Miss Lulu Bett Study Guide

Miss Lulu Bett by Zona Gale

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Introduction

Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* was produced in 1920, less than a year after publication of its genesis, the best selling novella of the same name. New York producer Brock Pemberton telegraphed Gale that she should adapt her novella for the theater, and she immediately set to work. "I'm almost ashamed to say how quickly it was done," she told a friend, as Harold P. Simonson noted in his study *Zona Gale.* "I finished it in a week, but as I wasn't satisfied with the last act I held it over from Saturday to Monday to revise it." That new ending would prove to be the play's greatest source of controversy.

The novella's original ending—which saw Lulu wedded to a neighbor after her first "marriage" was voided by her "husband's" prior marriage—was changed so that Lulu went off in the world on her own, telling her family, "I thought I wanted someone of my own—but maybe it was just myself I wanted." Gale asserted she had changed the novella's ending because it would stretch the audience's credulity to have one woman marry two men in the course of two hours. However, the second ending caused an uproar among theater-goers, who craved a happy resolution. Obligingly, Gale wrote a new ending in which Lulu's first marriage turns out to be legitimate and she and her husband are happily reunited. The audience, if not the critics, were thus satisfied, and *Miss Lulu Bett* went on to enjoy a successful run and immense popularity. For this play, Gale became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Despite the controversy over the ending, *Miss Lulu Bett* shows a woman who makes the choice to assert her identity and independence. As such, the play conveyed Gale's feminist politics, which she made an important part of her fictional work. The play also is significant in Gale's body of work, marking her transition from sentimental works of fiction to more realistic, sharp-edged works of fiction. *Miss Lulu Bett* can be found in *Plays by American Women, 1900-1930* (1990), edited by Judith Barlow.

Author Biography

Zona Gale was born August 26, 1874, in Portage, Wisconsin, a small-town setting to which she frequently returns in her novels and plays. As a teenager, Gale wrote poetry, short stories, and a play, and during her years at the University of Wisconsin, she wrote her first unpublished novel. Upon graduating with a degree in literature in 1895, she worked as a reporter for several years. She continued her studies during this period, earning her master's degree in literature from the University of Wisconsin in 1899.

In 1901 she moved to New York where she obtained a position as a reporter for the *Evening World.* After only eighteen months, however, she quit journalism so she could devote herself to creative writing. She sold her first magazine story in 1903, and soon made her living through the publication of her sentimental fiction. Visits home to Wisconsin inspired Gale to write a series of short stories about the fictitious Friendship Village. The success of the ensuing four volumes ensured Gale's popularity.

Gale's official career as a playwright dates to 1910, when the Wisconsin Dramatic Society asked her to write a one-act play. Gale's *The Neighbours* was quite similar to her Friendship Village stories. The play was a critical success, and in 1916 it traveled to New York.

Throughout the 1910s Gale focused on writing short stories and novels. She returned to Portage to live, but the work she produced during this period gradually moved away from her earlier sentimentalism and idealism to a harsher, realistic portrayal of small-town life. This new emphasis on realism stemmed partially from her continuing interest in social issues of the time. Her short novel *Miss Lulu Bett*, published in 1920, showed her interest in women's rights.

Gale was approached by a producer about turning *Miss Lulu Bett* into a play, and she wrote the resulting script in ten days. The play *Miss Lulu Bett*—which opened in December 1920 on Broadway in New York—was a hit with critics and the public alike. Gale received the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for drama for this work. It was later made into a silent movie.

Despite this success, Gale concentrated on her novels in subsequent years, and developed a solid reputation as a leading American writer. She completed a one-act play, *Uncle Jimmy*, in 1922, and in 1925 adapted her successful novel *Birth* (1923) into the play *Mister Pitt*. This play was only moderately successful, however, and Gale turned her attention back to fiction.

Throughout the rest of the 1920s Gale produced several volumes of short stories, a book of essays, and several novels. *Preface to Life* (1926), considered her best work of the period, showed a turn from regional realism toward mysticism. During the 1920s Gale also worked for progressive causes and social reform. She helped write Wisconsin's Equal Rights Law of 1923 and served as her state's representative to the International Congress of Women in 1933 in Chicago. She also established a series of

scholarships at her alma mater for students in the creative arts, and served on the university's board of regents.

In the 1930s Gale returned to writing plays, and the three dramas she produced blended domestic realism with an optimistic faith. *Evening Clothes* (1932) marks her final visit to Friendship Village. Gale died of pneumonia December 27, 1938 in Chicago. Her final work, the novel *Magna*, was published posthumously in 1939.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Miss Lulu Bett opens in the Deacons' dining room, where most of the family is gathering for the evening meal. Over the course of the meal, Mrs. Bett appears, then Di's friend Bobby, who is looking for a job mowing the lawn, and finally Di accompanied by Mr. Cornish, who is carrying her party favors. After dinner, when Di and Mr. Cornish have already left, Dwight notices a letter on the shelf, which both Ina and Lulu forgot to tell him about. The letter is from Dwight's brother Ninian, who lives in Oregon, and announces that he will arrive for a visit sometime the following week. Dwight teases Lulu that Ninian would have come sooner had he known how pretty she was. Then he and Ina leave for their study group. Soon thereafter, Bobby comes in from having cut the grass and Di returns home. Di flirts with Bobby, then tells him to leave, and she gets a snack to bring to Mr. Cornish, who is waiting on the front porch. Mrs. Bett and Lulu talk about how easily Di manipulates Bobby and wonder if Ina knows about this romance.

Scene 2 opens a week later in the dining room. Di is talking tenderly to Bobby through the window. Then Lulu and Monona come into the room. Monona tells Lulu that Ninian had been talking to Dwight about her; Ninian said hers was the best cooking he had ever tasted. Lulu is disgusted because men only notice her for her cooking. When Ninian comes into the room, he asks Lulu if she has ever married, and she says, no, from choice. Ninian tells Lulu that her family treats her like a slave and that she should have a life of her own. Although Lulu protests that the Deacons treat her well, she eventually admits that she would rather live under different circumstances, perhaps get an education or obtain a job where people appreciate her. Ninian hits upon the idea of taking Lulu to a show and dinner in the city, along with Dwight and Ina. Lulu protests that she should not go, but Ninian will not hear of it. He goes off to arrange the excursion, and he invites Mr. Cornish and Di as well.

When Dwight comes home, like his wife, he is surprised that Ninian convinced Lulu to make the trip. As Ninian explained to Ina, it is simple: he invited her. Lulu comes back, dressed for the theater, and soon the entire party has assembled. It is too early to leave yet, and Dwight jokes that they must find something amusing to do, otherwise "They'll begin to read the funeral service over us." Ninian asks, why not the wedding service, and says he would not object. Then he asks Lulu if she would. Ninian says, "I, Ninian, take thee, Lulu, to be my wedded wife," and over Dwight's protest, Lulu says her part. Dwight informs them that they now are married. He is a magistrate, and they have just performed a civil wedding, which is legally binding. At this news, Ninian expresses his pleasure at being married to Lulu. Although surprised that Ninian would want to marry her, Lulu agrees to stay married and go on a honeymoon in Savannah before returning to Oregon. When Mrs. Bett hears the news, she wonders who will do the work around the house.

Act 2

Act 2 opens a month later. Di wants to go to the library, but Ina does not want to let her go since she has been out every night this week. Dwight says he supposes Bobby will be at the library. After Di has left, Dwight and Ina remark that they have not heard any news from Lulu and how they miss having her around the house. Suddenly Lulu appears, alone. She says that Ninian is on his way to Oregon. She left him after finding out he has another wife. Though he had not seen the wife in fifteen years and thinks she is dead, he is not sure, so Lulu could not stay with him. Ina sends Lulu to bed, and the family talks about the problem. Ina exclaims it is a good thing that no one knows about the scandal, which surprises Lulu. Dwight agrees with Ina, saying it would bring disgrace to the family. Lulu is concerned that the townspeople will think she had not been a good wife, but Dwight tells her that if she expects to return to live with them, she had better not tell anyone the truth. Lulu argues that the truth is better, but Dwight asks if he showed Lulu any proof that he had been married. Dwight says that Ninian was always making up stories and maybe he just wanted to get rid of Lulu.

The next night finds the family again bickering over Di's trip to the library. Di asks what happened with Lulu and Ninian, and Dwight tells her that Ninian deserted her aunt. Lulu enters and asks Dwight for Ninian's address in Oregon. She wants to know the truth: if Ninian was married or if he was just lying to get rid of her. Dwight does not want to give her the address, and Lulu threatens to tell the whole town the story. Even Dwight's threats to turn her out of the house do not deter her. In the end, Dwight volunteers to write Ninian himself, and Lulu mails the letter. However, Dwight and Ina are going to visit Dwight's aunt, and Lulu wants to open Ninian's letter should it come while Dwight is away. Dwight refuses. Lulu acquiesces, but after she goes inside, Dwight and Ina remark how changed she is since Ninian's arrival. Dwight further calls Lulu a "brazen" woman for marrying Ninian in the first place.

A week later, the letter from Ninian sits on the piano while Lulu and Mr. Cornish are playing the instrument. Mrs. Bett opens the letter and inside is an old newspaper clipping announcing Ninian's marriage. Lulu is thankful to find out that Ninian had not lied to her and that he did not just want to get rid of her. As Mr. Cornish gets ready to leave, he asks Lulu to marry him. Mrs. Bett encourages her to accept the proposal, but Lulu refuses, and he leaves. Then Di appears with a traveling bag, ready to elope with Bobby. Lulu urges her to wait for her parents and get married at home, but Di says that her parents would simply laugh at the idea and ignore her wishes. Bobby shows up and tells Di they cannot get married because they are underage. While Di wants to lie about their age, Bobby will not lie about so serious a matter. Just then Dwight and Ina return. They want to know what is going on, and Mrs. Bett reveals that the whole town is talking about Di and Bobby wanting to get married. Di denies the rumor, and Dwight turns to Lulu for the story, but she will not tell. Bobby, upset that Di denied their affair, breaks up with her.

Dwight asks Lulu if a letter came for him and is upset when he sees it is open. When Dwight learns what Ninian has to say, he thinks Lulu is worse off, for she lived with

Ninian without being married to him. Lulu and Dwight argue about whether or not she will keep the truth from the townspeople. She

wants people to know that Ninian has a first wife, but Dwight feels it will bring disgrace upon him and the family. Only when Dwight points out that Ninian could go to prison for having committed bigamy does Lulu agree to keep the affair secret.

Act 3

Later that day, Lulu has made her decision to leave. She does not want to stay and have the townspeople think that Ninian did not care for her, nor does she want to resume work in Dwight's kitchen. With the blessing of her mother, Lulu departs for the train station. When the family comes down, they discover that breakfast is not ready. Eventually, Mrs. Bett tells them that Lulu has left. She says that Lulu wanted to get away from them, as Di did when she set out to elope with Bobby. No sooner has everyone left the room then Ninian enters. He has come to tell Lulu that his first wife is dead—and he has a letter to prove it. Upon finding out that Lulu has run away, he dashes off to the train station to catch up with her. Almost immediately, however, Lulu returns, and Mrs. Bett sends Monona to bring back Ninian. Lulu has heard from the station agent that Ninian is in town and she wants to know why. Dwight and Ina come in. They ask Lulu to remain with them, but she refuses. Ninian returns, and he affirms that his first wife is dead. He asks Lulu to forgive him, and she does, agreeing to go back to him.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Miss Lulu Bett is a three-act play about a few weeks in the life of Lulu Bett. The protagonist is a woman of thirty-five who finds independence and a life of her own after enduring the charitable keep of her married sister Ina and Ina's husband Dwight Deacon in the early years of the 20th century in America.

The play opens in the plain-looking dining room of the Deacon home. Dwight has just arrived home and greets his young daughter Monona. Ina greets her husband and announces that dinner is ready even though Lulu has not called the family to the table. Lulu does all the cooking for the family. Ina is embarrassed about Lulu's homely appearance and hesitates to have guests. Lulu and Ina's mother, Mrs. Bett, also lives in the Deacon household. She is cantankerous to everyone in the house with the exception of Lulu. Monona is a petulant child, and Lulu tends to her special food requests.

When the family is finally seated, Dwight comments on a pot of tulips on the table. Ina informs her husband that Lulu purchased the tulips. Dwight makes a caustic comment that even though Lulu is living with the Deacons because she has no money, somehow she can afford to buy spring flowers. Lulu throws the pot of flowers out the window and goes to the kitchen to prepare something special for Monona.

Di, the Deacons' older daughter, arrives home from a tea party accompanied by Mr. Cornish, an older man who is smitten with Di. Dwight hates interruptions at dinner. He soon suffers another irritation with the arrival of Bobby Larkin, a classmate of Di's who is looking for a job. Dwight hires Bobby to cut the grass, which will free up Dwight to spend more time in the garden.

Suddenly, Ina remembers a letter that arrived for Dwight. Dwight reads the letter and announces that his brother, Ninian, is coming for a visit. The two brothers have not seen each other for almost twenty years, and Dwight is anxious for Ninian to meet his wife, his daughters, and especially Lulu, who he hopes will spark some sort of flame in Ninian.

Dwight and Ina leave for a study group, and the cantankerous Mrs. Bett is glad to see her son-in-law go out for the evening. Bobby Larkin has finished cutting the grass and is happy to see Di inside the house. The two young people talk and flirt for a few minutes until Di tells Bobby goodnight. Di asks her aunt Lulu for some cookies and apples and heads out to the front porch where Mr. Cornish is waiting.

Lulu remarks to Mrs. Bett about the ease with which Di has charmed Bobby while having another man waiting on the porch. Mrs. Bett sums up Di's charms as wiggles and chitters. Lulu wonders if Ina should be made aware of Di's activities, and Mrs. Bett

urges Lulu not to press her luck. If it weren't for Ina, Lulu would have had no place to live for the past fifteen years. Lulu picks up a framed photograph of Ninian and stares at the face looking back.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The author, Zona Gale, who won the Pulitzer Prize for this drama, is well known for her feminist beliefs, which are reflected in this play about life in 1920s America. Women lived lives of oppression under the guise of being well cared for by husbands, and sometimes extended families, who passively abused them. Lulu's vulnerable position as an unmarried woman of thirty-five has reduced her to being a drone in her sister's house, where she caters to the petulant whims of the children and the adults.

Lulu's self-esteem is paper-thin due to the daily emotional and verbal abuse she endures from everyone except her own mother, Mrs. Bett, who also lives in the Deacon household. Ironically, Mrs. Bett is completely free with her disdainful comments about Dwight, even though she has accepted the man's hospitality. The fact that she is a widow elevates her status slightly because she has at least been married, whereas the long suffering Lulu has no past to speak of and is now too old to marry.

In order to soften the terse dialogue and uncomfortable situations, the author utilizes the tool of humor, especially in the character of Mrs. Bett whose sarcasm collides with her failing hearing. Dwight is also the source of some humor, since he mispronounces words in an attempt to elevate his perception in the eyes of others. Ina is only frustrated by her husband's pathetic attempts.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

A week later in the Deacon dining room, Di sits on a windowsill talking to Bobby, who waits outside. The entrance of Lulu and Monona ends the conversation between Bobby and Di. Di leaves the dining room in a huff. Lulu is intrigued by Monona's comment that Ninian has been talking about Lulu. Ninian enters the room and flirts openly with Lulu, who is unaccustomed to the attention.

Ninian validates how poorly Lulu is treated in the Deacon household and tells Lulu that she should get a life of her own. Lulu would like to get an education or maybe even a job where people would appreciate her. Lulu feels that she is beyond the marrying age, but Ninian fervently disagrees and ultimately asks Lulu to dinner and the theater in town tonight. Lulu hesitantly accepts, and Dwight and Ina, who have also been invited, are surprised to find that Lulu will be going. She has never accompanied them in the past. Ninian replies that all he did was invite her.

Ninian also invites Mr. Cornish and Di to join the group, and Di breaks tentative plans she had with Bobby. Lulu borrows a few accessories from Ina, since her own wardrobe is woefully inadequate for social occasions. Dwight is pleased that the women are dressed and ready ahead of time for once. He wonders what the group should do with the twelve minutes left before departure for the city, since if they don't do something people will start to read the funeral rites over them.

Ninian suggests wedding rites instead of funeral rites and asks Lulu is she would mind. Of course, she does not. Ninian and Lulu engage in a comedic act of exchanging wedding vows. The tone of the group changes when Dwight informs them that the exchange was a civil ceremony which Dwight, as a justice of the peace, has just witnessed.

Lulu is shocked to realize that Ninian does not contest this marriage. She complies with it as well. The newly married couple makes plans to depart for Savannah in the morning before heading to Ninian's home in Oregon. In the meantime, they join the rest of the group headed to the city for dinner and the theater. Upon hearing the news, Mrs. Bett wonders who will do the work around the house now that Lulu will be leaving.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

The sudden appearance of Ninian after a twenty-year absence seems calculated, especially in light of Dwight's enthusiasm for Lulu to like Ninian and the impromptu wedding, which is judged completely legal because of Dwight's presence. It seems as if Dwight has put into motion a scheme to rid his household of Lulu by marrying her off to Ninian. The author masterfully sets up the suspicious scenario with humor and surprise

behavior. Perhaps Lulu herself will surprise all of them by going through with the marriage as a way out of her humiliating life.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

As the second act begins, the family is gathered on the side porch and making polite after-dinner conversation. Di asks permission to go to the library, but Ina denies it. Di has gone every night this week, and it doesn't look right for a young girl to be out alone every night. The discussion turns to the whereabouts of Lulu, who surprises them by walking up to the porch and announcing that the marriage to Ninian is over. Apparently Ninian had been married before and is not sure if his wife is still living or not, a fact which Ninian did not divulge to Lulu until their arrival in Savannah, Georgia.

Ninian is on his way back to Oregon, and even though he does not know if his first wife is dead or alive, Lulu could not stay with him. Dwight and Ina's first thought is the suppression of any rumors or scandal for the family. Dwight suggests that Ninian has always had an active imagination and created this story in order to get rid of Lulu. Dwight wants the whole affair to be kept quiet and threatens to kick Lulu out of her home with the Deacons if she leaks the story to anyone else.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The author gives Lulu's character a radical personality and plot shift in this scene. Up until this point, Lulu has been a subservient, passive person to whom no one paid any attention. Ninian's attentions enrapture Lulu and provide hope for a future she never dared to dream about. Lulu's agreement to continue the impromptu marriage startles the family, and they are even more surprised by Lulu's obstinate position that she loves Ninian in spite of his revelation about a first wife. The author uses the radical life change in Lulu to mirror the changes occurring for women in this period in America.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

On the following night, the family is again on the back porch holding an after-dinner conversation that sounds exactly like the conversation from the night before. Again, Di asks permission to go to the library, and before she can be refused, Di changes the subject to Lulu's predicament. Ina does not want to discuss Lulu's situation for fear of any family scandal. Dwight agrees with his wife and is outraged when Lulu approaches Dwight, asking him to write a letter to Ninian to discover the truth.

Lulu wants to find out if Ninian has another wife or if her supposed husband fabricated the story in an attempt to be rid of Lulu. Lulu threatens to tell the truth to the entire town if Dwight does not cooperate. Emboldened by love for the first time in her life, Lulu does not back down even at Dwight's threat to put her out of the house. Eventually, Dwight concedes and writes the letter, which Lulu personally mails.

In light of Dwight and Ina's imminent trip to visit Dwight's ailing aunt, Lulu mentions that Ninian's reply may come during their absence. Lulu wants permission to open the letter. Dwight does not grant this permission, which he considers a gross invasion of privacy. Dwight begins to have misgivings about Lulu's new personality and calls her a woman of questionable character to have married a virtual stranger at a mere suggestion.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The author continues to point out the dreary atmosphere in the Deacon household, exemplified by the repeated conversation from the night before as well as the constant reprimanding and then praise of the youngest daughter, whose petulance is a cry for help from the stifling environment. Dwight controls his household and everyone in it, and he is completely baffled by Lulu's new personality. Dwight's refusal to grant Lulu permission to read the letter is the last remaining hold he has over Lulu. Seeing that his hold on his sister-in-law is dwindling, Dwight resorts to insults in order to try to control her verbally. It no longer works on the newly vitalized Lulu.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

A week later, Lulu plays the piano as Mr. Cornish sings with her. Di sneaks into the house unnoticed. Lulu's attempts at making light of her embarrassing situation regarding Ninian's disappearance are met with compliments and flattery by Mr. Cornish. Mrs. Bett has just put Monona to bed and joins Lulu and Mr. Cornish. Lulu continues to make excuses for Di's absence, but Mr. Cornish is more interested in Lulu.

Mrs. Bett cannot stand the suspense of the unopened letter from Ninian sitting on top of the piano. She opens it herself to find a newspaper clipping announcing Ninian's marriage fifteen years ago. With mixed feelings, Lulu at last realizes that Ninian had been telling the truth about the other woman. He had not abandoned her because he did not love her. Mr. Cornish is concerned for Lulu, but Lulu is happy to have been wanted by someone for the first time in her life. She continues to love Ninian.

Taken with emotion, Mr. Cornish suddenly proposes marriage to Lulu. She declines, but the besotted young man offers Lulu his recent inheritance of five hundred dollars if she should need it. This, too, Lulu declines, and Mr. Cornish excuses himself and leaves the ladies.

Suddenly, Di appears with a suitcase and reveals plans to run away with Bobby to get married. Lulu does her best to dissuade her niece, but Di does not want to end up an old maid like Lulu and is intent on carrying out her plans. Just as Di is ready to leave, Bobby enters to tell Di that he could not secure a marriage license for them because they are still minors. Di chastises Bobby for not lying about their ages in order to secure the license.

Dwight and Ina arrive home from their trip to see Di with the suitcase in her hand. Di denies that anything is going on. Just then, Mrs. Bett comes home from the neighbor's laughing about a rumor going around that Di is running away with Bobby. Afraid of a confrontation with her parents, Di flatly denies any such plan, and Bobby breaks up with Di because of her denial of their love.

Dwight is upset that the letter from Ninian has been opened, and in retaliation, he tells Lulu that her situation is no better because she clearly lived with a married man for a few weeks. Lulu is adamant about letting the people in town know the truth about her circumstances, and Dwight is livid about the possibility of disgrace upon the family. The only thing that calms Lulu is a point that Dwight raises. Ninian could be jailed for bigamy should this unfortunate news be revealed.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Lulu and Di's wishes to escape the Deacon household are parallel stories running through the play. Di is not yet twenty and feels the black cloud of spinsterhood over her head. She does not want to live a fate similar to Lulu's. This is a very poignant statement on the emotional and social state of women and their desperation to marry in order to validate their own lives.

Lulu has fallen in love with the first person who ever paid any attention to her, and this is a particularly sad statement. Even though Dwight preaches the value of family, he is not kind to Lulu and uses her only to serve his purposes. He uses the home as a bargaining tool when Lulu begins to discover her independent spirit. Dwight cannot even allow Lulu a shred of dignity by being able to tell the real truth about Ninian's situation.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

The next morning, while Mother Bett is sweeping the back porch, Lulu approaches her mother to tell her that she is leaving. Lulu cannot live in a town where people think the worst of her and will not stay to cook and clean in Ina's house any longer. Lulu has a small amount of money, and Mother Bett gives her fifty dollars along with her good wishes. Lulu is pleased that her mother is not hurt by Lulu's decision to leave, and Mother Bett tells her daughter that this is something Lulu should have done a long time ago.

In Lulu's absence, the house cannot function properly, and no one can manage to prepare an edible breakfast. Everyone speculates on Lulu's whereabouts, and finally Mother Bett confesses that Lulu has gone to the train station in order to escape the drudgery of life in the Deacon household. Mother Bett warns Dwight and Ina that Di will do the same thing some day. Distraught over the loss of her household help, Ina pleads for Dwight to find Lulu at the station and bring her back.

Suddenly, Ninian appears with the news that his first wife died fifteen years ago. He has come back to claim Lulu. Hearing that Lulu is on her way to the train station, Ninian rushes off in the hopes of catching her. Very soon after, Lulu returns to the house because the stationmaster has told Lulu of her husband's recent arrival. Mother Bett sends Monona to bring back Ninian. At last, Lulu and Ninian are reunited. Dwight and Ina make one last plea for Lulu to stay and keep the household intact. Lulu is not about to make that mistake and forgives Ninian for the unfortunate episode.

Act 3 Analysis

Lulu emerges at the end of the play as a totally transformed person who is nothing like the meek character introduced at the beginning. The play is a real statement on the political and sociological limitations on women who live colorless lives in the service of those who happen to be male. At this time in America, a woman's salvation was her ability to marry well, and any woman with an independent spirit had an especially difficult time, being reduced to subservience in a society which provided no other means of support for these single women.

Mother Bett is a breath of fresh air. Her humor and surprising attitude of independence are shown at the end of the play. Through this character, the author personifies the strength and hope that lived inside women of all ages. The old woman is glad to see some willfulness exhibited by her daughter.

There is some benefit to being a woman in this time, in that the family is expected to provide for unattached women, especially widows like Mrs. Bett. The inconvenience of having an older woman living in the home was far less than the social disgrace of

turning these family members away. As the matriarch of the family who knows her position in the home is secure, Mrs. Bett enjoys a freedom of spirit and comment which is in ironic contrast to the restrictions of society as a whole.

Characters

Miss Lulu Bett

Miss Lulu Bett, a mid-thirties spinster, is the protagonist of the play. For the past fifteen years she has lived in the household of her sister's family, along with her mother. In the Deacon home, she serves in the role of cook, housekeeper, and general domestic. Her sister and brother-in-law take advantage of her, treating her and speaking to her more like they would a servant than a family member.

Lulu finds her situation in the Deacon household paradoxical. On the one hand she feels she ought to be grateful that the Deacons have taken her into their home. On the other hand she knows—despite her contrary protests—that they do not treat her well. She would like to leave the Deacons and find a job where she is better appreciated, but she thinks other options are unavailable to her. Her family has long told her she is no good for work or for a relationship—for instance, she does not believe that any man could possibly like her for herself, as Ninian does—so she feels that she has no chance now to ever change her life.

Lulu jumps at the chance to leave the Deacon house as Ninian's wife. When she comes back a month later—after learning Ninian was previously married and his first wife may still be alive—it is with new resolve and a new ability to stand up for her own rights, much to the dismay of her sister and brother-in-law, both of whom want her literally to return to her place in the kitchen. Lulu realizes that she cannot take this role on again, and she sets out to create a life of her own, despite her own uncertainties about what the future will bring. Before she can leave town, however, she discovers that Ninian's wife is dead and that he wants her back. Thus, instead of leaving town alone, she leaves, again, with her husband.

Mrs. Bett

Mrs. Bett, Lulu and Ina's mother, lives with the Deacons. A senile elderly woman, she dislikes her son-in-law, and in fact all her family members from time to time. In act 1, she accuses Lulu of always having been jealous of Ina, but in act 3 she shows real tenderness toward Lulu when she realizes that Dwight and Ina had been trying to convince Lulu that Ninian never loved her. At that moment, she supports Lulu's decision to leave, even giving up her entire savings to the venture. Mrs. Bett also claims to be the reason that Lulu never married, telling Ninian that she would not allow marriage to happen. Having buried a husband and four children, Mrs. Bett believes she has saved Lulu from extra pain.

Mr. Cornish

Mr. Cornish is a possible suitor for both Lulu and Di. He has several attributes that endear him to the Deacons: he owns a business (a piano store), but more notably, he is due an inheritance of $500. Ina is confident he will fall in love with Di. Cornish, however, a thinking man who studies laws in the evenings, appears more infatuated with Lulu, praising her cooking, her appearance, and her virtues. After Lulu learns about Ninian's prior marriage, he asks Lulu to be his wife, but she refuses because she loves Ninian.

Di Deacon

Di Deacon is Dwight and Ina's oldest daughter. About nineteen years old, she is looking for a way out of the home and for someone who will treat her well. As she tells Lulu, "I could love almost anybody real nice that was nice to me." To achieve these goals, she plans to elope with the neighbor Bobby Larkin. The romance fails when he refuses to lie about their ages, and now that he offers her no escape and thus is of no use to her, she denies their affair to her angry, suspicious parents.

Dwight Deacon

Lulu's brother-in-law Dwight is a pompous man, for instance, referring to his daughter Monona as "progeny," mispronouncing words such as *rendezvous* and *chef,* making fun of Lulu's supposed dowdiness, and talking down to his wife. He always insists that his observations are correct and that his rules be followed. His attitude endears him to no one in his family but Ina.

Dwight focuses on his own needs, which are at no time more apparent than when Lulu returns with news of Ninian's first marriage. His primary concern is how having a brother who is a possible bigamist will reflect upon him, not how this surprising turn of events has affected Lulu. He orders Lulu to hide the truth and let the townspeople think Ninian sent Lulu away because she was not a good wife. Lulu's refusal to accept this plan both startles and angers Dwight, who accuses her of being ungrateful. His marked selfishness is apparent in his demand that Lulu not open any letter from Ninian in his absence. This time, he places the sanctity of his privacy above Lulu's need to know the truth from her so-called husband. These instances show Dwight's utter inability to consider the feelings of others or to see the world from another person's viewpoint.

Ina Deacon

Lulu's sister Ina, wife of Dwight, has her husband's sense of self-importance, but to a lesser degree. She joins Dwight in bossing Lulu around and in making fun of her, but at times she treats her sister with acts of relative kindness, for instance, lending her sister her old clothes or even complimenting her. Her acts of kindness, however, are more along the lines of those a person would bestow on someone he or she deems to be an

inferior, such as a maid. What is abundantly clear is that Ina does not consider her sister an equal; rather, she pities her unmarried sister, while at the same time relishing the fact her sister has nowhere else to go, because it makes Ina's life easier. As she says at the end of the play, when she realizes that Lulu really is going to leave for good, "Dwight, you've simply got to make her stay. When I think of what I went through while she was away . . . everything boils over, and what I don't expect to b-b-boil b-b-burns." She demonstrates her true feelings about Lulu with her next lines: "Sister, how can you be so cruel when Dwight and I—." To Ina, Lulu is a cook, a maid, and a babysitter, but little else.

Monona Deacon

Monona Deacon is the youngest of Dwight and Ina's children. She is only a child, maybe ten years old, but at times she speaks the closest thing to truth in the Deacon household. For example, she says that "grown folks" do not act grown up.

Ninian Deacon

Ninian Deacon has not seen his brother Dwight in twenty years and has never met Dwight's family. Ninian has spent the past twenty-five years wandering around Central and South America. He sees in Lulu a person in her own right, not merely a household drudge. He believes that her family treats her as a "slavey," and he encourages her to have a life of her own, offering to give Dwight a "chunk of my mind." Ninian is the first person in anyone's memory who actually invites Lulu out for the evening. He believes that Lulu is a fine, capable woman, and when he and Lulu accidentally marry, he tells her he would like to let the marriage stand, although he never explains exactly why. Ninian, however, has a secret: he once was married and is not certain that his first wife is dead. He tells Lulu the truth during their honeymoon in Savannah, Georgia, before they set off for Oregon, so she can decide whether to accompany him and take her chances that his first wife is, as Ninian believes, dead. Instead, Lulu returns to the Deacons' house, but as soon as Ninian learns definitively that his first wife is dead, he comes to win Lulu back. As Lulu hoped all along, he does love her.

Bobby Larkin

Bobby Larkin is Di's young, illicit boyfriend. He is the neighbor boy of whom, for inexplicit reasons, everyone likes to make fun. Di and Bobby plan to elope but are unable to do so because he refuses to lie about their ages for so sacred a matter. When Di then refuses to acknowledge their relationship to her parents, he breaks up with her.

Themes

Family Relationships

The play is set within the Deacon family home, where three generations of the Bett-Deacon family live together. Dwight regularly extols the virtues of family life and relationships, speaking often of the solidarity among kin. He remarks that people "don't know what living is if they don't belong in a little family circle," crows of "the joys of family life as Ina and I live it," and speaks in platitudes such as there is "no place like home." However, the way the family members treat each other belies his words. For fifteen years, Dwight and Ina have used Lulu like a household drudge. Ina berates her for burning Monona's toast and Dwight berates her for spending *his* money—25 cents of it—on fresh flowers.

Dwight also uses the sanctity of the family to make others submit to his will. He orders Lulu not to let the townspeople know that Ninian may be a bigamist because of the disgrace that it will bring upon himself and his family: "What about my pride?" he asks Lulu. "Do you think I want everyone to know that my brother did a thing like that?" Despite this rhetoric, Dwight is convinced that Ninian made up the story about a previous marriage to get free from a life with Lulu. He sanctimoniously explains that he and Ina will stand by Lulu in her time of distress because "the family bond is the strongest in the world," but he really is pleased to have her back in his kitchen. Lulu easily sees through his talk; she says "I . . . I know you'd sacrifice Ina, Di, mother, Monona, Ninian—everybody, just to your own idea of who you are."

The other members of the household are not immune to the unpleasant family dynamics. Di confesses to Lulu the real reason she wants to elope with Bobby: she does not love him, but "I could love almost anybody real nice that was nice to me." In act 2, scene 1, Monona, the sassy child, speaks the voice of truth about the Bett-Deacon household when she announces, "I hate the whole family," to which Mrs. Bett replies, "Well, I should think she would."

The Oppression of Women

Simonson wrote that Gale "believed her novella [*Miss Lulu Bett*] to be an honest portrayal of the duty-bound, domestically enslaved woman of her day"; she felt the same about the play that derived from that novella. In the play Gale creates a household composed entirely of women, with the exception of the head of the family, Dwight. The women are under Dwight's control. He controls the purse strings (chastising Lulu for spending money of her own accord), makes the rules (deciding that he will not give Ninian's address to Lulu, and then forbidding her to open the return letter should it arrive in his absence), and sets the tone for Ina's shabby treatment of her sister. Offhand comments that Dwight makes also show his denigration of women; for instance, he states on more than one occasion that women cannot generalize. Another

time, when Ina sides with Lulu and implores him to write Ninian about the first marriage, he says, "Isn't this like a couple of women?"

It is up to the most oppressed women—Lulu and Mrs. Bett—to rebel against Dwight. Mrs. Bett does so by flagrantly opening Ninian's letter and thus satisfying her curiosity. She also is the only family member to be supportive of Lulu, both in her belief in Ninian's love for Lulu, and in her approval of Lulu's decision to leave the household. For her part, Lulu's defiance of Dwight comes through her insistence that he write to Ninian despite his threats to throw her out of the house. Even before Ninian returns for her, she announces to Dwight her intention of leaving Dwight's home "for good." Lulu eventually learns to speak up for her own rights, and tacitly, those of the other women in the household. She tells Dwight, "You're one of the men who can smother a whole family and not even know you're doing it."

Lulu also shows her dissatisfaction with her plight in life, aside from her relationship with Dwight. She speaks to Ninian of her wish for an education and her desire to hold a job where she helps people and where she is appreciated. She despairs to Cornish because all she can do is cook and has no means to earn her own living. Her comprehension of these inadequacies in her own life reflect the domestic trap into which many women of Lulu's day fell.

Love and Marriage

In *Miss Lulu Bett*, love hardly seems to be the unifying force in marriage. Dwight and Ina draw together over their mutual satisfaction with their own life and their mutual condescension of others, namely Lulu. While they openly praise one another, they demonstrate little affection based on any genuine appreciation of each other's good qualities. Lulu and Ninian come together for different reasons. While the play makes it uncertain why Ninian wants to stay married to Lulu, other than to save her from the intolerable situation he observes in the Deacons' home, Lulu's reasons are abundantly clear. As she tells Cornish, "You see Ninian was the first person who was ever kind to me. Nobody ever wanted me, nobody ever even thought of me. Then he came. It might have been somebody else. It might have been you." For Lulu, kindness and regard, from which she has long been deprived, equate to love.

Style

Comedy

The majority of the comedy in the play derives from the shenanigans of the characters. Dwight's pomposity—marked by his language, and most notably, his mispronunciation of words—is cause for mirth, especially since he does not recognize his own inflated self-importance. Di's forbidden romance with Bobby Larkin plays out under the eyes of her witless family; at the end of act one, stage directions read, "*At the window, behind the curtain, Di has just kissed Bobby goodby*"—all despite the presence of her mother, father, and prospective suitor in the very room. Mrs. Bett's chronic confusion comes and goes in flashes—one minute she encourages Lulu to accompany the theater party and the next she forgets where everyone is going—but she still emerges as one of the few sensible members of the family. Comedy also arises from Gale's use of repetition. For example in act 2, scenes 1 and 2 contain identical dialogue: "Mama, I have to go down to the liberry," Di says—and action—the family is seated in the "*approximate positions*" on the porch.

Monona, left out of the family dramas because of her young age, craftily eggs her family on; as she informs her grandmother, "Oh, I like to get them [Dwight and Ina] going." Other times, Monona sassily responds to her family's constant shuttling her around, as when Ina tells her to run off and play and she "*runs her circle and returns.*" Monona's one-liners, such as that "grown folks" do not act grown up, or her wondering if grown ups "always say something bad," provide comic relief while giving voice to the truth as applies to this household.

Plot

The storyline of *Miss Lulu Bett* is quite simple: a spinster in her mid-thirties, long ill-treated and disrespected by her family and with seemingly no options to change her life, finds herself married to a man she met a week ago. She seizes the opportunity to escape, leaves her family's home, but returns a month later with the news that the man was previously married and may still be so. Despite the simplicity of the story, and the characters as well, Gale raises themes of supreme importance of her day, namely, the domestic oppression of women and their lack of independence. The play also allows for a related subplot in Di's attempted elopement with Bobby. She reveals to her aunt that she only wants to marry Bobby to get free from Dwight's house; she does not love him, but she could learn to love almost anyone who treats her well. In this sense, Di's problem reflects Lulu's problems; the two women, though separated by some fifteen years, feel trapped and with little hope of any relevant future in the Deacon home. They both also have been so starved for genuine affection that kindness and attention, in any form, transforms into love.

Ending

As Gale saw it, her character Miss Lulu Bett had three different futures. In the novella, after learning that Ninian's wife is still alive, Lulu marries Cornish. In the first version of the play, after learning that Ninian's wife is still alive, Lulu sets off on her own, to make her way in the world. In the version of the play that won the Pulitzer Prize—the version generally known today—Ninian, having learned that his wife is dead, comes to the Deacon home to ask Lulu to return to him. The play's ending is thus a happy ending, one that reunites a couple that has grown to love one another while at the same time, one that allows Lulu to escape the Deacon home with a more secure, stable future.

Historical Context

The Modern American Woman

During the 1920s the "new woman" appeared in America. Women no longer believed that marriage and family was the ultimate goal in life. Women were voting and taking part in America's political life. Many women began seeking jobs outside of the home, which give them greater economic and social independence, and others became reformers and sought to improve social conditions for women. Women also exhibited greater independence in other ways, such as by wearing short, loose dresses, cutting their hair, and wearing makeup. Young women in particular began modeling their behavior after freethinking artists, such as writer Dorothy Parker. Married women, however, did not share these freedoms. A married woman was still expected to be a homemaker, which remained the ideal of American womanhood.

Women's Rights

In 1920 after decades of struggle, women gained the right to vote with passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Voting gave women the opportunity to influence American politics, and serve as political leaders. In 1924 Nellie Tayloe Ross of Wyoming and Miriam "Ma" Wallace Ferguson of Texas became the first two female governors, and by 1928, 145 women held seats in state legislatures, and two women had been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Female activists continued to seek broader social gains. Laws still regulated the types of work women could do, the pay they could receive, and the loans they could get. In 1923 the National Women's Party proposed an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the U.S. Constitution which would make such laws illegal. Women activists disagreed on whether the ERA should be passed, however, since some women protested that it would take away labor protections that they had fought hard to achieve. Other groups, such as the League of Women Voters, believed that the ERA would interfere with women's roles in society. The ERA failed to win widespread political support, and it did not pass.

Rural vs. Urban America

As America became an increasingly urban and industrial society, the differences between city and rural residents became more apparent. For example, one of the key disagreements between rural and urban residents was over prohibition (the banning of alcoholic beverages). Rural residents often believed that city culture was less moral. Some urban writers responded by accusing rural residents of remaining ignorant of new technology and modern times.

The Midwest

Many of the Midwestern states relied on an agricultural economy. In the 1920s, prices for food crops dropped dramatically. For example, in 1919 a bushel of Nebraska corn sold for $1.22, but the following year, it sold for only 41 cents. Many farmers found it impossible to pay their debts, and nearly half a million lost their land. In an effort to solve their economic problems, farmers in the Midwest elected pro-agriculture members of Congress. Known as the Farm Bloc, these members of Congress hoped to pass legislation to ease the plight of farmers. They helped pass the Fordney-McCumber Tariff Act, which placed high taxes on imported farm products. Intended to prevent foreign farm goods from being sold in the United States and thus raise demand and price for domestic crops, the tariff raised the cost of many consumer goods, which hurt everyone, including farmers. The federal government refused other suggestions to help the farmers, and only large farms or those with expensive, modern machinery prospered in the 1920s.

Critical Overview

In 1920 Gale's novella *Miss Lulu Bett* was published and quickly became a bestseller. Critics lauded Gale's new work as a welcome departure from her sentimental style of writing. Most read the work of fiction as a realistic portrayal of an average woman's life in small-town America.

Less than a year after this publication, Gale was approached to write a dramatic adaptation of the novella, which she did in less than two weeks. The play *Miss Lulu Bett* opened in December 1920 in New York City. For the dramatic version, Gale changed the ending: instead of having Lulu marry Cornish, she sends her heroine out alone in the world to make her own way, leading some of the play's earliest critics to compare it favorably with Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House.* Harold P. Simonson, writing in *Zona Gale,* noted that the transformation to an "unromantic ending creates a more artful ambiguity," leaving viewers to wonder whether Lulu is really free and if so, with few job prospects, whether she will merely find herself again trapped, as she was by the Deacons. Some of Gale's contemporaries agreed with this assessment. Ludwig Lewisohn, critic for the *Nation,* believed that the first performance of *Miss Lulu Bett* easily demonstrated the success of this "weightier and severer ending." He called the play "the most genuine achievement of the American stage since Eugene O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon.*"

Not all viewers agreed, however; in fact, so many complained that the new ending was depressing that after the play's second-week run, Gale rewrote the ending, reuniting Lulu with the now widowed Ninian. This traditional happy ending satisfied most playgoers but raised a host of protest from critics. As Leslie Goddard summarized in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* "Those critics who had previously approved Gale's depiction of women's independence now railed against her for giving in to popular, conventional tastes." Heywood Broun (quoted in Simonson) alleged in 1921 in the New York *Tribune* that demanding a happy ending for such a play made about as much sense as "demanding feathers on a mountain lion." Lewisohn assessed that with this change, Lulu's "act of liberation is thus stultified and with it the significance and strength of the dramatic action sacrificed at one blow."

Despite his disappointment over the ending, Lewisohn enjoyed important aspects of the play—in fact, he subtly suggested that audiences leave at the end of the second act. He reveled in Gale's "transferring to the stage the exact moral atmosphere of a class, a section, and a period. . . . That Deacon family group on its front porch is magnificent and memorable. . . . mark[ing] an enormous advance in the American drama."

Not all critics were as favorable, however. Alexander Woollcaott, writing in the *New York Times,* called *Miss Lulu Bett* "a rather dull and flabby play, one somewhat sleazily put together by a playwright who has but slight sense of dramatic values and no instinct at all for the idiom of the theatre." Still other critics charged that in changing the ending, Gale proved that Lulu's fifteen years with the Deacons arose out of her own lack of initiative and that Lulu's story was mere propaganda for the feminist movement.

Eventually Gale answered her critics in the New York *Tribune.* She pointed out (quoted in Simonson) that "the common experience affords as many examples of marriage as of going out into the world alone"; that Lulu was not witless but "overshadowed, browbeaten . . . enslaved by duty," as were many women she knew; and that Lulu story's was not meant to be about the plight of women but merely about one woman. The controversy over the ending did nothing to lessen the play's popularity. The play ran for 201 performances, toured in the Midwest, and won the 1921 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Miss Lulu Bett continues to resonate with audiences, even though some current theaters choose to restore the original ending, as did a New York City production in 2000. Elyse Sommer wrote in *Curtain Up* that the play had "considerable assets." Perhaps Lulu's appeal stems from her complexity; as Goddard wrote, she is "similar to conventional melodramatic heroines in her initial meekness and desire to be rescued by a Prince Charming and strikingly modern in her transformation into an assertive, self-knowledgeable woman."

Criticism

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- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In this essay, Korb discusses Lulu Bett's transformation into an independent-thinking woman.

Miss Lulu Bett focuses on the dramatic transformation of Lulu Bett, a middle-aged, unmarried woman who believes she is doomed to spend the rest of her life as a "slavey" in her brother-in-law's kitchen. Through the course of three acts, Lulu takes the opportunity to escape this future and stays true to this course despite an unsupportive family and trying circumstances.

The Lulu whom the audience meets at the beginning of the play has remarkably little control over her own life. She works as a drudge to earn her keep in the household of her sister and brother-in-law. Both in financial matters and in decision-making, Lulu lacks any independence; Gale demonstrates this lack of autonomy through small yet telling details. For example, although Lulu has full responsibility for cooking for the family, Ina insists on overseeing her every move in the kitchen, down to telling Lulu whether to use yesterday's bottle of milk or today's bottle of milk. For his part, Dwight controls the purse strings, growing upset when Lulu spends a quarter on a handful of fresh flowers. "[W]e give you a home on the supposition that you have no money to spend, even for the necessities," he chastises her, thereby handily recalling her inferior status within the family.

Dwight and Ina's disrespect of Lulu is both public and private; they openly question her desire to have "a little something, same as other folks," as if she does not deserve the pleasures of life that other people enjoy; behind her back, they make fun of her manners and dress. Dwight even mockingly asserts that when Ninian "sees Lulu you can't drive him away" because she is such "a stunner," showing his supposition that Lulu holds no attractions as a woman. The Deacons' confusion as to how Ninian manages to get Lulu to accompany them to the theater—which he does simply by inviting her—shows that they fail to see her as a person in her own right.

Lulu puts up with such daily indignities because she feels she has no choice. Her mother, professing to have saved her from the pain of family life, "never let her go to the altar," and a conversation with Ninian shows that Lulu knows that she is widely considered to be a spinster.

LULU: What kind of a Mr. are you?
NINIAN: Never give myself away. Say, by George, I never thought of that before. There's no telling whether a man's married or not, by his name.
LULU: It doesn't matter.
NINIAN: Why?
LULU: Not so many people want to know.

The influence of her family keeps her trapped in the Deacon's home and unable to obtain a home and husband of her own. She also has never sought a "real" job; for the past fifteen years, her family has insisted upon the idea that she is not strong enough to work, so she remains with the Deacons. Almost thirty-four, Lulu nurtures no hopes of ever escaping. While she would like to do something different—"[T]ake care of folks that needed me" or simply "get clear away"—as she tells Ninian, "I can't get out. I'll never get out—now."

The lack of positive reinforcement in her life, combined with the sheer dearth of possibilities, leads Lulu to accept her family's perception of her, even when it is patently untrue. As Ninian, the outsider, immediately notices, she works harder than anyone else in the family; in his words, she "make[s] this whole house go round." He tells her, "I think you have it pretty hard around here." Ninian's positive support leads Lulu to take small chances that she would not have dared otherwise, such as defy Ina and put on a nicer dress, or to take larger chances, such as defy the family and leave the house as Ninian's wife.

The opportunity to leave the house as a married woman comes to Lulu by chance—she and Ninian find themselves married after uttering the marriage vows in front of Dwight, who is a magistrate. Lulu's shock at finding out that Ninian would like to let the marriage stand shows how her self-esteem has suffered at the hands of her family these long years: "Why—why—that couldn't be," she stutters, and asks, "How could you want me?" It is practically inconceivable to her that someone could like her from "the first moment"—for a reason other than her cooking—although Ninian told her this prior to the "wedding." Still, her desire to leave the Deacons and her stultifying life is strong enough that she decides to go with Ninian, though she has known him only a week. He offers the excitement of travel—a honeymoon to Savannah, Georgia, and then a return to his home in Portland, Oregon—but more importantly, he offers Lulu the chance to be respected and admired as a wife and as a person.

Unfortunately for Lulu, she is forced to return to the Deacon household scarcely a month after leaving it, having learned that Ninian was already married and is uncertain whether his first wife is dead. Ina and Dwight are determined that no one in their town will know about this scandal, this "disgrace of bigamy," but Lulu wants to tell the truth: she does not want people to think she "hadn't been a good wife to Ninian." Dwight, however, wants to protect his own name more than Lulu's ego, and to this end, he plans to tell everyone the so-called truth: that "Lulu's husband has tired of her and sent her home."

The conversation between Lulu and Dwight demonstrates that, once again, the Deacons focus on how circumstances in Lulu's life impact them rather than how these circumstances impact her. Instead of feeling badly for Lulu's troubles, the Deacons are pleased at this turn of events. They now have her back "on the old terms," meaning that she will follow their orders—typified by not telling anyone what really happened with Ninian—and return to all her household duties, at which Ina fails so miserably. They immediately try to force her back into this old image, but Lulu, although she feels

dependent upon the Deacons, has returned not only with new clothing but also with more gumption. For instance, when Dwight says, "I think you'd show more modesty if you arranged your hair in the old way," Lulu merely replies, "Yes, you would think so." More importantly, however, Lulu has developed enough sense of entitlement to make certain demands; her top priority is to find out from Ninian if he was telling her the truth about his first wife or if he merely wanted to get rid of her. Dwight, who holds the power of his brother's address, resists this course of action, but eventually writes to Ninian himself, after Lulu threatens to tell what happened "all over town" otherwise. "I shall tell what I know and then leave your house anyway unless you get Ninian's word," she announces. "And you're going to write him now." The family notes Lulu's radical transformation. When Ina suggests that Lulu keep "out of sight" for a few days until they hear news from Ninian, Lulu refuses. "It certainly has changed Lulu—a man coming into her life," says Ina. "She never spoke to me like that before."

Lulu again finds herself at odds with Dwight and Ina after the arrival of Ninian's letter. Now that she has "the proofs" of Ninian's first marriage, Lulu wants to tell everyone that she left her husband, not because he did not want her anymore, but because he was already married. Dwight and Ina "wouldn't have people know of it for worlds." They put their own pride against Lulu's even though she points out it is "the only thing I've got." Perhaps it is this realization that leads her to take an even greater radical step; the day after reading Ninian's letter, Lulu leaves the Deacons' home—in the words of her mother, she has "Gone to call her soul her own." This action on Lulu's part is tremendous, for she possesses only $62, lacks marketable skills, and has no solid plans other than to get out of the Deacon household. At the eleventh hour, however, Ninian arrives with the welcome news that his wife is dead. He asks Lulu to forgive him and return to him, which she does.

Many critics of Gale's day denigrated this ending; it was a second version, rewritten by Gale after audiences complained about the first ending, which had Lulu venturing out in the world alone. Ludwig Lewisohn wrote in the *Nation* that Lulu's achievement of "respectable wifehood" thwarted Lulu's "act of liberation." To judge the play, and Lulu, solely by the ultimate outcome, however, misses the significance of Lulu's resolve to leave the Deacon home "for good" and make a new life for herself, regardless of her chances of success. After hearing that Ninian is in town, Lulu opts not to catch the train but to go back to the Deacons.' She does not return because she is fearful of life on her own and looking for an excuse not to leave—she makes it abundantly clear that she will not remain with the Deacons no matter what Ninian has to say. Instead, her reason for returning is simple—she has grown to love her husband and hopes to hear good news from him regarding their marriage. By returning to her marriage, Lulu does not show her transformation back into the meek, subservient woman she was at the play's opening; rather, this action shows Lulu's development into a more complete woman, one worthy of love and respect and one who loves and respects herself.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on *Miss Lulu Bett,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay excerpt, Schroeder explores how "*Miss Lulu Bett *uses the conventions of realism" to criticize the lack of fulfillment in the lives of women.*

Critical Essay #3

One play that offers a serious critique of women's familial entrapment is Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett* (first performed in 1920). *Miss Lulu Bett* depicts an unmarried woman's domestic enslavement to her unappreciative and demanding family. However, it also scrutinizes the plight of the other women in the household—those with ostensibly more "enviable" positions—and ends with the suggestion that autonomy and self-support may offer the only escape from enforced domestic roles.

Gale's three-act play focuses on the title character, who performs all the household work for her sister Ina's family, her labor the price paid so that she and her mother can exist as dependents of Ina's husband Dwight. The family mythology has defined Lulu as not "strong enough to work," thereby emphasizing both Lulu's dependency and the belief that performing all the household duties for four adults and two children does not constitute "work." This devaluing of Lulu's contribution to the family permits Dwight and Ina to see Lulu as a faceless drone, not as a person with desires and aspirations of her own. They criticize everything she does, from the color of the bread she toasts for them to her purchase of flowers to brighten their table (at which she rarely gets to sit). Although Lulu owns nothing but what they provide for her, including a wardrobe of Ina's cast-off clothes, they complain about Lulu's appearance, finding her presence in front of company to be an embarrassment. Dwight's kindhearted brother Ninian sums up Lulu's plight when he tells her, "They make a slavey of you. Regular slavey. Damned shame I call it."

In *Miss Lulu Bett*, Gale made powerful use of the realistic set to emphasize the protagonist's restrictions. Act I, in which Lulu functions solely as a household servant, takes place in the family dining room, an enclosed space which Lulu enters and exits from the kitchen while the rest of the family sit and eat. At the end of Act I, however, Lulu marries Ninian, and the scene thereafter shifts to a side porch of Dwight's house. This space, attached to the house but with fewer confining walls, parallels Lulu's partial break from Dwight's family. After traveling briefly with Ninian, Lulu has seen something of the world and has been recognized as an individual instead of a mere functionary filling a role. Unfortunately, when Ninian confesses that he had lost touch with his first wife fifteen years previously and does not know for certain if she is dead (and, therefore, if his marriage to Lulu is legal), Lulu feels she must return to Dwight and Ina's home. At this point, however, she is, like the porch, attached to the household but not entirely confined by it, and she begins to assert herself against Dwight and Ina by keeping their daughter's secrets from them, appropriating a dress of Ina's without permission, and reading Dwight's letter from Ninian despite Dwight's express order not to. This movement to an exterior space thus symbolizes Lulu's emerging consciousness of her own identity and desires, desires that cannot be contained within the walls of Dwight's house.

In Gale's original script, Lulu's desires also exceeded the boundaries of realistic closure, an important innovation in an otherwise realistic play. In that original ending, Ninian's first wife is found to be alive, thus invalidating Lulu's marriage. Rather than marrying

Cornish (another suitor) or maintaining her position in Dwight's household, however, Lulu chooses a life of uncertain independence. Refusing to let Cornish explain her decision to Dwight and Ina, Lulu insists on speaking for herself. Furthermore, she leaves town alone to seek employment, needing, as she says, "to see out of my own eyes. For the first time in my life." The play thus originally concluded with Lulu's escaping her lifelong imprisonment, but without any resolution of her economic or social problems. Like the shift in set, then, the original ending of Gale's play indicates the rebellion of Lulu's desires against the forces of oppression, forces represented, in part, by the realistic set and resisted by Lulu's refusal of containment.

Unfortunately, this open ending caused so much controversy in the original 1920 production that the author felt compelled to change it to ensure the play's successful run. In the revised ending, Ninian's first wife turns out to be dead, and he returns to rescue Lulu from her life of drudgery in Dwight and Ina's house. While Cynthia Sutherland sees this change as Gale's capitulation to public opinion—in her view, an example of women increasingly choosing to act as mediators rather than revolutionaries after women's suffrage was won—Carole L. Cole notes astutely that both versions retain Lulu's basic evolution as she strives to define herself rather than merely accept Dwight and Ina's definition of her; the way the play concludes is not its whole meaning. The merit of Cole's interpretation is further suggested by other elements in Gale's realistic text, elements hinting that domestic entrapment was common among women of the era and suggesting some of the social and economic forces that sustained it.

The primary reason women accepted roles like Lulu's within Dwight's family was economic necessity, a condition Lulu recognizes and laments on several occasions. First she discusses the problem with Ninian, revealing her awareness of her plight as just one example of a widespread social condition. She says: "I can't do any other work—that's the trouble—women like me can't do any other work." Later, she makes a similar remark to Cornish, explaining her desire for independence and the economic difficulties that prevent her achieving it. She tells him that although she is a locally renowned cook, "I can't earn anything. I'd like to earn something." Lulu's perceptions of her limited earning power accurately reflect the conditions of the time. Despite the political gains women apparently achieved with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 (the year of *Miss Lulu*'s premiere), political rights did not bring economic equality. As historian William Chafe has noted, almost all the women who joined the labor force in the 1920s were motivated by economic need, yet they were treated on the job as marginal employees whose primary responsibilities—and chief sources of support—were in the home. While clerical opportunities for refined, middle-class, white women were expanding, uneducated women like Lulu rarely had the chance to "earn something" and so support themselves.

Given these economic limitations, marriage might seem to be the most desirable option a middle-class woman had to ensure her financial support. Yet Gale's play emphatically suggests otherwise, even given the revised ending in which Lulu is reunited with Ninian. Close scrutiny of the other female characters reveals the strictures placed on all women within the traditional patriarchal family, even if those women were not primarily responsible for domestic work. Lulu's mother, for example, states outright that marriage

offers no better alternative to Lulu's position. When Ninian asks Mrs. Bett if Lulu wouldn't be better off with a husband, Mrs. Bett replies: "Wouldn't make much difference. Why look at me. A husband, six children, four of 'em under the sod with him. And sometimes I feel as though nothin' more had happened to me than has happened to Lulie . . . Only she ain't had the pain."

In Ina, the female head of the household, we see the clearest example of how limiting marriage could be, especially to women married to petty tyrants like Dwight. Despite his contradictions and repeated sexist remarks, Ina follows her husband's lead in all actions, accepting his every notion, no matter how illogical or insulting. In everything from the proper preparation of potatoes to the value of family life, Ina echoes Dwight's remarks with her own "That's what I always think." When Dwight attempts to coerce Lulu's obedience with a family vote, Ina mindlessly follows his lead, consolidating his power and making a mockery of the democratic process. In short, Ina is a cipher, a useless woman literally unable to boil water without Lulu's instructions or to conceive a thought without Dwight's direction; she is yet another victim of Dwight's manipulation, even as she practices the same arts on the other, less powerful members of her household. As Cole has explained it, the play "is a study of the power relationships within the nuclear family. Indeed, the play constitutes a devastating portrait of the male autocrat who holds absolute power in ways both petty and profound and the hierarchy that forms among the female family members based on each one's relationship and usefulness to him." Given a social reality in which most women lived as economic dependents of possibly despotic men, some form of entrapment for women was virtually inevitable. And while Gale's play does focus on a domestic world where women are "others" with little possibility for self-fulfillment or even self definition, *Miss Lulu Bett* uses the conventions of realism to criticize those limitations and to suggest some of the widespread cultural conditions that create and sustain them. In this way, the play makes a strong political statement regarding the rights of women. Some feminist critics have argued that realism is without value for feminist dramatists because it is incapable of exploring individual dilemmas in terms of a broad social context. *Miss Lulu Bett*'s attention to historical context, social convention, and women's economic realities challenges the universal applicability of this dismissal.

Critical Essay #4

While Gale and others were using realism to document how social conventions and economic restrictions often forced women into narrow domestic roles that offered no choice or potential for growth, other playwrights were portraying women who had already moved outside the domestic sphere. This depiction of single women pursuing careers and creating alternatives to patriarchal living arrangements reflects a social trend of the early 1900s. As historian William Chafe has observed, at the end of the nineteenth century, "half the graduates of the best women's colleges remained single, and they constituted the core of female professional workers." These career women—often ridiculed as humorless, sexless "New Women" in the popular press—faced a number of social problems that sound distressingly familiar to 1990s feminists: hostility to women working outside the home (especially from men competing for their jobs), lack of role models in other than traditionally female fields such as teaching and nursing, disparagement of female aspirations, malicious rumors about independent women's sexual orientation, and the apparent need to choose between marriage and a career. So while female playwrights of the era were eager to depict autonomous working women with interests beyond the domestic, as working women themselves they recognized the potentially paralyzing problems the New Woman faced. As playwright Martha Morton observed in a 1909 interview, "Woman is going out into the world and helping to do the world's work, and adapting herself to the new condition hurts."

A number of playwrights writing between 1900 and 1920 explored these sometimes hurtful adaptations in their realistic plays, documenting the personal and professional problems faced by career women and protesting social conditions that interfered with women's pursuit of economic independence. By their very existence these plays counter the criticism that realism was limited to portraying and therefore validating the domestic world of the patriarchal nuclear family. The feminist plays I have chosen to explore here show the conflicts between and within individual working women, conflicts created by social mores and internalized by the women characters of these realistic plays. In this way, these plays illustrate the current feminist belief that female identity is, at least in part, a product of cultural mythology. Furthermore, they delineate the problems that arise when the forces of convention or individual desires conflict with a woman's wish for autonomy. These plays reveal that realism could be used in the theatre to depict what women might accomplish, as well as what price they would have to pay, as they moved outside traditional domestic spheres.

Two plays that use realism to explore the plight of the career woman are Rachel Crothers' *A Man's World* (1909, published 1915) and Marion Craig Wentworth's *The Flower Shop* (1912). Both plays focus on independent women with satisfying work to do, and both emphasize the central character's connections with a community of women who exhibit various stages of feminist awareness. Both plays explore the economic and social forces that propel women into marriage, and both depict women in conflict with the men they love when it comes to balancing a home and a career. However, the similarities between the plays end at their conclusions, as the two central characters find different ways to reconcile their romantic attachments with their feminist ideals.

A Man's World takes place primarily in the apartment of Frank Ware, a female novelist and social reform worker who lives with her small adopted son, Kiddie. While Frank's drawing room is conventionally appointed and focused on the domestic, it certainly offers a counterpoint to the male-dominated living spaces inhabited by Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*. For Frank's parlor is located in a rooming house occupied by an assortment of struggling artists, musicians, and writers, male and female, who each occupy a private space but who nonetheless move rather freely from one room to another. The extent to which Frank's bohemian drawing room differs from that of a traditional patriarchal family is illustrated vividly in the first act, when Frank arrives home from work to find a group of male friends entertaining Kiddie—that is, engaging in child-care activities traditionally associated with women. As Frank flops onto a chair, the men gather to wait on her, offering her food, stoking her fire, and helping her off with her gloves. Lois Gottlieb has noted that this scene *reverses* the patriarchal norm in which the male breadwinner enters a domestic space expecting service from the subservient women who work within the domestic space and whom he supports. Yet despite the fact that she is the only one of the group who is financially successful, Frank asserts no authority; she is simply depicted, as the stage directions clarify, as an equal, exuding "the frank abandon of being one of them—strong, free, unafraid."

Unlike most of the other inhabitants of her building, Frank takes her work outside her home: she not only publishes critically acclaimed novels about the exploitation of impoverished women, she is also deeply involved in setting up a "girls' club" for former prostitutes. While Frank may write in her apartment (her exact writing habits are never made clear), her work in both publishing and social reform extends her influence beyond the domestic scope. As Sharon Friedman has argued: "Through her social welfare activity and her writing, Frank makes these private grievances [i.e., unequal sexual relations and man's exploitation of women] a matter of public concern, and in the process gives herself a platform. As social housekeeper, mother to destitute girls, Frank makes maternity her career outside the home." Frank's life work is therefore the inverse of Miss Lulu Bett's. Rather than showing us the impact of social concerns on the home, Crothers has created a feminist-activist protagonist who takes the values of home and care and attempts to infuse them into society at large.

Margaret Kendall of Wentworth's *The Flower Shop* is a similar character: an independent career woman (formerly an opera star, currently a shop owner) with an interest in social reform and in building community with other women. The setting of Wentworth's play, moreover, moves out of domestic spaces entirely and into the flower shop of the title, an enterprise owned and managed by Margaret. While the set is realistic in its functioning doors and its attention to detail, it depicts a public space controlled by Margaret and populated with her staff, her customers, and occasionally her women's group, which holds its meetings in the shop. Margaret's social work differs from Frank's, however, in that she is attempting to enlighten women of her own upper-middle class to the dangers of being financially dependent on men. For Margaret, economic freedom is the greatest freedom of all, the one on which all other liberties depend. As she tells a friend, "I shall always be my own mistress because I have my own work, my own pocket-book." For her, many of the members of her women's club—her "followers"—"seem like a lot of frightened slaves . . . and the husbands masters and

owners by right of the household purse." Perhaps Margaret's work to "abolish" this form of domestic slavery is not so different from Frank's work with "fallen" East Side women after all, since Margaret views marriage based on financial dependence as just another form of prostitution.

Building communities of women for their mutual support is thus important to both Frank and Margaret. Frank defends her rooming-house arrangement against a detractor as "rather good for me . . . The house is filled with independent women who are making their own living"; she also experiences great satisfaction in her reform work with poor girls. Margaret likewise is dedicated to her "followers," claiming that the interests of a family (were she to have one) would not make her forget "the *other women,* their helplessness and their needs." Yet both plays do an excellent job of depicting the differences among the varied women each independent protagonist encounters. What Doris Abramson has noted about *A Man's World* is true of both plays: not all the women characters are at the same level of emancipation, so the plays illustrate a moment of historical transition. Each female character has to make decisions between new freedoms and old customs and prejudices.

In *A Man's World,* this transitional moment for women is perhaps best reflected in the character of Clara, an aspiring miniaturist from a wealthy family who (as one of the other artists describes her) would "like to tiptoe through bohemia, but she's afraid of her petticoats." While Clara admires everything about Frank, from her self-sufficiency to her generosity and kindness, she herself is without marketable skills and feels "absolutely superfluous." Complaining about the double standard that relegates unmarried women to "old maid" status, Clara asserts: "If I were a man—the most insignificant little runt of a man—I could persuade some woman to marry me—and could have a home and children and hustle for a living—and life would mean something." But Clara is not the only counterpoint to Frank. Lione, a singer, while more independent and also more talented than Clara, also rails about the unfair position of women who must depend on men for financial support and social position. Her response to the problem, however, is a self-centered acceptance of the *status quo.* She tells Frank: "Men are pigs of course. They take all they can get and don't give any more than they have to. It's a man's world—that's the size of it. What's the use of knocking your head against things you can't change? I never believed before that you really meant all this helping women business. What's the use?" Despite these women's differences from each other and from her, Frank responds to both of them with sympathy and support. While Frank herself values autonomy and fosters sisterhood, she realizes that not all women would or could make the choices she has made. In response to Clara, who accuses her of believing "in women taking care of themselves," Frank asserts: "I believe in women doing what they're most fitted for. You should have married, Clara, when you were a young girl—and been taken care of all your life." Given this backdrop of social reform work and varying states of feminist consciousness, Crothers' play avoids projecting one proper course of action for all women, focusing instead on the complex network of environmental forces complicating all women's choices.

The Flower Shop also depicts the various conflicts faced by women, both the independent New Woman of the period and her more traditional sisters, during this

transitional historical period. In Wentworth's play, these differences emerge most clearly in the discussions about marriage in which Margaret's flower shop staff frequently engage. For Polly, young and pretty and enamored of her beau, traditional marriage beckons appealingly. Noting that "It is a man's place to provide for the woman he loves," Polly proclaims that she wants "a real *old-fashioned* marriage," in which she will quit her job, devote her time to caring for the household, and never object to asking her husband for money. Lena, another shop worker, sees marriage not as a romantic adventure but as an opportunity to rest from toil. Like Crothers' Clara, Lena is aging, unmarried, and alone. She sees marriage to a decent carpenter whom she does not love as "a good chance" to achieve financial security, to avoid lifelong loneliness, and to have a child, which she desperately wants. These experiences with other women, while they do not change Margaret's ultimate choices for herself, do allow her to see (as Frank does) that not all women have the fortitude or the training to face daily economic demands and a solitary life. Both of these plays, then, document the difficult choices and limited options women faced in the early twentieth century, thus providing a tape stried background against which to evaluate the actions and decisions of the central characters.

Against this backdrop, Frank and Margaret look all the more courageous in overcoming the many obstacles to their freedom. For Frank, most of these obstacles are placed in her way by social convention and public opinion. The strength of these forces against an independent woman are made clear in the very first scene, when Frank's male friends are discussing her book in her absence. First they read aloud from a glowing review, which finds Frank's novel especially impressive in its "strength and scope" now that she has been revealed to be a woman. This brings them to wonder where she finds her material—that is, what man is ghostwriting for her. Their gossip then moves to her love life, and they wonder about the exact nature of her relationship with Malcolm Gaskell: whether he and Frank are, in fact, lovers, and whether he is the man supplying her material. That Frank's alleged friends have such doubts about her veracity and ability suggests the wave of hostile criticism and innuendo faced by women active in public life.

Frank's problems in maintaining her autonomy are compounded by her love for Gaskell, a successful newspaper man and a staunch supporter of the gender-divided *status quo.* He disparages her book as "clever as the deuce" but not "big"; he asserts that "Women are meant only to be loved—and men have got to take care of them"; he protests that her settlement work is "disagreeable"; and he summarizes proper relations between men and women this way: "Man sets the standard for woman. He knows she's better than he is and he demands that she be—and if she isn't she's got to suffer for it." In addition to his belittling of Frank's work and beliefs, he insists that she reveal her entire history (especially how she came to adopt Kiddie), while insisting that she has no need to know his. It may seem unlikely that the independent Frank could actually fall in love with such a man. That she does suggests two things: that independent women have as much a need for love as traditional women do; and that, as products of the social system they are trying to reform, women like Frank have nonetheless internalized much of their patriarchal culture. As Florence Kiper noted in the 1914 review that I cited earlier:

> [Frank] is a type of the modern feminist. And the conflict of the drama is waged not so much without as within her own nature, a conflict between individual emotion and social conviction. What many of our writers for the stage have missed in their objective drama that uses the new woman for protagonist is a glimpse of that tumultuous battlefield, her own soul, where meet the warring forces of impulse and theory, of the old and the new conceptions of egotism and altruism.

The conclusion of the play indicates exactly how painful this conflict between "impulse and theory" is for Frank and how much she is willing to pay for her feminist ideals. Just after Frank reveals to Gaskell that she reciprocates his love, they discover the secret of Kiddie's parentage: Gaskell is actually Kiddie's father and, therefore, a man Frank has long hated for abandoning the boy's biological mother. When Gaskell refuses to admit any responsibility for the affair, Frank refuses his marriage proposal. In a reversal of Nora's slamming the door to Ibsen's *Doll's House,* Gaskell leaves Frank's apartment, closing the door behind him.

While the door may be shut on Gaskell's relationship with Frank, the debate between the New Woman and the traditional man, and thus the issues of the double standard and equality for women, are left open at the end of the play. The play thus beautifully illustrates Kiper's point about the New Woman's inner conflicts. Because the play ends, as Kiper describes it, with "no sentimentalism, no attempt to gloss over the situation with the pet American dramatic platitude that love makes right all things," we are left inspired that Frank has stood up for her principles but saddened that her stand has cost her emotional fulfillment. In short, Crothers' realistic treatment of an increasingly common predicament of the era, combined with the varied background characters and with her innovative refusal to provide an easy solution, forces an audience to feel something of the losses women face when their feminist ideals collide with their very human hunger for love.

In *The Flower Shop,* Wentworth does an even more thorough job of depicting the "warring forces" within career women of the day. Her task is made easier because Margaret has already rejected her version of Malcolm Gaskell, the extremely chauvinistic William Ramsey, who years before had wanted Margaret to renounce her career as an opera singer in order to marry him. Her current problems are twofold: the first involves helping her old friend Louise, also a former opera star and now married to Ramsey, to return to her career over her husband's objections; the second concerns reconciling her insistence on financial independence with her deep love for Stephen Hartwell, who is currently running for a judgeship under much public scrutiny.

When the wealthy Hartwell first proposes, he simply assumes that Margaret will give up her flower shop. Once she convinces him of the absolute necessity, for her, of maintaining a separate income and therefore her own business, he capitulates, realizing

that "It is easy to be romantic . . .set woman on a pedestal as a saint for devotion and all that,—it is harder to help her live her own life, but perhaps after all that is the most genuine devotion—real chivalry in the end." Given his public position, however, it soon becomes clear to Margaret that her independence may cost him both the support of his traditional family and the judgeship he seeks. Her conflict, then, is internal—her desire for autonomy versus her love for Hartwell—but also includes public repercussions for the man she loves.

In Act III, as she waits in the darkened flower shop to hear if Hartwell has found some way to reconcile their love and his public interests, and as Polly and Lena come in separately to tell her of their wedding plans, Margaret vacillates in agony. This scene of Margaret's turmoil, while perhaps suffering from unrealistic coincidences, brilliantly encapsulates the "tumultuous battlefield" within themselves that independent women of the era suffered. First Margaret thinks of her "followers," lamenting that she cannot give up her business without disappointing them. Then, haunted by the dance music filtering in from across the street and tormented by the sensuous fragrance of the flowers surrounding her, she surrenders to her emotions and desires, feeling that she cannot lose Hartwell's love. Margaret cries out: "Is this what it is to be merely a woman—no will—no head—all heart—nothing but heart, with a cry in it that will not be stilled. *I want him* . . . Ah, my sisters, I have understood your needs—now I see your temptation." Just as Margaret decides to send for Hartwell and renounce her flower shop, however, Louise returns with the news that she has abandoned her career plans for fear of losing her husband's love. Louise's lack of persistence reinvigorates Margaret's own, and she vows to "renounce the sweetness" in order to promote the new order she envisions between women and men.

Unlike *A Man's World,* however, *The Flower Shop* ends with a conventional reconciliation. It seems Hartwell's publicity director has found a way to avoid "the woman question" during his campaign, so Hartwell and Margaret are free to marry under their original agreement: Margaret keeps her shop and her economic independence. This forced closure does falsely simplify the complex issues raised by the play. However, Hartwell's resolve to stand by Margaret no matter what the cost suggests a more positive vision for social reform than the one Crothers envisioned in *A Man's World.* Margaret's happy ending suggests that men as well as women can suffer from sexist public criticism, that some men are willing to support women's autonomy, and that heterosexual love is not necessarily a cage designed to restrain women and regulate their activities. It also vividly paints the conflicts and agonies that career women faced in trying to lead full emotional lives.

In these plays of women in the workforce, both Crothers and Wentworth dramatize the conflict between career ambition and the desire for love that working women of the early twentieth century faced (to say nothing of their late twentieth-century sisters). Using a realistic set, everyday characters, increasingly commonplace situations, and the linear logic of realism, the plays accurately depict and protest the barriers to achievement faced by women of the 1910s. Realism has historically been used in this way more than once. As Michelene Wandor has observed, "artistic movements which seek to represent the experiences of oppressed groups reach initially for a realistic and immediately

recognizable clarity . . . Such realism has a radical impact when the content is new, when the selection of ordinary everyday elements in life are shaped into a work of art." By using realism in this way, these playwrights made the new and sometimes radically revised ideas about gender roles and gender relations more accessible to theatergoers of their era, inviting audiences to see these changes as a part of everyday reality.

Critical Essay #5

In this chapter, I have used my analysis of three plays to illustrate some crucial points in the ongoing debate about realism's usefulness to feminist drama. Most obviously, I have tried to show that historical context is crucial in determining meaning. In the Progressive Era, realism was considered the highest and most modern form of dramatic writing, the only form appropriate for critical exploration of social problems. Many feminist playwrights of the period thus wrote realistic plays as the best way to have their voices heard and their ideas taken seriously. We would do them grievous disservice to dismiss their work as inadequate because realism is sometimes seen, in late twentieth-century criticism, as an outmoded or debased form.

But it is not only in distant historical contexts that I want to rethink the relationship between feminism and realism, for realism as dramatic form has persisted now for over a hundred years, and perhaps contemporary feminists can learn some lessons by looking at its history. While realism is based on the specific theatrical conventions described at the beginning of this essay, it can also be adapted and modified by innovative playwrights; indeed, many feminist playwrights from the Progressive Era to the present have mingled realistic conventions with antirealistic ones to create hybrid forms, suitable for many purposes. Furthermore, even the most traditional realism can still reach wide audiences and protest the social conditions it presents. Let the continuing lesson of Gale, Crothers, and Wentworth be this: depicting what is can be a step toward creating what should be.

Source: Patricia R. Schroeder, "Realism and Feminism in the Progressive Era," in *Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights,* edited by Brenda Murphy, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 31-48.

Critical Essay #6

In the following essay, Sutherland examines a pulling back from more strident portrayals of femnist concerns in plays of the 1920s, including Miss Lulu Bett. Ibsen's Nora shut the door of her "doll's house" in 1879. Among the generation of American women born in the 1870's and 1880's, Zona Gale, Zoe Akins, and Susan Glaspell all won Pulitzer Prizes. Rachel Crothers, the successful dramatist who wrote more than three dozen plays, characterized her own work as "a sort of Comédie Humaine de la Femme." In an interview in 1931 she said: "With few exceptions, every one of my plays has been a social attitude toward women at the moment I wrote it . . . I [do not] go out stalking the footsteps of women's progress. It is something that comes to me subconsciously. I may say that I sense the trend even before I have hearsay or direct knowledge of it." During a period in which most American play-wrights con-fined their work to representations of the middle class, these women were distinctive because they created principal roles for female characters whose rhetoric thinly veiled a sense of uneasiness with what Eva Figes and others more recently have called "patriarchal attitudes."

By the turn of the century, the mostly "abolitionist" women who had originated the battle for suffrage in the 1840s and 1850s were either dead or retired, and a new generation of leaders was attempting to expand popular support through the use of muted political rhetoric which intentionally avoided controversy. The majority of women resisted arguments advocating changes in sex roles on the grounds that their inherent femininity would be diminished and their homes threatened. In the *Ladies' Home Journal,* Jane Addams argued benignly that a woman who wanted to "keep on with her old business of caring for her house and rearing her children" ought to "have some conscience in regard to public affairs lying outside her immediate household." The conciliatory strategy of feminist leaders like Addams and Carrie Chapman Catt exalted the family, motherhood, and domestic values, minimized conflicts between self-realization and inhibiting social conditions, and often disregarded the arguments of radical feminists who insisted that only basic alterations in the organization of the family and sexual relationships could effect substantive changes in women's lives.

For many members of audiences, political issues continued to be dissociated from personal lives in which an equator divided the world of human activity marking "homemaking" and "breadwinning" as hemispheres. In 1924, a study of a fairly large group of young girls indicated that a substantial number planned to choose marriage over a "career" and that few had developed alternative goals. Asked to "name the four heroines in history or fiction whom [they] would most like to resemble," only two of 347 chose women identified chiefly or even at all with feminist causes. They elected, rather, to live vicariously through husbands and children, accepting the traditional sex-role differentiation in which "instrumental/task functions are assigned to males, and expressive/social functions to females."

Glaspell, Akins, Gale, and Crothers chronicled the increasingly noticeable effects of free love, trial marriage, the "double standard," career, divorce, and war on women's lives. Public rhetoric generally subsumed private sexual rhetoric in the theatre during this

period, and dramatic discourse tended to mediate conflicting views of women's "legitimate" place in society more often than it intensified dispute. Although the sector of life subtended by domesticity was being steadily decreased by technological and economic developments in the early years of the century, feminist leaders, artists, and housewives shared the common inability to suggest an alternative social structure through which discontent might be alleviated. To the extent that female characters on the stage accepted the traditional sex role, a diminished state of consciousness manifested itself in language that avoided strong or forceful statements, evinced conformity, consisted of euphemism and question-begging, and celebrated the processes which safely domesticated erotic pleasure. As contemporary critics, we tend to be disappointed by portrayals of women who cannot express, much less resolve, their problems. Yet, here, precisely, I believe, is the reason for the popular success and the "critical" failure of many of these plays. The spectacle of dramatic characters conducing themselves in the ironic guise of people only half aware of conflicts between individuation and primary sex role has usually been interpreted as trivial, the result of mediocre artistry, rather than what it is—the theatrical encoding of a "genderlect," or to put it another way, a language that reflects the internalizing by members of society of a particular system of sex differentiation and values.

However, during the period before the thirty-sixth state ratified the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, a significant number of plays did present exceptionally articulate female artists as figures incarnating the dilemma of people torn by the conflicting demands of sex role and career. In *A Man's World* (National Theatre, Washington, D.C., October 18, 1909), Rachel Crothers's protagonist Frank Ware is a novelist who oversees a club for girls who "need another chance." She has published anonymously a defense of women's rights which even her friends—themselves painters, writers, and musicians—agree is much too good to have been written by a woman. After accidentally discovering that her fiancé, Malcolm Gaskell, has fathered her adopted seven-year-old son (the deserted mother had been her friend and died in childbirth), she renounces him. Avoiding a facile reconciliation, Crothers chose rather to stress Frank's abhorrence of her lover's complacent refusal to acknowledge responsibility for the deplorable consequences of his own sexual license. In the final curtain scene, their relationship is abruptly severed:

FRANK. Oh, I want to forgive you . . . tell me you
know it was wrong—that you'd give your life to make
it right. Say that you know this thing is a crime.
GASKELL. No! Don't try to hold me to account by a
standard that doesn't exist. Don't measure me by your
theories. If you love me you'll stand on that and forget
everything else.
FRANK. I can't. I can't.

In *He and She* (Poughkeepsie, 1911), Crothers again explored the dilemma of a woman who must decide between sex role and career, in this instance, motherhood or sculpting. Ann Herford surrenders the commission she has won in a national

competition to her husband, Tom, who has been openly skeptical that his wife could do "anything for a scheme as big" as the project required for the contest. When he wins only the second prize, his ego is badly shaken, and he retrenches to the familiar rhetorical stance of chief breadwinner. Reconciliation comes only after Ann abandons her prize in response to the needs of her teenage daughter. Crothers, although she shows a woman conceding final "victory" to her primary sex role, allows her character to voice bitterness and disappointment:

TOM . . . you've not only beaten me—you've won
over the biggest men in the field—with your own
brain and your own hands; in a fair, fine Hard fight . . .
there'll be times when you[ll] eat your heart out to be
at work on it—when the artist in you will *yell* to
be let out.
ANN. I know . . . And I'll hate you because you're
doing it—and I'll hate myself because I gave it up—
and I'll almost—hate—her . . . my heart has almost
burst with pride—not so much that *I* had done it—but
for all women . . . then the door opened—and Millicent
[their daughter] came in. There isn't any choice
Tom—she's part of my body—part of my soul.

Ann's uneasy capitulation to the obligations of motherhood is carefully orchestrated by the simplistic attitudes of two women who are in love with her husband's close friend, a partially caricatured "male chauvinist" hard-liner; one woman accepts a promotion in her job rather than tolerate what she views as his suffocating demands, the other chases him because she believes that "all the brains a woman's got [are]—to make a home—to bring up children—and to keep a man's love." That Tom and Ann might exchange roles, he taking over as parent temporarily while she carves her frieze, is outside the realm of dramatic choice, because, in Crothers's dialectical structure, the men and women are shown to be incapable of conceiving this as an alternative. General expectations that a shift towards a more egalitarian society would lead to personal and social enfranchisement in the progressive era as middle-class women moved in the direction of greater self-consciousness are clearly undercut in the endings of Crothers's plays.

A vastly more imaginative if less independent playwright, Susan Glaspell both directed and acted in her own plays. From 1913 until 1922, she worked with the Provincetown Players. A sounding board for new ideas, the Provincetown group produced plays that sometimes spoofed feminist excesses, yet usually respected the seriousness of the "movement's" political aims. In *Suppressed Desires* (Wharf Theatre, Provincetown, Summer, 1915), Glaspell ridiculed a woman who nearly wrecks her marriage by testing psychoanalytic theories on her sister and husband, and in *Close the Book* (Playwright's Theatre, 1917), she poked fun at a liberated girl who naively insists, "*Hand on heart,*" that she is "not respectable." In *Woman's Honor* (Playwright's Theatre, 1918), she presents a satiric sketch of the effects of the "double standard." A young man accused of murder refuses to provide himself with an alibi by identifying his married mistress. He

is beleaguered by a bevy of volunteers, each of whom wants to sacrifice her own "honor" to save him by claiming that *she* has been the anonymous lover. The women are comic types with predictable opinions about female honor: "The Shielded One," "The Motherly One," "The Silly One," "The Mercenary One," and "The Scornful One." The last of these expresses her resentment of society's definition of "woman's honor": "Did it ever strike you as funny that woman's honor is only about one thing, and that man's honor is about everything but that thing?" With amusing logic, she tells the prisoner that since "woman's honor means woman's virtue," the lady for whom he "propose[s] to die has no virtue." Caught in the midst of chatter, he resigns himself: "Oh, *hell, I'll plead guilty,"* rather than be faced by another speechifying female.

But in her most famous play, *Trifles* (Wharf Theatre, Province-town, Summer, 1916), Glaspell began to explore seriously the more violent psychological aspects of women trapped in loveless marriages. Minnie Wright has strangled her husband. The wives of the sheriff and a neighbor have come to her home to collect a few things to make her more comfortable in jail. As their husbands search for evidence that would provide a motive, the women discover among Minnie's "trifles" a canary's carcass and decide to defy the law by concealing it, guessing that her husband "wrung—its neck . . . Wright wouldn't like the bird—a thing that sang—She used to sing. He killed that, too." The neighbor expresses her regret: "I might have known [Minnie] needed help! I know how things can be—for women. . . We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of the same thing." As they leave, the women explain to the men who have ridiculed Minnie's "trifles" that she was going to "knot" her quilt, a subdued, ironic, and grisly reminder of the manner in which a stifled wife has enacted her desperate retaliation. In the theatre of the next decade, the motifs of the caged bird and the lost singing voice were to become the hallmarks of numerous "domesticated" women who abandoned careers.

In *Trifles,* Glaspell had negotiated that portrayal of a woman's violent repudiation of her husband's narrow notion of sex role by removing her from the sight of the audience (a technique she later was to repeat in *Bernice* and *Allison's House*). But the play in which she confronted most vehemently the sex-role imprisonment of women is *The Verge,* first performed by the Playwright's Theatre in its last season (November 14, 1921). Claire Archer rejects her daughter and murders her lover. Her insane passion to breed a fresh botanical species which she calls "Breath of Life," one which may be "less beautiful—less sound—than the plants from which [it] diverged," expresses her radical rejection of biological and cultural inheritance—she is identified as the "flower of New England . . . what came of men who made the laws that made . . . [the] culture." She has divorced a "stick-in-the-mud artist and married—[a] man of flight," who she has hoped will "smash something," but who also has turned out to be baldly conventional. The son who had shared her vision of transcendence is dead. Driven by frustration and disappointment, in a terrifying scene, she strikes her daughter across the face with the roots of an "Edge Vine," believing that both the girl and the plant are incurable conformists. Her words echo horribly those of familiar mythic murderesses: "To think that object ever moved in my belly and sucked my breast." When the lover who has rejected her frenetic sexual advances returns because he wants to keep her "safe" from harm, she strangles him as a "gift" to the plant, choosing to break "life to pieces in the struggle" to cast free from

traditional sex role. A demented Demeter, Claire has been mesmerized by an apocalyptic vision: "Plants . . . explode their species—because something in them knows they've gone as far as they can go. Something in them knows they're shut in. So [they] go mad—that life may not be imprisoned. Break themselves up—into crazy things—into lesser things, and from the pieces—may come one sliver of life with vitality to find the future. How beautiful. How brave. Glaspell's representation of a failed Goddess-Mother was treated respectfully by reviewers in England, but in this country it was largely misunderstood or ignored.

Written a year earlier, another study of a woman's plight, Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*, opened at the Belmont Theatre on December 27, 1920 and subsequently won the Pulitzer Prize. Like Rachel Crothers and Susan Glaspell, Zona Gale had come to New York from the Midwest and was sympathetic to feminist causes despite her mother's caveat to shun radical politics and women's groups—"I would let that mess of women alone!" she had advised her daughter. The novel on which Gale had based her play had been immediately successful, and in eight days, she had hastily, though with considerable dramatic skill, adapted it for production. Even though *Miss Lulu Bett* did not present a threatening subject (for "old maids" were commonly seen not as electing spinsterhood but as having had it thrust upon them by faithless lovers or deprivation), strong critical pressure influenced Gale to alter the last act, in which, like Ibsen's Nora, Lulu walks out of the house in which she has been a virtual servant to become an independent woman. Gale rewrote the last act so that it conformed more closely to her popular novel, which concluded with Lulu comfortably established as a respectable wife. This story of a drab but resourceful and dry-witted woman—whom Fannie Hurst called a "shining star" reflected in "greasy reality"—ran for 186 performances. Such capitulation to public opinion evident in the modification of the ending by a writer who had supported the Woman's Peace Union, the Woman's Peace Party (Wisconsin), Jane Addams and the Hull-House workers and who later helped to write the Wisconsin Equal Rights Law, has considerable significance. It anticipated the new style of mediation used by playwrights who continued to dramatize aspects of the "woman problem" in the 1920's.

After World War I and the extension of the franchise, the momentum towards fully equal status for women slowed considerably. One of Rachel Crothers's characters sees herself as an exception to what was to become an increasingly regressive trend: "I haven't slipped back one inch since the war. Most women who sort of rose to something then have slumped into themselves again, but I've gone *on.* My life gets much fuller and wider all the time. There's no room for men. Why, *why* should I give up my own personal life—or let it be changed in the slightest degree for a man?" But the woman who speaks these somewhat fatuous lines will, during the course of the dramatic action, reveal her disingenuousness by seducing a member of the British upper class so that her "personal life" and career are, in fact, exchanged for marriage.

Statistics on employment indicate that the percentage of females in the total labor force had decreased from 20.9 in 1910 to 20.4 in 1920. Among women, the proportion of the total college enrollment dropped—three of every four new professionals chose traditionally female-dominated fields, and the number of doctors decreased by nearly one-third. Female architects and lawyers continued at less than three percent, and

attendance at professional schools increased only slightly. When members of Pruette's test group were questioned, only thirty-two percent indicated that they would like to be successful *themselves* in "some chosen work"; the remainder opted for success "through" husband and family. The choice between marriage and career continued to be polarized; and the divorce rate rose steadily. By 1929, Suzanne la Follette was to comment that "the traditional relations of the sexes is far from being reversed in this country, [but] . . . has shifted away enough to cause alarm among those to whom it seems the right and inevitable relation *because* it is conventional." Many of the changes affecting women's lives were seen as detrimental to their femininity. George Jean Nathan opined that ". . . women more and more have ceased to be the figures of man's illusion and more and more have become superficially indistinguishable from man himself in his less illusory moments. In sport, in business, in drinking, in politics, in sexual freedom, in conversation, in sophistication and even in dress, women have come closer and closer to men's level and, with the coming, the purple allure of distance has vamoosed." The plays of this period characterize masculine responses that range from reactionary to adjustive but are rarely innovative. Crothers spoofs (or does she?) a gentleman's overreaction to a woman who aggressively courts him: ". . . it seems to be awfully important . . . nowadays to be a woman . . . I'm not criticizing. Men *are* totally unnecessary, I s'pose, except for breeding purposes. And we go on taking ourselves for granted in the same old relationships with women. Stupid of us, isn't it?"

Early in the 1920s, the struggle against social oppression had shifted towards a rebellion against convention in which the manipulation of style was both means and end. The flapper was sometimes a flamboyant flouter, as Zelda Fitzgerald's life apparently proved, but she generally strayed only temporarily from acceptable patterns of conduct, because her values were essentially the same as those of her parents. Cocktail in one hand and cigarette in the other, she made an vocational pretense of "rebellion" that was quite compatible with middle-class wisdom, as she mimicked the demands of earlier feminists for sexual equality.

The plays that Crothers wrote in the 1920's signal her own ambivalence toward the contrived stance of young women whose gold-plated philosophy was an amalgam of "free-thinking" writers like Ellen Key, Mona Cairn, Havelock and Edith Ellis. Like Congreve's Millamant, they were choosing to "dwindle into a wife" rather than persevere in a search for practical alternatives. Crothers's formulaic plot for flappers continued to have the staple elements described by Clara Claibourne Park in her study of the young women in Shakespeare's comedies: "Invent a girl of charm and intellect; allow her ego a brief premarital flourishing; make clear that it is soon to subside into voluntarily-assumed subordination; make sure that it is mediated by love." But Crothers's perspective is ironic, because she juxtaposes romantic courtship and the harsh antagonisms that often grow between marriage, partners. The plays she wrote during these years strongly emphasized deteriorating sexual relationships over a period of time, thus undermining the power of the traditional plot to sustain communal custom through ritual reenactment, In *Mary the Third* (Thirty-ninth Street Theatre, February 5, 1925), the playwright presented three generations of women in the throes of choosing mates. The grandmother, Mary the First, traps a mate with flirtation in 1870; the mother, Mary the Second, yields to the proposal of her most vigorous but most unsuitable lover

in 1897. These two women are seen as mere anachronisms by Mary the Third, in 1923, who fecklessly flaunts convention by insisting that she will choose her mate only after going off to the country on an experimental trip with two men and another woman to "live naturally and freely for two weeks—doing a thing we know in the bottom of our souls is *right,* and knowing perfectly well the whole town is going to explode with horror." However, after only a few hours, Mary rationalizes her own lack of persistence, deciding to be "magnanimous" to the "deep prejudices" of her parents. She returns home. Fearful of being scolded, she and her brother hide and are horrified when they accidentally overhear their parents in a fight (reminiscent of Strindberg and foreshadowing Albee) that shaves off the thin skin concealing the bleeding tissue of their marriage. They hear their father tell their mother: "I'm flab-bergasted at you. You seem to have lost what sense you did have . . . I can't count on you. You aren't *there.* Sometimes I think you aren't the woman I married at all," and their mother's even more devastating reply: "And sometimes I think you're a man I *couldn't* have married. Sometimes I loathe everything you think and say and do. When you grind out that old stuff I could *shriek.* I can't breathe in the same room with you. The very sound of your voice drives me insane. When you tell me how right you are—I could strike you." The fate of the marriage of Mary the Third has left unresolved at the conclusion. Even though Mary the Second is seen her mother's agonized entrapment and recognized its partial basis in her inability to earn an independent income, the daughter herself yields to the pressures of convention and enters marriage knowing just as little about her future husband as her grandmother and mother had known of theirs. Self-deceived, she has only partly digested the teachings of those writers who had argued for new kinds of marriages: ". . . you *ought* to be able to [make your own living] . . . I shall have my own money. I'll *make* it. I shall live with a man because I love him and only as long as I love him. I shall be able to take care of myself *and* my children if necessary. Anything else gives the man a horrible advantage, of course. It makes the woman a kept woman." Significantly, Mary has rejected an intelligent suitor who has warned her that "unless we change the entire attitude of men and women towards each other—there won't be any marriage in the future" and disregarded the fact that she is as ill-trained to support herself as her mother had been.

Crothers's plays signal changes in the treatment of the "woman problem" in the theatre during the twenties. The dialectic between the "new woman" and her "old-fashioned" relatives increasingly undercut conventional comic endings as reconciliation with older patterns became a hollow act. In a series of skillfully constructed one-act plays, Crothers continued her mordant comment by creating the character of a successful but shallow politician, Nancy Marshall, whose words expose a growing "tokenism" in the feminist views of many of her contemporaries:

> We women must be considerate of each other. If I am nominated I'm going to be awfully strong for that . . . Men have made a mess of it—that's all. The idea that there aren't enough houses in New York to go 'round. What nonsense! . . . All those awful people with money who never had any before in their lives ought not to be allowed to crowd other people out. It's

> Bolshevism—just Bolshevism . . . And not enough school teachers to go 'round . . . People ought simply to be made to teach school, whether they want to or not . . . I can't teach school. God knows I'd be glad to—and just show them if my hands weren't so full now of—I'm going to have awful circles under my eyes from standing so long.

She contrasts her own knowledge of the nuances of political style with her female opponent's corpulent presence on the hustings: "She is so unpopular I should think she'd withdraw from sheer embarassment . . . she is so unattractive. That's why the men have put her up . . . they're not afraid of her because they *know* she'll never get anywhere." The sheer vacuousness of Nancy Marshall's political views elicits the response from her best friend that "Between you and her I'd vote for the best man going," and comes into sharp relief when compared to the comment of Mary Dewson, director of women's work for the Democratic party, after the election of 1932: ". . . we did not make the old-fashioned plea that our candidate was charming, . . . we appealed to the intelligence of the country's women."

In a one-act sequel, after the same friends calls her an "old maid," Nancy Marshall suddenly comprehends the real "importance of being a woman" and hastily puts on a proper gown for the purpose of attracting a proposal of marriage. The customary import of the courtship scene is compromised, because the gentleman of her choice has been rejected, in an earlier scene, by Patti Pitt, a young woman who sees herself as public property (she is an entertainer!), but who actually has meant it when she said "It's power, . . . I've got it and mustn't throw it away . . . Any woman can get married, but I have something more important to do" (*The Importance of Being a Woman*). The satiric treatment of both women by Crothers indicates that she was sensitive to the processes of rationalization used by women confronted by the choice between career and marriage, and had identified in those who opted for the latter an erosion of energy that was to continue to perpetuate, for a number of years in the theatre, the prominence of the "feminine mystique."

In the 1930's, Clare Boothe's satire, *The Women* (Ethel Barrymore Theatre, December 26, 1936), slashed at materialistic Park Avenue matrons, but also reflected an underside of the cultural milieu as female characters turned increasingly to divorces, affairs, and sometimes to temporary careers. In a late play by Crothers, *When Ladies Meet* (Royale Theatre, October 6, 1932), the scenario of the struggle of female characters for economic and moral independence receives less emphasis than the failing and futile relationships all the women have with the men. Mary, a writer, and Claire, a wife, are both in love with the latter's philandering husband. Mary has continued to reject the persistent courtship of

good-natured Jimmie, a friend who puts women "in pigeon holes and tab[s] them—[according to] a *man's* idea of women." "Jimmie shrewdly arranges a meeting of mistress and wife at a mutual friend's country house. The play's title is drawn from a

remarkable scene that occurs "when ladies meet" to discuss the fictional case in Mary's novel in which a mistress tells her lover's wife that she wants to live for a year with him on a trial basis. Claire's comments on the verisimilitude of Mary's novel barely conceal her response to her own situation:

I suppose *any* married woman thinks the other woman ought to know enough not to believe a married man, if he's making love to her . . . I happen to be married to a man who can no more help attracting women than he can help breathing. And of course each one thinks she is the love of his life and that he is going to divorce me. But he doesn't seem to . . . I can always tell when an affair is waning. He turns back to the old comfortable institution of marriage as naturally as a baby turns to the warm bottle . . . I'd say [to the mistress] *of course* something *new* is interesting. Of *course* I look the same old way—and sound the same old way—and eat the same old way and walk the same old way—*and so will you*—after a while. I'd say *of course* I can understand his loving you—but are *you prepared to stand up to the job of loving him?* Most of the things you find so irresistible in him are terribly hard to live with. You must love him so abjectly that you're glad to play second fiddle just to keep the music going for *him.*

When her husband unexpectedly blunders into the room, fiction become's reality—true to Claire's prediction—he begs to return, but she rejects him with a newly discovered decisiveness: "You can't conceive that I *could* stop loving you. It happened in just one second—I think-when I saw what you'd done to [Mary] . . . I'm not going *home—now—or ever.*" Mary will continue to write and to live alone. The theme of the emotional consequences of both disintegrating marriages and the pursuit of careers had been introduced earlier in the play by their hostess, who diagnoses women's restlessness as due to a far-reaching lack of fulfillment in either institution . . . "Men mean a great deal more to women than women do to men . . . I don't care *what* strong women—like Mary tell you about loving their work and their *freedom*—it's all *slush.* Women *have got to be loved.* That's why they're breaking out so . . . They daring to have lovers—good women—because they just *can't stand being alone."*

Crothers had managed to write, on the average, a play a year since 1904. The incipient thirty-year-long quietism in feminist activities produced by apathy, factionalism, and personal loneliness is evident in the uneasy resignation of her later female characters. The playwright's response to a reporter, in 1941, revealed her final alienation from feminist causes and repeated her earlier assertion that her plays had mirrored, *mutatis mutandis,* the social evolution of sex roles: "What a picayune, self-conscious side all this woman business has to it . . . I've been told that my plays are a long procession

reflecting the changing attitudes of the world toward women. If they are, that was completely unconscious on my part. Any change like that, that gets on to the stage, has already happened in life. Even the most vulgar things, that people object to with so much excitement, wouldn't be in the theatre at all if they hadn't already become a part of life."

In 1931, the Pulitzer Prize was given to Susan Glaspell, the first woman to win it in a decade. In *Alison's House* (Civic Repertory Theatre, December 1, 1930), her last play, she again returned to the dramatic techniques she had used during her years with the Provincetown a decade earlier. Zoe Akins won the Prize, in 1935, for *The Old Maid* (Empire Theatre, January 7, 1935) but her skillful dramatic adaptation (like Edith Wharton's novelette published eleven years earlier) is set back in time. Both prize-winning plays safely distanced controversial feminist issues by presenting women tethered by Edwardian proprieties rather than more immediately recognizable topical restraints. It is possibly worth pointing out that the plays for which American women have won Pulitzer Prizes deal essentially with the "old maid" figure in whom the threat of sex-role conflict is "neutralized," as did the near-winner, Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (Maxine Elliott Theatre, November 20, 1934), which dealt with the cruel ostracism of suspected lesbians.

The efforts of women to understand and determine their own lives, their failure to develop effective strategies for the realization of personal gratification, their continuing attachment to the perimeters of capitalism were portrayed by Glaspell, Gale, Crothers, and Akins less as a passionate subjugation than as the restless sojourn of half-articulate captives in a land that seemed alien to them. Marriage continued to be the first choice and a career the second of most women, as their enrollment percentage in colleges continued to drop steadily from 40.3 in 1930 to 30.2 in 1950. In the theatre, divorcees and professional women continued to be perceived as "threats" to the institution of marriage, because they personified women's fulfillment through chosen alternative social roles. Not until the late 1950s would public attention again focus on the issues probed so searchingly by this generation of playwrights. Certainly, isolated expressions of "feminist" theatre, like Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (Plymouth Theatre, September 7, 1928), had continued, but they were generally short-lived, and for a quarter of a century, there was no reappearance of the serious concern with the "woman problem" that had characterized the work of America's women playwrights from the Midwest.

My comments have been limited to plays written by middle-class women who bring to issue kinship rules and incest taboos in which primary sex role determines generic restrictions for dramatic action. A thoroughgoing analysis would have included, among others, the ordinary females and heteroclites created by Clare Kummer, Rose Pastor Stokes, Alice Gerstenberg, Alice Brown, Sophie Treadwell, Rita Wellman, Neith Boyce, Lula Vollmer, Maurine Watkins, Charlotte Perkins Gillman, and Julie Herne. Nor have I mentioned Edward Sheldon, George Middleton, Bayard Veiller, Sidney Howard, George Kelly, Eugene O'Neill, and S. N. Behrman, who were remarkably sensitive to the predicaments of female characters and deserve to be reevaluated in this light.

As theatre historians and critics, we must now attempt to refine our working lexicon. Beyond female roles dictated by kinship structures (e.g. wife, mother, daughter, sister, bride, mother-in-law, widow, grandmother), there exist other roles which are more or less independent (e.g., coquette, ingénue, soubrette, career woman, servant, shaman, witch, bawd, whore) as well as interdependent roles (e.g., the other woman, mulatto). Only by developing descriptive categories with some historical precision can we hope to account for both formulaic successes and changes in dramatic modes. A more accurate vocabulary for female "dramatis personae" could help us to understand the interrelationships between the theatre and evolving social milieus in this and other periods.

Source: Cynthia Sutherland, "American Women Playwrights as Mediators of the 'Woman Problem,'" in *Modern Drama,* Vol. 21, No. 3, September 1978, pp. 319-36.

Critical Essay #7

In the following essay excerpt, Simonson covers the creation and publication of Miss Lulu Bett, *and subsequent critical attention.*

Critical Essay #8

Early in 1919 Zona Gale began sending her new manuscript on its rounds to magazine editors, her cover-letter typically restrained: "Dear Sir:—I am submitting with this a novelette, 'Miss Lulu Bett,' with the hope that it may just possibly be acceptable to you." Six editors rejected it straightaway, even though it could have been run as a magazine serial. Finally Rutger Jewett of D. Apple-ton Company agreed to publish it as a book.

For the story Zona Gale had taken an episode originally intended for *Birth* but cut out to shorten the already too lengthy novel. Jeffrey Pitt became Bobby in *Miss Lulu Betti* and the title character was his casual aunt in *Birth* changed to the leading character in the novelette. Carefully she expanded the episode, which in its completion was still "as spare," thought Carl Van Doren, "as the virgin frame" of the heroine. Wilson Follett and other friends had warned her that another long novel would probably have the same unprofitable fate as *Birth*. This advice, which augmented her previous resolution to strip away the fanciful, left her with forty-five thousand lean words, the length of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome* and Wilta Cather's *A Lost Lady,* with which Zona Gale's story was later favorably compared.

Because of meager sales with her preceding novels, booksellers were skeptical about this one. But with the vigorous promotion which her new publisher gave it, plus the burst of favorable reviews, it soon competed as a best seller with Lewis' *Main Street,* published also in 1920. Without hesitation reviewers thought it the best novel Zona Gale had yet done; furthermore, it promised them that she had forever cast sentimentality behind her, that she was unquestionably finished with Friendship Village. They read the new novel as a tart picture of small-town American life, and as first-rate realism. Nothing now interfered with her straightforward expression—no sentimentality, no distracting threads of mysticism, no contrived optimism, no tiresome chatter, and no tea parties. In it instead were realism's sordidness and triviality, its tragedy of unfulfilled lives, its hypocrisies, its mundane and dishwater monotony. Writing five months after the novel appeared, Robert Benchley in the New York *World* (July 10, 1920) apologized for merely hailing it as "a great book." "But I can't do anything else. I'm very sorry." His wry point was that for five solid months the same adjective had been used. Constance Rourke a month later summarized the attitude generated about the book by stating flatly, "Whatever its antecedents, the book stands as a signal accomplishment in American letters."

A "portent" to Miss Rourke of even firmer work to come, *Miss Lulu Bett* also reinforced the current hue and cry over women's rights. Her most successful treatment of woman's plight comes in this novel. No longer does Friendship Village, with its kindness and goodwill, befriend the newly educated American woman—nor do its comforting niceties satisfy her. The "home town" now tyrannizes her. What was once familial harmony is now in *Miss Lulu Bett* snapping and peevish incivility. Worse still, the chances for escape are few, the hopes gigantically disproportionate to their realization.

After fifteen years in her sister's and brother-in-law's household, Lulu Bett, unmarried at thirty-three, presents a sad spectacle of the frustrated, unemancipated woman. When old Mr. Bett died, Lulu and her senile mother moved in with Ina and Dwight Deacon who routinely assumed that, for her "keep," Lulu would take over all the menial domestic chores. Her stirrings of rebellion offer no hope, for the pattern of small-town mores dictates her duty to the household. She is its only competent person, its workhorse, but no one pays attention. She has long ago sacrificed her pride to Dwight's grossness. Virtually a slave having no means of liberation, she stoically submits to the treadmill. Her own summary, "Nobody cares what becomes of me after they're fed," echoes the old woman in Sherwood Anderson's story, "Death in the Woods." Demeaned and scorned, the butt of jokes, both women represent figures found in a social captivity which deprives them of individuality and relevance.

It is not surprising that when Dwight's brother, Ninian, comes to visit the family, Lulu's expectations stir. Ninian has traveled for twenty years, has been to all the places John Embers described to provincial Cosma Wakely in *A Daughter of the Morning,* and has now returned with endless stories to tell. Though lacking the capacity for intensive observation, he has nevertheless been away, to alien lands. Incredulous that Lulu has never left Warbleton, merely another Portage Katytown Burage, he lightly suggests a trip to the city with Dwight and Ina. Symbolizing liberation, the big city dazzles Lulu; with her companions, she sees *Peter Pan,* chosen by Ninian because the tickets were expensive. Later the four go to a restaurant where, as a gag, Dwight performs a marriage ceremony for Lulu and Ninian. Startled to discover its legality, since Dwight *is* a justice of the peace, flushed and tremulous Lulu accedes to Ninian's wish to consider themselves married. Ironically for helpless Lulu, that which was intended as a joke becomes a marriage; brassy ragtime music is her wedding march.

A month later when Lulu returns to Warbleton without her husband, the Deacons are shocked to learn from her that Ninian was already married and has gone to Oregon to learn if his wife is still alive. Caring nothing for Lulu's torment, Dwight thinks only of the gossip Lulu's return will set afoot. "I desire that you should keep silent and protect my family from scandal," he thunders. But the neighbors' curiosity cannot be curbed.

"Lulu Betti" Or "W-well, it *isn't* Lulu Bett any
more, is it? Well, what are you doing here? I
thought. . . "
"I'm back to stay," she said.
"The idea! Well, where are you hiding that handsome
husband of yours? Say, but we were surprised! You're
the sly one—
" a"My—Mr. Deacon isn't here."
"Oh."
"No. He's West."
"Oh, I see."

While waiting to hear from Ninian, Lulu meets Neil Cornish, the new music store

proprietor whom the Deacons regard as an eligible husband for Di, Dwight's eighteen-year-old daughter by an earlier marriage. Cornish, however, attends to Lulu when, for example, after dining with the Deacons he joins her at the piano in singing such tender classics as "Long, Long Ago" and "Little Nell of Narragansett Bay." More importantly, he recognizes the stifling Deacon household and Lulu's intolerable role in it as a parody of the old-fashioned "historical home," a haven transformed into a trap. She discovers in Cornish a sensitivity and intelligence rare indeed in prosaic Warbleton. She tells him about her bizarre marriage to Ninian and her present anxiousness to hear from him. When Ninian finally writes to Lulu that their marriage is absolved because he has found his wife who had deserted him, she and Cornish marry. Lulu leaves the household welter to her inept sister and serenely gives to her shattered brother-in-law the task of rebuilding his respectability among his gossiping neighbors who will be agog at learning of his brother's bigamy.

Zona Gale's characterizations are economical and strong. Lulu is what Fannie Hurst called the "shining star" reflected in greasy reality." She mitigates the family's heavily weighted banality with an ingenuousness which Henry James enjoyed portraying in his young, unmarried women. By contrast, the boorishness of Dwight Deacon, the village's prototypal businessman, prevents his ever transcending the maudlin or the tiresomely respectable. Ina is weak and simpering, able to do little but feed Dwight's own image of self-importance. Old Mrs. Bett, shriveled and dis-affectionate, occasionally "sasses" Dwight but is herself a narrow-minded person given to "tantrims." The daughter Di apes sophistication in an unsuccessful elopement with Bobby Larkin, the neighbor boy, but her intentions only reveal a sauciness nurtured by her father. Little Monona, daughter of Ina and Dwight, is a whiny, recalcitrant pest. In short, the traditional family hearth as the center of peace is now a stage upon which dull-witted, thoroughly bourgeois fools do their strutting.

Zona Gale's angular and staccato style, her stark brevity, artfully project these characterizations. Embroidery is cut away, and what remains is "a hard little picture," a term Edith Wharton used when writing to Miss Gale about the novel. But Miss Wharton was uneasy about it too, even though she praised her for the sharpness of the picture's edges. She cautioned her that at this "turning-point" she must avoid stripping her style to the point of barrenness. In her opinion this was what Zona Gale had done in *Miss Lulu Bett*. "I resent this," Miss Wharton continued, in her own Jamesian way, "first because you have needlessly limited your field of expression, and produced an impression of monotony in your style as well as in the lives of the people you depict; and secondly, because it is to this telegraphic brevity, and to this poverty of vocabulary, that hurry, laziness and ignorance of the history of our language and its boundless resources, are inevitably leading all our young writers. . . "

Miss Wharton, who had won the Pulitzer Prize in 1920 for her novel *The Age of Innocence,* was inveighing against the notion that a denuded subject needs a denuded style. She was far too acute to suggest that Zona Gale's earlier filigree enhanced characterization: she readily acknowledged *Miss Lulu Bett* as a major literary achievement, a "turning-point." Her warning was directed toward a style lacking "inflections, modulations, twists, turns, surprises, heights and depths." Even a mediocre

mind such as Dwight Deacon's, she would insist, is the result of invisible accumulations and its atmosphere the totality of innumerable experiences. She wanted Zona Gale to subtilize the picture, not simply to etch it. The Jamesian "figure in the carpet," elusive as it is, would never show if the carpet itself lacked texture. And Miss Wharton was at a loss to find texture in a passage like this, from *Miss Lulu Bett:*

"Baked potatoes," said Mr. Deacon. "That's good—
that's good. The baked potato contains more nourishment
than potatoes prepared in any other way. The
nourishment is next to the skin. Roasting retains it.
" "That's what I always think," said his wife pleasantly.
For fifteen years they had agreed about this.

It is important to know that Edith Wharton wrote this letter in September, 1922, more than two years after *Miss Lulu Bett* first appeared. By this time, Zona Gale had successfully adapted it for the stage; she had written another lean novelette entitled *Man at Red Barns* which *The Delineator* had run serially; and she had also sent off the manuscript of *Faint Perfume* to Glenn Frank, editor of *Century Magazine.* In other words, for nearly three years she had been experimenting with her new style, fully appreciating that it had implemented her literary success.

Yet Miss Wharton's words disturbed her. In her reply she said she was, in fact, under the "spell" of the letter. Two weeks later she confessed to Miss Wharton that her criticism of *Miss Lulu Bett* had come "at precisely the moment I needed it, was restless because of the need of it." Then, pointedly, she added, "Since my new book [*Faint Perfume*] left my hand I have been haunted by just this verbal insufficiency, unwise compression, inflexibility, monotony." The style bringing her literary fame dissatisfied her. For Robert Benchley to praise her for having dared to create a Dwight Deacon who says "the gorgeously conventional thing with epoch-making dullness" only increased her own uncertainty, now provoked by Edith Wharton.

Regardless of these misgivings, Zona Gale believed her novel to be an honest portrayal of the duty-bound, domestically enslaved woman of her day. Its impact satisfied her. When New York producer, Brock Pemberton, wired her on October 27, 1920, that she should adapt it for the theater, she immediately set to work. "I'm almost ashamed," she told Keene Sumner, "to say how quickly it was done. I finished it in a week, but as I wasn't satisfied with the last act I held it over from Saturday to Monday to revise it. So I can say that it took me ten days, and that doesn't sound quite so bad." Another wire from Pemberton on November 13 said he would look for actors and a theater at once. On December 27 the play opened at the Belmont Theater in New York. Five months later she won the Pulitzer Prize for it.

She had practically no writing experience for the stage. Six years earlier she had written the one-act drama called *The Neighbors*, which had been produced by the Wisconsin Dramatic Society and taken on tour through several states. Yet so adroitly did she shape this first full-length theatrical effort that it ran for some six hundred performances

in New York and on the road, and it brought her royalties amounting to nearly six thousand dollars.

For the dramatic adaptation Zona Gale retained the same terse expression to depict the banality of the Deacons. Minor changes bring Neil Cornish into the play sooner, arrange Lulu's marriage to Ninian in the Deacon kitchen instead of in a big-city restaurant, and soften the character of old Mrs. Bett. Missing is the novel's romantic ending with Lulu as the new Mrs. Cornish. Instead, Lulu first receives word that Ninian has found his wife, then she leaves the Deacon family and, bewilderingly liberated, goes alone into the world to find work. As the curtain falls, old Mrs. Bett turns to helpless Ina and snickers, "Who's going to do your work now, I'd like to know?"

Miss Gale did not intend the paradoxical ending in *Miss Lulu Bett*, the novel, to suggest that Lulu's liberation from one household only sends her into the confinement of another. She thought that Lulu's marriage to Cornish constituted a "happy ending"—something hardly credible after she had depicted what domestic oppression is really like. In the play, however, the unromantic ending creates a more artful ambiguity. Is Lulu free? With no job and no husband, what are her chances? Will love and marriage, or a job paying wages, sustain her freedom? Or must she inevitably again be trapped? Ludwig Lewisohn correctly pointed out that this is "a weightier and more severe ending" than the novel's.

But rumors convinced Zona Gale after the second week that the public thought this ending too depressing. So she rewrote it! In the new third act Ninian discovers that because his unnecessary first spouse has obligingly been dead for many years, he can return to rescue Lulu from her drudgery. Lulu achieves respectable wifehood, this time as Mrs. Ninian Deacon.

Immediately a torrent of criticism broke. Heywood Broun in the New York *Tribune* (Feb. 6, 1921) thought that employing the "happy ending" tradition was about as sensible as demanding feathers on a mountain lion. Lewisohn argued that Miss Gale's new twist destroyed Lulu's significant liberation. Alexander Woolcott in the New York *Times* (Dec. 28, 1920) called the whole play "sleazily put together," an opinion which the rewritten last act failed to change. In a parody on Zona Gale's confusion over her heroine's destiny, Louis Untermeyer has Lulu say: "'We'—she flushed suddenly—'my first husband and I—I think it was my first husband, although the play and the book and the lady wrote about me mixed me up sort of about myself.'" The occasion brought other criticism: that Lulu's fifteen years with the Deacons proved her own lack of initiative, and that the story was only propaganda for the feminist movement.

To her scoffers Miss Gale gave straightforward answers. In no way apologizing for her revised act, she publicly replied in the New York *Tribune* (Jan. 21, 1921) that "the common experience affords as many examples of marriage as of going out into the world alone." Irony, satire, tragedy "must constitute many and many a curtain. But not all." To the charge that Lulu's treadmill cannot represent women's plight because it presupposes a witless Lulu, she sharply replied: "Do you mind my saying: 'I know them' . . . overshadowed, browbeaten women, wives or Lulus" enslaved by duty, "dead

duty." And to the charge of propaganda, she averred that the story merely shows one woman, Lulu, anxious about herself.

As is to be expected, the storm increased the play's popularity. Months of solid booking made it a contender for the Pulitzer Prize. Among several other productions creating lively response the same season were *Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neill, who had won the Pulitzer Prize the previous year for *Beyond the Horizon;* Frank Craven's *The First Year;* and Porter Emerson Browne's *The Bad Men.* But it was *Miss Lulu Bett* that attracted the most favor with Hamlin Garland, Robert Morss Lovett, and Stuart Sherman —the group appointed to recommend the best play of 1921 to the Pulitzer Prize Committee. Though the decision to recommend Miss Gale's work was unanimous, Garland expressed disappointment with the way she "had fumbled about for a 'happy ending.'"

Again the New York critics stormed. Heywood Broun in the *Tribune* (June 1, 1921) led the pack by declaring that only a few would agree with the committee's choice. To dull his attack upon Miss Gale but to sharpen it upon the committee, he argued that *Miss Lulu Bett*, the novel, might better have been the committe's choice for fiction the preceding year instead of Miss Wharton's *The Age of Innocence.* This cross-fire grew too hot for Zona Gale, who had been in New York most of the time since the play's opening five months earlier. With the prize money of $1,000 she was only too ready to hurry back to her Portage home adjacent to the silently flowing Wisconsin River.

Zona Gale's public image now appeared to be clearly set; Wisconsin had no other woman to match it. A La Follette supporter, a Progressive, a pacifist, a leader in women's rights and suffrage, the author of more than a dozen books, a Pulitzer Prizewinning dramatist—these were the unmistakable hallmarks of this slightly built, modest Portage woman. New to the image was Zona Gale as the iconoclast, one who was cutting into bourgeois Babbittry to find it both mean and vulgar. While formerly a small-town romanticist, she had now boldly come forth as a skeptic of American values in the 1920's. She saw in the times—as did H. L. Mencken and Lewis—a flabby degeneration of nineteenth-century idealism. Her futile attempt to reconcile America's traditional faith in human dignity with the newer instances of exploitation and Darwinian competitiveness aroused her disgust toward the reincarnated American hero, the man of business, who, typically, like Cyrus Harkness in her *Man at Red Barns* pontificated, "I hope to thunder the time'll come when we can have a real business man in every pulpit." Her fiction during this period showed that, in America, vices had become virtues: deceit in business was hailed as shrewdness; generosity was belittled as evidence of unmanliness. Her lethal pictures of "leading citizens," "successful men of affairs," and "super patriots" placed her solidly among the literary realists at a time when there was both a vogue and a need for them.

Her realism reminds one of Edgar Lee Masters' icy cynicism toward Spoon River's leading "whited sepulchres," but it is counterpoised in her fiction with a deep sympathy toward the unsuccessful, disappointed, inhibited people. She captured the drabness of these lives, forgotten in the backwashes of American bombast. She went further to create amid these gray scenes a faintly mystical tone. This vague mysticism, colored by

her characters' private longings for self-assurance, suggests that Zona Gale was not a realist at all. She was, instead, a poet, a mystic, a symbolist. But this deeply flowing, silent strain was not visible to the public's eye or, if seen, not allowed to interfere with its image of her.

Critical Essay #9

Before starting *Faint Perfume* (1923), her third and in some ways her best novel explicitly written as realism, she published three minor pieces more interesting for what they imply than for their literary excellence. The first was an inconsequential one-act play for the *Ladies' Home Journal.* Entitled *Uncle Jimmy* (1922), it resurrected for a brief moment the buried Calliope Marsh and her Friendship Village neighbors. That this play should have followed *Miss Lulu Bett* is evidence that Zona Gale's break from Friendship Village sunshine never conclusively occurred. The second piece was the serial *Man at Red Barns*, published in *The Delineator.* Reflecting Zona Gale's growing interest in religious New Thought movements, the novelette's protagonist is John Hazen, a recently widowed Universalist minister who believes that all churches should become one. By preaching universal love, supposedly more deeply infused than any creed, Hazen hopes to eliminate the "stupid duplication or competition of the denominations." Unfortunately, his efforts toward the "evolving process of brotherhood" excite more antipathy than cooperation in the community, the exception being Anita Wentworth who joins him in the double blessedness of both religious reform and matrimony.

In a third work, this time a thin volume of poetry called *The Secret Way* (1921), Miss Gale again develops what may seem a paradoxical theme for the social reformer who trusts legislation as a means to effect reform. Working assiduously for social legislation, she retains the illusion that any worth-while change must come from within rather than be imposed from without. Her subject in these poems is again love, the secret way to clarify one's sight to "abiding beauty everywhere." In "Contours," she traces beauty as a true line, "drawn from my spirit to some infinite outward place." In "Enchantment," the "ultimate star" becomes her neighbor, and the town's confining walls dissolve like Thoreau's prison.

The interlude, then, between *Miss Lulu Bett* and *Faint Perfume* reveals a deeply moving interest in the metaphysical and a growing crystallization of key ideas soon to be vital. For example, "love" is Zona Gale's term for the release of an indwelling spiritual force fusing with an all-encircling Spirit. One's captivity, even in small-town realities, is never ultimate so long as one's spirit has not been annihilated. Consequently, her hard little pictures of village life lack the dreadful quality with which a Sartre or a Camus would imbue them: her walls are porous and ultimately nonexistent because one's spirit can never be imprisoned, while those of the Frenchmen remain forever impenetrable.

Searching for the certainty that ultimate reality lies somewhere outside the walls, that it transcends the dreary and mundane workaday world, Zona Gale found herself ready to write another *Birth*. Yet she had not finished outlining the bleakness of the market-place world and its tortuous confinement. Her emphasis in *Faint Perfume* still is on the village's uninspired commonplaceness which, when not allayed, turns its inhabitants into clods. Love someday might enable her new heroine, Leda Perrin, to fly above what Miss Gale called the "labyrinth of the unreal," but for now love's absence consigns Leda to the town, ironically named Prospect. In the town one finds Orrin Crumb's house, where Leda lives, no different from Dwight Deacon's. Both are "violently dedicated to the

concrete." The faint perfume of spring is barely perceptible, and then only to Leda, the little boy Oliver, his father Barnaby Powers, and old grandfather Crumb. To all the others, who rule the house and town, "the ground was iron beneath dirty snow."

In this novel Zona Gale's use of symbols reveals a surer hand. The red and awesomely beautiful poinsettia dominates the family table, and its "red eye" is like Dr. Eckleburg's in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby;* both silently gape upon the human debris. Before the severity of "red eye's" judgment, Leda, trapped in her cousin's household, feels naked. Here is not the nakedness of Richmiel, her fleshy and worldly-wise cousin, whose "yellow gown unclothed her." Instead, Leda is exposed to her own conscience. She stands guilty; the charge is submission to the prosaic and the ugly. By marrying Barnaby, Richmiel's divorced husband, Leda hopes to atone for her guilt: a marriage to another caged spirit would, neatly, liberate both. Barnaby is ideally suited to rescue Leda. No longer distracted by the heavy eyes and wanton ankles of Richmiel, he discovers to his surprise that looking upon Leda reminds him of angels who perhaps "know something better."

But any such knowledge of bliss possessed by angels or by D. H. Lawrence's Miriams will not be Leda's. Earthbound Richmiel stands in the way. Legally divorced from Barnaby but given custody of their small son Oliver, Richmiel now manipulates him as a pawn to keep Barnaby and Leda apart. Raichmiel's heartless game is to allow Barnaby, who adores Oliver, to have his son only as long as Leda remains apart. In this way Richmiel, a hedonist who cares nothing for Oliver, can twist the screw into her former husband and at the same time revenge her jealousy of Leda. Barnaby must choose between rescuing Leda from the Crumbs or freeing Oliver from his mother. His departure with Oliver leaves Leda stranded with only the small hope that someday Richmiel will marry another man, be glad to rid herself legally of the boy, and thereby enable Leda to join with Barnaby.

In the meantime, Leda lives amid all the frustrations and hypocrisies present in Zona Gale's transformed village. Orrin Crumb is stamped from the same machine of Babbittry, and Miss Gale's scalpel cuts just as deftly into the fat as did Lewis'. Busy as both a salesman and Gideonite, Crumb distributes his wares and Bibles with equal gusto: "It would not matter what the *corps* was, the *esprit* would be there." The particularly handy combination he created for himself—the religious order of traveling salesmen—pleases him completely. Cloddish and gauche, he resolves any problem with a grunt, guffaw, sigh, or moral platitude. His wife, Tweet, is just as inert to complexities, except for family intricacies such as Richmiel's divorce which may provoke town gossip. Tweet's two sisters, Richmiel and Pearl, and their mother, lock the cage around Leda.

After Barnaby and Oliver have left, the only kindred but also trapped spirit remaining is grandfather Crumb, a worn-out old man still harboring the feelings of a poet. His last years in his son's house hold have cost him his privacy and singular dignity. His silence serves as his only refuge. But Richmiel's meanness and the taunting of the others who scorn his old age finally overwhelm him. His suicide note reads: "Canal. By the cottonwood. Blind in a year. Can't take care of my room much longer. Have broken the water picher [*sic*]. Good bye all. Good bye Leda. Shiny quarters for the little chap."

Swept by desolation now even more profound than that in the valley of ashes named Prospect, Leda sees life as only "cadaver, skeleton, dust." She hears screams inside her which she cannot openly voice to Crumb: "You have killed me a hundred times since I have been in this house. Your way of life is death. I cannot die anymore." Barnaby's remembered words about love and freedom—the faint perfume—provide only fragile solace to Leda who, as the novel ends, sits in the Crumb house which is filled with grandfather's funeral flowers and listens to the hollow voice of Orrin Crumb, the Gideonite: ". . . a Bible in every hotel room. And on the inside cover these wholesome references: If lonesome, read Twenty-third Psalm. If in trouble, read John fourteen. If trade is poor, read——."

Faint Perfume swiftly compresses Zona Gale's distinguishing marks as a literary realist. In this novel her small town again shuts in small people whose cherished values kill spontaneity, imagination, freedom, and life. Ensnared is the fragile soul, like a butterfly, seeking egress. If escape is possible at all, the passage out is as precarious as Thoreau found it to be on leaving the village for Walden Pond. Not only the village's commitment to mercantilism but its intolerance and militant conformity crush a beautiful spirit. Marshall and Jeffrey Pitt, Lulu Bett, Leda Perrin are similar spirits, impaled and imprisoned by Mencken's *boobus americanus.*

Her taut realism—her depressive pictures of American life etched with bold hard lines—added to the baleful cry, uttered by other realists, that the bumptious *nouveau riche* had left the nation barren of culture. Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age* (1873) and William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and, by the end of the century, more than sixty other novels lampooned the bustling, business-minded, self-satisfied middle class and its new wealth. In 1896 historian Brooks Adams declared in the last chapter of his sensational *Law of Civilization and decay* that no art can flourish in "the arid modern soil." Critics Van Wyck Brooks, V. F. Calverton, and Matthew Josephson added their voices to the protest. Across the ocean Matthew Arnold had warned against what he called "philistinism," and Swinburne, Wells, Shaw, and Wilde reiterated his warnings. Exile from middle-class mediocrity sent artists to their separate sanctuaries; the Americans in the 1920's were going to Parisian bistros. Zona Gale stayed in Portage and found her escape in contemplating the real mysteries of the river seen from her second-floor back window.

After the last touch of poison in *Faint Perfume* she went no further. She knew she was on the verge of something big, and, whatever it was, it did not lie in further depicting the hollow Deacons and Crumbs nor the broken wings of Lulu and Leda beating empty air. Her literary stature she thought secure, and she was corroborated by such critics as Carl Van Doren who, as fiction editor of *Century Magazine,* told her of his pleasure in serializing *Faint Perfume*, which was followed after its last installment by Willa Cather's three-part novel *The Lost Lady.* Even Heywood Broun, in the New York *World* (March 23, 1923), praised *Faint Perfume*. Edith Wharton's "grumble" that sensitive Leda could not possibly also be a Crumb cousin, elicited from Zone Gale only a quiet answer, not an argument. With something else on her mind, she merely thanked her for the letter and added that she had learned a great deal from writing the book. In a cryptic

conclusion she referred to "a certain brooding hope which leaves me quite breathless." That brooding hope concerned her next novel, *Preface to a Life*.

Source: Harold P. Simonson, "On to Realism," in *Zona Gale,* Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962, pp. 73-91.

Adaptations

Miss Lulu Bett was made into a silent film in 1921. It was directed by William C. DeMille, produced by Adolph Zukor, and starred Lois Wilson and Milton Sills. It is available through Nostalgia Family Video.

Topics for Further Study

Read the novella *Miss Lulu Bett*. How do the play and the novella compare? Which do you prefer? Why?

As Gale saw it, the character Lulu Bett had three possible futures: marriage to Mr. Cornish, marriage to Ninian, or the solitary journey away from home to make a new life for herself. Which of these endings do you think most strongly supports the ideals of feminism? Which of these endings do you think works best artistically? Explain your analyses.

At the time of its publication, *Miss Lulu Bett* was alternately praised as a feminist statement on the drudgery and oppression of women, and criticized as being merely feminist propaganda that failed to show strong, independent women. Which assessment of the play do you feel is more accurate? Explain your answer.

Conduct research to find out more about what was happening with the women's rights movement in the 1910s and 1920s. Do the difficulties that Lulu faces seem representative of the period? Why or why not?

With the novella *Miss Lulu Bett*, Gale found her voice and her place among the burgeoning Ameri-can realist school of writers. Find out what life in small-town America was like around 1920. How accurately does Gale portray this milieu? Explain your answer.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: The Nineteenth Amendment is passed in 1919 and ratified the following year, giving women in the United States the legal right to vote. In 1924, two states have female governors, and by 1928, 145 women serve in state legislatures and 2 women sit in Congress. In 1923 the National Women's Party proposes an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Many people, including women, oppose this amendment because they fear it will make legislation protecting women workers unconstitutional, and it fails to pass.

Today: More and more women are holding public office, with numbers rising continuously throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1999, 1,664 women hold offices in state legislatures. In 2002 74 women serve in Congress.

1920s: In 1920 women make up 20 percent of the workforce, but few hold professional jobs; instead, most are employed as domestics and servants. Throughout the decade, increasing numbers of women go to work outside the home—more than 2 million by the end of the 1920s. However, women continue to face obstacles in the workplace, such as the types of jobs they can get and the low pay they receive.

Today: By the beginning of the decade, around 48 million women, aged sixteen and over, are employed. These women make up about 44 percent of the American workforce. Women generally earn less money than men; on the average, women earn only 74 cents for every dollar a man earns. They also tend to be concentrated in fewer types of jobs.

1920s: For the first time in the country's history, more Americans live in urban settings than in rural ones. A little over 50 million Americans live in rural settings compared to about 55 million who live in urban settings.

Today: In 1990, just over 75 percent of Americans live in urban areas.

What Do I Read Next?

Gale's best selling novella *Miss Lulu Bett* (1920) was the basis for the play of the same name. The play is very faithful to the novella with one notable exception: the novella ends in Lulu's marriage to Mr. Cornish.

Gale's novel *Birth* (1918) was considered by the author to be her best work. Marking Gale's shift away from writing sentimental novels, it focuses on life in the grim village of Burage, which entraps its residents with its stern provinciality.

The Group (1963), by Mary McCarthy, follows the lives of several women who have just graduated from college in the early 1930s. Their stories fascinatingly detail the changing morality as well as the roles assumed by women of that decade.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's short story "The Revolt of 'Mother,'" published in 1891 in the collection *A New England Nun and Other Stories,* chronicles the oppression of a farmwife and her rebellion against her long-standing familial role.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), by Zora Neale Hurston, tells the story of Janie, an independent minded young black woman, and her three very different marriages.

Sinclair Lewis's novel *Main Street* (1920) tells the story of a young woman married to a Mid-western doctor who settles in a small town in Minnesota. Lewis clearly portrays local speech, customs, and social amenities, satirizing both the townspeople and the condescending so-called intellectuals who dislike them.

Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) created a furor among its nineteenth-century audience, who wanted a "happy ending." The play focuses on Nora, a middle-class wife, who once committed a fraud in order to obtain a loan to save her husband's life. When Nora's husband, who prides himself in his sense of ethics, finds out about this, he repudiates her out of concern for his reputation. Faced with the utter disillusionment about her husband and his loyalty, Nora leaves her family, declaring her independence.

Donna M. Lucey's *I Dwell in Possibility: Women Build a Nation, 1600 to 1920* (2001) provides an overview of the wide variety of roles women played in America up through the time that Gale wrote *Miss Lulu Bett.*

Further Study

Derleth, August, *Still Small Voice: The Biography of Zona Gale,* D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940.

This in-depth biography, while more anecdotal than critical, provides an interesting look into Gale's life and the literary times in which she lived. It also includes excerpts from Gale's writing, including her poetry; other writers on Gale's work; Gale's unfin-ished autobiography; a selected bibliography; and photographs.

Nettels, Elsa, "Edith Wharton's Correspondence with Zona Gale: 'An Elder's Warm Admiration and Interest,'" in

Resources for American Literary Study, Vol. 24, No. 2, 1998, pp. 207-34.

Wharton and Gale corresponded with thoughts about each other's writing, and Wharton criticized the stark style employed in *Miss Lulu Bett.* In this article, Nettels investigates the helpful literary relationship between the two writers.

Williams, Deborah Lindsay, *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship,* St. Martin's Press, 2001.

Williams investigates the transition in the early twentieth century from the model of the "lady author" to a new, but yet undefined alternative.

———, "Threats of Correspondence: The Letters of Edith Wharton, Zona Gale, and Willa Cather," in *Studies in American Fiction,* Vol. 25, No. 2, 1997, pp. 211-39.

Williams discusses why these women authors placed an importance on remaining separate from other women writers.

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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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