inserts the stick (the real stick) down the back of her

dress. In likewise fashion, Hippie Girl then scratches Hippie Boy's back with the stick. Hippie Boy enjoys the scratching so much he emits strange, ecstatic noises and announces that he hasn't had a bath in a long time. Here Abe inserts humor. It is used as a respite, an opportunity for the audience to relax and laugh at nonsense. However, it does not last long. As soon as the audience begins to laugh, Abe turns their emotions around and makes them confront anger. Hippie Girl throws the stick down in disgust and exclaims: "You egoist!" Just when the audience thought that Abe was letting up the pressure, he catches them again. This time he catches them in a puzzle. What is wrong with Hippie Girl? What does she mean by calling Hippie Boy an "egoist"? What is going on? In throwing out questions at his audience, Abe keeps them connected to his play. Nothing is answered or explained, of course, leaving the audience to work through the confusion, creating their own answers.

The play progresses, with Abe clenching and squeezing the nerves of his audience, then releasing them for short periods of time, only to grab them again with new, unsettling elements. Stick speaks. He is very emotional. His son is crying out for him. Stick knows that this is the last he will see of his son. Interspersed between the monologues of the dying stick are Abe's reflections on modern life, as expressed by the other characters in the play. The audience, now completely rapt with anticipation, wonders why the Man from Hell has asked for their attention. Their minds are open, and Abe is about to leave them with a message that will remain with them for quite some time.

Toward the end, the play takes a turn toward the serious. Hippie Boy, while holding the stick, senses his own resemblance to it. He feels the life flowing out of it, and it startles him. The reflection on the boy's part is flitting, at first, for the conversation quickly changes direction, returning briefly to comedy, with Abe orchestrating a discordant rhythm that keeps the audience perturbed as the characters switch from jokes to irrational actions to moments of reflection. Hippie Boy's identification with the stick continues to weave its way through the play until, in astonishment and confusion, Hippie Boy gladly hands over the stick to Man from Hell. Hippie Boy, Abe demonstrates, does not like what he feels. He does not want to see himself as a stick.

It is during the last section that the play delivers most of Abe's message. The dialogue is fairly straightforward, with no comedic interruptions. Abe partially explains the metaphor of the stick and the reasons why the man has turned into one. Then he has everyone but Stick leave the stage, with the Man and Woman from Hell seen in silhouette as they stand behind a curtain. They begin reciting poetic stanzas again as Stick contemplates the reasons for his present condition. Without stepping out from behind the curtain, Woman and Man engage in a brief dialogue, wondering how a stick would scratch himself if he had an itch. The audience is lulled into believing that the play has reached its conclusion. However, Abe has a few more tricks up his sleeve. The audience is in for another surprise. Abe is not quite finished with them.

Man from Hell suddenly reappears on stage and walks over to the audience. He stands, pointing his finger at individuals in their seats. Then he says: "Look—there's a whole forest of sticks around you." With this, Abe has done it again. The play, in essence, has

finished, but the final message has yet to be delivered. Abe is not going to let the audience go home, believing they can sneak out of the theatre unnoticed. Abe is like a teacher, and Man from Hell is handing out Abe's take-home exam. The play has delivered Abe's message, only now he wants to make sure that the audience understands that he was talking directly to them. There was only one man in this play who turned into a stick, but in the audience there are many more potential victims. Man from Hell then delivers his last lines: "I wouldn't want you to think I'm saying these things just to annoy you . . . . It's just the simple truth."

Just in case the audience didn't get Abe's message, he has Woman from Hell console Stick by telling him, just before the curtain falls, that he is not alone. "You've lots of friends," she says. With these words, Abe leaves his audience alone. At least he leaves them in the physical sense. His play, his thoughts, his quirky images, and his disturbing questions go home with every member of the audience. If there are questions in their minds, and most assuredly there will be questions, Abe leaves the members of the audience to answer them on their own.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *The Man Who Turned into a Stick,* in Drama for Students, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

France France is a librarian and teacher of history and interdisciplinary studies at University Liggett School. He also teaches basic writing at Macomb Community College near Detroit, Michigan. In the following essay, he discusses elements of existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd in Abe's play.

In a darkly playful and bizarre manner, *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* forces its audience to think about the purpose of life in a crowded, technology technologysaturated society. Subtle conflicts between characters inspire one to explore the meaning of life and death as an essential aspect of the human condition. As the play opens, the title character jumps off the roof of a department store located above a busy subway or train station in Tokyo. His suicide creates the play's situation and plot. However, one cannot determine whether the ensuing action and dialogue are "real." As the Man from Hell suggests, it is possible that he and his partner-in-training "constitute no more than the dreams that people have when they are on the point of death." Such ambiguity gives the play disturbing and unsettling force. Conceptually, the bleak themes of existential despair and death in Kobo Abe's *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* can be placed within a historical context.

The philosophy of modern existentialism and the closely related Theatre of the Absurd came into their own in the wake of the destruction and trauma caused by World War II. This horrendous conflict, raging from 1939 to 1945 in Europe and the Pacific, killed millions of men, women, and children. It left the survivors, particularly those who lived in areas where the fighting was most intense, disoriented and devastated, in a state of shock. For many, religious leaders seemed incapable of explaining why or how God or a Supreme Being could allow such an atrocity to occur. Many intellectuals and artists lost faith in either God or the idea of rational human progress. Existentialism flourished in the wake of such twentieth century horrors as the European Holocaust and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, events that provided ample evidence of mankind's capacity for inflicting—and enduring—tremendous suffering. Emerging in Paris, which had been occupied by Nazi forces from 1940 to 1944, existentialist writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) stated that modern life is pointless and absurd, without real meaning. In their view, God or a Supreme Being has apparently abandoned humans to their own devices. The best one can do is bravely face the absurdity of life and act accordingly.

Following World War II, the Theatre of the Absurd developed and explored the theme of existentialism. Sartre and Camus wrote plays as well as novels and essays and books of philosophy, but Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954) is probably the best-known example of Theatre of the Absurd. In this genre, characters frequently experience alienation, a feeling of separation from society and place. They often come to realize that their lives are pointless. Once they reach this conclusion, they either continue on without much hope or try some desperate and often irrational act such as suicide. To keep audiences from fleeing to the exits in despair or denial, Theatre of the Absurd playwrights often use humor—usually bizarre and often nonsensical— to

provoke laughter, even if the laughter is nervous or anxious. The Theatre of the Absurd made its maximum cultural impact in the 1950s and 1960s, a period of recovery from World War II. Tellingly, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. Kobo Abe's *The Man Who Turned into a Stick,* first staged in 1967, fully resonates with elements of both modern existential philosophy and the Theatre of the Absurd.

Modern Japan, the setting of Abe's play, has undergone radical and startlingly rapid change in less than thirty years. Once the principal Asian military power, Japan suffered firebombings of its major cities, atomic attack, and military occupation by the United States and its allies. It then became transformed into a technologically advanced and rapidly developing economic power. Throughout this time, Japan was served by a disciplined workforce that accepted personal sacrifice as a rule. The Man Who Turned into a Stick represents this workforce, the necessary ingredient that made modern post-war Japan possible. He, like most Japanese workers, pays a heavy price for Japan's "success." The Man from Hell explains that the Stick "has put up with every kind of abuse, until its whole body is covered with scars, never running away and never being discarded" and therefore "should be called a capable and faithful stick." Similar characteristics could also describe those who led and served under the Japanese war machine of the 1930s and 1940s. From Abe's point of view, as expressed by the Man from Hell, capability and faithfulness are not particularly enlightened attributes for humans. Indeed, when placed entirely at the disposal of others without question, they eventually contribute to one's sense of alienation from the world. In the Stick Man's case, it leads him to such despair and desperation that he flees his son and leaps off a roof. Life has become so unbearable that an act of suicide seems heroic and liberating by comparison. For once he does something for himself. This seems irrational, perhaps, but taking responsibility for one's actions despite the absurdity of life is a heroic gesture, an act that constitutes one of the hallmarks of existentialism and Theatre of the Absurd. In life, one makes self-defining choices, even if they lead to one's own death.

Free will is an essential aspect of existentialist thought. The very act of transforming a man into a stick seems absurd on a rational level, but this transformation makes more sense on a subconscious and symbolic level. The quality of workers' lives is so poor that they are worth no more than sticks to be used as tools. The outlook is bleak. The Man from Hell points out to his partner that "the percentage of sticks has steadily gone up." Workers' lives have become so dehumanized that they require no judgment or punishment when they die. Without hope while they live, they have no faith in Heaven or a redemptive afterlife. Yet Hell exists, at least in a dying man's consciousness. If there is a God or Supreme Being, he has abandoned humankind to its own devices. According to Hell's textbook: "The Master has departed and the earth has become a grave of rotten sticks. That's why the shortage of help in hell has never become especially acute." Here and throughout the play are echoes of Sartre, Camus, and Beckett.

Two other characters provide an alternative to the Stick Man's way of life. Hippie Boy and Hippie Girl represent the counterculture that developed throughout the 1960s in reaction to the established values of the time. The counterculture movement made a lasting impression on the United States during the Vietnam War and soon became a

worldwide phenomenon. Hippies defied the accepted social norms, yet they defined themselves simply by being against these norms rather than offering an alternative. Hippie Girl says blithely, "This is the age of the generation gap. We're alienated." With this pronouncement, the playwright indicates that hippies are just as alienated as people who live by the more accepted social rules and expectations. The hippies live aimlessly, which bothers Hippie Girl somewhat. Her sister has died recently and she feels unsettled. She suggests that some aims in life would be a good thing. The Man from Hell replies in typical existentialist fashion. "The uncertainty you feel at the thought you have lost track of whatever aims you once had—they're a lot better proof that you are there . . . than any aim I can think of," he tells her. In existentialism, mental anguish is a necessary part of understanding the absurd nature of human life no matter how it is lived. Hippie Boy acts disagreeably, trying to assert his uniqueness. But he feels anxious after Hippie Girl tells him that he resembles The Man Who Turned into a Stick. Hippie Boy cannot help but feel more disturbed when the Man from Hell follows up her observation: "Let's suppose for the moment you do look like the stick—the meaning is not what you think it is." Hippie Boy thinks he's been clever by selling the stick for five dollars, but immediately after he makes the deal the Man from Hell says rather menacingly, "It wasn't just a stick you sold, but yourself." In folklore, making a bargain with the Devil or his minions frequently leads to the surrender of one's soul. Later, when the Woman from Hell asks her partner what will become of the hippies, he says: "If they don't turn into sticks maybe they'll become rubber hoses." He seems to be saying that, in the end, it makes no difference.

Much of the subtle conflict in *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* results from the interaction between Hippie Girl and Hippie Boy and between the Man and Woman from Hell. The girl and woman show more compassion and hope, which their male counterparts try to dash through quips and commentary. Hippie Boy calls Hippie Girl "just plain stupid," while the Man from Hell chides his partner for being too compassionate, too sentimental. Hippie Girl thinks that some aims in life would be worthwhile. The Woman from Hell thinks that The Man Who Turned into a Stick should be given to his son. "Don't you think that's the least we can do?" she asks. "At least it ought to serve as a kind of mirror. He can examine himself and make sure he won't become a stick like his father." But her partner refuses to do so. Still, their own fate is no better. After all, they reside in Hell—or in a figment of the dying Stick Man's imagination. The Man from Hell even has problems back at Headquarters. He's forgotten his keys and his wife might be mad at him. The Voice from Hell tells him over the walkietalkie that he's "hopeless." Elements of existentialism and Theatre of the Absurd are found throughout *The Man Who Turned into a Stick*. Kobo Abe bluntly and repeatedly announces that no one can escape the human predicament. Like a stick prodding the audience to examine its beliefs and values, the play forces different generations to become aware of how they live their lives. As if this is still not clear enough, in the final moments before the curtain falls, the Man From Hell advances toward the audience and says "Look—there's a whole forest of sticks around you . . . All those sticks. You may never be judged, but at least you don't have to worry about being punished." This pronouncement is merely "the simple truth, the truth as I see it."

Source: Erik France, Critical Essay on *The Man Who Turned into a Stick,* in Drama for Students, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

Although Abe's *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* was never made into a movie, several of his other works were. Abe wrote the screenplays for each of these movies, all of which were directed by Hiroshi Teshigahara: *The Woman in the Dunes* (1964), which received a special jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival. His *Face of Another* was produced in 1966, and *The Ruined Map* was produced in 1968 as *The Man without a Map. The Woman in the Dunes* is available on videocassette.

Topics for Further Study

Abe stages his play *The Man Who Turned into a Stick* as a series of three one-act plays. Read the other two plays (*The Suitcase* and *The Cliff of Time*) and write an analysis of how these plays fit together. Do you find a common theme? Do the plays reflect the subtitled themes of birth, process, and death? In reading the plays together, does it give you a better grasp of what Abe was doing in *The Man Who Turned into a Stick?*

At the end of his play, Abe has the Man from Hell character turn to the audience and state that he sees a forest of sticks out there. If you were sitting in the audience, how would you respond? Write a letter to Abe stating how you interpret this accusation. How does it make you feel? Do you agree with the assessment? Does it waken you to some new realization about your life?

Two of Abe's characters are described as hippies. Change the description of these characters to bring them up to date. What would their names be? How would their attitudes differ in their communications with the other characters? Rewrite the portion of the play where these two characters are on stage, using a modern definition of rebellious and alienated youth.

Abe is often compared to Franz Kafka. Read Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in which a man turns into a bug. What are the themes of Kafka's story? Are these themes similar to any of the themes in Abe's *The Man Who Turned into a Stick?* Enlist a few volunteers to sit on a panel to discuss the two works. Research the backgrounds of these writers, the overall themes of their writing, and how these factors influenced their respective stories.

Research the history of Japanese imperialist rule in Manchuria. Then write a fictionalized account of Abe's adolescence as if it were true. You may want to focus on one week in his life, covering what it must have been like to walk through the streets in constant fear of being kidnapped or to ride on the train and see heads stuck on the ends of poles. Find out what the landscape was like. Decide if you want this story to take place during the harsh winter or another season. Remember that Abe was a loner, so you might want to include interior dialogue.

Compare and Contrast

Early 1900s: Korean, Russian, and Japanese forces fight over Manchuria in a series of wars. In the decade prior to World War II, Japan exerts military control over the land and establishes Manchuria as the most industrialized section of mainland China.

Middle 1900s: Japan loses its rights to Manchuria after World War II. Chinese Communist forces take control of the area when Russia threatens to invade.

Today: China's interest in Manchuria wanes and large-scale unemployment ensues as state-controlled businesses stagnate.

Early 1900s: Japan's economy is largely based on textile goods. Later, as imperialist ambitions increase, the Japanese economy becomes even stronger with the manufacture of heavy war machinery.

Middle 1900s: After a total collapse of its economy coming as a result of its defeat in World War II, Japan emerges as a major industrial power, manufacturing machinery, automobiles, and steel.

Today: Japan is the most industrialized country in Asia and is the second-greatest economic power in the world, second only to the United States. Japan's economy is now based on technological goods such as electric and electronic appliances.

Early 1900s: Expressionist playwrights like Karel Capek (Czechoslovakia) and Eugene O'Neill (U.S.A.) influence dramatists around the world with their use of minimal scenery, talking machines, and characters as types, rather than as real people, to convey the dehumanizing aspects of a technological society.

Middle 1900s: The Theatre of the Absurd reflects a widespread sense of the utter meaningless in life through the work of such dramatists as Samuel Beckett (Ireland), Eugene Ionesco (France), and Edward Albee (U.S.A.), who influence many young, international playwrights.

Today: There is a trend in modern plays to reflect realistic themes such as gay lifestyles, multicultural interests, reflections of Holocaust and Hiroshima survivors and their children, the political struggles of Apartheid, the devastation caused by AIDS, and cultural conflicts of post-Colonialism.

What Do I Read Next?

Abe's work and style are often compared to Franz Kafka, a writer born in Prague in 1883. Two of Kafka's better known works include *The Metamorphosis* (1915; English translation 1937), in which a young man wakes up one morning to find that he has been changed into a large bug. The theme of this book, as with most of Kafka's work, is the individual's feelings of inadequacy and isolation in modern civilization. The other book, *The Trial* (1925; English translation 1937), involves a young man accused of a crime he did not commit, much less understand. He is eventually released but must return to court to repeatedly prove his innocence. Both novels explore the psychological terrors that many people experience in modern-day life.

Another writer to whom Abe is compared is Alain Robbe-Grillet, who was born in Brest, Brittany, in 1922. Robbe-Grillet wrote about characters who had little or no previous history and no conventional names to identify them, as do the characters of Abe's plays. Robbe-Grillet's most famous work is the novel *Les Gommes* (1953; translated as *The Erasers*, 1964). This book is a type of murder mystery, which covers a supposed twenty-four-hour period that begins when a bullet is fired from a gun and ends with the bullet entering and killing its victim.

Three other popular plays by Abe include *Fake Fish* (1973), a play about fish who dream of being men and men who dream of being fish; *Friends* (1965), in which a smiling but unidentified family invades a man's life and drives him to suicide—Abe's statement against the traditional Japanese communal values; and *Green Stockings* (1974), a play about a man who, in an attempt to transcend his everyday existence, steals stockings, panties, and brassieres from other people's clotheslines.

Abe's most popular work of fiction is *The Woman in the Dunes* (1964). In this story a schoolteacher, who is also an amateur entomologist, sets out to find a rare insect. While searching in vast, unnamed sand dunes, the protagonist comes across a primitive colony of people whose daily task is to haul sand out of their submerged living quarters. The schoolteacher eventually becomes entrapped and is kept prisoner there. When he finally escapes, he no longer has the desire to return to his former life.

Jacob Golomb's *In Search of Authenticity: Existentialism from Kierkegaard to Camus (Problems of Modern European Thought)* (1995) is a study of the writings of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, existential philosophers and novelists who examined mankind's responsibility in determining what is right and wrong, a subject (and philosophy) that Abe often referred to.

Further Study

Goodman, David. G., trans. and ed., *After Apocalypse: Four Japanese Plays of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,* Cornell University Press, 1994 (reprint).

A collection of modern Japanese plays that looks into the spiritual, political, and moral questions that faced most Japanese during the postwar era.

Iles, Timothy, *Abe Kobo: An Exploration of His Prose, Drama and Theatre,* European Press Academic Publishing, 2000.

This is one of a very few books written in English that is totally focused on Abe's work. Iles offers a comprehensive study, interpretation, and criticism of both Abe's fiction and his plays.

Keene, Donald, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era,* Columbia University Press, 1984.

This book, written by the noted scholar and translator of Abe's works, offers an extensive study of Japanese literature, including drama. Keene has translated the works of many major contemporary Japanese writers.

Mishima, Yukio, *Five Modern Noh Plays,* Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1981.

Using the traditional form of the Noh play, Mishima, a famous novelist, explores modern existential questions. Modern audiences often state that Mishima's work haunts them long after they have experienced his plays.

Takaya, Ted T., ed., *Modern Japanese Drama: An Anthology,* Columbia University Press, 1979.

This collection offers an overview of modern Japanese plays that were written and produced in Abe's time. Included are plays by Abe, Yukio Mishima, and other contemporary Japanese dramatists.

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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.
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- 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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