

The Matchmaker Study Guide

The Matchmaker by Thornton Wilder

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Introduction

Thornton Wilder's play *The Matchmaker* is a farce in the old-fashioned sense. It uses such time-honored conventions as characters hidden under tables and in closets, men disguised as women, a complex conspiracy to bring young lovers together, and a happy ending in which three couples are united with plans to marry. The traditional aspects of the play should come as no surprise: Wilder himself was the first to acknowledge the sources that it was based upon. The character of Dolly Levi came from French playwright Molière's comedy *L'avare*, or *The Miser*, from which Wilder lifted some scenes directly. A closer influence was Johann Nestroy's *Einen Jux will er sich Machen*, performed in Vienna in 1842. Wilder referred to his play as a "free adaptation" of Nestroy's, which itself was adapted from British playwright John Oxenham's 1835 comedy *A Day Well Spent*. Wilder's first adaptation was called *The Merchant of Yonkers*, which failed on Broadway in 1938, running for only twenty-eight performances. *The Matchmaker* was itself adapted as *Hello, Dolly!*, which began in 1963 and ran for years, ranking as one of Broadway's longest-running musicals.

In all of these permutations, the basic plot has been the same as it is in *The Matchmaker*. In Wilder's version, an irascible, penny-pinching store owner, Horace Vandergelder, refuses to let his niece marry the poor artist she loves, although he himself plans to remarry. Dolly Levi, the matchmaker of the title, pretends that she is helping Vandergelder find a suitable bride, but she actually schemes to marry him herself, and she works to help the young lovers gain his approval. Vandergelder's beleaguered clerk, who is longing for excitement, also meets the woman of his dreams, although she happens to be the one Vandergelder intends to marry. In the end, everyone is happy and just a little smarter.



Author Biography

Thornton Niven Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin, on April 17, 1897, the only survivor of twin brothers. His mother, the daughter of a minister, and his father, a strict, moody newspaper editor, both had a strong influence on the view of the world that he would eventually develop. In 1906, his father joined the foreign service as a consular general to Hong Kong. The entire family moved there with him, but after six months Wilder's mother took the children and moved back to the United States, living in Berkeley, California. When his father transferred to Shanghai, Wilder returned to Asia and attended German and Chinese schools before returning to the United States once more to finish high school in Berkeley.

When his father enrolled Wilder in Oberlin College in Ohio, Wilder was disappointed, having hoped to attend Yale. He found that the small college atmosphere suited him, however. Several of his works were published in the student magazine, and he came to know professors on a personal level. He transferred to Yale for his last two years, which were interrupted by a short tour of service in the Coast Artillery Corps, the only branch that would accept him because he was severely nearsighted. Returning to Yale, he had his first full-length play published in serial form in the *Yale Literary Review* before graduating in 1920. He received his master's degree in French literature from Princeton in 1926.

In 1926, his first novel, *The Cabala*, was published, and his first play, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, was produced. The following year, his life was changed forever when his second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, became a sensation, selling millions of copies and winning the Pulitzer Prize. After that, he taught part-time, taking visiting professorships at Harvard, the University of Chicago, and the University of Hawaii; and he wrote, alternating between novels and dramas.

In 1938, Wilder won a second Pulitzer Prize for his play *Our Town*, making him the only American to ever win Pulitzers for both fiction and drama. Every year, *Our Town* is still one of the most often-produced plays. He won a third Pulitzer, in drama, for 1942's *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

Wilder served in the Air Force during World War II, earning the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star. After the war, he wrote less, and his new works were greeted with less enthusiasm by critics, but his place in American literature was already firmly established. He died in December 1975, in the house in Connecticut where he had lived for years with his sister, who served him as secretary, literary advisor, and business manager.



Plot Summary

Act 1

The Matchmaker is set in the 1880s and begins in the cluttered living room of Horace Vandergelder, a wealthy old widower living above his prosperous hay, feed, and provisions store in Yonkers, New York. His bags are packed, and he is being shaved by a barber. Ambrose Kemper, an artist, is trying to get Vandergelder to allow him to marry Vandergelder's niece, Ermengarde. Vandergelder does not approve because Ambrose does not make a steady income, and the old man is too practical to consider either love or the promise of future earnings as significant reasons to change his mind. Ambrose points out that Ermengarde is twenty-four and old enough to do what she wants. Vandergelder says that he is sending Ermengarde away to a secret place to prevent the wedding, but then his housekeeper, Gertrude, comes in and announces out loud the address where Ermengarde's luggage is being sent.

Vandergelder sends for his chief clerk, Cornelius Hackl, and explains to him that he is going away for a few days to be married. He says that he is promoting the thirty-three-year-old Cornelius to the position of chief clerk, even though, as Cornelius tells the junior clerk later, it is a position he has held for several years already.

When no other clerks are in the room, Malachi Stack enters with a letter of recommendation from a past associate. Vandergelder agrees to hire him and sends him away immediately to catch a train to New York City so that he can prepare for Vandergelder's arrival after his marriage.

Vandergelder is out of the room when Dolly Levi arrives. She is an old friend of his late wife, a matchmaker who is supposed to be finding a suitable wife for Vandergelder. She hears Ermengarde and Ambrose complaining that he is obstructing their wedding plans, and she agrees to help them, arranging to meet them at a restaurant in New York that night.

Vandergelder arrives and tells Mrs. Levi his plans to marry Irene Molloy. She makes up a story about a woman who is wealthy, socially connected, and interested in him, and so he agrees to put off proposing to Mrs. Molloy.

Left alone, Cornelius complains to the other clerk, Barnaby Tucker, that they never get time off to go out and experience life. He goes downstairs to the store and heats some cans of tomatoes until they explode, creating a foul smell that forces them to close the store, and they take off to New York, planning to have an adventure.

Act 2

In the hat shop that she owns, Irene Molloy tells her assistant, Minnie Fay, that she will marry Vandergelder if he asks, in order to get out of the hat business. She feels trapped



by the reputation that milliners have, with her every move being watched by people who expect her to be a woman of low virtue. Minnie objects that Mrs. Molloy should not marry if she does not love Vandergelder.

They are in the back room when Cornelius and Barnaby come into the shop to hide, having seen Vandergelder on the street. When the women enter, the two clerks pretend to be wealthy men who are shopping for a hat—actually, "five or six"—for a friend. Cornelius falls in love with Mrs. Molloy immediately.

Seeing Vandergelder and Mrs. Levi approaching the shop, Cornelius and Barnaby hide in a closet and under the table, respectively. Mrs. Molloy suspects what is going on and leads Vandergelder to the back room to give them a chance to escape, but Cornelius decides to stay so that he can get to know Mrs. Molloy. Dolly Levi finds out about their situation and decides to help them. When Vandergelder and Mrs. Molloy come back, the conversation turns to Cornelius. Mrs. Molloy is under the impression that he is wealthy, and Vandergelder says he is just a clerk. Mrs. Levi explains that Cornelius is actually a well-known socialite, a prankster who comes from a wealthy family and works at the shop in Yonkers to amuse himself. The clerks sneeze and are found out; Vandergelder walks out, indignant, taking Mrs. Levi with him. Mrs. Molloy, thinking that Cornelius really is wealthy, insists that he and Barnaby take Minnie and her to an expensive restaurant for dinner.

Act 3

At the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant, Vandergelder plans to meet Mrs. Levi and the mysterious woman whom she said admires him. He sees Ermengarde and Ambrose enter. He pays Malachi and the cabdriver who brought them to abduct the young couple when they leave and take them to the house of Miss Van Huysen.

The two clerks arrive with Mrs. Molloy and her assistant. As she orders food and champagne, Cornelius worries about how they will pay the bill at such an expensive restaurant. The waiter sets up another table and puts up a screen between the two, for privacy; at the other table he seats Vandergelder, who is waiting for his date. Malachi finds a wallet on the floor and, not seeing that it has dropped out of Vandergelder's pocket, takes it around the screen and gives it to Cornelius, whom he has never met. No longer worried about the bill, Cornelius confesses to Mrs. Molloy that he is not rich and is just a clerk. She suggests that they just have a good time.

Mrs. Levi joins Vandergelder and explains that the woman she told him about has run away and gotten married. During their conversation, he discusses how difficult Mrs. Levi can be, and she pretends that he is flirting with her and hinting at marriage, in order to plant the idea in his head.

To get out of the restaurant without being seen by Vandergelder, Cornelius and Barnaby put on the ladies' coats and veils. Before leaving, they take time to dance. Vandergelder, dancing with Mrs. Levi, bumps into Cornelius and recognizes him. He fires both clerks,



and Mrs. Molloy breaks up with him. Ermengarde enters and faints, to be carried out by Ambrose. Mrs. Levi points out the sorry situation of Vandergelder's life: "Without niece—without clerks—without bride—and without your purse. Will you marry me now?" He still refuses.

Act 4

The cab driver and Malachi arrive at Miss Van Huysen's house with Cornelius and Barnaby, who is still disguised as a woman; they have mistaken them for Ermengarde and Ambrose. Miss Van Huysen explains that she has no intention of interfering with young love as Vandergelder expects her to.

The real Ermengarde and Ambrose show up. Expecting Miss Van Huysen to object to their relationship, they tell her that Ambrose is Cornelius Hackl.

Dolly Levi arrives with Mrs. Molloy and Minnie. She pays off the cabdriver with money from Vandergelder's wallet, which Cornelius gave to her.

When Vandergelder arrives, Mrs. Van Huysen insists that he let the young lovers marry. Everyone goes to the kitchen, and Dolly Levi, addressing her dead husband Ephraim, explains that she intends to marry Vandergelder in order to spread his money around, creating happiness. When Vandergelder comes back, he does in fact propose to Mrs. Levi. Barnaby comes in and says that the other two couples are going to marry, too, and Mrs. Levi has Barnaby, as the youngest member of the cast, give a final speech to the audience about the importance of having enough adventure in one's life.



Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Act 1 takes place in the home of Horace Vandergelder, which is situated over his feed store in Yonkers, New York. A barber is shaving Horace, a 60-year-old miser, as Horace argues with Ambrose Kemper. Ambrose is an artist who wants to marry Horace's niece, Ermengarde. Horace intends to send Ermengarde away to a secret place, but his deaf housekeeper has given away the location of the secret place, telling exactly where it is. Ermengarde is going to visit a family friend, Flora Van Huysen, in New York. Ambrose leaves, gratefully kissing the housekeeper.

Horace dresses for a parade in the morning and for courting in the afternoon. He confides to the audience that, although he believes marriage is for fools, he intends to marry. He has enlisted the help one of his deceased wife's friends, Dolly Levi, to find a new wife.

When Dolly arrives to meet with Horace, she overhears Ambrose trying to convince Ermengarde to elope with him right away. However, Ermengarde wants a "proper" wedding, complete with her uncle's blessing. Dolly sends Ermengarde back to her room to get ready as she assures Ambrose that she will arrange things so that the young couple will have a proper wedding. Dolly is not concerned with propriety, but she wants to make sure Ermengarde receives her inheritance from her miserly uncle.

Dolly explains to Ambrose that she is interfering in their lives not only for her own benefit, but also for the pleasure of seeing Horace's money circulate. Dolly has a plan to take Ermengarde to her own home in New York, rather than to Flora's home, and she instructs Ambrose to meet them for dinner at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant in New York this evening.

Ambrose leaves, and Dolly waits for Horace, who returns to the living room dressed for the parade. He announces that he will propose to Irene Molloy. The audience can see that Dolly is flustered by this news, and she fabricates a "Miss Simple" for Horace to meet first. Dolly confides to the audience that she plans to replace the wallpaper in the living room, helping to confirm the suspicion that she wants to marry Horace herself. For now, Horace pays her \$25 for her matchmaking services. Dolly and Horace plan to meet, at Irene's hat shop in New York in the afternoon, and later for dinner with Miss Simple at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant.

Meanwhile, Horace has "promoted" Cornelius Hackl to the position of chief clerk, and he leaves him in charge of the shop while he goes to New York. However, Cornelius resents this pretend promotion and he is fed up with working long hours for very little reward. He and the younger clerk, Barnaby, decide to go to New York for a night on the town. They do not know that Horace hired a third clerk, Malachi, and sent him ahead to New York to make arrangements.



Act 1 Analysis

In the first conversation of the first act, Wilder gives us the central conflict of the play. "Gelder" is a German word meaning "money." Horace's surname, Vandergelder, indicates he is "of the money." Ambrose's name, on the other hand, reminds one of "ambrosia," a pleasure to the senses. The play opens with this question: Which is the more worthy pursuit: financial security or pleasure, business or the arts?

Horace spends his life earning and hoarding money. He claims to believe that love is for fools. Even in his own search for a wife, Horace cannot admit he might be lonely. He claims he needs a woman just to work, like an ant carrying twice its weight, to help him save money and bring order to his home. However, his concern for his niece and her security gives the audience reason to be sympathetic towards him. Through this character, Thornton Wilder shows us his view of the middle class. He is both critical of its selfishness and compassionate of its desire for safety and stability.

Ambrose Kemper is a stereotypical angry young man. He feels money, or the lack of it, should not keep him from having whatever he wants. Ermengarde seems not to have thought much about money at all. She is accustomed to her uncle taking care of her. She wants Ambrose, but she also wants to be a "proper" young lady. She does not want to lose her uncle's favor, which is the only security she knows.

Dolly Levi is a character that gives voice to a more mature perspective on this conflict. She says to Ambrose Kemper that money "should be flowing down among the people, through dressmakers and restaurants and cabmen, setting up a little business here, and furnishing a good time there." Dolly is not anti-money, but she is anti-greed. Unlike Ambrose and Ermengarde, Dolly is old enough to provide a realistic perspective about the need for money.

When Cornelius and Barnaby discuss a dreary future working for Horace Vandergelder, Cornelius speaks of the danger of greed. One would become a Vandergelder, that is, a miser, by narrowing his life to nothing more than work and money. Though Cornelius dislikes his boss, he also seems to realize that greed is a shortcoming of human nature.



Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act 2 takes place in Irene Molloy's hat shop in New York, where she works with her assistant, Minnie. Irene calls people "fools," just as Horace does. However, Irene plans to marry Horace, because she is tired of working and being lonely. Like Cornelius, however, she longs for adventure.

Barnaby and Cornelius enter Irene's shop in an attempt to hide from "Wolf-trap," as they call Horace, who is exiting a cab outside. Cornelius and Irene seem attracted to each other, and Cornelius leads her to believe he is a wealthy man. When Dolly and Horace walk toward the hat shop, Barnaby hides underneath a table, as Cornelius hides in the wardrobe.

Irene takes Dolly and Horace to her workroom, allowing the two clerks the time they need to get out of her shop. However, Cornelius has fallen for Irene, and he is in no hurry to leave. Dolly returns to the room, discovering the men, but she says nothing about it as Irene and Horace join her.

Irene asks Horace about Cornelius, thinking that surely they know each other from Yonkers. When Horace says that Cornelius is his clerk, she does not believe it is the same man whom she has met. Dolly advances the idea that Cornelius is leading a double life, as a quiet clerk by day and a wealthy man-about-town by night. She suggests to Horace that he should make Cornelius a partner in his business.

Then, the two clerks start sneezing from the dust and perfume in their hiding places. Horace is shocked and insulted to realize that there are two men hiding in the room, though he still does not know who they are. Dolly escorts Horace out for his dinner with "Miss Simple," pretending to be as shocked as he is by Irene's "impropriety." Secretly, though, she encourages Irene to take advantage of this opportunity for a little fun. Irene, who still thinks Cornelius is wealthy, insists that he and Barnaby take her and Minnie out to dinner. The act closes as the four leave for the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant, even though Cornelius barely has enough money to get himself back to Yonkers.

Act 2 Analysis

In this second act, the audience is introduced to the dilemma of working women like Irene. She is a successful businesswoman, and therefore she is not considered a proper lady. She spends all her time at work, among her employees. However, if she were to go out for fun without a chaperone, it would damage her business. No proper lady would patronize her shop.

The meeting of Irene and Cornelius is a meeting between equals. They are not equals in status, but in their humanity. Both are hungry for love and adventure. They are only

able to feel their equality because of the illusion that Cornelius is a wealthy man. The audience realizes, too, that if Irene marries Horace simply to be more comfortable, she will not be happier.

Yet, when Horace arrives, Irene plays the role assigned to women in 1900's middle class culture by pretending to need his advice on business. This is further evidence of her quandary. Obviously a successful businesswoman, she must be exhausted by her work and loneliness to pander to Horace's ego in this way.

Wilder foreshadows part of the resolution of this comedy when Dolly suggests that Horace makes Cornelius a partner in his business. This is the second time the idea has been mentioned in the play. The audience knows that women will be partnered with men in marriage, and men will be partnered with one another in business.



Act 3

Act 3 Summary

Act 3 takes place in the late afternoon on the veranda of the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant in New York. Horace and his new clerk, Malachi, are at the restaurant arranging for Horace's dinner with Miss Simple.

Ambrose and Ermengarde arrive at the restaurant in a cab chaperoned by Dolly. Malachi pulls Horace behind a folding screen, so that they can hear the other three characters as they insult Horace. Dolly, however, becomes aware of Horace's presence and quickly changes her tone from insult to praise and sympathy. She then leads the young people upstairs for their dinner.

Horace bribes Malachi and the cabman, who is still outside, giving instructions that, when the young couple come out of the restaurant, the cabman is to take them to Flora Van Huysen's address and keep them there until Horace arrives. Meanwhile, Horace leaves to prepare for dinner and instructs Malachi to make sure no one else uses the veranda. Malachi and the cabman have a humorous exchange about employers, retiring finally to the kitchen to find whiskey to brace their selves for the kidnapping.

Irene, Minnie, Cornelius and Barnaby arrive and seat themselves on the veranda. They order an extravagant meal, including champagne. The women dance, and Barnaby even scores a kiss from Irene. There is conflict, however, when Malachi returns and tries to clear the room for his employer. A waiter resolves the issue by unfolding the screen between the two tables, so that when Horace arrives, he grumbles about having other people in the room, but he does not know who they are. He sits down to read a newspaper and waits for Dolly to arrive with "Miss Simple," dropping his purse on the floor.

Malachi finds the purse and "returns" it to Cornelius, who is thereby spared the humiliation of not being able to pay for the extravagant meal. Cornelius learns that Malachi's employer is Horace and that Horace is on the other side of the screen. He then sits down to tell Irene everything.

Dolly arrives and claims that Miss Simple ran off to marry someone else. She then pretends that Horace has suggested he marry Dolly, but she says that she would not marry him. Cornelius and Barnaby try to get past Horace, by disguising themselves as women as they leave the restaurant, but Horace discovers Cornelius and fires them both.

As the curtain closes, Horace has fired his clerks and lost his purse. His niece has fainted, and Ambrose has carried her out. Noting all that Horace has lost, Dolly chases him out of the restaurant saying, "Will you marry me now?"



Act 3 Analysis

Just as Malachi uses the screen to force Horace to listen to harsh words spoken about his self, Thornton Wilder uses conversation between employees to make his middle class audience "overhear" some hard truths. In the first act, it was Cornelius and Barnaby who spoke of the subject of rich people. In this act, Malachi and the cabman make fun of employers. When the women dance, Minnie tells Irene that all the girls in the workroom dance when their employer is not looking. Irene is moved to say, "You thought I'd be angry! Oh dear, no one in the world understands anyone else in the world." Again, Wilder is using an employee to teach that human nature dictates that all people have similar needs, including leisure, companionship and enjoyment of the arts.

When Malachi "returns" the purse he thinks Cornelius has lost, he explains to the audience that there was a time when he would have kept it, but that he is no longer in the business of "re-distributing wealth." Ironically, that is exactly what he is doing by handing over Horace's purse to Cornelius. The audience enjoys watching Cornelius receive some money from Horace's purse, because there seems to be justice in that act, and because we do not want him to be humiliated in front of Irene. However, Cornelius' natural integrity comes into play, and he tells Irene everything. By this, Wilder is showing his audience that a true gentleman is not necessarily the one with the money.

Irene and Minnie try to help Cornelius and Barnaby, and as the act ends, it becomes clear why Dolly has arranged for all the characters to meet in the same restaurant. She wants Horace to see that by trying to keep things in order, he has made his life unnecessarily chaotic. She shows him that his money has bought him neither happiness nor the admiration of others. She also wants him to believe he needs her in his life to bring some real order to it.

The playwright's motives in this act are similar to Dolly's. He is showing his audience that a life, which is centered on acquisition and cut off from other people, can never bring real order and security.



Act 4

Act 4 Summary

The final act of *The Matchmaker* takes place at the home of Miss Flora Van Huysen.

Flora is upset and worried about Ermengarde, who has not arrived as scheduled. Flora is also angry with Horace and "everyone else who tries to separate young lovers." Someone interfered with her and her fiancée's relationship years ago, and she has never been married. She wants to help Ermengarde escape her uncle and in order to marry Ambrose.

The cabman and Malachi arrive with their two prisoners, the man and "woman" who came back to the cab after dinner. However, these two are not Ermengarde and Ambrose, but Cornelius and Barnaby. Barnaby is still dressed as a woman. Flora mistakes him for Ermengarde, kisses his cheeks and assures him she will not interfere with the marriage. The arrival of Ermengarde and Ambrose in another cab completely confuses Flora.

Horace, Dolly, Irene and Minnie arrive now, all in the same cab. Flora tells Horace to "behave" in her house and to forgive Cornelius and Ambrose, though she is still confused about who is who. Dolly also encourages Horace to forgive them, telling him, "You've had a hard day...you can start quarreling with them tomorrow." This is one way of saying that, sometimes, we are being kinder to ourselves by not insisting that life be exactly as we want it to be.

Then Flora, at Dolly's suggestion, takes everyone else into the kitchen for coffee. This gives Dolly time to "talk" with her deceased husband, asking his blessing to marry Horace. Dolly then addresses the audience and tells her story. Two years after the death of her husband left her alone, Dolly realized that the only way to be truly alive is to be involved in the lives of other human beings. She also realizes that in order to be happy, it is necessary to have money, but not too much. She intends to help herself be happier by enjoying some of Horace's money, and to make him happier by helping him to let go of his surplus.

Horace comes in from the kitchen, with a cup of coffee for Dolly, and says a lot of "foolishness" has been going on in the kitchen. He has forgiven his niece and her fiancée. He has made Cornelius his partner and now he wants Dolly to marry him. Dolly pretends to struggle with the decision, until he assures her that she can do with his money as she pleases.

Barnaby bursts in to tell the two that Cornelius and Irene will marry. Horace sends him back into the kitchen to tell everyone that he and Dolly will also be married. Everyone who was in the kitchen comes out to offer congratulations. The play closes as Barnaby



is pushed forward to tell the moral of the play: everyone needs the right balance of security and adventure.

Act 4 Analysis

The way Wilder ends this play suggests that, if someone's life includes love and fun, not just work and money, the he or she will be more charitable with others, in terms of both money and judgment.

A familiar proverb says, "A fool and his money are soon parted." However, Dolly has learned, and she teaches Horace, that there is no escape from with the common human needs for affection, fun and money. Man can either be a fool among fools, or a fool amongst none other than his self. Being a fool among fools involves letting go of one's grip on money. It is safe to let go of security and pursue balance, because, as Dolly says, "The difference between a little money and no money at all is enormous...and the difference between a little money and an enormous amount of money is very slight." In other words, one needs enough money to be happy, but too much money does not make one happier.



Characters

August

August is the younger waiter at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant. He is so nervous that he bursts into tears at the slightest provocation.

Cabman

When Vandergelder finds out that his niece Ermengarde is at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant with the man whom he has forbidden her to see, he hires a cabdriver named Joe to take them to Miss Van Huysen's house and keep them there, by force if necessary. The Cabman has a few drinks with Malachi, and they end up kidnapping the wrong couple.

Cook

Miss Van Huysen's cook has waited all day with her for Ermengarde to arrive. She watches out the window and reports to Miss Van Huysen whenever anyone approaches the house.

Ermengarde

Ermengarde is the niece of Horace Vandergelder. She is twenty-four and intends to marry Ambrose Kemper, an artist, even though he does not make a good salary. When Vandergelder forbids her marriage and sends her to live in New York to keep her away from Ambrose, she goes along with him. She is rebellious enough to plan marriage to a man her uncle does not approve of, but she is also very concerned about her standing in society: when Ambrose suggests that they elope, she is not only against the idea but is shocked that he would even mention such a scandalous word.

Minnie Fay

Minnie works in Mrs. Molloy's hat shop. She is amazed that the older woman would even consider marrying a man whom she does not love. Minnie is not very worldly and has to ask if the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant is "what they call a 'cafe.'"

Gertrude

Gertrude is Vandergelder's housekeeper. She is described as "eighty; deaf; half blind; and very pleased with herself." When arrangements are made to send Ermengarde



away so that she cannot marry Ambrose, Gertrude spoils the plan by mentioning the address that Ermengarde is going to in Ambrose's presence.

Cornelius Hackl

Cornelius is the thirty-three-year-old chief clerk at Horace Vandergelder's store. Early in the play, Vandergelder announces to him that, after much consideration, he has decided to promote Cornelius to the position of chief clerk. The announcement that he has been promoted to the position he already holds makes him realize that he is in a rut, so he convinces Barnaby to join him for a night on the town in New York. There, he runs into Irene Molloy in her hat shop while he is pretending to be a wealthy socialite shopping for a hat, and he falls in love with her.

To keep Mrs. Molloy from finding out that Cornelius is just a clerk, Dolly Levi concocts an extravagant story about him being one of the most sought-after bachelors in New York, explaining that he comes from a wealthy family and that he only works in Vandergelder's store because he wants to. When Mrs. Molloy sees him next, she insists that he and Barnaby take her and her assistant to an expensive restaurant. Cornelius goes along, not wanting to tell her the truth, but he is frightened about being arrested when he cannot pay the bill until a stranger finds Vandergelder's wallet filled with money and gives it to Cornelius, assuming that he dropped it. A series of mistaken identities causes Miss Van Huysen to spend most of act IV thinking that Cornelius is Ambrose Kemper and that Ambrose is Cornelius, but in the end Cornelius and Mrs. Molloy plan to marry.

Ambrose Kemper

Ambrose is an artist who wants to marry Vandergelder's niece, Ermengarde. Because he is an artist, he does not have a secure economic future, and for this reason Vandergelder objects to the marriage. Ambrose tries to convince Ermengarde to elope with him, an idea which she finds scandalous, forcing him to accept Dolly Levi's help. In the end, he and Ermengarde are engaged.

Dolly Levi

Dolly is one of the play's central characters and the one after whom it is named. She is a manipulator and schemer who does not mind making up stories to get the results she wants. Her business cards claim skills in reducing varicose veins and in giving instruction on guitar and mandolin, but she states her principal occupation as "a woman who arranges things." Although she plans to marry Vandergelder for his money, her intentions are good; as she says to the audience in the last act, she plans to spread his money around to make the world a better place.

Mrs. Levi is a widow, an old friend of Vandergelder's late wife. As she points out later in the play, she and Vandergelder danced together at each other's weddings.



Vandergelder brings her into the situation because he wants her to chaperone Ermengarde, whom he plans to send to New York while he goes to marry Mrs. Molloy. Mrs. Levi starts planning against him almost immediately. She works to help Ermengarde and Ambrose get together, and she disrupts Vandergelder's intention to propose to Mrs. Molloy by making up a fabulously wealthy, sophisticated woman whom she says is interested in him. When she finds Cornelius in Mrs. Molloy's shop, she helps him hide from Vandergelder, and she makes up a ridiculous story so that Mrs. Molloy will not realize that he is a lowly clerk. This serves two purposes: she wants to help the lovers, and she wants to keep Mrs. Molloy from Vandergelder. At dinner with Vandergelder, she carefully but obliquely states the case for his marrying her so that he will think that the idea was his own. Her strategy works, in part because he is a willing victim, which becomes obvious when she announces that she has agreed to become his wife and she has him change his announcement to "*finally* agreed," as if he had been begging her for a long time.

Irene Molloy

At the beginning of the play, Vandergelder intends to marry Mrs. Molloy. She has no personal interest in him, but she is interested in being married in order to get out of the hat business. As she explains to her assistant, people think of women in the millinery trade as being wicked, and she has had to limit her social life in order to keep up an air of respectability. She cannot go out to restaurants, balls, or the theater, because it would hurt her reputation. The only men she meets are feather merchants. In addition, she is interested in marrying Vandergelder because she thinks he would be a good fighter, which she thinks an attractive trait in a husband.

When Cornelius ducks into her shop to hide from Vandergelder, he falls in love with her, and she is just as quickly attracted to him. Part of her attraction comes from the fact that he is pretending to be a wealthy man, an impression that Dolly Levi later promotes when she makes up a story about him being the famous Cornelius Hackl, a millionaire rogue who is well-known in the highest reaches of society. At the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant, she finds out the truth, but by then she is so in love with Cornelius that it does not matter. In the end, they are engaged to be married.

Rudolph

The senior waiter at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant, Rudolph is a snob who tries to maintain dignity when dealing with the antics of the play's main characters. He speaks with a German accent.

Joe Scanlon

Joe is the barber who is grooming Vandergelder in the first act as he prepares to go off to get married. As a barber, Joe has ethics: when Vandergelder offers him fifty cents to do "something a little special" for his looks, Joe is horrified, as if he had been offered a



bribe for something improper. "All I know is fifteen cents' worth, like usual, Mr. Vandergelder," he explains, "and that includes everything that's decent to do to a man." The attempted bribe that Joe refuses turns out to be for hair dying.

Malachi Stack

Malachi arrives at the store in Yonkers with a stack of letters of recommendation from employers in different trades, including a letter from one of Vandergelder's friends named Joshua Van Tuyl. Vandergelder hires him and sends him to New York on a train that is leaving immediately, so that he does not meet the other clerks. Therefore, when he runs into Cornelius and Barnaby at the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant, he does not know them, and he gives Cornelius the wallet he finds on the floor, which is Vandergelder's. Malachi explains his honesty in trying to return a wallet full of money to its rightful owner: he used to be a thief, then took to drink, and has found that a person can only handle one vice well, so he drinks but doesn't steal. Later, his drinking clouds his judgment, and he and the Cabman abduct Cornelius and Barnaby instead of Ermengarde and Ambrose.

Barnaby Tucker

Barnaby is seventeen, the junior clerk at Vandergelder's store. He is naive about the world, which makes him inclined to follow after whatever Cornelius does, even when Cornelius leads him off on an adventure that gets them both into trouble. At the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant, Mrs. Molloy rewards Barnaby for his sweetness by kissing him, and he is so overwhelmed with his first kiss that he falls to the floor.

To get out of the Harmonia Gardens without being spotted by Vandergelder, Barnaby dresses up in a woman's hat and coat, which gets him mistaken for Ermengarde, a disguise that he has to maintain throughout the fourth act.

At the end of the play, when harmony is restored and everybody is happy, Dolly Levi says to the audience, "I think the youngest person here ought to tell us what the moral of the play is." Barnaby makes a speech then about the need for "just the right amount" of adventure in life.

Flora Van Huysen

An old friend of Ermengarde's deceased mother, Miss Van Huysen is a very old spinster who lives with her servants at 8 Jackson Street, New York. Vandergelder sends Ermengarde to live with her so that she cannot marry Ambrose, but they follow Miss Levi's advice and go to the restaurant instead, leaving Miss Van Huysen to wait in vain all day for Ermengarde's arrival. When they do arrive, it turns out that Miss Van Huysen has no intention of keeping them apart. She considers herself "a friend of all young lovers," hinting that her own love life was ruined by "obstacles and disappointments."



She is easily confused, fooled into thinking that Barnaby is Ermengarde, but her good intentions are essential to everything coming out all right in the end.

Horace Vandergelder

Vandergelder is the play's central character. He is sixty years old and is described in the stage notes as "choleric, vain, and sly." He is stingy with money and rude to everyone he talks to. He is displeased with practically everything around him. He does not approve of the man his twenty-four-year-old niece intends to marry and so sends her away to ruin the engagement. He does not like the clerks who work at his hay, feed, and provisions store because he thinks that they should work more than fifteen hours a day, six days a week.

Vandergelder, a widower, plans to marry again, explaining to the audience in a soliloquy that a woman who marries into a household will keep house better than one who is hired to do so. He originally plans to marry Mrs. Molloy, but his interest in her is so feeble that he is willing to postpone his proposal when Dolly Levi tells him another woman is interested in him.

Throughout the play, other characters spend their time either trying to avoid Vandergelder because of his fearsome temper or plotting to get their hands on the money that he has hoarded by living a miserly existence. In the end, though, he becomes a warmer person. Dolly Levi tricks him into marrying her, and he goes along with it good-naturedly; he consents to the marriage of Ermengarde and Ambrose, which he had violently opposed in the first scene; and he agrees to make Barnaby a partner in his business. The sudden transformation implies that Vandergelder was a good-natured person all along but just did not know how to show his softer side.



Themes

Gender Roles

Wilder uses the different expectations that society has for males and females to twist the comic situation of *The Matchmaker* into a tighter knot than the events would otherwise permit. The first and most obvious example of this is the way in which Horace Vandergelder attempts to control his niece's life, dictating whom she may or may not marry, and the way in which Ermengarde accepts his authority. At the same time that he is trying to control Ermengarde's love life, Vandergelder is also planning on marrying someone—he is not very concerned about whom—in order to get an efficient housekeeper. Keeping house is a task for women, he explains, but the women who do it for hire do not do it well. "In order to run a house well," he tells the audience, "a woman must have the feeling she owns it. Marriage is a bribe to make a housekeeper think she's a householder." Throughout the play, Vandergelder is presented as an example of prejudice and ignorance, so blind to reality that he cannot see how his clerks think of him or how Dolly Levi is manipulating him into marriage. His view of gender roles is therefore not necessarily one that audiences are expected to accept.

A more realistic view of gender roles is the one held by Irene Molloy. She owns her own business, a hat shop in New York, and so has financial independence. Still, she wants to get out of the hat business because of the stereotype that "all millineresses are suspected of being wicked women." She is not able to go to public events because people will think that her behavior is improper for a lady. This knowledge of unwritten social conventions and of how people would punish her if she broke them is more telling of gender roles in this society than Vandergelder's skewed notions. Even so, the play probably gives its female characters more freedom than they would actually have enjoyed in the 1880s, reflecting more about the time when it was written than the time when it is set.

Money

One of the keys to the social situation in *The Matchmaker* is the uneven way in which wealth is distributed among the characters. Vandergelder is clearly the wealthiest character, and how he spends money helps audiences gauge what he considers important. He usually pays fifteen cents for a haircut, but for the occasion of proposing to Mrs. Molloy he is willing to go up to fifty cents. (The barber, Joe Scanlon, will not accept more than three times his regular fee for something as improper as dying a man's hair.) The wages he pays his workers for ninety hours of work per week leave them with about three dollars each in their pockets. Yet Vandergelder is willing to pay the Cabman fifteen dollars to help him keep Ermengarde and Ambrose apart. He carries a purse that is stuffed full of twenty dollar bills, and he is only willing to consider the adventure of remarrying because he has half a million dollars in the bank.



The plot revolves around Vandergelder's insistence on holding onto his money. His objection to Ambrose is based solely on Ambrose's poor financial prospects and has nothing to do with the young man's character. Ermengarde, on the other hand, thinks nothing about money whatsoever. Dolly Levi represents a compromise between the two: though she says that she wants Vandergelder's fortune, her affection for him is clear. His theory is that money should not be spent, and hers is that it should. Once Vandergelder learns to trust Dolly, he lets his money go, and once he does that he can have open relationships with his niece and clerks.

Love

Like many comedies, *The Matchmaker* takes advantage of the mysteries of love in order to put its characters into complex situations. Vandergelder may be cheap and rude, but it is when he denies having ever heard of such a thing as a broken heart that audiences know he will get his comeuppance, just as surely as they know that Ermengarde, who thinks of nothing but love, will be satisfied in the end. Vandergelder fools himself into thinking that he is interested in women for all sorts of reasons that are not love. He tells himself that he wants a housekeeper and falls for Dolly Levi's idealized portrait of a woman who is a great cook, wealthy, infatuated with him, and a third his age. In the end, though, he cannot keep himself from falling for Dolly, even though she is none of the things that he was looking for.

The play would end in the second act if Cornelius and Barnaby simply hid out at Mrs. Molloy's hat shop for a while and then went away. What keeps them engaged in the action, and therefore involved with the main characters, is that Cornelius falls instantly, hopelessly in love with Mrs. Molloy. A realistic play would not have a character lose control of himself so quickly after their first meeting, but then, a realistic play is not trying to make audiences laugh. Without faith in love at first sight, the various plot threads of *The Matchmaker* would spin out in different directions. Without faith in a love that is more powerful than sound thinking, the play would leave Horace Vandergelder unpunished for his stinginess and his plotting, which would not make it a very satisfactory comedy at all.

Adventure

When the play is over, and all of its extraordinary events are through, Dolly Levi has the youngest character tell the moral of the play to the audience. The speech that Barnaby gives talks about the need for adventure in life. In the most direct sense, this is the lesson that he and Cornelius have learned throughout the play: they were reluctant about leaving their posts as clerks at the store in Yonkers and end up happier for having interrupted their routine. In a broader sense, it is the lesson that nearly all of the characters learn. Vandergelder, certainly, starts the play thinking only of safe prospects and ends it happier because things that he would not have wanted have had their effect on him. Irene Molloy, who has been waiting for a rich man to take her from the job she hates, falls in love instead, which she apparently finds better. Minnie goes to the kind of



restaurant that she would never have thought existed; Barnaby receives his first kiss; Ermengarde and Ambrose find a solution to the problems that kept them from getting married. All of these characters are better off at the end because they went through a frightening situation that was out of their control and were willing to enter into an adventure for its own sake.

The only character who does not really have an adventure is Dolly Levi. She is, as she explains to Ambrose early in the play, "a woman who arranges things." Throughout the course of *The Matchmaker*, she is not someone who has adventures but someone who causes adventure to happen to others. She is, however, open to the unexpected; in her speech in act IV, she describes how she was shut away from life after her husband's death until one night when "I decided to rejoin the human race." Because of Vandergelder's overbearing personality, the end of the play suggests that Dolly Levi's adventure is just beginning.



Style

Soliloquy

A soliloquy is the speech a character gives directly to the audience, either when alone on the stage or else ignoring the other characters, who cannot hear it. Wilder has several characters give soliloquies in *The Matchmaker*. In the first act, after everyone else has gone and left him alone, Vandergelder talks at length about why he wants to be married now. These are personal thoughts that he would not share with any of the other characters; he may explain his theory of marriage as a way to get a decent housekeeper, but the idea that he is willing to take a chance is too personal, and sharing it would leave him too vulnerable. He ends his soliloquy by acknowledging that he is talking to an audience, telling them, "Think it over."

Cornelius gives a soliloquy in act II, when he and Barnaby are supposed to be hiding. His speech explains how wonderful he feels, having fallen in love. These are ideas that Barnaby has shown himself unable to understand, and Cornelius certainly could not tell them to anyone else.

In act III, Malachi tells the audience his theory about the need to have one vice but no more than one. His ideas are relevant to the play in general, but, again, they would not fit into the dramatic scene because they represent things that Malachi, a relative newcomer, would not explain to anyone else there.

Dolly Levi's soliloquy in the final act is addressed to the memory of her dead husband rather than to the audience. Since the subject is remarriage, she would naturally think of him, but as a dramatic technique this is handled in the same way as the other soliloquies.

Barnaby's speech at the end takes off from the earlier soliloquies. In them, characters talked to the audience, but they never acknowledged the audience to one another. In the play's final moments, though, Mrs. Levi drops the pretense that usually separates players from audiences, acting like a mutual friend who is introducing Barnaby to the audience and vice versa.

Subplot

If this play's main plot is the strange courtship between Horace Vandergelder and Dolly Levi, then the other two romances would have to be considered subplots. Either one could be removed without substantially changing the whole play. Ermengarde and Ambrose do give Vandergelder a chance to show off his intolerance and autocratic nature in the beginning, but that could have been handled in any number of other ways. For most of the play, the young lovers are gone, signifying their relative unimportance. On the other hand, the blossoming romance between Cornelius Hackl and Irene Molloy takes up most of acts II and III, at times becoming more important than Vandergelder's



story, Still, all that this romance really adds to the plot is that it removes Mrs. Molloy from the pool of available wives and gives Cornelius a chance to expound upon how good it is to take a chance.

Another way to look at it, however, is that these are not subplots at all. They are only subplots if the story of Vandergelder and Mrs. Levi is considered the one main plot. *The Matchmaker* is not necessarily their story, though. It is a story about love, and as such each of the three variations on the theme of love is as important as the others, regardless of how colorful the characters are or how much time they spend onstage.

Denouement

Denouement is a French word that means "the unraveling." In literature, it is used to describe the action that happens after the story has reached its climax. In *The Matchmaker*, the final few pages clearly are there to tie up loose ends. The play does not end with action but with Barnaby coming in from the kitchen bringing news. Before that comes Vandergelder's proposal to Mrs. Levi, but even that seems to be a necessary but minor afterthought: from the fact that he calls Dolly "wonderful woman" and lets her keep his purse, audiences can tell that he has already changed his character. Even Dolly Levi's speech to her dead husband does not represent any advance in the plot but just a clarification of the principles she has been following all along.

A good case can be made for the idea that the climax of the play occurs when Vandergelder's pretensions are finally put to rest at the end of act III. Mrs. Levi explains very clearly that he has lost everything: his niece, his bride, his clerks, and even his money. This seems to have no effect on Vandergelder, as he still refuses to marry her, but the next time he shows up on stage he is humbled. He allows Mrs. Van Huysen and Mrs. Levi to give him orders and behaves civilly at their request. Once Horace Vandergelder allows others to tell him what to do, the rest of the play is just a matter of clearing away leftover plot elements.

Historical Context

The Gilded Age

The phrase "Gilded Age" comes from the title of an 1873 book by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner. The book was an exposé of corruption in politics and business after the end of the Civil War in 1865, but the phrase is used today to describe the American situation throughout the last third of the century.

Economically, the era was notable for the rise of industry. The population was in the process of shifting from rural to urban, and the growth of cities provided the workforce to create larger production facilities. Railroads expanded across the country—the transcontinental railroad was completed at Promontory, Utah, in 1869—making it possible to move materials for production and to ship manufactured products nearly anywhere on the continent. From 1870 to 1900, the use of bituminous coal, which powered industry, rose tenfold, and the use of rolled iron and steel increased to twelve times what it had been. The country's gross national product multiplied six times over in those years. Out of this situation arose the businessmen who made giant fortunes from this economic growth, usually by controlling an entire industry, as John D. Rockefeller controlled the oil industry, Andrew Carnegie controlled steel, and J.P. Morgan controlled banking. At the same time that a few individuals were amassing incredible fortunes, there was terrible poverty and illness among the common laborers who worked in the factories.

Although *The Matchmaker* takes place among shops and not factories, the economic situation of the times can still be seen in the disparity between the characters' finances. Horace Vandergelder, a store owner, comes off as a miserly tyrant who carries stacks of twenty dollar bills in his wallet, while his clerks, who are forced to work from six in the morning to nine at night six days a week, have to scrounge for train money. And while class differences will always be present, this play portrays the restaurant as being a particularly unsafe place for those of the lower classes. By contemporary standards, Vandergelder is a heartless, petty tyrant, and the Harmonia Gardens Restaurant is too snobby, but the 1880s were a time of extreme wealth and poverty.

Nostalgia

The time when *The Matchmaker* was produced was a particularly trying time in American history. After the tumultuous decades of the 1930s, which saw the worst economic depression in the nation's history, and the 1940s, which were defined by the second world war, the 1950s were peaceful and prosperous. Still, even as external conflict was lacking, there were social forces that served as continuous reminders of life in the modern world.



One defining characteristic was the awareness of the potential for nuclear destruction. World War II ended after the United States dropped the first nuclear bomb ever used on August 5, 1945, killing almost 130,000 people with one blast. The second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. In the 1950s, people were aware of the devastation of the bombs and uncertain of the ability of politicians to refrain from using them. People at that time practiced disaster drills to prepare for nuclear attacks. Homeowners built bomb shelters and stocked them with food, preparing for the time, that could come any day, when civilization would be wiped away in an instant.

The other defining element of the 1950s was the Cold War. During World War II, the Soviet Union and America were allies in the fight against German aggression. After the war, though, their different political ideologies led them to be fierce competitors. The Soviet Union pursued a policy of spreading communism around the globe, leading to an American foreign policy based on containing communism. There were hearings, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, aimed at identifying communists who had infiltrated the U.S. government and the entertainment industry in order to spread communist ideas. (McCarthy was later censured by the Senate, and his name has come to be associated with systematized fear mongering.) The United States became involved in wars in South Korea and Vietnam with the goal of stopping the growth of communism in those places.

In a time of constant worry about sudden annihilation, of suspicion that treacherous spies were trying to overthrow the government from within and to control American minds, *The Matchmaker* offered reassuring, light entertainment. It was set in a time in the nation's history when there were no great disturbances, no war or imminent danger. Racial issues are not approached in the play, and genders are equal, with a female-owned shop in New York balancing a male-owned shop in Yonkers. Unlike comedies with contemporary settings, the historical setting of *The Matchmaker* allowed audiences to forget the problems of the day and to bask in the warm feeling of nostalgia for a simpler time.



Critical Overview

Thornton Wilder is considered one of America's most important authors, although *The Matchmaker* is not generally thought of as one of his most important works. Taken as an evening's entertainment, the play has always been well respected by critics. Negative views have only come when critics have thought the work of such an important author should do more.

Wilder's place in American literature is secure, if only because he is the only writer to have won Pulitzer Prizes for both fiction (for *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*) and drama (for both *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*). Overall, his reputation as a dramatist has held up better than that as a novelist.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey is still required reading in literature classes, but it is seldom read outside of schools, and his other novels have disappeared. *Our Town*, on the other hand, remains one of the most enduring and most frequently performed works in America, performed by over four hundred amateur groups each year.

Wilder's first critical and popular success came with *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* in 1927. Not only did it win the Pulitzer, but it sold millions of copies. Just three years later, though, a critical backlash began with a 1930 article by Michael Gold for the *New Republic* and a second article he wrote later that year for *New Masses*, in which he said, "Yes, Wilder writes perfect English. But he has nothing to say in that perfect English. He is a beautiful, rouged, well-dressed corpse, lying among the sacred candles and lilies of the past, sure to stink if exposed to the sunlight." His criticism struck a chord with other reviewers, who began taking Wilder to task for his failure to address complex social problems. As Jackson Bryer explained the critics' complaints in his essay commemorating Wilder's one-hundredth birthday, "What these critics were saying was that Wilder was not sufficiently attuned to the problems of his day, that by setting his novels in remote times and places, he was ignoring the present." Bryer went on to explain that it had to be that way. Unlike other major writers of the day, such as Faulkner or Hemingway, Wilder grew up in different places on different continents, and so he had no place that he could feel deep in his heart was his own. It was natural for him to set his fictions in different times and places, even though some critics took this as a sign of aloofness.

It was not long after the critical backlash against his fiction began to arise that Wilder experienced his first success in the theater with *The Long Christmas Dinner* in 1931. Divided into three acts, it is, like most of his works (except, notably, *The Matchmaker*), experimental in form. This fragmented structure carried on in his works throughout the 1930s, reaching its high point in *Our Town* in 1938. Even more than *Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Our Town* was hailed by critics and by audiences. A fairly representative example is John Mason Brown, who wrote that *Our Town* "is a remarkable play; one of the sagest, warmest, and most deeply human scripts to have come out of our theatre." The first version of *The Matchmaker*, named *The Merchant of Yonkers*, was produced the year following *Our Town*. Reviews are difficult to find because it had an extremely short run,

fewer than thirty performances. Most critics attribute its failure to the direction of Max Reinhardt. Though Wilder wrote it for him, Reinhardt was German and probably did not understand the pacing of comedy suitable for American audiences. The evidence of this is that *The Matchmaker* was a success ten years later, even though the script is not substantially different.

Because Wilder had, by the time *The Matchmaker* was produced, won two Pulitzers and established himself as a fixture of the American literary scene, reviewers had to lower their expectations in order to think of the play in the right sense. As Rex Burbank was to put it in his overview of Wilder's career in 1961, "There is less claim to serious attention and contemplation in this play than in any of Wilder's other full-length works; and it should be enjoyed for what it is—a farce." The lack of social insight that became a rallying cry against Wilder in the 1930s helps readers understand the spirit of *The Matchmaker*, according to Burbank: "one enjoys laughing at Vandergelder's absurdities but is not constrained to give much thought to their social or ethical significance."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



Critical Essay #1

Kelly teaches creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly examines elements of The Matchmaker that make it function as a parody, as Wilder intended.

As an old show business adage puts it, tragedy is what happens to you, while comedy is what happens to someone else. This explains, in one sentence, the complex problem Thornton Wilder examines in the famous preface to his collection *Three Plays*. He discusses how, starting in the 1920s, he found himself growing increasingly bored with the theater, which he had loved all his life. The plays were competent enough, but they did not affect him on a personal level, the way that good art should. At length, Wilder traced the problem to the rise of the middle class in the nineteenth century. His explanation went like this: the middle class, then a new social phenomenon, did not want the sharp discomfort that art can cause when it makes one face reality and instead supported art that was soothing. One result was that writers began producing characters as broad types, which audiences could then distance themselves from, telling themselves that the concerns of the character on the stage were nothing like the ones they faced themselves. Another, related way to make drama soothing was to use the stage itself as a frame to separate "their" world from "ours"—the stage becomes, as Wilder puts it, a "box set."

At the end of his preface, Wilder applied this artistic theory to the book's three plays—*Our Town*, *The Skin of Our Teeth* and *The Matchmaker*—and explained how each one represents his stand against soothing art. The misfit of the group is *The Matchmaker*, his romantic comedy that whips up complications and misunderstandings that come out all right for everyone in the end, as do the bloodless plays that Wilder said bored him. In the preface, he explained that he wrote the play as a parody of plays he saw in his youth, taking a sharp-witted German comedy of manners (*Ein Jux es sich Machen*, by Johann Nestroy) and flattening it to meet American standards. "One way to shake off the nonsense of the nineteenth-century staging," he explained, "is to make fun of it." The problem with theater was that people no longer came away from plays feeling, "This is the way things are." In *The Matchmaker*, he addressed art's relationship to reality by presenting a situation so contrived that audiences would *have* to be aware of its falsity.

The Matchmaker is meant to be such an extreme example of middle-class art that it forces those who experience it to notice how little it resembles true art. To accomplish this goal, Wilder had to distance the audience from the action and make them aware of the distance while at the same time creating a play that is so cold and impersonal as to be un-watchable.

The play is certainly made to be felt at a distance. The characters are meant to be understood at a theoretical level, but their problems are not felt, which is exactly the feeling Wilder described having plagued him about other plays that did not claim to be



parodies. He uses several techniques to make audiences feel that "they" on stage are different than "us" beyond the footlights.

The most obvious distancing mechanism is the surly personality of the play's main character, Horace Vandergelder. Certainly, there are elements to his character that anyone can relate to, but just as certainly there are not people coming away from the theater telling themselves, "He's like me." He is a curmudgeon, a crank, and a tightwad, too money conscious to recognize true love and too stingy to let his employees have one evening off out of the week. He distrusts the young, but he also has no respect for the law. He parts with cash sparingly, a few dollars here and there, but he carries a huge amount in his purse, which he is surprisingly careless enough to lose. In short, he is a compilation of unpleasant human traits, which would make him a fine secondary character. As the lead, he serves to remind audiences of the extremist nature of comic characters. Putting Horace Vandergelder in the middle of the play is like focusing a movie camera so tightly on a sciencefiction monster that a zipper in the back of the suit eventually shows.

The play's other main character, Dolly Levi, is just as artificial, but in the other direction: she is too good, too knowing, to be from the world ordinary humans inhabit. Her chosen mission as a "woman who arranges things" comes with supernatural powers. She can tell the two young lovers to go to a certain restaurant at a certain time, and everything will come out all right for them. She can tell outrageous stories, such as the one about Vandergelder's clerk being an undercover millionaire, and have them accepted if not quite believed. The only way audiences can accept Dolly's abilities is by distancing the world onstage from their own and accepting that things happen there that could never happen here.

Wilder uses other theatrical conventions, or, rather, overuses them, to keep his comedy at arm's length. Inside the box set, people do not realize that a character wearing a woman's coat and a veil could be a man. They do not hear what is being said on the other side of a screen. They find men hiding in cupboards and under tables, and the proper response is to walk away in a jealous snit. These stage conventions make theatrical sense, because they allow the playwright to put different characters onstage and move them in and out without having to constantly change sets; and they are funny, too, drawing from the human capacity to be fooled. They are exactly what is to be expected from a comedy that means to be there just to make people laugh. At the same time that they chide the characters for their intellectual nearsightedness, though, they openly mock the play for having wandered so far from meaningfulness.

Whenever audiences come close to accepting the world onstage as its own separate place, with its own physical, psychological, and moral rules, Wilder reminds them, through the use of soliloquies, that the actors are present in a common reality after all. When it works, the objectified theater does so by presenting events for audiences to scrutinize like grasshoppers in a jar. The open area facing the audience is referred to as "the fourth wall," an invisible barrier between the two worlds. Soliloquies break that fourth wall. When characters step out into the footlights to talk to the audiences directly, the spell of watching a separate reality is broken. This technique comes up just a little



short of having actors introduce themselves and announce that they know they are just people in makeup pretending to be other people who never existed. Audiences made aware of theater's artifice experience the feeling that Wilder describes in his preface, that modern theater has "shut the play off in a museum showcase."

Having determined Wilder's intention to satirize modern theater and examined some of the methods he used to do this, the question that then arises is how effective is he at making audiences reconsider comedies. The answer is almost certainly different for today's audiences than it was for those who saw the play in its first run. At that time, it was rare for a Broadway playwright to take an ironic look at his material, which is why Wilder seemed to feel that doing so was necessary. He wanted his audiences to become aware of what is happening to them when they are in the presence of a play, and to do that he had to draw attention to technique. Today, however, irony is done to death. Comedians give hammy exaggerations of what it is like to be a comedian; serious artists scrutinize advertising art; television shows are about people making television shows, with the interior show being the sort of static product that Wilder sought to lampoon. *The Matchmaker* satirized how modern culture flattens the realness of the theatrical experience, but modern culture has absorbed Wilder's satiric method and for the last forty years has been joyously satirizing itself. With so much irony going around, the earliest attempt looks primitive.

One more aspect to the weakening of *The Matchmaker's* satiric strength is that it was turned into the sort of consumer-friendly, "soothing" entertainment product that it was supposed to unmask, as the musical *Hello, Dolly!* Musicals in general are meant to entertain, not to provoke thought; musical adaptations usually end up cutting out any challenging ideas to make room for songs. Because the world of musical theater is, by its nature, farcical (audiences are not supposed to *really* think that a band just suddenly appeared and that everyone improvised lyrics and dance steps in unison), any satiric sense is lost.

Why should *Hello, Dolly!* influence how people interpret the ironic stance of *The Matchmaker*? It shouldn't, but it does. *Hello, Dolly!* was the more popular of the two, with a title song that has become a standard of pop music. When *The Matchmaker* is mentioned, you can count the seconds until someone mentions that it was the basis for *Hello, Dolly!*, with as much certainty as counting the seconds between a lightning flash and thunder. If the satiric element of *The Matchmaker* had been stronger, it could stand alone, as the nasty little piece that was declawed and made into a feel-good musical. But the satire is actually so quiet that it has to be explained, and so it is often missed.

The problem with satirizing pop art is that one is halfway into the pop art world already, and it is easy to be accepted by the mainstream. Songs by the Who and Janis Joplin, once emblems of the counter-culture, are catchy enough to use in car ads, if the lyrics are left out. "Born in the U.S.A.," an angry song about betrayal and disappointment, is found suitable background music for political rallies if no one listens to anything it says besides the title and refrain. And *The Matchmaker*, which Wilder meant as an examination of theatrical conventions, reads like just another comedy of manners today,

because modern audiences are more accustomed to satire that is sharper and more obvious.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on *The Matchmaker*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.



Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Burbank provides a thematic overview of The Matchmaker, finding it belongs to Wilder's pre-World War II phase, rather than the later period in which it achieved hit status.

The Merchant of Yonkers was a plea for a freer stage and a freer and fuller participation in life. Its first performance was at the Colonial Theatre in Boston on December 12, 1938, a little less than eleven months after the first production of *Our Town* at Princeton, New Jersey. On December 28, 1938, it opened in New York, where it had a short run of twenty-eight performances. It lay unused until Wilder revised it slightly, changed the title to *The Matchmaker*, and brought it out again in August, 1954, in Edinburgh. From Edinburgh it went to London, where it began a successful run the following November 4. In October, 1955, it was brought to Philadelphia, where it also succeeded; and when taken to New York, it engaged a run long enough to win "hit" status.

The Matchmaker doesn't differ materially from *The Merchant of Yonkers*; and it belongs, therefore, with the work of this earlier period of Wilder's career rather than with that after World War II. As Harold Clurman pointed out in his review of *The Matchmaker*, the failure of the earlier version and the success of the latter were probably owing to the difference in directors. *The Merchant* was directed by Max Reinhardt, for whom Wilder wrote it; and it failed, probably, because of what Clurman called the director's "unfamiliarity with American theatre custom." *The Matchmaker* was directed by Tyrone Guthrie, who by common critical consent kept the action moving at the rapid pace it requires.

Wilder took much of the material for this play from Johann Nestroy's *Einen Jux will er sich Machen* (Vienna, 1842). He calls it a "free adaptation" of Nestroy's play, which was in turn based upon *A Day Well Spent* (London, 1835) by John Oxenham. "One way to shake off the nonsense of the nineteenth-century staging is to make fun of it," he wrote in the preface to *Three Plays*. "This play parodies the stock-company plays that I used to see at Ye Liberty Theatre, Oakland, California, when I was a boy." Much of its humor arises from the use of such old comic stage devices as mistaken identity, quick leaps for hiding places under tables, characters dressed in clothes of the opposite sex, and people caught in folding screens. It features stock characters and absurd situations that develop into a conventional complicated plot. It has a "villain," for instance, in the merchant Vandergelder, who tries to prevent the marriage of a young couple—his niece Ermengarde and the impecunious young artist Ambrose Kemper.

The action takes place in Yonkers during the 1880's and involves the efforts of the principal characters, whose enjoyment of life is in one way or another dependent upon Vandergelder, to "participate" in life. In addition to Ermengarde and Ambrose, the main characters include Vandergelder's two clerks, Cornelius and Barnaby, who go to New York in search of "adventure," and Dolly Levi, the "Matchmaker," who pretends to make a match for Vandergelder with a young, attractive woman (Irene Molloy) but actually makes it for herself. Vandergelder's "sensible" behavior and values are the obstacles in



each instance to their free enjoyment of life, and the plot consists in the attempts of these people to combat his life-denying conventionality. His most formidable antagonist is Dolly Levi, who is the arranger, the artist of life who follows no doctrine except that of the full enjoyment of it and opposition to the conventional theories of "success" held by Vandergelder to whom work and money are life's highest values. She frankly and simply wants to marry him for his money, but her ideas about wealth are in direct opposition to his. She is determined to put Vandergelder's coins into circulation so they can free others from habit, convention, and isolation—for the enjoyment of life. She explains her economic philosophy to Ambrose: "Money should circulate like rainwater. It should be flowing down among the people, through dressmakers and restaurants and cabmen, setting up a little business here, and furnishing a good time there."

When she has conquered Vandergelder, his unconditional surrender contains assurances that his money will be spent instead of saved. Vandergelder is "sound" from the standpoint of conventional social values; for he has saved, worked hard, and been cautious. He is the stolid, pompous "self-made" man who equates the acquisition of riches and the exploitation of others with virtue and "good sense." The clever Dolly turns the platitudes he lives by to her own uses in such delicious bits of dialogue as the following:

VANDERGELDER: Mrs. Molloy, I've got some advice to give you about your business.

MRS. LEVI: Oh, advice from Mr. Vandergelder! The whole city should hear this.

VANDERGELDER: In the first place, the aim of business is to make a profit.

MRS. MOLLOY: Is that so?

MRS. LEVI: I never heard it put so clearly before. Did you hear it?

VANDERGELDER: You pay those girls of yours too much. You pay them as much as men. Girls like that enjoy their work. Wages, Mrs. Molloy, are paid to make people who do work they don't enjoy

MRS. LEVI: Mr. Vandergelder thinks so ably. And that's exactly the way his business is run up in Yonkers.

Enjoyment of life requires nurturing of a vice as well as the virtues. The ne'er-do-well Malachi expresses this bit of philosophy: "There are some people who say you shouldn't have any weaknesses at all—no vices. But if a man has no vices, he's in great danger of making vices out of his virtues, and there's a spectacle. We've all seen them: men who were monsters of philanthropy and women who were dragons of purity. We've seen people who told the truth, though the Heavens fall—and the Heavens fell. No, no—nurture one vice in your bosom. Give it the attention it deserves and let your virtues spring up modestly around it."



The clerks Cornelius and Barnaby are also in rebellion against Vandergelder and what he stands for. Yearning for excitement and resolving to go to New York for an "adventure," they blow up the tomato cans on the shelves of Vandergelder's store and leave. They are determined to have a good meal, to be "in danger," almost to get arrested, to spend all their money (three dollars), and to kiss a girl. Much of the best humor of the play consists in the attempts of these two—and, later, Irene Molloy—to have a part in the excitement of life heretofore denied them by conventions that equate "adventure" with foolishness. It is tender humor, a bit sentimental, even a bit "heartwarming," but nevertheless very enjoyable. The hilarious scene in Act III, where Dolly twists Vandergelder's exasperation with her into a hinted proposal, is one of Wilder's most comical.

It is interesting that while this play first appeared during the depression and featured a conflict between a villainous "boss" and his exploited employees, it was utterly unproletarian; it did not present a "problem" for which social amelioration or reform was needed. The play says in effect that Vandergelder is a moral rather than a social problem. Like *Heaven's My Destination*, it proposes that a vigorous, robust spirit of humanism is the answer to materialism: that effective reform should begin with the moral improvement of individuals rather than with legislation. But the play is really too good-natured to command serious consideration of its humanistic propositions; and perhaps this is one reason it failed in the thirties. Furthermore, it lacks the bite of real satire; and, while there is some ridicule aimed at conventional notions of "success," the character representing it, Vandergelder, is so candidly, absurdly, and farcically "bad" that the seriousness of what he represents does not become apparent.

There is less claim to serious attention and contemplation in this play than in any of Wilder's other full-length works; and it should be enjoyed for what it is—a farce. The laughter it evokes at Vandergelder and the conventions he embodies is that of compassion for a fellow human who is unaware of his own foolishness and not that of bitterness or contempt. Wilder often uses the phrase "makes fun of" where "satirizes" might ordinarily be expected. The difference in terminology is relevant, for he seldom *satirizes* in the sense that he holds persons up to ridicule or scorn. He takes the more gentle way of viewing his people with mild irony, and he achieves a kind of spontaneous gaiety out of his depictions of human folly instead of a laughter of superiority and contempt. The result in *The Matchmaker* is that one enjoys laughing at Vandergelder's absurdities but is not constrained to give much thought to their social or ethical significance.

Source: Rex Burbank, "Three Theatricalist Plays," in *Thornton Wilder*, Twayne, 1961, pp. 82-111.

Adaptations

The Matchmaker was made into a film by Paramount Pictures in 1958, starring Shirley Booth as Dolly Levi, Anthony Perkins as Cornelius, and Shirley MacLaine as Irene Molloy. John Michael Hayes wrote the adaptation, which was directed by Joseph Anthony.

In 1963, this play was adapted as a Broadway musical, *Hello, Dolly!*, with a book by Michael Stewart and music and lyrics by Jerry Herman. Carol Channing played Dolly, in a career defining performance. *Hello, Dolly!* ran on Broadway for 2,844 performances.

Topics for Further Study

Find a character on television who reminds you of Horace Vandergelder. Explain what the two have in common and what you think each would do if put in the other's place.

A marriage is often thought of as a beginning, though it often comes as a happy ending in comedies. Write a short story that shows what life is like for one of this play's couples a year after they are married.

Vandergelder's shop sells hay in Yonkers in the 1880s, a time when New York City already had elevated trains. Research your town, and report on the period from when the first automobiles arrived through when the last horses left.

Instead of matchmakers, the modern world has dating services. What kind of business would Dolly Levi consider herself to be in today? Design an ad that she might run in the newspaper, on the Internet, or on television to promote her services.

Write an explanation, with illustrations, showing why, in the 1880s, canned tomatoes heated with a match would explode.



Compare and Contrast

1880s: People going from Yonkers, which is adjacent to the Bronx, into Manhattan, which is also adjacent to the Bronx, most often take a train or ride a horse. (In the play, Vandergelder's shop sells horse supplies.)

1954: The trip from Yonkers to Manhattan is often made by automobile.

Today: Because of traffic congestion and a shortage of in-town parking, the trip from Yonkers to Manhattan is often made by train.

1880s: The American economy is prospering during the Industrial Revolution.

1954: The American economy is secure, but many in the audience for this play remember the Great Depression (1929 through 1941) clearly.

Today: America has just experienced a period of unprecedented economic growth due to the technology revolution.

1880s: Energy production is a growing industry.

Gasoline and oil are just starting to be in demand for combustion engines, and the newly-invented electric light bulb creates the need for power lines to spread electricity from municipal generators into homes.

1954: The first nuclear power station starts up in the Soviet Union. In the United States, Bell Laboratories creates a solar cell to convert sunlight into energy.

Today: Most of the world is still committed to using non-renewable fossil fuels, which are in greater demand than ever due to the growing demand for electricity and gasoline.

1880s: Millinery shops are common in all cities, because women do not think of going with their heads uncovered.

1954: Hats are still popular but are considered optional.

Today: It is rare to see either a woman or a man wearing a formal hat.

What Do I Read Next?

Wilder's most famous work of fiction is *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, his 1927 best-selling novel about the collapse of a bridge in Peru. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928. It is available in a 1998 edition from Harper Perennial.

Wilder's most popular play is *Our Town*, a heartwarming view of small-town American life. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1938, the year it was produced. It is available along with *The Matchmaker* and *The Skin of Our Teeth* in *Three Plays*, published in paperback by Harper Perennial in 1998.

Bernard Malamud's 1954 short story "The Magic Barrel" is one of the most famous literary works about matchmaking. Drawing on New York Yiddish culture, Malamud weaves a tale about a mysterious stranger who promises to find a wife for a busy rabbi. It is available in Malamud's *The Complete Stories*, published by Farrar, Straus & Gireaux in 1997.

Gertrude Stein was one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century and a close friend of Wilder.

The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder, published by Yale University Press in 1996, helps readers get to know both authors through the correspondence they had over the course of twenty years.

The spirit of the farce in *The Matchmaker* is indebted to the seventeenth-century French playwright Jean Baptiste Poquelin Molière. In fact, Wilder uses two passages that he adapted directly from Molière's *L'Avare*, which translates into English as *The Miser*. Two versions if it are available in *Molière: Four Plays*, published in 1999 by Branden Publishing Co.

A series of interviews with Wilder concerning his views of the world and theories about writing was collected by University of Mississippi Press in the 1992 book *Conversations with Thornton Wilder*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer.



Further Study

Cowley, Malcolm, "Thornton Wilder: Time Abolished," in *New England Writers and Writing*, University Press of New England, 1996, pp. 232-43.

This brief essay gives readers a concise overview of Wilder's life from one of the most respected literary critics of his time.

Haberman, Donald, "Appendix," in *The Plays of Thornton Wilder: A Critical Study*, Wesleyan University Press, 1967, pp. 127-136.

At the end of his analysis of Wilder's work, Haberman includes a three-column, side-by-side comparison of a section from Molière's *L'Avare* and Wilder's rewriting of it.

Lifton, Paul, "'The Sign of Kierkegaard': Existential Aspects of Wilder's Theatre," in *Vast Encyclopedia: The Theatre of Thornton Wilder*, Greenwood Press, 1995, pp. 122-67.

Certainly one of the most scholarly treatments of this farce, Lifton's study finds the philosophical basis for the actions of Irene Molloy and Dolly Levi, placing them in the context of Wilder's plays in general.

McClatchy, J. D., "Wilder and the Marvels of the Heart," in the *New York Times Book Review*, April 15, 1997, p. 1.

This article looks with great appreciation at Wilder's comic instincts, relating biographical facts that shaped his easygoing style and attitude.

Walsh, Claudette, *Thornton Wilder: A Reference Guide, 1926-1990*, G. K. Hall & Co., 1993.

This 450-page bibliography refers readers to thousands of publications about Wilder.

Wilder, Amos Niven, "A Brother's Perspective," in *Readings on Thornton Wilder*, Greenhaven Press, 1998, pp. 145-53.

Wilder's brother Amos, himself a respected literary figure, has a unique summary of the author and his work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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



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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized



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

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



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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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



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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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