The Miss Firecracker Contest Study Guide

The Miss Firecracker Contest by Beth Henley

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Contents

Introduction

This story belongs in the group of Southern Gothic comedies for which Henley is best known. Its heroine, Carnelle, is an irrepressible young woman who thinks that winning the local beauty contest will restore her soiled reputation and make her somebody in her small Mississippi community. The family and friends who help her along the way are a dysfunctional bunch who tackle life in their own peculiar ways. There is a former beauty queen cousin, Elain, who comes to offer advice and to run away from her husband and children. Elain's brother, Delmount, has come home from the mental institution to sell the family house and provide Carnelle another way out. Wandering into the chaos as Carnelle's seamstress is sweet and strange Popeye, who falls in love with Delmount. The general conclusion the characters reach is that, even if the real you is not the fulfillment of your hopes, you will be more at peace if you learn to define and accept your own self.

Author Biography

Beth Henley's birthplace and upbringing have determined the subject and setting of many of her plays. Born in Jackson, Mississippi on May 8, 1952, Elizabeth Becker Henley is the second of four daughters of an attorney and state senator, Charles Boyce, and an actress, Elizabeth Josephine Henley. As a child, she attentively watched her mother's work in regional theatre and followed this interest to a fine arts degree at Southern Methodist University in 1974. Although she aspired to be an actress, she wrote her first play *Am I Blue* while in college. She taught at the Dallas Minority Repertory Theatre for a year after graduation, studied and taught for another year at the University of Illinois-Urbana, then moved to Los Angeles.

She soon realized that breaking into acting was a futile effort and turned to playwriting. Her second play, *Crimes of the Heart*, was first produced in 1979 and went on in 1981 to be the first play ever to win a Pulitzer Prize before it appeared on Broadway. It was also the first Pulitzer given to a female playwright in twenty-three years. Subsequently, the play won a Tony nomination for best play, as well as an Oscar nomination for best adapted screenplay when the movie version was produced in 1986. *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, another Henley play that was produced in 1980, was also made into a movie in 1989.

In addition to her continued work in playwriting, Henley has written screenplays and television scripts. In most of her work, Henley gives the lead roles to women. Most of her works can be classified as Southern literature because they are set in the South and expertly reproduce Southern dialect and colloquialisms. Further, they can be considered Southern Gothic because death and freakish disaster permeate the plots, adding to a comic style that has the audience laughing at the humor and wincing at the pathos at the same time. Her characters tend to be misfits who, like real people, are not always successful in overcoming their flaws. Nonetheless, Henley treats them with compassion and optimism.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

As *The Miss Firecracker Contest* opens, Carnelle Scott is practicing her talent routine for the upcoming Fourth of July beauty pageant in Brookhaven, Mississippi. A seamstress, Popeye Jackson, arrives and Carnelle hires her to make a pageant costume. As Popeye takes measurements, she tells Carnelle that she got her sewing start making outfits for bullfrogs. Popeye comments that the house is scary, and Carnelle explains that it belonged to her recently deceased Aunt Ronelle. Carnelle adds that her aunt's cancer treatment involved a pituitary gland transplant from a monkey that resulted in Ronelle "growing long, black hairs all over her body." The dialogue continues to reveal how Carnelle was orphaned and grew up with her aunt, uncle, and the two cousins she adores. Popeye notices a picture of Carnelle's cousin Delmount and falls in love immediately. Carnelle reveals that Delmount has recently been released from a mental institution.

Then Carnelle's other cousin, Elain, arrives unexpectedly. Elain won the town beauty contest fifteen years earlier. In discussions of the pageant, it is revealed that Carnelle has a promiscuous past that might keep her from winning. Elain admits that she has left her husband and two sons. Popeye comes back to find Delmount and explains to him how she got her nickname. Delmount tells Carnelle that he has returned to sell the house but will give her half of the proceeds to help her move away from Brookhaven. Carnelle gets the idea of winning the contest as a way to leave in a "blaze of glory." Delmount also lashes into Elain for not helping him to get out of the mental hospital.

Act 1, Scene 2

The next Saturday, Carnelle awaits the phone call that will tell her she has made it into the contest finals. While they wait, Elain takes a phone call from her husband and tells him that she is not coming home. Delmount is thrilled though he knows that Elain never follows through on her plans. They fight over memories of their mother. Popeye arrives, and since the phone call is well past due, everyone assumes that Carnelle did not make the finals. Popeye reveals to Elain and Carnelle that she is in love with Delmount. Elain tells Popeye that Delmount is unstable. Popeye tries to talk to Delmount about his poetry and his nightmares, but he leaves with a headache. Elain tries to console Carnelle and Popeye. Then the phone call finally comes announcing that Carnelle has made the pageant finals. A celebration ensues, which Delmount fails to appreciate.

Act 2, Scene 1

At the pageant, Carnelle talks over the different contestants' chances with the pageant coordinator, Tessy. Then, Carnelle's former lover, Mac Sam, drops by her dressing room but leaves when Delmount arrives excited about the success of the auction of his

mother's things. They also discuss the contestants before Carnelle reveals that Popeye is in love with Delmount. Elain arrives to announce that she has been asked to give a speech about her life as a beauty queen. Delmount and Mac Sam hunt down Popeye to repair the dress Elain has loaned to Carnelle. A wild scene ensues as Carnelle, way behind schedule, frantically tries to get dressed as everyone offers advice.

Act 2, Scene 2

The pageant unfolds. Carnelle trips and falls on her face. The crowd laughs, calls her "Miss Hot Tamale" and throws things at her. Delmount attacks the worst tormentor but is pelted with rocks until Mac Sam rescues him. Popeye and Elain comically try to treat his wound, then discuss how Popeye lost her job. Mac Sam proceeds to do smoke ring tricks, and Delmount follows by wiggling his ears. Carnelle returns to the stage just as Elain receives flowers from her husband. She has decided to go back to him because she knows she is used to the life he can give her. Carnelle's dance routine is a hit with the crowd, and her expectations are raised again. However, she comes in last in the contest. Although the others tell her she does not have to suffer more humiliation by following the float in the parade, Carnelle insists that she must follow the rules.

Act 2, Scene 3

Carnelle runs off to hide after she spat and screamed at rude bystanders during the parade. Elain goes off to meet Mac Sam for a once-in-her-life fling. Delmount and Popeye go to see the fireworks together. Carnelle sneaks back into the dressing room to retrieve her things, but Mac Sam finds her there and asks her for one more night together. She declines, planning to go home, but Delmount and Popeye talk her into joining them. As they watch the fireworks, Carnelle confesses to not knowing the point of it all, but they all agree it is a nice night out.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The Miss Firecracker Contest is a two-act play based in a small town in Mississippi in the mid 1980's during which the protagonist Carnelle hopes that winning a local beauty contest will provide the self-esteem and validation destroyed by her dysfunctional family and her own poor choices. As the play begins it is the beginning of July in Brookhaven, Mississippi and 24-year-old Carnelle Scott practices her patriotic-themed baton twirling routine in anticipation of becoming a contestant in the local Miss Firecracker beauty contest. Carnelle has tried to enter the contest in previous years but her reputation around town for being a little bit promiscuous has always blocked her candidacy.

Carnelle waits for her friend, Popeye Jackson to arrive to take Carnelle's measurements to make a pageant costume. Carnelle wears a leotard and has even dyed her hair bright red and makes the appropriate explosive sounds imitating the Roman candles in her act. When Popeye arrives Carnelle serves saltines and iced tea and shares that her house is scary and too cluttered.

Carnelle explains that she has been living in the house alone since the death of her Aunt Ronelle last Christmas. Carnelle's own mother died when Carnelle was a baby and her father kept her for a few years and then left Carnelle with Aunt Ronelle who had two children of her own, Elain and Delmount. Carnelle shares the pathetic details of Aunt Ronelle's cancer and how the transplanted pituitary gland of a monkey made the old woman sprout black hair all over her body. Aunt Ronelle had been good enough to let the local newspaper photograph her indelicate condition in spite of her illness.

Popeye continues to eye the artifacts in the room until she spots the picture of Delmount and instantly falls in love with the man whom Carnelle reveals has a bit of a troubled past having spent some time in jail and a mental institution for injuring a man with a broken beer bottle. Suddenly Elain enters the house several days in advance of her expected arrival for the Fourth of July festivities. Elain has left her husband and two children in Natchez because her husband, Franklin bores her to tears. Elain had been Miss Firecracker several years ago and Carnelle has asked to borrow the red antebellum dress that brought Elain good luck but Elain has not brought the dress bringing instead a gaudy Mardi Gras mask for Carnelle's use in the pageant.

Carnelle helps Elain take her things to her bedroom upstairs leaving Popeye alone for a few minutes when Delmount unexpectedly arrives. Popeye is immediately attracted to Delmount having recognized him from his picture in the room and becomes tongue-tied trying to explain to Delmount how she got her nickname. Apparently Popeye's eyes were injured when eardrops were mistakenly used in place of eye drops once when Popeye complained of eye irritation. Since that time Popeye's eyes bulge a little bit and she has to wear thick glasses. The good part though is that she can now hear voices through her eyes. Delmount is touched by the young woman's story but is relieved when

Carnelle enters the room and Delmount can explain the reason for his surprise visit. Popeye takes Carnelle's measurements and leaves the house.

Delmount has come back to Brookhaven to sell the house and its furnishings since Aunt Ronelle had willed all of it to him. Delmount is prepared to split the income with Carnelle after the sale. Elain re-enters the room to see Delmount who chastises her for not acting to get him released from the mental institution when she had the power to do so after only two months of his admittance. Elain claims that Delmount's violent behavior and his grief over Aunt Ronelle's death caused her to make the decision she did.

Elain retires to her room leaving Carnelle and Delmount alone to discuss the prospect of having the money from the sale of the house so that they can both leave Brookhaven for good. Carnelle is not sure she really wants to leave but then decides that leaving is the best idea and determines that she will win the Miss Firecracker contest and go out in a blaze of glory.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The author of the play, Beth Henley is a Southern writer famous for writing in the dialect and the style indigenous to the Southern states. Henley also weaves in Southern cultural aspects such as the importance of family. Although Carnelle lives alone in her aunt's house it is important to her that Popeye understand her heritage including her cousins Elain and Delmount. Aunt Ronelle's big house gives Carnelle some prestige in the small town, and she is better situated by living there than if she would be if she were a single woman in a small place of her own. In Southern culture reputation is extremely important and Carnelle's lack of self-esteem has led to bad choices in men and ultimately a tarnished reputation. Winning the Miss Firecracker contest would provide the validation that Carnelle needs so that she can leave the town with an improved image.

The author also introduces some eccentric human behavior that is consistent with the style of Southern literature. Popeye's explanation of her eye injury and the resulting after effect of being able to hear out of her eyes is amusing especially in her earnestness. Popeye also tells the story of learning to sew by making clothes for frogs found in the back yard. Popeye also admits to Elain that after seeing Delmount her hot is heart and she has to blow on it to revive herself. These incidents are all amusing and help to exhibit the quirky nature of real life Southern characters.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

It is now Saturday evening about 8 o'clock and the phone call announcing whether or not Carnelle is a pageant contestant was to have come by 6 o'clock. Each phone call jars Carnelle's nerves but the callers are not for her and it becomes clear that she is not going to be asked to participate in this year's contest. One of the calls is from Franklin and Elain maintains once more that she is not returning home to him and the children. Delmount is pleased to hear this news as Delmount has never liked Franklin but Delmount also knows that Elain cannot follow through on her ideas.

Popeye arrives at the home with Carnelle's costume and in a private moment tells Elain about her love for Delmount. Elain cautions Popeye because of Delmount's instability in so many areas. Delmount has tired of all the family activity and retires with a headache and Popeye is distraught over her unrequited feelings of love for Delmount. Carnelle is also in despair because of not being chosen for the pageant and Elain is doing her best to console both young women when the phone rings with a call for Carnelle who actually has been chosen to participate. The little family throws an impromptu celebration to mark Carnelle's reversal of fortune.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

The themes of self-identity and the quest for love are very important in this scene. Carnelle hopes that participation in the beauty pageant will validate her sense of self and boost her badly wounded self-esteem. Carnelle has been in search of the love she never received as a child through relationships with the wrong men and the public validation of her beauty and worthiness could change her life's course. Popeye too is in search of love and sets her impaired sight on Delmount who is emotionally wounded and unable to respond. Delmount searches for a woman with at least one perfect physical characteristic and the homely Popeye does not fit the description. Ironically it is Popeye with her impaired vision who can see what Delmount really needs in spite of himself.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Finally the Fourth of July has arrived and the stage is set at the back of the beauty pageant tent with a dressing room in a smaller tent to one side. A man named Mac Sam who is a carnival worker and one of Carnelle's former boyfriends strolls into the scene looking for Carnelle. Carnelle arrives speaking to Tessy the pageant coordinator about the other contestants in the pageant.

Delmount arrives in a good mood because the auction of Aunt Ronelle's furniture is going well and he will soon have money to escape from this town. Carnelle's spirits are lifted too because if she wins the pageant she can leave in a blaze of glory. Carnelle tells Delmount that Tessy is looking for him and that Popeye is in love with him.

Elain arrives at the tent glowing in a breezy summer dress and announces that she has been asked to speak to the audience on her life in beauty. Elain has also brought the Mardi Gras mask for Carnelle to wear in the contest because the red dress is too tight on Carnelle and Elain hopes the mask will focus attention away from the ill-fitting garment.

Delmount hides under a table when he sees the approaching Tessy who has brought a shoebox for Carnelle. The box, which is from Mac Sam, contains a frog wearing a pink outfit that leads all of them to assume that Mac Sam knows where Popeye is and they rush off to find the young woman to see if she can make any alterations to the red dress.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

This scene is the climax of the true theme of the play which is the search for real identity. Carnelle is convinced that Elain has the perfect life because she had been a beauty queen and lives a privileged life in a big city. Elain serves as the foil for Carnelle who feels that if she too could attain the Miss Firecracker title her own life would begin its own magical journey. Unfortunately it is not beauty titles or big homes, which provide happiness as Elain can testify with her separation from her husband and the life she thought would provide unending happiness. This scene also provides some comic relief from the story of broken hearts and unrequited love with the physical humor of characters hiding and running off at ill-timed moments. The author wants to share the foibles of human beings in their attempts to live their dreams and find the love they need.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Mac Sam and Delmount are talking together behind the pageant tent waiting for Carnelle to finish her performance. Delmount does not understand Carnelle's need to put herself through such humiliation and Mac Sam simply tells Delmount that women need to feel beautiful. Suddenly Elain and Popeye return in an agitated state. Carnelle tripped on the red dress and fell onstage resulting in name-calling and objects being thrown. Delmount takes off to beat the offenders as Carnelle returns to the dressing room in total humiliation.

Mac Sam leaves and returns with the bloodied Delmount who has fought for Carnelle's honor. Popeye leaves in search of ice for Delmount's wounds and Tessy corners the elusive Delmount and chastises him for his inappropriate behavior years ago, which still continues to haunt her. Tessy might be consoled if Delmount were to agree to watch the fireworks with her later this evening. Delmount protests but Tessy leaves without hearing him. Popeye returns with a purple snow cone for Delmount's wounds and Elain and Mac Sam meet and are attracted to each other. Elain tries to divert attention to someone else and talks to Popeye who has recently lost her job at a dime store for giving a compact to a young girl who wanted to see the color of her own eyes.

Carnelle has been nervously watching the other contestants perform their talent acts and finally it is her own turn and she takes the stage to do her patriotic twirling routine. Tessy returns with an arrangement of roses Franklin has sent to Elain who has called her husband to come pick her up the next morning. Elain tries to get Delmount to understand her motive because their mother left everything to Delmount and a life with Franklin is the only way Elain will ever have anything and she cannot return to a life with nothing.

Suddenly Carnelle returns in a joyous mood because her dance routine was a success. With hopes raised again Carnelle changes into her bathing suit for the final lineup where the winner will be crowned. Everyone but Delmount leaves to watch the ceremony and soon Mac Sam returns with the news that Carnelle has come in last place in the contest.

Carnelle is angry and impatient at the placating comments of her family and friends yet takes her place carrying the flag behind the float in the parade because that is the traditional job of the loser.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Although Carnelle is to be commended for her persistence and desire to change her life she is defeated before she even begins. The Miss Firecracker contest is a symbol for the pretentious life and shallow values accepted as the norm for acceptance. Carnelle

does not have the beauty, money or family heritage which are necessary to guarantee happiness in the society in which she lives. Having a beautiful married cousin as comparison does not help Carnelle's state of mind but it is revealed that Elain is not happy either despite the fact that she has all the things that are supposed to guarantee happiness to a Southern woman. Hopefully the women will realize that contentment does not derive from outside elements and must stem from internal sources.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

Elain and Delmount wait for Carnelle to return to the dressing room and discuss the negative impact that their mother had on their lives and how they have made the choices they have in attempts to either please her or distance from her. Popeye returns with a pair of binoculars and Delmount agrees to watch the fireworks with her much to the dismay of Tessy who has returned to claim Delmount for her own. Carnelle returns to the back of the beauty pageant tent after the parade in a furious state her humiliation heightened by onlookers who hurled insults and objects along the parade route. Mac Sam invites Carnelle out for a night of fun but Carnelle declines wanting to get home and put this day behind her.

Delmount and Popeye have climbed to the top of the tent to watch the fireworks and yell down to invite Carnelle who refuses at first but ultimately accepts the invitation. Carnelle apologizes for her rude and angry behavior this afternoon after she did not win and Delmount consoles Carnelle who has been extremely disappointed in not winning because she had wanted to go out in a blaze of glory. Carnelle admits to not knowing the point of anything that happens but somehow that is fine and the trio watches the fireworks display from the top of the tent.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Ironically it is Popeye the girl with the impaired vision who can see the most clearly of all the characters. It is Popeye who has the simplicity of a pure heart uncluttered by strife and the need for acquisition. Popeye's simple intentions go to the heart of the issues for these wounded characters and she can supply what they need without ulterior motives.

At the end of the story it would seem that Carnelle is once more defeated in a string of disappointments but she has an indomitable spirit and wins just by taking chances, which is something that Elain cannot do. The assumption is that Elain is the winner because of her reputed beauty and marriage to a successful man but Elain's fear of not being accepted has kept her from truly living a life driven by her internal core and not outside sources. The author does provide hope in that Delmount seems to be falling in love with Popeye and Carnelle is coming to terms with life's unpredictability and some new options of creating a life not dictated by other's definitions.

Characters

Popeye Jackson

Popeye is the seamstress who makes Carnelle's costume; she becomes involved in the pageant madness while adding further strange elements to the story. A funny character with a hard life, Popeye got her nickname from a childhood prank that caused her eyes to bulge, but left her with the ability to hear through her eyes. She is a semi-literate, naïve, and always out-of-luck young woman who learned to sew as a child by making outfits for bullfrogs because she didn't have any dolls. Popeye is sincerely kind and curious about everything. Popeye falls in love with Delmount just from seeing his picture. Popeye is rewarded with Delmount's returned affection; this theme is perhaps the heart of the play.

Tessy Mahoney

As the beauty contestant coordinator, Tessy is supposed to keep Carnelle on schedule and cue her appearances on stage. Tessy's ugliness makes her another misfit at the beauty contest. Her past scandalous tryst with Delmount adds one more bizarre twist as she flirts with him anew.

Elain Rutledge

Elain is Carnelle's cousin, and she is everything that Carnelle is not. Although they grew up together, Elain was the spoiled beauty and Carnelle the misfortunate orphan. Elain won the Miss Firecracker contest when she was just 17, while Carnelle is 25 and pushing the eligibility limits. Elain did everything her mother told her to do by going to junior college and parleying her beauty into marriage with a wealthy man. To Carnelle, it appears that Elain has everything: the big house in the big city, a husband and children, beauty, and class. Elain, however, feels suffocated by her life and comes back home with the intention of leaving her husband and two sons because she doesn't like them. Naturally, she is asked to give a speech at the town's Fourth of July festivities about her life as a beauty. Delmount accuses Elain of never being able to go through with any of her threats. As predicted, she gives in to her husband's pleadings and decides to go back to him because, she says, "I need someone who adores me." Her selfishness enables her to dismiss the needs of her family, but doesn't allow her to leave the luxuries to which she has become accustomed.

Mac Sam

One of Carnelle's former lovers, Mac Sam seems to truly care about her, even if she did give him syphilis. The carnival's balloon vendor, he cheers on Carnelle as she competes in the beauty contest. Mac Sam is tubercular, drinks heavily, and hasn't bothered to get

his syphilis cured because he is tired of life□but not so tired that he doesn't ask Carnelle to spend the night with him. When she declines and says goodbye, he remarks: "I'll always remember you as the one who could take it on the chin" and then he leaves to meet Elain for a wild night.

Carnelle Scott

The play revolves around Carnelle's attempt to win her town's annual Fourth of July beauty contest. She is 25 years old, works in a jewelry store, and is known around town as "Miss Hot Tamale" for her promiscuous past. However, Carnelle is trying to change all that. She got her syphilis cured, joined a church, volunteers for the cancer society, and invites an orphan to dinner every week. Carnelle is insecure and has low self-esteem. After Carnelle's mother died when Carnelle was an infant and her father abandoned her at age nine, she grew up with her aunt who favored Carnelle's older cousin, Elain. Her father came back after her Uncle George died, but soon her father died as well. Shortly before the time of the story, Carnelle's mean Aunt Ronelle dies. Having been surrounded by death all her life, Carnelle is trying to make sense out of life and find her own identity. Carnelle sees the Miss Firecracker contest as a way to redeem herself and to be somebody. She doesn't understand that the social system will never permit her to win, that dyeing her hair bright red will look ridiculous instead of patriotic, or that stomping her feet to music is not tap dancing. Once her cousin Delmount offers to give her enough money to start a new life elsewhere, Carnelle further imagines that being Miss Firecracker will allow her to go out in a "blaze of glory." Instead, after working really hard to prepare, she is humiliated by the crowd and finishes in last place. Although she has enough integrity to fulfill the duties of the person in last place, she spits and screams at the people who taunt her during the parade and then hides. Carnelle's tenacity evokes the loyalty of family and friends. They admire Carnelle's spunk and the indomitable spirit that enables her to spring back, even after the mortification of the pageant, to enjoy the night's fireworks.

Delmount Williams

After he has spent time in a mental institution and worked at a job scraping dead animals off the road, Carnelle's cousin and Elain's brother, Delmount returns to town to sell his mother's house. He intends to use the proceeds to go to college to study philosophy, but he offers half the proceeds to Carnelle to enable her to leave town and start a new life. Although perhaps more realistic than the rest of his family, Delmount is unstable and has a history of rash actions, such as rushing out to beat up the guys who taunt Carnelle during the pageant. He also has an obsession with exotic beauty that always gets him into trouble and results in gruesome nightmares about women's dismembered bodies. Yet, Delmount has a sensible disdain for the phoniness of the beauty pageant. He doesn't respect Elain's life choices either, especially the one that left him in an asylum when she could have gotten him out. However, he always forgives her transgressions. Delmount is amazed to learn that Popeye is in love with him, having

been entranced with his ability to wiggle his ears and write poetry. But he then falls for her, too, and therein might be Delmount's redemption.

Themes

Seeking Identity

A common theme in the works of Beth Henley is that her characters are seeking their identity, particularly the female lead seeks her identity as a woman outside of her family and her relationships with men. In *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, Carnelle is trying to find an identity other than orphaned cousin, other than "Miss Hot Tamale," and other than the ugly loser she sees herself to be. She does not find her identity in a beauty title, but she may yet find it with the help of her family and friends and her resilient nature. Elain is seeking an identity as her real and complete self as a woman rather than that of the proper wife and mother. However, Elain doesn't have the courage to leave her security for any longer than a one-night fling. Her identity is tied up with being adored; therefore, she must go back to the life that sets her on a pedestal□a miserable pedestal, but a pedestal nonetheless. Delmount is also seeking a new identity. He wants to go to college to study philosophy and try to find a new life away from the claims and labels put on him by his hometown. His new identity, though, may be a reflection of Popeye's love. It is typical of Henley that, although some of her characters succeed in their quest for identity, they usually do so only partially and with compromises.

Beauty

True beauty, and the only kind that should count ultimately, is internal. Unfortunately, internal beauty is hard to discern, and an awful lot of fuss is made over the external kind. Consequently, Carnelle, who has worshipped her beautiful cousin since childhood, and witnessed the perfect life that beauty has supposedly brought to Elain, thinks that physical beauty is all that matters. Carnelle says, "I feel sorry for ugly people, I really do." So, she is intent on proving her beauty even though she worries that she is actually ugly herself. As a teenager, she sought affirmation from men, only to discover that they were after her "carnal" beauty. In a desperate effort to redeem her reputation, Carnelle again tries to prove that she has physical beauty as well as the other features that the community finds attractive. When that fails, Henley gives ample evidence of the beauty of friendship□through Mac Sam's tribute when he says that Carnelle can really take it on the chin and through the comradeship that Carnelle finds with Delmount and Popeye as they watch the fireworks. In the process, Henley pokes fun at the culture's vanity while simultaneously showing the insidious harm that it does. For example, Elain's speech about life as a beauty makes it seem that she doesn't have to be anything else; she has an excuse for not following other dreams. Elain has found sufficient power in being beautiful to satisfy her needs, but she is stuck with being Miss Firecracker all her life. Carnelle has escaped that label, albeit painfully, and is still free to mature as a woman.

The Need to be Loved

Carnelle has a desperate need to be loved. She grew up without the love of parents and with the disdain of her aunt. Consequently, she looked for love in one sexual affair after another. Once she realized that promiscuity brought her only disgrace and the nickname "Miss Hot Tamale," she sought a form of love through acceptance. Carnelle wants to belong to her community, so she joins a church and does charitable work. The ultimate sign of acceptance, though, would be winning the Miss Firecracker Contest and becoming queen of Brookhaven, Mississippi.

Elain also has a need to be loved, but not in the form of admiration for her beauty or the silly infatuation of her husband. Unfortunately, Elain has only a brief exposure to this awareness before she decides that her greater need is to be adored and pampered as the icon of Southern femininity that she has set herself up to be. Delmount also has a need to be loved, but he is so frightened and confused by his sexual fantasies that he doesn't realize his need to be loved until he is confronted with the true love of Popeye. Luckily, Delmount seems to instantly succumb to the power of innocent love, indicating that there might be hope for him.

Style

The Foil

A foil is a character whose personality or physical qualities obviously contrast and thereby emphasize those of another character. Elain serves as the foil to Carnelle. Carnelle thinks that Elain has everything that a woman could want: beauty, a rich husband, a big house, pretty clothes, a place in the best social circles, and the title of Miss Firecracker. Carnelle worries that she is ugly while Elain can give a speech on her life as a beauty. Elain has done everything according to propriety, while Carnelle has made herself a social outcast because of her promiscuous past. Carnelle is single, lives in her aunt's house by the charity of her cousins, and apparently has trashy taste. In the end, however, Carnelle has achieved more personal success than Elain because Carnelle has dared to take a risk while Elain feels trapped in her life.

Southern Literature

The Miss Firecracker Contest fits into the genre of Southern literature because it is about the Southern United States and is written by a playwright who was reared in the South. The play uses Southern voice and dialect, which Henley accomplishes precisely. In addition, a characteristic of Southern literature that applies to this play is the importance of family: Carnelle lives in her aunt's house and idolizes the two cousins who are important characters in the play. Another characteristic is a sense of community: Carnelle's whole world is the town of Brookhaven, Mississippi, as well as her reputation in it, and her efforts to gain acceptance through one of the town's biggest community events, the annual beauty contest. A sense of human limitation or moral dilemma is also characteristic of Southern literature. The story of *The Miss Firecracker Contest* is built around the limitations of its characters and their search for their identities.

Critics often discuss the elements of Southern Gothic in Henley's work, i.e., stories that include grotesque, macabre, or fantastic incidents. In the case of *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, there are numerous references to incidents such as Aunt Ronelle's hairy illness, the bizarre ways Carnelle's uncle and father died, Popeye's eyes and her frog costumes, Delmount's bloody dreams, the Mahoney sisters' deformed kittens, and so on. In Henley's hands, these elements are used for comic effect, but they also serve to point out the sad and pathetic nature of the characters' lives, as well as their resilience.

Historical Context

The 1970s

The 1970s was a period of recovery, as well as continued turmoil, for the American people. The 1960s had been violent, troubled times that saw three major political assassinations, the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and anti-war demonstrations. The pendulum swung back towards conservatism with the election of Richard Nixon for president in 1968. However, his administration was riddled with scandal, resulting first in the resignation of the vice-president and eventually in the resignation of the president himself. The Watergate investigation led the headlines for months while Gerald Ford, the first president ever to serve without having been elected to the office, or even that of the vice-president, tried to restore normalcy. Ford was replaced by Jimmy Carter, the first Southern president since before the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. Carter was successful in negotiating peace between Egypt and Israel, but wasn't successful in getting the American hostages freed from Iran until the day he relinquished his office to Ronald Reagan in 1981. The sexual and technological revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as integration, changed the culture of the United States. In the process, the job market developed more openings that could be filled by women just as women were demanding more opportunities.

The Climate for Women Playwrights

In the 1970s, Beth Henley wrote her first plays, including *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, which is set in no particular time period. This play needs little adjustment, if any, as the times change. By 1980, Henley had two plays going on stage. In 1981, she won the Pulitzer Prize for best drama, but she was the first woman to do so in twenty-three years. The situation for women playwrights was paradoxical. In the 1930s to the 1950s, the only female playwright of note was Lillian Hellman. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a noticeable proliferation of young women playwrights. Women were "in" to the point that plays by women of the 1960s were resurrected. However, their subjects were not necessarily about women or from a woman's perspective, as women writers tried to fit into the male-dominated mainstream. Despite the number of women writing plays, few were getting them produced on Broadway or in regional theatres. One had to look to Off- or Off-Off Broadway to see a play written by a woman. Although two more women playwrights won Pulitzers in the 1980s (Marsha Norman in 1983 and Wendy Wasserstein in 1989), by the end of the decade only 7 percent of the plays on stage nationwide were written by women. This male dominance continues into the 2000s. Another three women won the Pulitzer Prize in Drama around the turn of the century (Paula Vogel in 1998; Margaret Edson in 1999; Suzan-Lori Parks in 2002). Despite this, only 17 percent of plays in production in America in 2002 were written by female playwrights.

The Culture of Beauty Pageants

Beauty pageants, although held across the country, are more of a Southern phenomenon, perhaps because the image of a Southern lady can be taught through these events. As anthropologist Robert H. Lavenda explained: "Small-town pageants are about social class, achievement, community values, and femininity in a small-town context, and they are training for the social positions toward which many of the candidates aspire." Furthermore, and this is a point that Carnelle didn't realize in the play, "The pageant is not designed to select the most beautiful young woman in town, but rather a suitable representative for the community." Often, suitability is determined by the importance of the candidates' families. Carnelle kept going over the list of finalists and comparing herself to the others in terms of beauty. She thought she had a real chance to win because she was sure she was prettier than the others. Realistically, however, as Elain feared, Carnelle came in last due to the bad reputation, which made her the least representative of the values of the community. Young women enter these contests, as Carnelle does, because they have something to prove, or because they need to be loved and think adulation will be a sufficient substitute. Fortunately for Carnelle, she realizes, albeit too late, that such a contest can be ludicrous when one has the love of friends and family.

Critical Overview

Critical reactions to *The Miss Firecracker Contest* have been mixed. Among the favorable reactions is a 1994 *English Studies* article that praises *The Miss Firecracker Contest* for the "depths in even the most objectionable characters and the enormous toughness in some of life's apparent losers." Furthermore, the article asserts that Henley "puts most faith in friendship . . . Brutal conditions cannot destroy their victims as long as emotional support comes from somewhere."

In contrast, Harry Bowman, writing for the *Dallas Morning News* declared that *The Miss Firecracker Contest* has no heart and no point. The reviewer found the characters to be "strange and weird" caricatures who fail to become human. "Carnelle becomes just another simpleton. And not a very appealing one at that. She has a strident edge that keeps snagging on the viewer's sensibilities." Patrick Taggert, the reviewer for the *Austin American-Statesman*, admits that "You either love [Henley's] grotesque characters and frenzied action or you hate them," but he also said that she carves "up Southern manners and archetypes" in *The Miss Firecracker Contest*. Moreover, her characters

seldom speak below a loud roar, never know a subtle gesture. She cartoonishly savages her characters, all the while making feeble attempts to show how innately noble these poor pieces of trash really are. How does she illuminate this nobility? With the occasionally insightful line of dialogue or a phony, late-hour epiphany, as when Carnelle realizes she doesn't have to belong to anything, least of all her crazy community.

Ironically, Carnelle's realization about the value of independence comes after she has pursued fitting into her community by conforming to its values. It is a feminist lesson, but feminists have not been certain that Henley's plays are feminist. Yes, they have strong female lead characters, but Elain's attempt at rebelling against social conventions fails, and she resigns herself to her stereotyped role. Carnelle, instead of asserting a lesson learned or a life transformed, says at the end of the play, "I don't know what the main thing is. I don't have the vaguest idea." A discussion about *The Miss Firecracker Contest* in *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition* concludes that the play conveys "nostalgia for the traditional family" and an admiration for "a determined, if pathetic, quest for and celebration of female identity." Furthermore, Henley parodies female sexuality: "Carnelle suffers for illicit sex and finds affirmation only in family at play's and quest's end."

Paul Rosenfeldt, writing in *The Absent Father in Modern Drama*, a book that examines "the pattern of the absent father" that appears to span "the scope of modern drama," finds this pattern in Henley's works. Certainly, in *The Miss Firecracker Contest* this absence is emphasized. Carnelle's father leaves her with relatives. After Elain and Delmount's father dies, Carnelle's father returns, but he also dies soon after. However, it should be noted that the mothers, too, are both deceased. Further, this book purports that, "Unlike the American son, the American daughter of the absent father lives in a

world where there is no possibility of escape through space and distance." In *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, Henley implies that Carnelle may yet escape.

Other criticism about Henley's plays as a body of work runs the gamut from positive to negative. The *Austin American-Statesman* declared that Henley's works are "heavy-handed, offensive and alternately sickly sweet and sneering," while other critics comment on Henley's clearly delineated characters, heartwarming stories, compassionate portrayal of human failings, and optimistic endings. The *New York Times* review expresses the confusion of elements that may be the cause of the varied reactions:

We hear about midgets, orphans, and deformed kittens□and they're the fortunate ones. Other characters, whether on stage or off, are afflicted by cancer, tuberculosis, venereal disease, and most of all, heartbreak. Even so, the evening's torrential downpour of humor□alternately Southern-Gothic absurdist, melancholy and broad□almost never subsides.

Generally, the critics talk about Henley's place in Southern literature. She has been compared to Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and William Faulkner. However, Richard Schickel, writing for *Time* speculates that

Though [Henley's] territory looks superficially like the contemporary American South, it is really a country of the mind: one of Tennessee Williams' provinces that has surrendered to a Chekhovian raiding party, perhaps. Her strength is a wild anecdotal inventiveness, but her people, lost in the ramshackle drams and tumble-down ambitions with which she invests them, often seem to be metaphors waywardly adrift. They are blown this way and that by the gales of laughter they provoke, and they frequently fail to find a solid connection with clear and generally relevant meaning.

As a living author who continues to write steadily, Henley and her works cannot yet be fully assessed. However, William Demastes, author of a book on the new realism in American theatre, is probably right to assume that Henley will continue to "draw from and build upon her small-town world of Mississippi and use her uniquely trained eyes to perceive in that microcosm the modern absurdities of existence."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is a freelance writer and adjunct college English instructor. In this essay, Kerschen shows how Henley uses each character and bizarre anecdotes to create both the comedy and the message in this play.

A constant litany of the bizarre runs through Henley's dialogue. Her plays are sometimes called tragicomedies, or black comedies, because the humor is achieved through eccentric characters who have experienced strange incidents in their lives. These incidents, often involving violence and death, are sprinkled throughout the play for their comedic effect and for what they reveal about the characters. Some critics find this technique to be too much, but others appreciate the creativity and enjoy the anecdotes that range from the merely unusual to the outright ludicrous. Nothing is anywhere near normal for Henley's characters: Carnelle has dyed her hair bright red, Delmount can wiggle his ears, Popeye has bulging eyes, Mac Sam is riddled with diseases, and perfect Elain is emotionally frigid and completely self-centered. They can't even find plain ice to put on Delmount's wound. Instead they use a purple snow cone□they were out of cherry, Popeye explains, as if that makes perfect sense.

The element of death is introduced early when Carnelle gets acquainted with Popeye and tells her matter-of-factly that "people've been dying practically all my life. I guess I should be used to it by now." Carnelle's mother died when she was barely a year old. After Carnelle came to live with the Williams family, her Uncle George fell "to his death trying to pull this bird's nest out from the chimney." Then her father "drops dead in the summer's heat while running out to the Tropical Ice Cream truck." Popeye commiserates by telling how her own brother died when he was bitten by a water moccasin.

Aunt Ronelle is an influential character in the play, even though she is also dead. Robert Andreach, in a book about creating the self in contemporary drama, explains that Aunt Ronelle reared Carnelle to feel "inferior to her two cousins. To compensate, [Carnelle] concentrated on the one area where she felt that she could excel: with the males in the town." Aunt Ronelle's importance to the characters is evident from the number of times she and her fatal illness are mentioned. Carnelle tells Popeye about Aunt Ronelle in the opening scene when Popeye observes that the house is scary. It seems that her aunt had cancer of the pituitary gland, so surgeons replaced it with one from a monkey. The transplant lengthened her life only a month or so and had the "dreadful" side effect of causing her to grow long, black hairs all over her body just like an ape. This event is a source of conflict between Elain and Delmount, who have the typical sibling argument about who Mama loved best. Delmount thinks their mother had the embarrassing transplant just to be mean to them. But Elain ennobles the experience by repeating as an adage, in various forms throughout the play that "Mama was enlightened by her affliction."

According to critic Patrick Taggert, writing for the *Austin American-Statesman*, Delmount "seems to serve no other purpose than to permit Henley to have at least one character

yelling and throwing things." While that is not exactly the case, it is true that Henley tends to use her male characters to catalyze the action of the female characters. In that light, Delmount has a problem with women. His confusion fits in perfectly with the women around him, who are also confused about themselves. Delmount claims that he has "a weakness for the classical, exotic beauty in a woman. I've been a fool for it. It's my romantic nature." Yet he has dreams about dismembered women. Linda Rohrer Paige in *Feminist Writers* speculates that "Delmount's imagination can envision women only from a limited, warped, or distorted perspective." Delmount is conflicted by the patriarchal image of women; this is the image he has been taught to use as a standard of beauty. This is at odds with his intuitive understanding that there is more to beauty than the cultural stereotype. Consequently, when a woman doesn't fit into his preconceived mold, in his dreams she becomes, as Paige surmises, "violently fragmented, disembodied, a portrait of beauty aborted."

Delmount's problem may be cured by Popeye. She isn't a classic beauty, or even a beauty, and it could hardly be said that her bulging eyes are "exotic." However, Popeye's love for Delmount may be just what he needs to get over his unrealistic expectations about women. It is poetic justice that he should fall in love with someone so outside his image of a beautiful woman. Perhaps by breaking away from the confines of his rigid expectations, he will break free from a number of his neuroses. One thing that Delmount and Popeye have in common is that they are both social outcasts who cannot imagine what is so important about the Miss Firecracker contest.

Popeye may be a calmer, more down-to-earth person than the others in the play, but her anecdotes reveal her off-kilter perspective. First we learn that she practiced sewing as a child by making clothes for bullfrogs because she didn't have any dolls. At one time she had a boyfriend who wanted her to meow and purr and liked to pet her as if she were a cat. Fortunately, Popeye recognized that behavior as weird. The reason for her name is a tragic tale in itself. Her brother threw some gravel into her eyes and then treated the stinging pain with ear drops instead of eye drops. From that point on her eyes bulged out, so people started calling her Popeye. She may have to use a magnifying glass to see up close, but she can now hear voices through her eyes, a unique talent indeed.

The character of Delmount further deals with the problem of beauty in his relationship with his sister. In large measure, Delmount gets his image of beauty from Elain. But he sees how messed-up beauty has made Elain and that adds to his confusion about beauty. Delmount loves his sister, but she left him in a mental institution when she had the power to get him out. He hates her for that, but as he says, he always forgives her for everything she does. "You'd think," he complains, "after you left me in that lunatic asylum, I'd know better than to trust you." Does he forgive her because she is his sister, or because beautiful people always get away with the harm they cause? Delmount, like the rest of society, may give latitude to some people just because they are beautiful. But he is left wondering how far anyone can trust beauty. Perhaps that is why Delmount falls for Popeye□her trustworthiness is ultimately more attractive than physical beauty.

The part of Mac Sam is a small one; he doesn't even appear until the second act. Nonetheless, he, too, is a male character who is useful to the plot. His most important purpose is to deliver the line to Carnelle, "I'll always remember you as the one who could take it on the chin." He also catalyzes the action by bringing the frog to Carnelle, thus letting her know that Popeye is somewhere nearby. Mac Sam provides a sympathetic male ear for Delmount, serves as Carnelle's biggest cheerleader, but he is also a link to her promiscuous past. Mac Sam also provides Elain with her one reckless night under the wisteria trees.

The story that Popeye tells about the midgets is a perfect example of Henley's style. It starts out as a cute story about two midgets, Sweet Pea and Willas, who marry and move into a darling little house made for their size. Then the story turns tragic: their child is born "regular size" like all their relatives and soon outgrows their "mite sized furniture." Consequently, they have to relinquish their child to Sweet Pea's mother to rear, and their hearts are broken. With this anecdote, the audience is moved from sweetly funny to sadly painful. Perhaps this anecdote is a mini-lesson in the midst of the running message that Henley wants the audience to understand: that being different, ugly, odd, or quirky can be difficult at best and excruciatingly demoralizing at worst. Henley may exaggerate the strangeness of her characters, but the point is that we all have our odd traits, yet we are still lovable, worthwhile people.

This technique is used in reverse in Carnelle's story. She was an unwanted child abandoned by her father with nothing but a pillow case full of dirty rags. She had ringworms all over her head, so Aunt Ronelle shaved off her hair to treat the sores. Carnelle went around wearing a yellow wool knit cap pulled down over her head. Delmount said she was an ugly sight and never did attain any self-esteem. He says she had to "sleep with every worthless soul in Brookhaven trying to prove she was attractive." With the beauty contest, Carnelle has once again chosen the wrong way to prove herself and winds up with just more humiliation. Instead of a yellow wool cap, she wears a faded red dress that doesn't fit and then she trips on the hoop skirt and falls flat on her face. Nonetheless, her natural resilience is already bringing her back to hopefulness within a few hours after the pageant. On one of the worst days of her life, Carnelle looks up at the fireworks and says, "Gosh, it's a nice night." She still has no idea what it all means, but the audience is left with the impression that she will keep trying to find out.

Henley's signature is not only her weird humor but also her optimism. The anecdotes may often be sickening and sad, but they make a point while also somehow being funny and upbeat. Some of her characters may fail temporarily in their attempts to solve their problems, but in *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, the band of strange underdogs has taken steps forward together that may get them there someday.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Holm is a fiction and nonfiction writer and editor. In this essay, Holm looks at how Henley treats the theme of appearance in this play.

The Miss Firecracker Contest is a play about appearances. Appearances, literal and figurative, drive the lives and the motivations of these characters. Appearances make or break these people. The effects of appearances in these characters' pasts continue to haunt them and direct their choices and thoughts. It is no doubt intentional that the title of the play, and the event that the title refers to, is a beauty and talent contest. Even more interesting is the fact that this could easily have been a play about one main character's struggle with her own appearance. But in this play Henley gives her reader lots to think about. Even the secondary characters in this play change as a result of the Miss Firecracker contest and its consequences.

Carnelle starts out as a terribly insecure character who is utterly convinced that the Miss Firecracker contest is the one and only way to erase her "hot tamale" past. Her insecurities are apparent in the first few pages of the play. Carnelle badly wants Popeye to know how special and important the upcoming Miss Firecracker contest is. When Popeye hesitates in her responses or does not respond the way Carnelle expects, Carnelle gets uncomfortable. Carnelle is interrupted in the middle of her routine by Popeye's arrival, and it almost seems as if Carnelle wants, or hopes, for glowing accolades from Popeye. Popeye, on the other hand, seems unconcerned with appearances or affectations; her answers and her dialog throughout the play are usually direct and to the point.

Carnelle: Wheew! Oh, and please excuse the way I look, but I've been practicing my routine. It's coming right along.

Popeye: Good.

Carnelle (after an awkward moment): Well, I guess what I should do is show you some sketches.

Carnelle seems to overreact with exaggerated disappointment when Popeye admits that she has never heard of the contest. However, Carnelle is almost ridiculously relieved when Popeye admits that she has only been in town for a few weeks and probably would not have known about the contest.

Carnelle is so insecure that she cannot bear the thought that her world and her efforts might actually be small and inconsequential. Based on her hopes for her looks, Carnelle hopes to put her past behind her, win the contest, and leave the town and her old life behind in a "blaze of glory." The power of firecrackers and the power that Carnelle might achieve if she is indeed able to leave in a "blaze of glory" is alluded to in several different ways. The color red indicates fire, or a blaze. Carnelle is referred to as "Carnation." Carnelle wears a red dress of Elain's during part of the contest. Carnelle

spits and hisses like a firecracker when she is heckled cruelly by the crowd. Carnelle does leave "in a blaze," though it is not the blaze she originally imagined.

Carnelle is also not confident about her looks and seems to take comfort in talking about how other people think she could have been a model. She is so lost in her own reverie that she is startled when Popeye tries to get her to relax.

Carnelle: They say, "You should be up in Memphis working as a model. You really should."

Popeye: (Trying to get Carnelle to relax her tightly tucked in stomach) You can just relax.

Carnelle: What? Oh, I'm fine. Just fine.

When Popeye tells of sewing clothing for bullfrogs, Carnelle tries to make a joke of it, but her insecurity about her appearance leaks through again. Popeye, who is unfettered by any worries about her own appearance, completely misses the fine line that Carnelle walks between attempted humor and sad insecurity.

Carnelle: Well, I certainly hope you don't think of me as any bullfrog."

Popeye: Huh?

Carnelle: I mean, think I'm ugly like one of those dumb bullfrogs of yours.

Popeye: Oh, I don't.

Carnelle: Well, of course you don't. I was just joking.

Popeye: Oh.

Carnelle (suddenly very sad and uncomfortable): Are you about done?

Brought face to face with her insecurities about her appearance and her life, Carnelle throws in a spontaneous kick, knowing it is one thing she can do better than others can do. Throughout the play, Carnelle continually compares herself to the other contestants. Missy is ugly but can play the piano. Another girl is pretty but has yellow teeth. The reader gets the sense that Carnelle is hanging onto what little esteem she can carve out for herself. Carnelle achieves her esteem at the end of the play through the catharsis of her own anger and the realization that "I was trying so hard t'belong all my life."

It is interesting that the two least outwardly attractive characters in this play seem completely unconcerned about their appearances. Popeye wears thick-rimmed glasses and eccentric and non-stylish clothes but seems to move through the world innocently and removed from society's judgement about appearances. Mac Sam unselfconsciously coughs up clots of blood in all kinds of company and jokes about taking bets on which of his body organs will disintegrate first. Both of these characters have a compelling inner

quality, however, that Carnelle and Elaine and Delmount do not realize within themselves until the end of the play.

Popeye is described as a "small glowing person." There is a compelling quality to Popeye that makes the reader take notice of her, even though she is plainer than Carnelle and Carnelle's extended family. Popeye hears voices in her eyes, and she is aware enough to be scared by the feeling inside Carnelle's house, even though Popeye knows nothing of the tumultuous history in that home. Popeye looks at a picture of Delmount and knows instantly that she is in love. Popeye seems to be guided by an inner clarity that the better looking characters in the play lack.

Mac Sam, for his stooped appearance, constant cough, and emaciation, still has eyes that are "magnetic and bloodshot at the same time." Mac Sam is "extraordinarily sensual," which makes him interesting in this play. He manages to be attractive in spite of his looks.

Delmount is so obsessed with appearance that he will not make advances toward any woman who does not possess "at least one classically beautiful characteristic." He alternately dreams of beautiful women and ugly women and, in a moment of confusion, seduces the town's ugly twins, Tessy and Missy. Delmount is also obsessed with repressing his own insanity, symbolically represented by his attempts to straighten his wild and curly hair. Elain calls him on his own internal struggle, when both Delmount and Elain are close to making important realizations about themselves.

Elain: So why do you straighten your wild hair? Why do you have horrible, sickening dreams about pieces of women's bodies? Some all beautiful, some all mutilated and bloody. I hate those dreams. They scare me.

In the end, Delmount dreams a magnificent dream of Popeye, a woman who he would have formerly not given a second look. Delmount falls in love with Popeye, somehow managing to bypass his former obsession with perfection in appearance. Popeye, with her own unerring inner voice, seems as if she knew that eventually her love for Delmount would be returned.

Elain's dialog takes a leap into a more honest realm as she finally leaves the superficial level that she had inhabited for so long and makes plans for a tryst with Mac Sam. "I'm gonna be a reckless girl at least once in my dreary, dreary life," she says. Elain has taken her own journey from her original role as a beauty queen. In the beginning of the play, Elain feels burdened by her pretty face and her own good looks. Even so, she is thrilled to be chosen to speak about beauty at the contest. After the fiasco at the Miss Firecracker contest, Elain ruefully admits that Carnelle probably will not have much reason to admire her anymore.

Mac Sam is less concerned with appearance than Delmount, Elain, and Carnelle start out. All Mac Sam likes is a woman who can "take it right slap on the chin." This foreshadows Carnelle's experience in the Miss Firecracker contest, when she is taunted, heckled, and pelted with peanuts. She reacts by fighting back and spitting like

a firecracker, giving a double meaning to the title, and an allusion to a new strength that Carnelle has found inside herself.

Carnelle: I'd never been so mad as I was. And I spit out at everyone. I just spit at them. Oh! That's so awful it's almost funny!

Later, Mac Sam refers to her with real affection and alludes to his original mention of what he prefers in a woman, over appearances. He says to Carnelle, who has just departed, "Goodbye, Baby. I'll always remember you as the one who could take it on the chin."

The dichotomy that runs throughout this play is a theme of inner versus outer beauty. Surprisingly, Elain sums this up in reference to her own deceased mother, recalling that "Mama was at her most noblest when she was least attractive." The reader never meets this character but can easily picture the abusive mother who, for some reason, turned saint-like after an operation that left her with freakish side effects. Perhaps Henley is trying to say that unmarred by outer beauty, a character's inner beauty may more easily shine through to the surface. *The Miss Firecracker Contest* uses the themes of outer and inner appearances to guide these characters' journeys toward a realization of true beauty.

Source: Catherine Dybiec Holm, Critical Essay on *The Miss Firecracker Contest*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

The screenplay for *The Miss Firecracker Contest* was also written by Henley. Produced as *Miss Firecracker* (1989), the movie starred Holly Hunter, Mary Steenburgen, Tim Robbins, Alfre Woodard, and Scott Glen. It was directed by Thomas Schlamme. The film was released by HBO Studios in 1997 on VHS and by First Look Pictures on DVD in 2004.

Topics for Further Study

Considering the characters, their situations, and the choices that they make, does this play express a feminist message? Write an opinion essay as your answer.

Three female playwrights won Pulitzer Prizes in the 1980s: Beth Henley in 1981; Marsha Norman in 1983; and Wendy Wasserstein in 1989. Research these women and compare their prize-winning works.

The work of Beth Henley is often described as Southern Gothic. What is Southern Gothic and what elements of *The Miss Firecracker Contest* fit into this category?

Beth Henley is often compared to other Southern writers such as Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Tennessee Williams. Research one of these writers and discuss his or her similarities to Henley.

Do you think that beauty contests are sexist and demeaning to women, or do you think they have value in U.S. culture? Write an essay defending your position.

Compare and Contrast

Late 1970s: Former First Lady Betty Ford enters a treatment program for alcohol and prescription drug addiction.

Today: The Betty Ford Clinic, founded by the former-First Lady and frequented by celebrities, is the nation's best known treatment center for addictive behaviors.

Late 1970s: Garfield the cat cartoons make their first appearance in the nation's newspapers.

Today: The enormously popular cartoon cat, having made television specials and sold millions of items of Garfield paraphernalia, branches out to his first feature-length movie in 2004.

Late 1970s: The first "test-tube baby" is born in England, resulting from a successful in-vitro fertilization and embryo implantation into the mother.

Today: Thousands of IVF babies are born each year as the process has become further improved and culturally accepted, despite some moral and ethical objections.

Late 1970s: Statewide limitations on indoor smoking are passed in Iowa and New Jersey.

Today: Indoor smoking is almost universally prohibited in public places in the United States.

Late 1970s: AIDS has not yet been recognized as a new disease. The most common sexually-transmitted diseases are syphilis or gonorrhea, which can be easily cured.

Today: AIDS, as an incurable disease, is the worst of the sexually-transmitted diseases and has spread in epidemic proportions around the world.

Late 1970s: The Ayatollah Khomeini gains control of the country of Iran, which quickly becomes a major concern after 400 Americans are taken hostage by his followers and not released for 444 days.

Today: Iran is making some progress toward a more democratic society while America is involved in a war and its aftermath with Iran's neighboring country, Iraq.

Late 1970s: In 1976, NASA lands spacecraft on Mars for the first time, the Apple II computer is produced in 1977, and the first ATMs are built in 1978.

Today: Personal and laptop computers are common household items in the United States, cell phones allow instant communication, and NASA goes back to Mars for further exploration.

What Do I Read Next?

Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias* (1988) is another story of strong Southern women who support and encourage each other during times of challenge. Harling's novel was made into a blockbuster movie in 1989, starring Sally Fields, Dolly Parton, Shirley MacLaine, Daryl Hannah, Olympia Dukakis, and Julia Roberts.

Alan Ball wrote *Five Women Wearing the Same Dress* (1998), a comedy about five very distinct women who feel the same about an upcoming wedding.

Beth Henley, Vol. 1: Collected Plays 1980—1989 (2000) and *Beth Henley, Vol. 2: Collected Plays 1990—1999* (2000) in the Contemporary Playwrights series form a two-volume set of all of her works to date, each prefaced by anecdotes from some of her collaborators.

Three Famous Short Novels (1958), by William Faulkner, contains *The Bear*, *Old Man*, and *Spotted Horses*, and is a good sampling of the diversity of this Southern writer.

The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty (1982) illustrates the complexity of stories and characters that made Welty an icon of Southern literature.

Tennessee Williams's classic play *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) has since become required reading in most American schools and has been produced on stage and published countless times.

Southern writer Flannery O'Connor's stories were collected in *The Complete Stories*. This book contains thirty-one short stories of penetrating dark humor, which Flannery wrote before her death in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine.

Further Study

Betsko, Kathleen, and Rachel Koenig, "Beth Henley," in *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*, William Morrow, 1987, pp. 211—22.

This interview covers Henley's creative process, her involvement in the production of her works, her family, themes, and literary goals.

Bryer, Jackson R., ed., "Beth Henley," in *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists*, Rutgers University Press, 1995, pp. 102—22.

This interview was conducted in October of 1991 and examines Henley's techniques as a playwright, the influences on her work, her interaction with the theatre, and her challenges as a writer.

Evans, Everett, "Beth Henley's Play at Alley: *Miss Firecracker* Author Gets a Bang out of Being a Southern Writer," in *Houston Chronicle*, January 12, 1986, Zest, p. 8.

This article is a summary of Henley's career as well as an interview with her about the creation of *The Miss Firecracker Contest*.

Murphy, Brenda, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

This volume is a history of American women playwrights up to the end of the twentieth century. Each chapter covers one or more playwrights in a topical context such as comedy, melodrama, or feminism.

Neimark, Jill, "Why We Need Miss America," in *Psychology Today*, Vol. 31, September —October 1998, p. 40.

The cultural ideals and conflicts that are reflected in the Miss American pageant are examined in this article.

Renner, Pamela, "The Mellowing of *Miss Firecracker*: Beth Henley□and Her Impetuous Characters□Are Undergoing Transformations," in *American Theatre*, Vol. 15, Issue 9, 1998, p. 18.

This article discusses the recent changes in perspective in Henley's works, such as softer tones and more mature characters.

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BOOKRAGS

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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.

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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.

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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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