The Mound Builders Study Guide

The Mound Builders by Lanford Wilson

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Introduction

Lanford Wilson's *The Mound Builders* was first produced on February 2, 1975, in New York City at the Circle Repertory Company. It was directed by Wilson's long-time collaborator and cofounder of the "Circle Rep," Marshall W. Mason. The play explores the conflicts between a team of visiting archeologists who are excavating several early Mississippian mounds and a local man who hopes to make his fortune by developing the land where the mounds are located. As the archeologists ponder and celebrate the dignity of the pre-Columbian people who built the mounds, they overlook the humanity of the people alive around them. The play is presented as a series of flashbacks, as August Howe, the chief archeologist, dictates notes about his slides from a recently ended expedition.

Wilson has said several times that *The Mound Builders* is his own favorite among his plays. It has not been his most successful play, either commercially or critically, in part because the issues and connections between the characters are so complicated and subtle that audiences miss much of what is going on. Wilson revised the play for a Circle Rep revival in 1986, deleting the character of Kirsten, August's daughter, but reviewers were still lukewarm. Readers of the published play (which is the 1975 version) have been able to better appreciate the play's richness. Though not currently in print as a separate volume, *The Mound Builders* is part of the collection *Lanford Wilson: Collected Works Volume II 1970-1983*.

Author Biography

Lanford Wilson was born on April 13, 1937, in Lebanon, Missouri. His father left the family when Wilson was five years old, and his mother took a job in a garment factory in Springfield. Six years later she remarried, and Wilson and his mother moved to his stepfather's farm near Ozark. As a teenager, Wilson discovered a love for the theater and acted in school plays. He also had a strong interest in art. After graduating from Ozark High School, Wilson went to California to try living with his father and to take courses in art and art history at San Diego State College. Neither the classes nor the reunion with his father went well, and he moved again a year later to Chicago to start a career as a graphic artist. He worked in an advertising agency and wrote short stories in his spare time. When he realized that the strongest part of his stories was the dialogue, he decided to try his hand at writing plays.

At twenty-five, Wilson left Chicago for Greenwich Village in New York City, determined to become a playwright. He worked at a series of odd jobs and attended the theater whenever he could, especially plays in the new off-off-Broadway movement. He met Joe Cino, founder of a coffeehouse that also staged new plays. Cino became his mentor and in 1963 staged Wilson's first production, *So Long at the Fair*, the first of ten plays by Wilson produced at the coffeehouse. By 1969, Wilson had several plays produced in New York, London, and other European cities. With three other artists, he founded the Circle Repertory Company to produce new plays. He served as a writer-in-residence, and the company produced more than a dozen of his plays over the next thirty years, while also encouraging other playwrights.

Wilson's plays have been critical as well as popular successes. He has won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award twice, for *The Hot l Baltimore* (1973) and *Talley's Folley* (1980). *Talley's Folly* also won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Play. Wilson's own favorite of his plays, *The Mound Builders*, won the Obie Award in 1975, although it was not a popular success.

Wilson has had more than forty of his plays produced. Many of them saw their first productions at the Circle Repertory Theatre, and although he has had some success on Broadway, he has found his work with smaller repertory companies more satisfying. In 1998 and 2000, two new Wilson plays were produced at the Purple Rose Theatre in Chelsea, Michigan. One of them, *Books of Days* (1998), won the American Theatre Critics Award for best play in 1999.

Plot Summary

Act 1

As the curtain rises on *The Mound Builders*, Professor August Howe, an archeologist, is alone in his office in Urbana, Illinois, looking at slides of "last summer's expedition" and dictating notes into a microphone. He shows a lake, a house, and an archeological dig. August and his slides will make frequent brief appearances throughout the play as a way to separate one scene from another. There are no breaks within the two acts; instead, short episodes merge into each other as flashbacks, illuminating and expanding August's dictated notes. In this opening scene, August shows several slides in succession as the audience hears sounds of a car stopping, and lights go up on another part of the stage to reveal the house where the archeologist lived. As August finishes his last line, Cynthia and Kirsten come down the stairs and begin the next scene.

Cynthia and Kirsten come to the door to welcome Dan and Jean, who have just arrived. Chad is finishing up a bit of maintenance, and August tells the group that his sister Delia is on her way from Cleveland. As Dan and Jean unload their car, the relationships among the characters become clear: August is married to Cynthia, and Kirsten is their daughter; Dan is August's assistant and Jean's husband; Chad, the caretaker, is the son of the man who owns the house. This will be the fourth summer that August and Dan have worked on this site, excavating mounds built by pre-Columbian people known as the Early Mississippians or the Mound Builders, who lived in great cities near the Mississippi River. This will also be their last chance to find artifacts in the mounds, because a new man-made lake and a planned interstate highway will soon cover the entire area.

Another scene follows with August showing more slides, many taken by Cynthia, the unofficial photographer for the project. He speaks mockingly of the townspeople from Blue Shoals, of the archeology students who helped with the digging, and of Cynthia and Kirsten, from whom he is now estranged. In the next series of flashbacks, the relationships between the characters are shown to be more strained than was revealed previously. Delia arrives, against her will, and meets Dan and Jean for the first time. She is angry about the care she was getting in Cleveland and angry about being sent to her brother, but she is clearly too ill to be on her own. Dan and Jean have never met Delia before, though both are familiar with her writing because Delia has published two popular books. Jean is a gynecologist and listens kindly to Delia's complaints about her health, while August mocks her. As Dan excitedly tells the women about the excavation, he makes fun of the local people and their questions but speaks admiringly of the Mound Builders. Throughout this scene and the rest of the play, Dan and Cynthia frequently use alcohol and marijuana (Jean has given up intoxicants for the duration of her pregnancy), Delia complains and sulks, and August criticizes Delia and patronizes Chad.

August's next slides show the beginning of the excavation and the screening of the first few inches of soil on the first mound. As the scenes in the present with August and his slides progress, they present a chronology of the dig over the four years, showing the most important artifacts. Toward the end of the play, they also show the rising water getting nearer the site. August's commentary becomes increasingly bitter and weary. As this third scene in the present ends, a slide of Chad standing in front of the lake merges into a flashback in which Chad tries to convince Jean to come to the courthouse to see the model of the development planned for the new lakeshore. He and his father expect to be wealthy beyond their wildest dreams when the new lake is completed and their land becomes the site of a highway interchange, new industry, resorts, and restaurants. Chad is excited about the money, and he hopes it will impress Jean enough that she will leave Dan for him; apparently Chad and Jean had a relationship the previous summer, before Jean and Dan married. But Chad is unsophisticated and uneducated, and Jean is not interested in him.

Jean has been at Blue Shoals only once before, and this is Delia's first visit, so Dan and Cynthia try to fill in the gaps in the women's knowledge. Dan provides a lesson on the ancient peoples who inhabited the area going back to A.D. 600, and Cynthia provides a spouse's eye view on what the men are looking for and recording. August and Dan can talk of nothing but the Mound Builders, while the women discuss their hopes and their lost dreams. Delia can no longer write, and Cynthia never became a professional photographer; Jean wonders whether she will have a medical career after her baby is born. Jean reveals that she was National Spelling Champion when she was twelve and that the effort led to her being institutionalized. Delia explains that her collapse was also caused by the pressure of success. Cynthia begins an affair with Chad and makes no attempt to hide it. Dan and Chad, both heavy drinkers, get drunk and go fishing together. When they return, Jean sends Chad home and Dan to bed, and she and Delia reflect on the sad roles of men and their wives.

Act 2

As the second act opens, it is evening and all of the adults are gathered and puzzling over the latest find from the dig: a man who is buried in an unexpected position. Chad tries again to connect with Jean, and August advises Jean not to socialize with Chad, whom he considers inferior. Rain falls steadily, making digging impossible and making the lake rise more quickly. Dan is frustrated. He admires a bone awl, made in approximately A.D. 1100, and imagines the nobility of the man who made it. The women discuss Chad's plans for the new development. Jean is sure Chad will soon be rich, but Cynthia believes that poor people will always be poor and that somehow Chad will be cheated out of his wealth.

As Jean and Delia sit reading one day, Dan bursts in with exciting news. The unusual burial site has turned out to be the tomb of an Early Mississippian God King, an archeological wonder that no one has ever seen before. They have found a gold mask, a hoard of pearls and copper bracelets, and other treasures. They will be famous. Chad tries to determine the value of the artifacts, and Dan and August explain that the value is

not in the worth of the gold itself but in the rarity of the find. As the men talk, several things are revealed. Chad learns that Jean is pregnant and realizes that he will never win her. He and the women discover that August and Dan arranged a year ago for the site to be protected by law. The planned highway has been moved, and Chad will not be able to sell or lease his land.

At these revelations, submerged hostilities are brought into the open. Chad leaves in anger but returns after dark to coax Dan outside. In the morning, both Chad and Dan are missing, their fishing boat found empty on the lake. The treasures from the tomb have disappeared, and Chad has driven a bulldozer over the site, ruining everything. When Cynthia deliberately destroys the film in her camera, the only record of the important find is lost. Police and volunteers arrive to drag the lake for the men's bodies, and Jean collapses into Delia's arms. As the play closes, August shows his last slide, of the house half-submerged in the still-rising lake.

Act 1 Part 1

Act 1 Part 1 Summary

August speaks into a hand-held tape recorder, making a recording for a woman named Dianne, whom we understand to be a secretary or writer, and whom August wants to transcribe the tape. He says that after months of putting it off, he intends to examine "the wreckage of last summer's expedition." As he continues, a series of slides shows the things he's referring to: the house where he and his colleagues stayed during three years of preparatory excavations, the site of their archeological dig, and the man-made lake that threatened both the house and the dig. As lights come up on the house, August concludes by saying that the dig continued with the lake constantly expanding behind them.

Act 1 Part 1 Analysis

At the core of both this play's action and its themes is the idea of legacies, of what people leave behind for future generations. This first section is the first aspect of this idea as August clearly intends to leave some kind of record for people who come after him, presumably so they can learn from it. The speech is also rich with foreshadowing about the dig, the lake, and August's relationships, with his use of the word "wreckage" being particularly evocative.

Act 1 Part 2

Act 1 Part 2 Summary

August moves from his office into the house, Cynthia and Kirsten come downstairs, and Chad, Jean, and Dan arrive. As their gear is brought in, various conversations reveal that there is a group of female archeological students camping nearby, that work conditions are good, and that August's sister has had a breakdown, is arriving at the nearby airport later that afternoon, and staying for the summer. We learn that Jean is pregnant, that Chad is the owner of the house and is willing to accommodate whatever his guests want, and that the house is threatened by the expansion of the lake.

For a moment, August goes back into his office, dictates more of his tape to Dianne, and shows more slides. These are pictures of townspeople gathered to watch the dig, the students, pictures of Cynthia whom August refers to as an ex-relation, of Kirsten whom he refers to as an alleged daughter, and of good times had by the family at the beach. Back in the house, Dan and Jean continue to move in. August tells Jean that it won't be a particularly good time for her this summer, but Jean protests that everything will be fine. Cynthia offers everybody drinks. Lights blackout.

In the darkness the beam of a flashlight moves about the room. We hear Dan stub his toe and swear, then when he turns on a lamp we see him and Cynthia. Dan says he heard a noise, Cynthia says it's nothing, then asks whether Dan is working the next day. He says he is, and Cynthia tells him to get back to bed. She then turns off the lamp. In the darkness, Kirsten cries out for her mother. When August tries to comfort her, Kirsten says she heard voices. August says that they were just shadows, but Kirsten insists that the voices were actually talking.

Act 1 Part 2 Analysis

This physically busy scene serves mostly as exposition, or to lay the foundations for the story to come. In general, the term exposition refers to the way that characters, relationships, plot elements, and key components of the setting are all introduced. This all happens in the expositional scene here, which also foreshadows several important events. First is the arrival of August's sister in the next scene, foreshadowed by the comments about her breakdown. Second is Dan's disappearance at the end of the play, which is foreshadowed by August's comment about how Jean isn't going to have a good time and also by the appearance of the flashlight, which reappears as an image throughout the play representing both Dan's death and his affair with Cynthia. Finally the conversation between Kirsten and August also foreshadows Dan's death.

Act 1 Part 3

Act 1 Part 3 Summary

The next evening, Cynthia and Kirsten are again coming downstairs as Chad opens the door to let in August, who's carrying Delia, his sister. As August puts her down on the couch, Delia says she's not going to stay and will check herself into a state hospital. She then explains that a chain of events she doesn't completely recall lead her from various exotic locations in Africa to Cleveland, where she collapsed. Dan and Jean come in, August and Delia argue about whether Delia's going to take her medication, Chad hints that Delia's going to be difficult to live with, and August asks him to leave. As he goes, August introduces Dan and Jean to Delia, and the conversation reveals that Delia is, or at least was, a well-known author.

As Cynthia opens wine, Delia comments that this is just the kind of academic situation she hates. Dan complains about how non-academic the environment actually is, rolling a joint as he repeats what he thinks are stupid questions people ask while he's working. He complains most about being asked why people build the burial mounds, saying that the mounds exist for several superficial reasons, but one main one, that people aren't happy unless they're building something, "to leave something behind."

As August pours Delia a spoonful of medicine, she complains she can't breathe and he's trying to poison her. Jean, who is a doctor and who has checked all Delia's medications, tries to calm her down. Delia confesses that she's a hypochondriac and tells Jean to ignore her. As Dan passes around the joint, he says that Jean is taking the next eighteen months off to have a baby. Jean refuses the joint, saying she's trying to take care of herself. This almost starts an argument between her and Dan, but Jean forestalls it by going up to bed. Kirstin, Dan and Delia follow, with Dan helping the still feeble Delia.

Cynthia comments to August on how difficult it will be to look after Delia while the dig is going on, but August reassures her that everything will be fine, telling her to laugh at Delia in the same way as their (Delia's and August's) father did. Cynthia suggests getting one of the students to help but August says they're there to learn how to be archeologists, not nurses. He suggests that because Cynthia doesn't like Delia, that's no reason to be supportive. Cynthia goes out, saying as she goes that it's August that Delia doesn't like.

August returns to his office. As he shows several more slides, we understand that they were taken by Cynthia. August tells Dianne to get rid of any of the slides that don't directly relate to the dig, and then shows more slides of the site, which include the bulldozer used to scrape away the top layers of soil, the layer in which August found some relatively poor artifacts, and several shots of the advancing lake.

Chad and Jean appear in front of one of the slides of the lake, which suggests that they're outside. Chad tries to convince Jean to go for a drive, since there's something he wants to show her. Jean refuses and Chad tries again, referring to a scale model of the future development of the lake. He goes into detail about the highways, hotels, restaurants and other businesses that will be built around the lake, excited because it's taken years of conversation with various governments to get the necessary approvals. He then tells Jean how his father saw the development coming and kept holding out for more and more money as the development got closer and closer to his land, finally settling for a lease which would net him more money in the long run. He adds that because of the lease agreement he and his family will get a percentage of every dollar the various businesses make, and concludes by offering to sign his share over to Jean, saying that she's the only thing he ever saw that he really wanted. Jean refuses, saying she is a married woman.

Cynthia and Kirsten arrive, saying that nobody's down at the dig site because they it was rained out. Jean and Kirsten go out. Chad asks Cynthia for some cash, and when she says he just wants to use it to go get drunk, he says he's got friends waiting for him in town. They go out, Cynthia getting money out of her purse. August speaks a memo to himself to separate the personal from the professional, illusion from family, past from present, and to organize his brain. He tells Dianne to write all those thoughts down for him, but not to include it in her other notes.

Act 1 Part 3 Analysis

The idea of legacies shows up in several ways in this scene. First is the reference to Delia as a writer, a vocation which, like all creative art, is on a subconscious level all about leaving something behind, a legacy of thought, idea or feeling. Second and perhaps most important are Dan's comments about the burial mounds, which contain a clear thematically important statement about the value of legacies, and the way that in fact all people want to create something of themselves to leave behind.

The third time the concept of legacies appears is in August's comment to Celia about how his and Delia's father laughed at Delia, a statement that suggests that at least part of Delia's hypochondria and neurosis is a legacy from her father's attitude. These comments also foreshadow his nastier comments about his father's attitudes at the play's climax. The fourth time the concept appears is in August's first comments to Dianne in this section, which suggests that he wants to carefully define his legacy by eliminating what he doesn't think are relevant to the particular story he wants to tell, things like things like Cynthia's pictures of Delia.

The fifth and final time in this section that the idea of legacies can be inferred is in the conversation between Chad and Jean. It doesn't make the point directly, but in the context of the play the passion Chad has for developing the lake and the shorefront property can also be interpreted as determination that they'll have something of financial value to pass on to future generations. This passion is also the fuel for his later explosion of anger against Dan and August, which means that his excitement in this

scene is another way in which the play's climactic confrontation between Chad and the two archaeologists is foreshadowed.

Another source of fuel for that explosion is Chad's apparent infatuation with Jean, or more specifically his frustration at her refusing to become involved with him. The question of his relationship with Cynthia also arises in this section. The implication that there's something intimate going on between them foreshadows Cynthia's reaction later in the play to the revelation of how August's activities affect Chad.

Finally August's second comments to Dianne function on two levels. Firstly, they indicate that the events of the previous summer have traumatized him in some way. The juxtaposition of these comments with the brief scene between Cynthia and Chad suggests that at least part of the trauma was August's discovery of their affair, and again foreshadows the later scene in which the truth of what went on becomes clearer. The second function of August's comments is a metaphorical one, in that his intent to sort things out for himself as a man is the same as his intent to sort things out as an archaeologist. This suggests that the action of the play, and particularly August's comments to Dianne, is an extended metaphor, comparing digging through memories to digging through layers of dirt, with the end result of both being a deeper understanding of what happened in the past.

Another metaphor is the way that both Chad and the lake represent the advance of time and civilization at the expense of history, represented by both August and the dig. The later revelation of what August did in his efforts to stall both Chad and the lake represent his attempts to halt that advance, which means that the play's final moments in which the dig is destroyed represent the inevitability of that same advance.

Act 1 Part 4

Act 1 Part 4 Summary

August shows a slide of a pot from a previous excavation, and comments to Dianne that he doesn't know why the slide is in this collection. Back in the house Delia sits on the couch, Kirsten sits nearby, and Jean does situps as Cynthia comes in from the dig. She asks Delia how she slept the previous night, and when Delia says she was cold Cynthia starts to go upstairs to get some blankets, but Delia says that now she's fine. Cynthia and Delia talk about Delia's history of being a wanderer, which leads Kirsten to ask about Delia's husband. Delia jokes about being very young when she married him and barely able to remember him, but then crudely refers to his sexual abilities and to how she traveled with him throughout the Far East.

As the conversation continues, Dan and August come in, with August going straight into his office and Dan getting a beer from the refrigerator. He hears some of the conversation about Delia's wanderings, then suggests that she might welcome the opportunity to be in one place for a while. She says that every once in a while she becomes sober enough to look around at the real world, then realizes that she likes it better drunk and goes back to her old ways. Jean finishes her situps, and the conversation turns to the dig. Dan talks about how the layout of the town they're discovering is typical of villages of that archaeological era, with mounds built at either end of a long avenue, one mound for the local god-king and one for a temple. He talks about the various communities and cultures that lived in the area over the centuries and how much of the site was bulldozed by Chad's family to make room for the lake. August calls out from his office and Dan goes in to see what he needs.

Cynthia and Jean talk for a moment about Jean's pregnancy. Jean reveals that her family has a history of miscarriages and that she has had two, which is why she's being particularly careful. Before they can go on, Dan and August come in, arguing about the best way to approach the bank for more money. August comments that Kirsten coming along and looking pathetic will probably help. Jean then talks about how relatively unspectacular the dig is, comparing it unfavorably to the archeological remains of the Aztecs or Incans. They talk about Ancient Incan poetry, and Dan quotes one of the poems that have been discovered and translated. When Delia asks who wrote it, Dan says that they don't know who wrote it, they only have the words.

Act 1 Part 4 Analysis

August's reference to the slide that doesn't belong represents both Delia and Chad, and the way that they're both outsiders in this situation. The subsequent conversation about Delia's wanderings and relations with her husband indicate that she sees herself as an outsider in general, which may explain why she's a writer and wants to leave something behind. In contrast to the communities and societies who left whole towns behind, like

other writers and other artists Delia is in some ways a community all to herself. This gives the idea that her work is her legacy even more thematic weight, as does Dan's comment at the end of this section about the author of the poem, which raises the thematically relevant question of whether it's important to know who left something behind, or whether the legacy in and of itself is enough.

The description of the town uncovered by August and Dan and the reference to its god-king foreshadow the later momentous discovery of the god-king's grave. At the same time the god-king himself represents Dan and August, the fact that they all have power and the more thematically relevant fact that Dan and August want to leave an important legacy in the same way the god-king did. The parallel extends into the way that the riches in the god-king's tomb represent the riches, both academic and financial, that Dan and August foresee when they announce their discovery. Ironically, the god-king also represents Chad and his desire for power, with the tomb representing the riches and glory he foresees coming to his family.

Dan and August's briefly overheard conversation about banking and money foreshadows the revelation of the way they've created the political situation that eventually deprives Chad and his family of their potential income from the development of the dig site.

Act 1 Part 5

Act 1 Part 5 Summary

A brief conversation between Cynthia and Jean about whether Jean will continue her medical career once she's had her baby leads to Cynthia abruptly going back out to the dig, and Jean wondering whether something's wrong with her.

Delia asks whether Jean knows whether the people who built the town being excavated fought with other communities. Jean talks about how everyone working on the dig wants the "townspeople" to fit into a particular pattern of behavior but nobody really knows anything about them. This leads Delia to comment that nobody can ever be sure of anything, and she and Jean both comment on how it's easier to pretend to know the answers than to face what's really behind the questions. This leads Jean into a long reminiscence about being a spelling bee champion, and how that led her to a nervous breakdown, which led her to reading medical books and eventually becoming a doctor, specifically a gynecologist.

Delia then talks about her father, an ear nose and throat specialist, reminiscing about a diagram of how the eye worked that when she was a child made her believe that the eye projected beams of light as opposed to opened to let light in. Jean talks about how feeling like there's something different in the atmosphere around the dig this year, and suggests that she may be projecting interpretation rather than perceiving something real. They joke about telling the future, and Delia tells a story from a book she read in which the future was changed by the intervention of the villain. Jean then talks about her real problem having nothing to do, and then she and Delia make jokes about diagnosing Delia's condition. Delia suddenly becomes serious, and tells Jean to not ask what's truly going on with her.

Act 1 Part 5 Analysis

There are several moments of foreshadowing in this section. Delia's question about whether the ancient inhabitants of the area fought foreshadows the conflict in the second half of the play between the archeologists, as represented by August and Dan, and the business people of the town, as represented by Chad. Jean's sense of something being different is a premonition similar to Kirsten's earlier one in that they both foreshadow the conflict between Chad and Dan and Dan's disappearance. Finally their joking conversation about foretelling the future also foreshadows the climax of the play, with Delia's specific reference to the intervention of the villain foreshadowing Chad's angry attack on Dan.

As a result of Jean's story about how she came to be a doctor, and of the fact that she's a gynecologist, she can be seen as a character symbolic of transformation, and specifically of new life. Specifically, the way in which she created a new life for herself

after her breakdown and the fact that her medical specialty is related to babies being born, show her to be significantly different from her husband, who seems to be much more interested in studying the old and remaining focused on the past.

Delia's comments about not knowing the answers to important questions, and the way she tells Jean to not ask her what's really going on with her, foreshadow an important truth about the way she views the world, that she doesn't want to have to deal with the truth. This relates to the central image of excavation, which as the action of the play reveals refers not only to the excavation of historical artifacts but also the excavation of emotional truth.

Act 1 Part 6

Act 1 Part 6 Summary

The house is dark. We see a slide of darkness with a small fire in one corner, and hear August describe the slide as one of a weenie roast. We hear a knock on the door and Chad shouting for Cynthia. Cynthia appears and urges him to be quiet, but he demands that they have sex, saying they've got to have it when he wants sometimes too. Cynthia takes him outside.

A moment later Dan appears, shining the flashlight around and then turning on a lamp, which wakes up Delia. This startles Dan even further, and he becomes a bit frantic. As he calms himself down Delia tells him to start acting more like a man, not just in this moment but in general, urging him to stand up for himself and develop some backbone. She then makes a joke about being a writer, not a chiropractor. This leads Dan to ask whether she still thinks of herself as a writer, and to reveal that he studied one of her books when he was in university. He says that his professor loved it so much he read half of it aloud. Delia comments that only half of it was good, says that she dictated the other half while she was drunk. She talks at length about the young women she hired to transcribe her dictation, about preparing the book to be sent to her publisher but hiding it in her closet, and about getting drunk for three days. She says that the police had to finally break down her door, and that her publisher described the book as a success but her as a failure.

Dan asks Delia whether the noise he heard was her. She sidesteps the question by referring to the way that the locals get restless, and how the dogs raid the henhouses. She then changes the subject and asks how Dan survived all his years studying in New York. He goes into a long rambling speech about how he realized the only way to survive in that city was to be continually drunk since cars, taxis and people all avoided you. He also refers to a sign on all the fire alert boxes that he saw, which said that in order to get help, "you must answer" when an operator takes your call. After a long moment of silence, he goes up to bed, leaving Delia in the dark.

Act 1 Part 6 Analysis

The first few moments of this section confirms that Chad and Cynthia are having an affair. There is even further confirmation in the comments that Delia makes about restless locals and dogs raiding the henhouse, a symbolic reference to the way Chad raids August's home in search of sex not just from Cynthia but also from Jean as seen earlier.

Another aspect of the play's thematic focus on legacies appears in the conversation between Dan and Delia about her book. Through its revelation that Dan knows Delia through her writing, their conversation reinforces the idea that for creative artists like

Delia, their work is their legacy. Meanwhile, Delia's resentfully told story about the young woman who transcribed her dictation has echoes of August's situation with Dianne, which suggests that in carefully defining what Dianne is to do with the tapes, August is as unable as Delia to trust in being able to clearly and effectively shape that legacy.

The two sides of the conversation about drunkenness, Delia's and Dan's, share a common thread but different outcomes. Delia drinks because she's afraid of her publisher's reaction to her book, while Dan drank because he was afraid of the city. In other words, they were both afraid of confrontations with an unfriendly reality. While what we've seen of Delia suggests that she's never actually learned to face reality, Dan's story concludes with the order on the phone box that "you must answer,," which can be seen symbolic insistence that reality must be faced. This serves as something of a wakeup call to Delia, and foreshadows her eventual transformation at the end of the play.

More foreshadowing occurs in Delia's passing admonition to Dan that he should start acting like a man. This ironically foreshadows his final confrontation with Chad in which he blindly goes along with Chad's suggestions that they go outside instead of standing up to him and insisting that he put down the artifacts he's stealing.

Act 1 Part 7

Act 1 Part 7 Summary

Back in his office August comments on a slide of Chad's father, Mr. Jasker. August describes him as looking forward to the money he was going to make from leasing his properties for the interstate highways and business developments. He says that he saw Jasker twice, when the archaeologists arrived in June and left in September, adding that last September there was no second visit.

Against the backdrop of a slide of the moon, Delia sits in the shadows as Chad and Dan come into the house after a day of fishing, drunk and noisy. They argue for a long time over whether it's advisable to drink beer and whiskey together and debate what phase the moon is in. While Chad is using the toilet, Dan asks himself, "What did we do?" When Chad comes back, they argue about who caught the biggest fish and reminisce about the fight they had to reel in a huge bass. Chad tells Dan he'd better go to bed since he's got to get out to the dig in the morning. They talk about how beautiful Jean is, and both Chad and Dan talk about how nice it is to have her waiting in bed. Chad tries to help Dan upstairs but Dan says he can't go to bed yet, he's all wet. Their conversation then reveals that Dan fell overboard while they were fishing, and that Chad saved his life.

Jean comes downstairs to find out what's going on, and reminds Chad and Dan that it's one thirty in the morning. She then asks Delia if they've been bothering her, and when Delia answers Dan is startled to find out that she's there. Dan tries to dance with Jean, who gets away from him and goes to the refrigerator to get food. Delia asks Chad to stay, but Chad says he's got to go. Dan also asks Chad to stay, but Chad says he'll leave them all to their dig and goes out.

As Jean fixes Dan a sandwich, Dan reveals that the incident in which Chad saved his life occurred a year ago, then excitedly whispers to Jean that when he and Chad were out just now he caught four very edible bass. He tries to get Jean to go out and see them, but she sits down on the couch and doesn't move. Dan snuggles in beside her, and when she complains that he's soaking wet explains that he jumped into the lake to test his life-jacket. He then tells a long story in a mixture of poetic and commonplace language about how he and Chad had a bad day with no bites, but as soon as the sun set and the moon rose the fish bit like mad and they caught twelve. After he admits to being quite stoned and having drunk five six packs of beer with Chad, Dan takes himself off to bed.

Alone with Delia, Jean says she's never felt more awake. She refers to a Chinese saying that suggested that once a man saved another man's life the second man belonged to the first man forever. Delia comments that she never cared for Asian philosophy in general or for statues of Asian deities in particular, because they all

seemed to hint at mysteries that mere human beings couldn't possibly understand. Jean tells her that statues are just statues and don't actually mean anything.

Cynthia comes downstairs, looks at Jean and Delia for a moment, then goes outside. Jean and Delia watch her in silence, then Delia comments that men are pretty sad, working themselves to death for their families. August comes in, gets himself a glass of milk, and leaves the refrigerator door open. Meanwhile, Delia talks about not wanting to be a man and carry the kinds of responsibilities they do. She says that being a woman would be worse, being what's left behind after the men have finished doing what they have to do and gone on. She then says that she's frightened herself with those thoughts, and asks Jean to make her a drink. Jean refuses. August closes the refrigerator. Blackout. In the darkness the beam of the flashlight appears, moves across the stage, then goes out. We hear the screen door open and close.

Act 1 Part 7 Analysis

In the middle of the long, repetitive conversation between Chad and Dan, dialogue that quite accurately depicts the kind of conversation two drunk, fish-happy men can have, is an easily missed nugget of foreshadowing. This is Dan's rhetorical question "What have we done?," that refers to what we find out later about the maneuvering August has done to secure more time to work on the dig. The information that Chad once saved Dan's life is another piece of foreshadowing, this time an ironic presaging of Chad's apparent responsibility for Dan's disappearance while they're out on the water. Delia's comment about the saved man's life belonging to the saver also foreshadows this incident, a comment that when viewed in hindsight suggests that as a result of what he did before, Dan's life is now Chad's to do with what he will, even to the point of killing him. Delia's comments about women being left behind are a third piece of foreshadowing, referring to the play's final moments in which Jean mourns Dan's apparent death.

The story of how Chad and Dan eventually caught their fish contains some of the most poetic writing in the play, which disguises the fact that it's actually an ironic and extended metaphor for the kind of patience and commitment that August had to manipulating the Jaskers and maintaining access to the dig. This ironic parallel is reinforced by the way that August eventually discovers bounty in the dig in the same way that Dan discovers bounty in the lake, and the way that the men bring the bounty home so they can win the acclaim of both their women and the world.

The negative aspects of the play's focus on legacy appear in Delia's observations to Jean about the relationship between men and women. Specifically, her comments about the way that women are left behind, suggests that abandonment is a legacy as well. At the same time, her negative comments about Asian religious artifacts foreshadow the discovery August makes in the second act of artifacts that serve a similar spiritual purpose. This suggests that the legacy of the cultures from which both sets of artifacts came has little relevance to the day to day lives of the people who encounter them.

Finally, Jean's refusal to make Delia a drink indicates that on some level Jean is aware that Delia uses alcohol to avoid facing reality, that Delia has brought herself face to face with a reality she doesn't want to see, and that by refusing her a drink she's forcing her to actually see it. This moment foreshadows the play's final image, in which Jean is unable to face reality but is comforted by Delia, who at last can.

Given what's been seen of Cynthia before, specifically her affair with Dan, it's easy to understand that her and August's silent entrances have to do with tension between them, perhaps even with August knowing that something is going on. The specific stage direction that he leaves the door of the refrigerator open certainly suggests that he's preoccupied, and if he knew or even suspected the affair that would certainly be something to be preoccupied by. His climactic confrontation with Cynthia in the second act, in which the truth of her infidelities is finally revealed, illuminates the subtext of this moment more clearly.

Act 2 Part 1

Act 2 Part 1 Summary

Everyone except Kirsten is gathered in the living room to discuss Dan and August's latest discovery, a burial site where they hadn't expected one. The circumstances and condition of the site lead Dan to formulate the theory that the tribe whose site they're excavating was similar in culture to another tribe, which means that it's possible they were governed by a god-king in the same way, which in turn suggests the possibility that his tomb is still to be found. Throughout this conversation August and Cynthia make pointed remarks to each other, Dan semi-seriously tries to talk Delia into writing about the discovery, and Chad comments on the possibility that this tribe could actually be cannibals. Caught up in his excitement, Dan makes disparaging comments about Chad. Rain begins, and August and Dan hurry out to put tarpaulins over their new find.

Act 2 Part 1 Analysis

After all the thematically significant and relationship building conversations of the first act, this first section of the second act kicks the plot into motion with the discussion of what August and Dan have found. The conversation reintroduces the god-king, the symbolic value of which manifests at different points throughout the rest of the play. At this point, however, it simply represents hope and possibility.

The comments August and Cynthia make to each other suggest that tension is building between the two of them, again the possible result of August either suspecting or knowing that Cynthia is having an affair. At the same time, the comments that Dan makes to Chad suggest that tension is building between them as well, building on their unspoken rivalry for Jean and foreshadowing their final, apparently murderous confrontation.

Act 2 Part 2

Act 2 Part 2 Summary

A slide appears, and August comments into his tape recorder that everyday the lake advanced. That night, rain continues as Chad knocks on the door. Jean answers it, and Chad again tries to talk her into spending time with him. Jean tells him, more insistently this time, that she's not interested. He persists, but Jean continues to refuse, reminding him that he's supposed to be Dan's friend. He accuses her of trying to make a fool of him, but she says she's uncomfortable with him. August and Kirsten come in, and after making small talk with August about the weather, Chad leaves.

The conversation between Jean and August reveals that August is concerned about the amount of time that Jean is spending with Chad, and that he thinks Dan is being more tactful than friendly. Dan comes in, having moved the female archaeology students into a motel. Kirsten discovers some marijuana seeds just as Delia comes shakily downstairs. Dan teases her about finally being up and around, while Jean seems to realize that Delia has been drinking. August goes into his office as Dan begins to tell Delia what the professor who liked her book so much said, but Delia soon stops him. She said that all she did when she wrote it was set herself a puzzle similar to the Chinese puzzle boxes in which each box, when opened, reveals a smaller box inside. She then says that she ran into trouble when she realized the smallest box, the core of the story, had to actually be something, have a point, or be an answer to the puzzle. She adds that once she got to the core of her puzzle, she realized that it was an idea for another book, another story to be told. She speaks in poetic language about how it was there to be found, but adds that when she went looking for it she couldn't bring it into reality. She tries to change the subject to what Dan and August have found in their dig, but Dan says there's nothing new to talk about since it's been raining and they can't actually work.

Jean changes the subject, saying that she's been thinking of the house that Delia and August grew up in, filled with medical charts. Delia says it was also full of light, but August comments that she left when she was so young that he's surprised she can remember it at all, or even wants to. As he prepares slides, he talks about how Delia was unable to make it to their father's funeral. He then shows his first slide, which shows a hand tool made of bone from an ancient civilization. Cynthia comes in and refers to the culture from which the tool came as having vanished without a trace. Delia comments that everything and everyone vanishes without a trace, but then Dan has a long angry speech in which he imagines the life that the man who created the tool must have led, finishing by swearing about the rain, kicking the door open and going out. Cynthia and Jean argue briefly about who is more important to the team, Dan or August, with Cynthia arguing for Dan and Jean arguing for August. August goes into the office, closing the discussion by saying that no one really knows anything about who made the tool or what it was used for.

Cynthia comments that Chad was going to drive her into town, but because he's gone her plans seem to have changed. Delia refers to him as a hustler, always on the lookout for chances to make money. This leads to a conversation about whether Chad and his father are going to get rich, with Cynthia saying they're deluded and will be manipulated out of any profit they hope to make and Jean saying they might just manage it. Emotions get heated as they talk about happiness, how some people need more than others, the cost of getting what is needed, and how Delia is used to picking up what she can when she can for whatever price while Cynthia is wasting a lot of gold on cheap merchandise. This leads Cynthia to comment that she thought Delia had given up men, referring to a vague memory that she'd gotten involved with a female sculptor. Jean then remembers hearing something about Delia having been arrested for participating in a bar brawl with a woman. Delia says that everything that appeared in the newspapers about her was only publicity for her book, and wonders whether lying in that context is actually a sin. She talks about which of the Ten Commandments is the worst, and finally says that the worst sin is self-humiliation. Cynthia searches for alcohol.

Act 2 Part 2 Analysis

The brief comments made by August represent, as suggested, the way that the archaeologists are now in a race against time, the elements, and the greed of the land developers to complete their excavation. On a symbolic level, they also foreshadow the way that Chad continues to advance on Jean, and that tension continues to build between Cynthia and August.

The conversation between Delia, Jean and Cynthia is full of metaphor and innuendo, all of which suggests that when Delia says that Cynthia is squandering gold on cheap merchandise she's actually saying Cynthia is wasting a good relationship in the name of a little quick excitement with Chad. This idea is reinforced by our awareness that Delia has seen and/overheard what's gone on between Cynthia and Chad, and also Cynthia's comment at the conclusion of the conversation that she thought Delia had given men up. Jean seems oblivious to what's really being discussed. The conclusion of their conversation, referring to the "sin" of seeking publicity, foreshadows the way that August and Dan refer to the publicity that will be gained as the result of their discovery of the god-king. At the same time, Delia's comments about self-humiliation seem to strike a chord with Cynthia. Her search for liquor suggests that on some level she agrees with Delia's oblique comment about the cheapness of her relationship with Chad, sees it as a kind of self-humiliation, and needs alcohol to avoid facing that reality in the same way as Delia needs it to avoid hers.

Several different kinds of excavations are referred to in this scene. First and foremost is the literal excavation being undertaken by Dan and August, the discussion of which leads to another long speech from Dan which suggests that even the smallest artifacts are a valuable legacy, and that the person who left that artifact, known or unknown, has value. A more metaphorical excavation is undertaken as Delia and August dig briefly through the memories of their childhood and Delia, in more detail, uncovers memories of writing the book. In both instances, these excavations reveal truths that the

archaeologists of memory involved, particularly Delia, have difficulty accepting. To her credit, Delia doesn't start drinking, but we still get the sense that facing reality is difficult for her.

At the same time, Delia's story of Chinese boxes is a metaphor for the work that August and Dan do in general as archaeologists, and specifically the work they're doing on this particular site. In the same way that Delia opens box after box, August and Dan peel back layer after layer of earth-buried history, with all of them searching for a core of truth. The particular difference between the two activities in these circumstances is that Delia was unable to bring to the surface the core of truth at the heart of her excavations while August and Dan reveal two truths at the heart of theirs. These are the mask and corpse of the god-king, and the truth of how they manipulated their way into working on the dig in the first place. A third truth is revealed as well, but as the indirect result of the dig; Chad's desperation, the consequences of which play a key role in the dramatic and thematic climaxes of the play in the following scenes.

Act 2 Part 3

Act 2 Part 3 Summary

In his office, August shows a slide of a pot and comments into his tape recorder that he's tired of his work and his finds being taken over by people who respond to aesthetics only, saying that the historical value of what he does is being overwhelmed by people who just want to find something pretty. He's surprised to see that the next slide is one of his college graduation, and refers to the hope and innocence in his face. The next slide is one of Dan, which leads August to talk about the way in which work like theirs, like anybody's, is undertaken to "blind him to the passing moon." He then briefly summarizes what's gone on with the dig up to the point at which the discovery of the god-king is made, and refers to it as the most important discovery in his forty year career, the kind of happening that everybody dreams about but don't allow themselves to admit to desiring. He concludes with the comment that nothing was salvaged when the dig was destroyed, repeating the word "nothing" over and over as he flashes through several slides and the focus shifts back to the house.

Act 2 Part 3 Analysis

The speech of August's is again all about legacies and leaving things behind. His testy references to people who reduce the work he does to questions of what's pretty is a comment on how the life's work that goes into such legacies is often ignored in favor of superficialities. The comment about the passing moon then uses a poetic metaphor to make the point quite clearly that people work hard in order to avoid being reminded that time passes and that as a result, they're mortal. The rest of the speech, which focuses on the importance of the discovery that he and Dan make at the dig site, is both a reference to and foreshadowing of the professional immortality that he had believed he and Dan would experience as a result of their find, their legacy. His final repeated use of the word nothing, however, tells us that all his hopes and dreams were completely dashed. As such, it foreshadows the play's final climactic revelations and confrontations.

Act 2 Part 4

Act 2 Part 4 Summary

Delia and Jean sit reading. Offstage there is the sound of excited voices. Dan runs on, desperately trying to calm himself but incredibly excited because they've discovered the tomb of a god-king, buried with jewelry, armor, treasure, and the bodies of hundreds of servants. As he tries to remember what he came in to find, Delia and Jean rush out, then come back in with August, Cynthia, Chad, and Kirsten, all moving boxes and artifacts. They shout excitedly to one another about how the find has to be kept secret for a while, how the head of August's department is already totaling the grants he's going and the magazine covers he's going to be on, and how Chad's father is going to be the one who actually becomes famous.

The action settles down to actual work on the artifacts, with August cleaning a gold burial mask, Dan restoring a string of beads, and Cynthia and Jean cataloguing the finds. Delia and Chad watch, with Chad commenting that he admires the way that August and Dan have done what they've done because it's what they had to do and in spite of continued disappointments. He then asks what of their find could possibly be sold, Cynthia tells him all of it, and Chad asks about a particular bead. August tells him that the gold on the bead isn't actually worth all that much, then as Chad tries to articulate his thoughts on what he thinks the find is really worth August asks him what he's really doing there. He suggests that Chad could be any number of other places, commenting that when Chad was observing them digging up relatively useless items the week before he had no interest in their worth at all. As Dan comments on how he's going to get Delia to document their discovery, Chad says he's going to get another beer, saying that he can always count on Dan to "turn him on." Cynthia comments that there are lots of things that turn Chad on.

August shows off the mask, saying it's coming up beautifully. Dan holds the mask in front of his face and asks whether he looks like a god-king. Jean, unnerved, tells him to take it off. Chad asks whether the mask is solid gold, and August lies, saying it's made of copper. Dan comments that it was only made to be worn when the god-king was dead, Jean says that she didn't like him wearing it at all, and Dan jokes about how it takes a while for every fashion to catch on. Chad looks at a string of beads, and Dan tells him they're copper as well.

Jean tells Dan that the smell of the nail polish he's using to hold the copper on the beads together is making her sick. As Delia, Cynthia and Jean discuss the various sicknesses of being pregnant, it becomes obvious that Chad didn't know that Jean was expecting a baby. As Dan and August talk about the right way to arrange the beads from the burial site, Chad repeatedly asks Dan and Jean what they're going to name their baby. Finally, he shouts to make himself heard. Dan makes jokes about how they won't know the baby's name until it's born, and Chad's temper explodes. He talks angrily about how the archaeologists think they're so cool and so important, picking up a spear

point as an illustration of the coolness of the things they've found but saying that someone doesn't need a weapon like that to kill. He grabs Cynthia and holds her around her neck, saying that all someone would have to do is twist in just the right way. Cynthia calmly says that he could kill her easily because he's so much stronger than she is.

Chad lets her go, saying that the archeologist's coolness is going to be short lived because next year the lake will be full size, the interstate will be coming through, and all the construction will be underway. Dan argues with him that there's no way a historical find such as the one that's just been made can be buried by industry, but Chad shouts that it's his land, not theirs and not their god-king's. Dan tells Chad that there's a law banning defacement of historical burial grounds. When Chad protests, and in spite of August's urgings that they talk about it in the morning, Dan reveals that August obtained an injunction prohibiting construction of the highway on the dig site, saying that it's going to be routed around the opposite side of the lake. In other words, Chad's family's property is not going to be leased.

After a long silence, Jean and Cynthia take August and Dan to task for both making this arrangement without telling them and for destroying the hopes and potential livelihood of Chad's family. As August and Dan try to defend themselves Chad gets angrier and angrier, finally telling them that they have no right to play with other people's lives the way they have. He finally screams NO, then goes out, saying that next summer he'll have to fuck his wife himself. Cynthia follows him out, protesting that she didn't know what August was up to.

Delia comments that she might just take Dan up on his suggestion that she write a book. This leads August to tell her not to bother, which in turn leads him and Delia into a bitter argument about whether their father actually cared about the work Delia did. As Cynthia comes in and takes Kirsten upstairs with her, August tells Delia that their father never liked her, laughed at her work, and thought she was a fool. He then tells Dan they should turn in since they've got an early start in the morning. As August goes, Delia thanks him for what he said. He says, "You're welcome."

Act 2 Part 4 Analysis

The action of this extended scene starts with a high degree of energy that steadily builds to the explosive confrontations between Chad and the other characters that make up the climax of the play. As the characters dig through layers of emotional dirt, their excavations uncover realities that will leave painful legacies in many lives. This scene illuminates more clearly than any other in the play the way that archaeology is used as a metaphor to illuminate the complicated ways in which people are affected by the sudden appearance of truth in their lives, either when unsuspected truths come to violently revealed light or what were once merely suspicions are confirmed. The confirmation that Cynthia and Chad were indeed having an affair is an example of the latter, while the back to back revelations of August's manipulations to preserve the dig and his comments about the true feelings of his and Delia's father are vivid examples of the former. Another example is the way that Jean's pregnancy comes as a surprise to Chad.

The suddenness of all these disclosures, and the powerful emotions they release, are foreshadowed at the beginning of the scene by the discovery of the burial site, itself a truth with far-reaching repercussions.

Meanwhile, the scene also dramatizes the ways in which one truth affects another. Cynthia's reaction to the news of what August did is colored by her feelings about Chad, whose reaction to Jean's pregnancy colors his reaction to August, who has himself been affected by the fact that his suspicions about both Chad's greed and his affair with Cynthia have been confirmed. This also triggers the viciousness behind his revelations to Delia about their father. In short, the way that truths and emotions ricochet off each other is another manifestation of the way archeology is used as a metaphor, since the action of the play has shown that one discovery in a dig leads to another, which leads to another, and so on.

Aside from discovery of his tomb being the catalyst or trigger for the revelation of several of those truths, the god-king's primary function in this scene is again to serve as a symbol. On a realistic level, as originally suggested in August's monologue the god-king represents the culmination of years of work by both August and Dan. As such, their excitement is completely understandable. On the same level, he also represents the possibility of both professional recognition and personal gain. On another level, however, there are two key aspects to his symbolic value. The way that Dan puts the mask on, and Jean's reaction to him doing so, both foreshadow Dan's apparent death. The fact that the god-king was buried with both riches and hundreds of servants represents the way that Chad, his father, their potential riches and the hopes of hundreds of other people in the area are buried by August's manipulations.

Act 2 Part 5

Act 2 Part 5 Summary

In the darkness, the beam of the flashlight appears again. Dan comes downstairs, looking for the source of the noise that woke him up. The flashlight reveals Chad, wearing the god-king's mask and holding a bag of artifacts in his arms. He comments that Cynthia warned him that Dan was a light sleeper, and Dan admits that he is. Chad goes outside, saying that he's got something to show Dan. Dan tells him he shouldn't take the artifacts outside and follows him out.

Lights change, and the action shifts to the next morning. We hear sounds of young women, the archaeology students, calling for Dan. August comes downstairs and goes out to see what they want. Delia appears, fully dressed, followed shortly by Jean. Their conversation reveals that Delia is leaving later that day. Jean asks whether Dan slept downstairs or whether he came in at all, saying that he was planning to celebrate the discovery of the god-king's tomb with a good drug trip. Delia says she doesn't know where he is, and again the young women's voices are heard. Cynthia appears, calls Chad a son of a bitch, then August comes in. They reveal that Chad has disappeared with all the artifacts from the dig and bulldozed earth over the site. Delia tells Jean to go call the sheriff, since Dan is missing. Jean goes out to make the call.

August and Delia ask Cynthia what she thinks Chad is capable of, and she says anything. Delia goes out to be with Jean, and Cynthia accuses August of not telling her about the land deal because he was afraid she'd tell Chad. He ignores her, saying that what's important is finding Dan. Cynthia comments that they have nothing to prove their discovery existed other than nine pictures she took the night before, and when August says that means nothing to him Cynthia says he's lying. She takes the film out of the camera and unspools it, saying that it's one thing she can do for Chad. Jean comes in saying that two police cars are driving onto the field.

The light immediately shifts to August's office. Speaking into his tape recorder, he reveals that an oar from Chad's boat was discovered floating on the surface of the lake, and that later that night local citizens focused the lights of their cars onto the lake to help the divers searching for Chad and Dan see.

The action shifts back to the house, where Jean is frantically worried about Dan. Delia asks why more and more cars keep coming, and Cynthia says they think the lights mean that something's been found. Jean shouts that she doesn't want them to use hooks to drag the lake, then hysterically wonders why nobody heard anything, why Dan went out, and why he had beliefs. Delia slaps her to calm her, then holds her. Jean mumbles incoherently, and is comforted by Delia and Cynthia.

Back in August's office, he comments on how everybody left the house soon afterwards. He talks about how he went back in January with the hopes of seeing the house

completely inundated by the lake but found it was only half submerged, about how the lake continues to rise ... and then shuts the tape recorder off, unable to continue.

Back in the house, Cynthia says that August won't work without Dan. Delia and Jean both suggest that's not true, but Cynthia insists. Jean says she's too heavy for Delia, but Delia says she weighs nothing, adding that the divers will be back later that evening. Cynthia says repeatedly that they won't find anything, and Delia tells her to be quiet. August rewinds the tape, and we hear through the machine the words he just said. He shuts the machine off again, says the name "Dianne" twice, then as lights fade on the women tries to say something else, but can't. He's still and silent for a very long time.

Act 2 Part 5 Analysis

Several aspects of the story foreshadowed earlier are seen in this section. These include the confrontation between Chad and Dan, foreshadowed by the instances of the beam of the flashlight sweeping the stage and by the earlier late night conversation between Dan and Cynthia which hinted at an affair, an aspect of their relationship confirmed here by Chad's reference to Cynthia's comment about Dan being a light sleeper. Another foreshadowed scene is the confrontation over the film between Cynthia and August, which represents the end of their marriage as foreshadowed by August's earlier references to her as an "ex-relation." This scene also puts into place the last pieces of the puzzle that explains why August referred to the "wreckage" of the summer.

Another aspect to the core image of legacies that appears in this scene as both Chad and Cynthia act to destroy the legacy that August and Dan hoped to leave behind. Their actions make the thematic point that anything left behind, any way that anyone is remembered, any legacy, can be affected by chance, circumstance, and human emotion. This is an idea reinforced by the way the tool discussed earlier was discovered by chance, that the burial site of the god-king was discovered as the result of human determination and passion, and the tomb was buried again and all proof of its existence destroyed by both human emotion and the circumstances in which that emotion erupted. This means, therefore, that the play's central theme is that the ultimate value of any legacy is the way in which it's reacted to.

This idea is reinforced by the way that the women react to the emotional legacies left to them. Cynthia reacts with anger to the legacy of betrayal August left Chad with, and as a result destroys August's hopes for his own legacy. This negativity contrasts with Delia's compassionate reaction to the legacy of grief left to Jean, which indicates that in finally facing reality head on, Delia has received a legacy of hope from this whole experience.

August's final dictations into the tape recorder indicate that as a legacy of the events of the past summer he has been personally and professionally shattered, meaning that it's easy to agree with Cynthia's contention that without Dan, he'll be unable to work. At the same time, his inability to finish his recording, to leave something behind, indicates that his dreams of leaving even a legacy of warning or instruction are gone. The argument

could be made that this lack of something for people to remember him by is what August left himself as a result of his less than fully honest dealings with Chad and the other townspeople. Whether that's the case or not, the play's final words and images prove the point symbolized by the lake ... that eventually, time and progress wipe out everything.

Bibliography

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Characters

D. K.

See Delia Eriksen

Delia Eriksen

Delia, or D. K., is August's mentally ill sister, aged thirty-eight. In her twenties, she wrote two books of fiction that made her a popular and critical success; her books were so well regarded that Dan studied them in a college literature course. Lately, however, D. K. has been known primarily for her eccentric and drunken living. She has come to Blue Shoals to stay with August because, penniless, she has suffered another in a series of breakdowns and has nowhere else to go. She and August have never approved of each other, and they seem to have spent their youth competing for their father's respect. D. K. spends most of the play bundled in a chair, physically ill and cynical about her own work and about August's project. At the end of the play, however, she is the one who most clearly sees the motives and strengths of the other characters, the one who, in Wilson's words, is "strong enough to comfort the others." She is dressed to leave for good on the morning that Dan turns up missing, and August is glad to see her leaving. Instead, however, she stays and holds onto Jean.

In an interview with Gene A. Barnett, Wilson explained that he had created the character of Delia with the actor Tanya Berezin, a member of the Circle Repertory, in mind. Berezin "had said she couldn't play a genius, and she also had a great fear of comedy, of being funny." Once he had the basic idea for Delia, Wilson shaped the character specifically to provide a comic genius to challenge Berezin.

August Howe

August is the head archeologist on the dig, the person around whom all the action revolves. Cynthia and Kirsten are his family; Dan is his assistant; Delia is his sister; Chad is his landlord, his temporary rival for Cynthia's affections, and his rival for a claim to the land on which the mounds are located. August is forty years old, a respected but not famous archeologist employed by a large university. This is his fourth summer digging near the town of Blue Shoals, Illinois, where he and his team are excavating mounds built by early Mississippian people. They have uncovered pieces of pottery and one excellent bone awl, which August carefully records in his notes.

The land on which the mounds are located will soon be along the shores of a new lake that will be created by the Blue Shoals Dam. Chad, the owner of the home where August stays in the summer, hopes to be rich when the new highway comes through, because he owns the land on which a Holiday Inn and a golf course will sit. August sees Chad as inferior to him in social class and education and treats him with determined

disrespect. Secretly, August has already arranged with the State of Illinois to reroute the new highway to protect the mounds. Chad will never be rich, and August has never bothered to tell him why.

When August and his team locate the tomb of a God King, he expects to finally have the recognition that has eluded him. In the end, however, he loses everything: his family, his artifacts, his assistant, and his job. In the scenes in his study in Urbana, Illinois, during which he looks at slides from the expedition, August is bitter and cynical. In the flashback scenes, he is generally distant, often passing silently through a room where people are talking, to head for his study. He does not share Dan's passions for archeology and for imagining the people who came before him. In fact, August is much more likely to be found in his study than out in the mud. He is impatient and even cruel with Delia, and he either does not notice or does not care that Cynthia is having an affair with Chad. But when Kirsten awakens in the night and calls for her mother, it is August who comforts her.

Cynthia Howe

Cynthia, age thirty-five, is August's wife and Kirsten's mother. When she was younger, she dreamed of a career as a photographer, but after Kirsten was born she never got back to it. She has never found something to be passionate about in place of her career. Now she takes pictures in an unofficial way for August; the slides August is looking at in the "frame" scenes were shot by Cynthia. She has learned quite a bit about the expedition over the years and passes along her knowledge and her humorous perceptions of the men to Jean and Delia. Underneath her ironic attitudes, Cynthia is restless and unhappy, especially in her marriage. She drinks too much and throws herself at Chad, but none of it helps. When she learns that August has deceived Chad about his property rights, she takes the only action she can think of to express her disdain for August: she ruins the film with the only existing photographs of the artifacts from the God King tomb so that August will have nothing to show for his discovery. Chad rejects her anyway. After the summer's events, Cynthia divorces August and obtains custody of Kirsten.

Kirsten Howe

Kirsten is the eleven-year-old daughter of August and Cynthia. She does not have much to do in Blue Shoals or in the play. Early on, she awakens from a bad dream in which she hears voices and is comforted by August. At other times, she hovers in the background, occasionally making a bored or sullen comment. When Wilson revised the play in 1986, he deleted the character of Kirsten.

Chad Jasker

Chad, twenty-five, is the son of the man who owns the land on which the summer house and the mounds are located. He serves as a general caretaker for the archeologists,

fixing windows and carrying gear. August condescends to him, but Jean and Chad were romantically involved the previous summer, Cynthia has an affair with him during the summer of the play, and Chad and Dan drink and fish together. Chad is not educated as the others are, and he both admires and despises them because of this. He dreams of the day when he will be wealthy and therefore equal or superior to them. Chad is disappointed that Jean has married Dan; he had hoped that she would share his new life. When he learns that she is pregnant and that August has arranged for the highway to bypass his land, he runs the bulldozer over the dig site and lures Dan outside. Earlier, Chad saved Dan's life, but now he takes it away. The empty fishing boat is found the next morning, but neither man is seen again.

Dr. Dan Loggins

Dan, twenty-nine years old, is August's assistant and Jean's husband. Dan has worked with August for four years, and he and Jean have gotten married since the previous summer's expedition. Dan is passionate about archeology. He loves to spend time in the mud digging for artifacts (unlike August, who prefers office work) and to spin imaginative tales of what ancient humans were like. He also likes to drink and use drugs, which he does whenever he is not on the site. Dan is open and friendly, and he has earned the nickname Pollyandy, after the eternally optimistic fictional character Pollyanna. He socializes easily with Chad, though August discourages it. The previous summer, Chad saved Dan's life, and this has created a friendly bond between them as they drink and fish together now. Dan has no suspicion that Chad carries a grudge against him, and even after the deception about the new highway is revealed, Dan willingly goes out with Chad after dark.

Dr. Jean Loggins

Jean, twenty-five, is a gynecologist married to Dan. She is bright and optimistic, a former spelling champion and a dedicated wife. The previous summer she accompanied Dan to Blue Shoals, but she was not married to him then, and she gave Chad some cause to believe that he might have a chance with her. This summer, however, she is married to Dan and pregnant again after two miscarriages. She has been working in a clinic but has taken an eighteen-month leave to have the baby and plans to spend the summer in Blue Shoals resting, reading professional journals, and typing up Dan's notes. Chad, unaware of the pregnancy, tries to rekindle their former relationship and hopes to impress her with his plans for developing the shores of the new lake, but she pushes him away. She is the only member of the party who takes Delia seriously, and it is to Delia that she turns when Dan dies.

Themes

Betrayal

Among its other themes, *The Mound Builders* is an examination of betrayal. All of the adult characters gathered in the house in Blue Shoals are bright and capable people; what keeps them from reaching their goals is a pattern of betrayal—real and merely perceived, large and small—visited on the characters by each other.

Chad, for example, destroys the dig site and probably kills Dan and himself. From his point of view, however, Chad is more victim than criminal. He reveals that he values two things above all others: Jean ("the only thing I ever saw I really wanted") and his future riches. Both have been taken from him by the actions of others. The summer before, when he was involved with Jean, he "didn't really figure" that she would marry Dan. In his mind, Jean has betrayed him by marrying Dan and is "trying to make a fool" of him now. The betrayals by Dan, whose life Chad saved the previous summer, increase through the play: he has taken Jean away, he has gotten her pregnant, and he is part of the secret machinations to have the highway moved.

Cynthia also betrays and is betrayed. She betrays August by having an affair with Chad. When she learns that August has deceived them all about the plans for the highway, she herself feels betrayed, because her photographs were used without her knowledge to persuade the authorities to protect the dig site. She acts against August again by exposing the film that has the only photos of the God King's artifacts.

August is at the center of the cycle of betrayal. He is the instigator of the plan to keep Chad from getting rich. He and his father have betrayed the bonds of family for many years by making a fool of Delia. August is cruel enough to tell Delia about their betrayal: "Dad never read a word you wrote. He quoted your reviews back to you verbatim and laughed behind your back because you never noticed." The only honest relationship in August's life is his friendship with Dan, and August's betrayal of Chad leads to Dan's death.

In the end, of course, betrayal leads to unhappiness and loss. Dan and Chad are dead. August and Cynthia are divorced. Delia and August will be forever estranged. The expedition has come to ruin. The play ends pessimistically; there seems to be no way to protect oneself from betrayal. In Jean's mind, Dan died because he was too innocent: "WHY DID HE TRUST PEOPLE, WHY DID HE BELIEVE IN THINGS?" Whether they are trusting or cynical, most of the characters in *The Mound Builders* hurt each other in the end.

Permanence and Impermanence

The world of *The Mound Builders* is a cruel one. Not only do people betray each other, but the simple passage of time makes everything people do turn to dust. The constant

action of the universe is to destroy, yet, even knowing this, the primal urge of people is to try to build something permanent. In the introduction to *Lanford Wilson: Collected Works Volume II 1970-1983,* Wilson wrote that even in the earliest drafts of the play, he realized that "at the burning heart of the theme was: Why do we strive to achieve? To build, to make our mark? Why are we Mound Builders?"

The parallels between the pre-Columbian Mound Builders and the modern characters trying to make *something* echo throughout the play. Dan makes the comparison plain early in the play, when he answers an imaginary girl's question: "Why did they build the mounds? They built the mounds for the same reason I'd build the mounds." There are frequent references to the past and records from the past. The Mound Builders lived from about A.D. 600 to 1100, and the poetry, pots, and bone awls they left behind are the foundation for what August and Dan are trying to accomplish. Delia compares the house in Blue Shoals to a painting by the Midwestern artist Grant Wood and compares her life to the Charles Dickens novel *Dombey and Son.* Chad cites local folklore, and Dan quotes Confucius (or tries to), when the two are drinking together. Jean quotes an old Chinese proverb. August compares Cynthia's work with that of famed photographer Diane Arbus. Dan's nickname, Pollyandy, is a reference to Pollyanna, a fictional character from a series of early twentieth-century novels. These references demonstrate that the past is useful in the present: people can use what others have left behind to help them live today.

All of the adult characters are trying to create something that will live on after they are gone. August and Dan are trying to build a national monument as well as careers and a reputation, "to conquer lost worlds with a doctorate in one hand and a trowel in the other." Jean wants to make a family and after two miscarriages in less than a year is cautiously optimistic about her current pregnancy. Chad plans to build a motel, a golf course, and a restaurant. Delia has written two books that will endure, and her inability to write more has driven her to alcohol and despair. Cynthia makes photographs, and although she is not as talented as the famous Diane Arbus, she is responsible for the visual record of August and Dan's work. (She is also the only one who chooses to destroy her own work.)

None of it is any good. August and Dan's work is destroyed, first by Chad and the bulldozer and then again by the floods. Jean, presumably, will deliver a healthy baby, but she will not have the family she dreamed of because her husband is dead. Chad is also dead, after being cheated out of his planned development. Delia and Cynthia may find new outlets for their art, or they may sink deeper into drink. As for the Mound Builders, their pots and bone awls and gold beads lie at the bottom of the lake, buried again as they were for nine hundred years before August came along. The cycle is complete—until another group of archeologists finds the artifacts and dreams of using them to build something permanent.

Style

Frame

As the curtain rises on *The Mound Builders*, August Howe is in his study in Urbana, Illinois, dictating notes into a tape recorder as he looks at slides of "the wreckage of last summer's expedition." The slides are projected onto a wall on the stage so the audience can see them, and the first series includes pictures of the lake, the house, the construction of the dam, the bulldozer, and the dig itself. Although most of the action of the play happens in Blue Shoals, Illinois, the Blue Shoals scenes are flashbacks, and the present time is February in Urbana. Twelve times throughout the play, scenes of August in his study are interspersed with scenes of the characters living out the events recorded in August's notes and Cynthia's slides.

This framing device has several effects. Mechanically, it enables Wilson to provide images for his audience that would not be possible to present in live action. The characters talk to each other inside the house, but much of what they talk about is outside: "August up to his a—— in mud," the mounds as they are excavated and after they are flattened by a bulldozer, the rising lake. Wilson cannot have a bulldozer run over a mound on stage, but the slides enable him to show a picture of it stuck in the mud afterward. Other items, such as a pot from the excavation and the bone awl, are too small to show the audience in detail, but the slides enable the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the artifacts the team is finding.

Another important effect of the framing device is to cast doubt on everything that happens between the characters. If the Blue Shoals scenes are August's memories of events, how reliable are they? Of all the characters in the house, August is the least engaged; he spends most of his time alone in his study and hurries through the room where others are talking. He is angry with Delia for being a burden on him, and after the summer, he is angry with Cynthia and Kirsten for leaving him. He has never respected Chad and must feel even less regard for him after, it may be assumed, Chad kills Dan and himself. It is likely that these events and emotions have colored August's memories of the summer. And if he did not even notice that his wife was having an affair (and making little effort to hide it), how accurately can he remember conversations? Wilson points out in the stage directions that "the house is seen from August's memory," and the same must be said of all of the flashback scenes. The frame repeatedly reminds the audience that the play is itself an artifact. It is imperfect, as all artifacts are, but it is all we have.

Foreshadowing

When a writer drops clues about what is going to happen in a story—especially clues to unhappy or evil events—those clues are said to foreshadow future events. In *The Mound Builders*, Wilson leaves no doubt from the very beginning that the play is going

to end unhappily. One of August's first lines in the first scene is a reference to "the wreckage of last summer's expedition," and audiences who have seen Wilson's earlier play *The Hot l Baltimore* know that the slide of the bulldozer in the first scene foreshadows future destruction.

Many of August's slides and comments refer to events before they happen on stage. In his second series of slides are pictures of Cynthia, whom he twice refers to as his "ex-relation." Halfway through the play, he comments that "by the time the lake over-ran the site, it didn't matter at all." He later reveals that his years of work ultimately came to "a salvage operation from which we salvaged nothing." Other elements of foreshadowing include Delia looking into the future at a "sad old world of widows" on the shore "looking out over the water"; Dan making Jean uncomfortable by putting on the death mask; and Cynthia telling Jean that Chad will never get rich, that he and his father will "have the whole property extorted out from under them." All of these moments (some more overt than others) indicate what is going to happen before it actually occurs.

Why would an author do this? Why spoil the surprise? Wilson uses foreshadowing to shift the audience's attention from the plot and onto the underlying themes. In other words, the plot itself is not the main point in this play; the play is about ideas. Wilson is concerned less with *what* happens than with *why.* By relieving the audience from the responsibility of keeping track of the action, he makes it easier for them to focus on motivation and cause.

Historical Context

The Drug Culture of the 1970s

For readers in the twenty-first century, the casual drug use by the characters in *The Mound Builders* may seem surprising. Contrary to the stereotype today of drug users as primarily young, poor, and uneducated, the marijuana and mescaline users in the play are in their twenties and thirties, middle class, and highly educated. Dan, the heaviest drug user, has a doctoral degree and works for a major university. Jean is a medical doctor, who has a history of being a "drughead" but who has gone "cold turkey" for the duration of her pregnancy. These characters are not meant to be seen as perverse or unusual but as fairly typical young professionals for whom recreational drug use is nothing to hide. In fact, the period of the 1970s saw the highest rate of drug use in the nation's history.

Before the second world war, drugs were difficult to obtain. Working with other countries to reduce production of opium poppies and coca, the United States was able to prevent most drugs from entering the country. Drug use was scarcely recognized as a social problem. The bursting economy after the war and advances in production methods led to many benefits for the country but also led to an increase in drug use. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1970s, the United States had a large population of middle-class young people who had the money to buy drugs and a ready supply of drugs. In the 1960s, marijuana became widely available for the first time, and psychedelic drugs were said to help users "expand their consciousness." In the era of Watergate and the end of the Vietnam War, drug use became a sign of rebellion for many people who needed a way to distance themselves from what they saw as an immoral society. Because many of the drug users were middle-class, use became somewhat casual and acceptable (although still illegal) in most places, which helped spread drug use even further. The 1970s saw the re-emergence of cocaine, which had virtually disappeared after the 1920s but later was now seen as a sign of power and status because of its high cost. Some celebrities made no secret of their drug use. Drugs were celebrated in movies and in music, and a comedy team named Cheech and Chong made a career of mocking and championing the drug culture.

By 1979, government figures estimated that one in ten Americans was using recreational drugs. Since that time, drug use has continued to be a major problem for the United States, but the numbers of users and the casual nature of their use has not been equaled.

The Nation's First Energy Crisis

In the early 1970s, the United States was enjoying a period of cheap energy and a growing economy. The idea of conserving energy was far from the minds of most Americans, who imagined energy to be so limitless that they never really considered it

at all. Like the early settlers who could not imagine this huge country ever running low on land or on buffalo, Americans had a disturbing awakening in 1973. Suddenly, large cities found they could not meet the demand for electricity to power the air-conditioners and other electrical appliances that had multiplied faster than energy companies' capacity to produce power. This led to periods of low power over large areas, called "brown outs," as utility companies simply could not produce enough power. Rates increased rapidly.

In October of 1973, the members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) staged an embargo, which means they intentionally reduced the amount of oil they would sell to other nations, including the United States. The effect was immediate and dramatic. In the United States, customers found long lines at gas stations, and in some areas customers were allowed to buy gasoline only on certain days. In December, the national Christmas tree went without lights as a symbol that all Americans needed to use less energy.

The price of oil rose from three dollars a barrel in 1973 to thirty dollars a barrel in 1980, leading to a worldwide recession. In the United States, it seemed important to reduce dependency on foreign oil. Federal laws called for energy conservation and encouraged the development of alternative sources of energy. Funding became available for solar, wind, and hydroelectric power development. This led directly to projects similar to Wilson's fictional Blue Shoals Dam, which would provide hydroelectric power and, incidentally, create a lake and all its accompanying tourist activity. As Jean says to Chad, "The signing of an energy bill in Washington transforms rural areas into resorts—field hands into busboys."

Critical Overview

Although *The Mound Builders* is Wilson's favorite of his plays, it has not been the favorite of critics. For the most part, it is fair to say that the play has been more widely admired by those who have read it and studied it as a text than by those who have seen it performed. Both groups agree that the play is complicated and literary, even "opaque"—just the type of play that is often more rewarding to readers, who can pause and retrace their steps to confirm connections. And most critics who have studied Wilson's career have found that Wilson did not hit his stride and produce fine, mature work until the Talley family plays a few years after *The Mound Builders*.

When the play opened off-Broadway in 1975, Wilson and the Circle Repertory were already important enough to draw the attention of New York's most influential reviewers. For Wilson, this was both good and bad. His play was reviewed in the *New York Times* and important magazines, but the reviews were not favorable. Edith Oliver, reviewer for the *New Yorker,* described an "elaborate production of a dim and insubstantial play." She admired Wilson's ability to write dialogue, writing "the lines are speakable, and there are a number of good, funny ones," but did not believe the characters to be "based on any firsthand observation, or even on memory." Stanley Kauffmann, on the other hand, found the play's "authentic base—in Wilson's well-known feeling for the Midwest" to be its strongest virtue. Kauffmann's review for the *New Republic* described moments of "real wit" and "genuine feeling" but concluded that "Wilson lacks the intellectual depth to make the schema fruitful or the art to keep it from the mere filling-out of a pattern." The most positive review was Harold Clurman's for the *Nation.* Clurman called the play "Wilson's most ambitious" and the play's idea "provocative and unmistakably felt." He found himself "strangely disturbed" by the play's "density as well as the pull and tear of motivations and thoughts evoked and left unresolved," and he concluded that the play "is one I genuinely respect even in my dissatisfaction with it."

The play was revived by Circle Repertory in 1986 with a slightly revised script. In this new version, the character of Kirsten was deleted, and other changes were made to sharpen the conflicts, but the critics were not much impressed. Reviewing the revival for *New York* magazine, John Simon commented, "Even the most talented playwrights cannot score all the time." He found the play "rather opaque" and joked that the characters and their issues were so difficult to empathize with that "It's all just making mounds out of molehills." John Beaufort, writing for the *Christian Science Monitor,* agreed, praising "the gifts that have served Mr. Wilson so admirably in other works" but finding that in this play "the characters and their problems arouse no particular concern."

Literary critics have focused on delineating the central conflicts of the play and on showing how the play fits into Wilson's body of work. In his Twayne overview *Lanford Wilson,* Gene A. Barnett intentionally sidesteps the play's weaknesses to focus on its strengths: "Thematically, *The Mound Builders* is Wilson's most complicated play, and any flaw in the work does not mitigate the validity of its themes." Barnett examines the themes of conflict between man's dreams and reality and "the cyclical repetition of

history and culture." Only one scholarly article devoted entirely to *The Mound Builders* has been published, Johan Callens's "When 'the Center Cannot Hold.'" Callens examines the play as both "an exploration of the psychological tensions that arise when people from different professions and classes" come together and as "an investigation of the nature of reality and man's relation to it." Mark Busby, author of a brief monograph entitled *Lanford Wilson,* traces the play's themes of "work, family, and betrayal" through several other of Wilson's plays. He admits that reviewers did not admire the play in performance but finds that "its complexity makes it perhaps his most satisfying play to read."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In the following essay, Bily examines Wilson's uses of parallels in The Mound Builders *to show the connections between Dan and Chad, characters who seem on the surface to be dissimilar.*

Lanford Wilson's *The Mound Builders* is a play about time and human attempts to outrun it. All of the characters dig into the past—literally and figuratively—to find materials with which to build a future, and in their attempts they get in one another's way and prevent one another from achieving their goals. Since everything in the play is filtered through August's consciousness, his personality and his struggles are easy to see. As August understands it, he has lost his life's work because of his own deception and because of a conflict between two young men, one good and one evil. Wilson, however, indicates not only that August's work was perhaps doomed from the beginning but that the characters of Dan and Chad are more complex and more similar than August realizes.

The title *The Mound Builders* refers to the Temple Mound people, the early Mississippian people who built burial mounds between A.D. 600 and 1100. Wilson has written, though, that he intended the title phrase to encompass all of the characters and, in fact, all people. In his introduction to the play in *Lanford Wilson: Collected Plays Volume II 1970-1983,* he explains that "at the burning heart of the theme was: Why do we strive to achieve? To build, to make our mark? Why are we Mound Builders?" The "we" is telling here. We are all Mound Builders. Wilson has created a play whose characters "somehow reflected that culture," and his challenge as a playwright is to make that reflection clear to the audience. He achieves this through highlighting parallels between the pre-Columbian people and the modern-day characters and between Dan Loggins and Chad Jasker. In doing so, he also makes his characters more complex, less clearly good and evil.

The most obvious parallel comes near the beginning, when Dan is making fun of the townspeople of Blue Shoals and what he perceives as their stupid questions:

"Why did they build the mounds?" They built the
mounds for the same reason I'd build the mounds.
Because I wanted to make myself conspicuous; to
sacrifice to the gods; to protect me from floods, or
animals; because my grandfather built mounds; because
I was sick of digging holes; because I didn't
have the technology to build pyramids and a person
isn't happy unless he's building something.

Dan's answer is somewhat facetious; he believes the answer to the question is so obvious that no one should even have to ask it. But his answer serves several important functions in the play.

Dan's comment that "they built the mounds for the same reason I'd build the mounds" states a direct connection between the prehistoric people and modern people. We are all the same kind of people. The adult characters in the play are all trying "to leave something behind," to build something—reputations, books, photographic records, children, buildings, a monument. Once Wilson has established that the archeologists are in this way like their subjects and that the man who wants to build a golf course is like the man who wants to build a temple, he can help us examine how different characters manifest that similarity.

The question that Dan is mocking is a question that Wilson thinks is central to the play's theme: "Why did they build the mounds?" or, in Wilson's words, "Why are we Mound Builders?" The fact that Dan takes the question so lightly says something about his character. On the one hand, he is filled with respect for the Temple Mound people because they fulfilled the human need to build something. He has devoted his professional life to understanding and preserving what remains of their culture and has published a book on the subject. He speaks of his typical Mound Builder chief "Cochise" with awe and reverence. Why, then, can't he understand Chad's need to build? Is Chad's need so different from Dan's? Dan is like the *Peanuts* character who proclaimed, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand." Dan is an academic who loves ancient cultures but has nothing but disdain for the townspeople and the students in his life. Even as he says, "Listen to Chad Jasker tell you about the restaurant he's going to build," Dan knows that Chad is never going to have the chance. Dan and August have already seen to it that the highway will be moved, and therefore Chad's land will not make him rich. Why should Chad's desire to build a restaurant be thought of as less noble than the Temple Mound people's desire to build a burial mound? Because Chad would profit from his project? Doesn't he want to build "for the same reason" they did? By setting the two building projects side-by-side early in the play and by putting the comparison in Dan's mouth, Wilson makes it harder for us to see Dan and August as the "good guys" and Chad as the bad.

Wilson will continue to show that Dan and Chad are as alike as they are different, and Dan will continue to miss the similarities. For one thing, they both love the same woman, Jean. In the scene in which the two men are drunk and fishing, Dan praises Jean's intelligence and beauty and twice tells Chad, "you wouldn't believe it." Of course, Chad does believe it and loves Jean for these qualities, but Dan has no inkling of Chad's feelings.

Because of the differences in their social class and education, Chad, too, believes that he and Dan are different kinds of people. He tells Dan and August, "I admire you people. You're really trying to make something of yourself." Neither archeologist steps in to say that Chad, too, is trying to "make something" of himself, but Cynthia does, pointing out that "They wouldn't have the patience to bust down a transmission." Chad brushes her off.

But Wilson demonstrates in one more way that the instinct to build is the same in both men. They not only want to build, but they want people to know they've built. As Dan explained earlier, he can understand that a Mound Builder would build something

"Because I wanted to make myself conspicuous." Throughout the play, Chad urges Jean to come with him to the courthouse to see the scale model of his proposed development. He tells her, "there's something I want you to see"; "I want to show you"; "you ought to look at it." When Chad finally realizes that he is not going to get his highway interchange, Cynthia's first reflex is to try to compensate him with something. Jean also tries to appease him by telling him, "Chad, I went down to the courthouse; I saw the model you told me to see." He ignores both women; it is too late for them to help him.

The other character who repeatedly wants to show people things is Dan. He grumbles about townspeople coming out to the dig to see what they're doing, but, as Jean says, "He loves it, of course; he performs for them like a dancing bear." When he stumbles home drunk after fishing with Chad, he wants Jean to come out and see the big fish he's caught. It's not enough to have caught it and not enough to just tell her about it. Even though it's late at night and cold, and Jean is barefoot, he insists, "Come out and look. Come—Would you come out here and look?" Later, when the team finally finds the tomb of the God King, the archeological find of a lifetime, Dan's first urge is to show it to Jean: "Jean, Jean, Jean, Jean—come outcome down." He even wants Delia to come see the tomb ("Delia, if you don't come and see this, I'll never read another word"), although she has been ill and scarcely out of bed all summer. If she can't make it to the site, he will carry her on his back.

When Chad decides to have his terrible revenge, it is Dan with whom he is most angry. He felt closer to Dan than to August. Because they shared so much in common, Dan's betrayal is the most hurtful. Chad knows just how to coax Dan outside to his death: he says, "I got something I want to show you"; "There's something outside I want to show you"; "I want to show you something." How can Dan not go with Chad? Another man might be suspicious and refuse to go out in the dark with a man whom he has cheated and whom he has found stealing priceless artifacts, but Dan does not hesitate. He and Chad speak the same language, they think the same way, they want the same things. When Chad calls, Dan follows.

In comparing Dan and Chad, Wilson seems to be saying that the blame for the disaster falls equally on all shoulders—or at least equally on the male shoulders. The role of the women seems to be to record and admire what the men accomplish. Delia feels sorry for men, "depressing poor bastards, breaking their balls for their families. We're their reflection, I suppose, but I don't know as they love us for it." When it is all over, however, it is the women who have truly made things that will outlive them: Delia's books, Cynthia's photographs, and Jean's child. They have created without fanfare or praise: August only makes fun of Cynthia's photographs; it is when Delia seeks approval from others that she finds herself unable to write; and Jean tries to keep her pregnancy a secret. It would be stretching things to say that Wilson was writing a feminist play when he created *The Mound Builders*. But it is fair to say that he took pains to show that Dan and Chad are more similar than they appear and that their similarity is wrapped up in their maleness and in their masculine approach to what it means to be a Mound Builder.

Source: Cynthia A. Bily, Critical Essay on *The Mound Builders,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Callens discusses Wilson's intent, his characters, and critical response to The Mound Builders.

The Mound Builders, was first produced by New York's Circle Repertory Company on February 2, 1975, under the guidance of Marshall W. Mason, Lanford Wilson's usual director. It could have been the simple story of how "The signing of an energy bill in Washington transforms rural areas into resorts." But important archeological discoveries determined it otherwise. In Wilson's play the decision to build the Blue Shoals Dam in Southern Illinois indeed interferes with the excavation of remnants from the Early Mississippian Culture. The ensuing complications are enough to expand a commonplace idea—based on the true though partial destruction of the historical site of Cahokia by encroaching civilization—into an exceptional play, given, of course, the help of a good playwright who has for the occasion sharpened his pen into an etcher's needle.

To Chad Jasker, the landowner's son, the lake created by the dam cannot fill up fast enough, the new highway and interchange should have been there already, together with the hotels, motels, restaurants, tennis courts and golf course, so that the tourists can start to enjoy themselves and the money to pour in. Chad and his father have in fact made agreements with the developers about the percentage they ought to get on every dollar spent. The archeologists, however, Prof. August Howe and his assistant, Dr. Dan Loggins, for a fourth consecutive summer down at the site with their respective wives, Cynthia and Jean, are "racing time" against the lake. It has been a "sopping spring" and the summer rains do not let up, with the result that the water level is rising fast. To make things worse, August is saddled with his ailing sister, Delia, an itinerant writer whom he flew down from a Cleveland hospital where she was stranded, broke, and briefly suffering from amnesia.

Under these conditions work is not easy, but as long as the Jasker Village proves to be typical, the archeological team has grudgingly accepted that its excavation is to be a mere salvage operation. Yet once the grave of a God King has been discovered—for the first time ever the atmosphere becomes more hectic and desperate. For the lake brooks no resistance, in contrast to the developers whom August had little trouble in warding off by appealing to a state law against public-funded construction defacing Indian monuments: "a brief report, a few pictures, and a phone call" is all it had taken him two years ago to have the legislature reroute the highway to the other side of the lake. The foresighted scientist could not foresee everything, though: through August's intervention, Chad sees his life's dream wiped out in an instant. As a result, the night after the great discovery, he takes off with the few artefacts already unearthed from the tomb, followed by Dan who caught him redhandedly, and runs a bulldozer over the site. The next morning both men have disappeared. Only an oar from Chad's boat is found floating near the center of the lake. Any efforts to find the men, however, remain unsuccessful.

These are the bare facts of a play that is presented as an extended recollection: while from his study in Urbana, Illinois, August is dictating into a tape-recorder comments on the slides from the expedition, past events materialize on stage. They do so intermittently, for every now and then the dramatic action is exchanged again for the illustrated narrative, which has the advantage of permitting jumps in time. The use of a narrator and of slides is no easy attempt on the part of a mainstream dramatist to reinforce one of his plays with Brechtian techniques and to pass it off as a docu-drama or modernist experiment. The slides certainly enliven the production and instruct the average spectator or layman about the nature of archeological fieldwork in general and about the Early Mississippian Culture in particular. Incidentally, when writing the play Wilson was assisted by Dr. Howard Winter from the Department of Anthropology of New York University. The speed with which the slides follow one another also influences the play's pace and never goes without any emotional impact: now their fast succession expresses August's anger and frustration, now the uninterrupted accumulation of shots from the lake charges it with an ominous, symbolic power. Yet, none of these is the slides' major function, which is that of leading up to the play's central problem, the mediation of reality. The frame establishes a distance between the present (February) and the layered past (immediate—the previous summer—or remote—the Mound Builders), between the nearby (Urbana) and the far away (Blue Shoals), an exemplary distance which the audience is never allowed to forget throughout the enacted sections of the play.

I say an "exemplary" distance because *The Mound Builders* is as much an exploration of the psychological tensions that arise when people from different professions and classes, and hence with different outlooks and convictions, are forced to live together under increasing pressures, as it is an investigation into the nature of reality and man's relation to it, carried out between the lines of the dialogue and through recurring metaphors. In this respect, archeology stands not just for the attempt to retrieve the past but for the quandary of reaching reality, whether past, present or future. In the highhanded jargon of philosophers, *The Mound Builders* touches upon the ontological issue (concerning the existence of reality) and the epistemological one (concerning our knowledge of reality). It is to Wilson's credit that he succeeds in translating these elevated issues into ordinary and intelligible terms without falsely and unduly simplifying them.

In Wilson's existentialist inspired portrait of contemporary life, reality is almost but not quite hopelessly fragmented, human existence alienated and devoid of a strong center that holds things together. Time is one culprit here: as soon as it has brought the future within easy reach, it carries it off again into the past. Frustrated as he is by this, man tries to hold on to present reality by reducing it to objects he can—so goes the illusion—rationally know and thus—double illusion—possess. The source of these two false assumptions lies in the early history of philosophy. It was Plato who in his allegory of the cave from the *Republic* (to which the frame alludes), turned reality into a figment of the human mind rather than something of which we are an integral part. Still, Plato never doubted the existence of the external world. By doubting even that, Descartes outstripped the Greek: his sceptical consciousness was the only thing he could be certain of. The gains of this radical exercise in critical awareness have been

considerable in terms of scientific advances and man's manipulative power over the things his rational mind isolates from reality and subjects to scrutiny. Nevertheless, reason has caused a fissure between man and nature through which the essence of things may have slipped and which may have consolidated the limits of rational knowledge. Reality still holds many mysteries despite reason's grandiose claims to unveil them. Other endowments of which man is so proud are, in Wilson's view, equally problematic mediators of reality: memory is unreliable and the controversy about the relation between human language and reality is still raging. The few mechanical tools man has invented to aid him in the process of grasping or mediating reality also falter: tape-recorders and cameras distort. In the end, art, so often vilified by (abstract) scientists may prove its worth as a more intuitive and integral approach to reality. Art, Wilson is suggesting in and through this play, may help to understand the nature of the problem and offer a solution that is inspired by archeology as an empirical science, the ancient Mound Builders' way of life (as interpreted imaginatively by the playwright), and by existentialist philosophy: a Being rooted within the world. The profound pessimism of *The Mound Builders* is not due to Wilson's conviction that solutions to the alienation and disintegration of modern life do not exist, rather to his exasperation about man's refusal to see these solutions and put them into practice.

It immediately strikes the attention how alienated and divided Wilson's characters are. In this sense *The Mound Builders* satisfies the dramatist's long-standing attraction to misfits and deviants. There is, in the first place, Chad Jasker, the landowner's son. On the one hand, he is attracted to the archeologists—to the women to be sure, but also to the men for their education, intelligence and drive. On the other hand, he is repelled by their arrogance and facile breaches of trust. He admires their dedication but also annihilates their achievement. Delia, another outsider in the archeological group, represents an extreme case of modern alienation: she is a divorced woman, like a "nomad" always "in motion", and the author of a novel called *Spindrift.* Her homelessness goes back to that moment when, aged seventeen, she left the parental house. Although that was long before August sold it, the sale is nonetheless symptomatic. In this house with its "Oak floors and old oak furniture" and its rooms full of light Delia must have felt rooted and inspired at the same time, an organic unity before her world-wide traveling and countless misfortunes turned her into a "dissipated" character without any sense of time and place. She ignores, e.g., how long she was kept at the hospital.

Dan is familiar with her feeling of disorientation because of a horrible fit of drunkenness, during which he ended up with his arms wrapped around a fire-alarm box as if it were his mother. This sad and grotesque picture of loneliness ends with the ironic and revelatory message on the fire-alarm box: "You must answer to get help." Had Dan known all the answers he would not have been in such dire straits. Like Delia he does not stand up well to the questions with which modern life confronts him. In search of security he retreats from reality into alcohol, joints and an archeologist's dream. Whichever he chooses, alienation is the price he pays. Take the last of the three: a hard day's work on the site leaves Dan "dirty and mildly refractory," the stage directions read, i.e., tired and unresponsive, as well as "falling apart," so to speak.

The general life-style of the archeologists is indeed conducive to a sense of personal fragmentation. Shuttling back and forth between home and the site, Cynthia has developed a feeling of schizophrenia. It remains to be seen, though, whether her philandering with Chad will relieve the feeling, as it leads to her divorce from August. The tensions between the members of the team prevent us from calling it the "sort of cozily, scientific, coenobitic community" as Delia does. It is more an "enclave" or "hothouse", an artificial environment breeding violent conflicts, death and disaster. In any case, Delia is right about the isolation in which the archeologists are operating: Jean realizes that conservators of the past are an "anachronism" from the viewpoint of the developers and in retrospect August compares the house at Blue Shoals to an ark tugged loose from its unstable moorings by the water flooding the valley. The drama as a whole even appears as a Platonic vision of his "mind's eye," concocted from the seclusion of his study and projected onto the back wall of the stage. Thus Wilson conveys the emotional, temporal and spatial estrangement of the archeologists' task in a world devoted to progress. Yet, even the play's token devotee of progress suffers from estrangement, which brings us back to the character we started with: Chad is already living on his "island" within the lake, his prospective wealth is a "fantasy" nurturing other, more romantic ones, such as the idea that he can seduce Jean with it. Chad is not just divided but as much as the others wrapped up in dreams, and therefore isolated. The disease of alienation is widespread, a generalized condition of contemporary life.

If we step back but a little from the characters' concrete experience of disjunction and deracination, we also notice the many thematic opposition pairs interwoven into the play and polarizing its substance. The structure, in its alternation of narrative and dramatic action and in the use of separate slides instead of an ongoing film, is also manifestly discontinuous. Nowhere, however, does the play approach the "facile scheme" Stanley Kauffmann claims it to be, "the mere filling-out of a pattern, step by overlong step." The numerous secondary oppositions need not simply align themselves with the primary ones of past and present, archeologists and developers, specifying their meaning. It may be the case, as when Delia's childhood comes to stand for rootedness and her present life for alienation. More often, new polarities transpose the terms of the original ones and shift their sense. They may latch onto one of the initial poles, further breaking it down, or draw new configurations that bridge former contrasts. Depending on the viewpoint, then, the dualisms may be apparent or real. For instance, Dan and August are idealists acting for the benefit of Mankind, sacrificing their time and energy to Science and to the promotion of man's historical consciousness, whereas Chad, living in the present, is the materialist and opportunist eager for personal profit. This multi-faceted opposition is echoed in the images of the (greedy) hand and the (disinterested) eye. And yet, Chad generously saves Dan's life twice, whereas the archeologists are not immune to the fame and money, which the discovery of a royal tomb can bring them or the Department. In the end, the value scales are reversed, the initial contrasts suffused and mitigated by parallels.

This is no proof of Wilson's inability to keep things distinct, or, as John J. O'Connor argues, of Wilson's reluctance to commit himself and follow through the implications of his material. The playwright first teases the audience into establishing clear-cut oppositions, then deliberately mixes the lines, mediates the poles. Cynthia, for instance,

associates her hometown with a comfortable but cluttered and stifling life in "eleven rooms of memorabilia," the site with a primitive but free and sexually exciting one. So Urbana, Illinois, apparently comes to stand for modern urban civilization and the site for natural existence. However, we have already seen how artificial the situation of the archeologists on that site is. Moreover, Chad, from whom Cynthia derives her image of country life, definitely sides with the developers and urbanizes. It is no use trying the polarity of urban and natural life onto that of the present and past, either. The Mound Builders were farmers tied to their land, who also built the first permanent settlements, the precursors of modern cities. Cahokia, we are told, outstripped Paris and London at the time.

Another example of Wilson's working method is provided by the opposition of the religious past and the secular present. The Mound Builders honored the Gods in return for an abundant crop and protection against floods and wild animals. At present, the ancient gods are either dead or no longer worshipped, incapable or unwilling to protect people against floods. Science has superseded religion. Facts for faith, that, Delia insists, is our present condition. But despite the decline of religion, there remains according to Dan and to Delia a need to dream and hope. The aspiration clumsily expresses itself in the brutal defacement of the ancient mounds and the erection of new structures such as the Blue Shoals Dam and recreation facilities: shrines to the modern idols of Progress and Leisure. From this it does not follow that Wilson conceives of his Mound Builders as devout innocents in comparison to our present-day vandals and desecrators of tombs (Chad as well as the archeologists). The cycle of destruction and construction must have functioned already in the days of the Early Mississippians, since they supplanted other cultures, as Wilson tells us, when they arrived in the region now known as Southern Illinois. To think, therefore, that the shabby present is only a falling-away from the greatness of the past, is to jump to conclusions. The same holds for the reverse but equally simplistic assumption that history is the steady rise from savagery to civilization and culture, a view cherished by the rationalists.

The point of Wilson's hedging, amply illustrated in the foregoing paragraphs, is twofold: to demonstrate the complexity of reality and the ultimate failure of attempts to comprehend it through dualistic thinking. Reality defies regimentation into the straightjacket of binary sets such as idealism/ materialism, city/country, religious/secular, progress/decay, or to mention the sets supplied by Delia and Cynthia: "those who hustle and those who don't," "winners and losers, givers and takers," "the quick and the dead." These antagonistic categories offer only partial insights—hustling, for instance, is a common and appropriate enough metaphor for our mercenary world—never the whole truth. "Chad tries to be among the quick" but fails, Delia resembles a zombie compared to the ebullient Dan but will survive him. Dualistic thinking is in fact a manifestation of the analytical spirit which we inherited from the Greeks through Descartes and which now reigns almost unchallenged. Reason is the supreme God of our age, the computer, its idol whose artificial mind operating with zeroes and ones only, is modeled after human intelligence at its worst. Unless checked and corrected, reason's sifting and searching may lead to total fragmentation and meaninglessness.

August suffers badly from an extreme rationalism. One of his personal notes reads:

Separate personal from professional. Discard personal.
Separate separate from separate; separate personal
from imaginary, illusion from family, ancient
from contemporary, etc., if possible. Organize if possible
and separate if possible from impossible. Catalogue
what shards remain from the dig; celebrate
separation; also, organize (a) brain, (b) photographic
material, (c) letter of resignation, (d) health, (e) budget,
(f) family, (f-1) family ties, (g) life. Not necessarily
in that order.

This sample of rational thought is rather confusing, to say the least. It confirms that the play's formal discontinuity is partially due to August's chaotic mind. In the absence of interpretative links, taxonomies and lists of loose facts do not add up to a meaningful whole. Your "thinking machine" will tell you as much: "You feed it all into a computer," Delia tells Jean, "all the facts and fancies the doctors have printed or typed or brushed and the computer would print out NOTHING APPLIES. It doesn't scan." Reason's proper means of unification are deficient. Even the sacrosanct cause-and-effect by which Delia characterizes rational thought, may be, as Hume maintains, a matter of the reported and haphazard concurrence of separate events, rather than, of a logically necessary connection. To a rational mind like August's, reality is a collection of objects ("eleven rooms of memorabilia") or else appears muddled and uncertain, at times disturbingly so, at times ludicrously: among the eight girls assisting Dan there is one "presumed" male, all of them are "alleged" students and now that Cynthia's sleeping around has been divulged, Kirsten is an "Alleged" daughter. Of course, these qualifiers may be simply interpreted as cynical markers of August's spite or embitterment but thematically they go beyond immediate character psychology.

Jean's story of her experience as a twelve-year old spelling bee champion directly correlates excessive analysis and nagging doubts about reality. The contests taught her many new words (quantitative knowledge) and how to spell them (analytical knowledge) but too many of them caused her to have a nervous breakdown. Jean could not stop: every word that was said to her, she spelled in her head. The meaning of sentences dissolved as she reduced them to words, syllables and letters. By the same token, the familiar world rarefied into similar and equally elusive Platonic universals:

there were days when the world and its objects
separated, disintegrated into their cellular structure,
molecular—worse—into their atomic structure. And
nothing held its form. The air was the same as the trees
and a table was no more substantial than the lady
sitting at it. . .

Systematic, frontal attacks on reality such as August's and Jean's, are bound to end in failure. In *Spindrift,* Delia, too, approached reality the wrong way so that it kept retreating, never yielding its secrets. She set herself, in all reasonableness

a simple problem and tried to solve it. Write a Chinese
puzzle box. Write a Russian doll. A box
within a box within a box within a box. Every time something was
solved, within the solution was another problem, and
within the solving of the second riddle another question
arose. And when that riddle was unwound there
was still a knot. And you know why I failed? For me?
Because either a Chinese puzzle box must go on *ad
infinitum* or there must finally be a last box. And when
that box is opened, something must finally be in it.
Something simple like maybe an answer. Or a fact,
since we all seem to be compulsive compilers.

This is not the only occasion on which Delia vents her frustration about the limits of human knowledge. Earlier she admitted ignoring the answer to most existential problems, which explains why she hates the complacent smiles of Indian deities, looking as if they knew all the solutions. And during her stay at the hospital she briefly forgot her identity, an occurrence that symbolizes, rather bluntly, modern man's restricted self-knowledge as well as his loss of personality. Actually, Wilson instills in his audience a personal feeling of ignorance and uncertainty while making these explicit as themes. By withholding facts about his characters until late in the play and by the piecemeal giving away of historical information about the Early Mississippian Culture, he is not just keeping his plot lively enough to hold his audience, or lapsing into didacticism. Delia learns only at the end of Act I that Chad saved Dan's life. Still later Dan finds out that Delia had started, though never finished, a third novel, and both characters are surprised to hear that, around the year 1100, "Parakeets were as common in Illinois as the sparrow is now", which makes Delia conclude that there are "Some things we don't know." With this very formula Dan had initially reproached Delia for assuming that Chad "had something on him." Without complete knowledge, which we will never attain, judgments, Wilson implies, will always appear somewhat premature, a matter of suppositions that require constant revision. It is only normal then that the play leaves some questions unanswered. Did Dan try to save the excavation and retrieve the artifacts but drown in the attempt? Or was he murdered? Perhaps he caused Chad's death or else Chad killed himself? These are some of the questions that must preoccupy the audience. For Jean, shattered as she is by the immense loss, these questions have been superseded by others, such as:

Why did [Dan] go out? Why didn't someone hear
him? Why did the girls stay at the motel? WHY DID
HE HAVE TO HEAR NOISES IN THE NIGHT?
WHY DID HE TRUST PEOPLE? WHY DID HE
BELIEVE IN THINGS?

All these questions can be summed up into the one and only "Why did it have to happen to my husband?"

Wilson approaches the problem of the elusiveness of truth and reality not only from the angle of reason or rational knowledge but also from that of language. To some extent, this is like begging the question since logic and logos are etymologically related. Man is a being of logic and language, so the shortcomings of the one may be those of the other. Perhaps Wilson has even given us a clue to the parallel in "Loggins," the family name of Dan and Jean, two scientists, the former an archeologist, the latter a gynecologist. Historically, the claims made for language have certainly been as high as those made for reason. In primitive cultures words are often invested with the power to conjure up reality. The superstition survived the advent of Christianity through the Bible, the Christian God's incarnation on earth. Does not the opening of St. John's Gospel read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God?" For children language has always amounted to ontological proof: the eleven-year old Kirsten considers the presences in her dream real enough—not just the "shadows" August calls them—because they were "talking." Even Wilson's adults believe in the incantatory effect of the language. Delia fears that prophecies and especially evil curses make things happen. Although Jean has been pregnant for some time now, she and her husband still have not come up with a name. After Jean's two former miscarriages they refuse to anticipate events. Naming the unborn child would be equal to assuming its existence and suffering its eventual loss like the death of a physical presence.

The playwright here touches upon the dilemma of the chicken and the egg. Which comes first, language or reality? Are words invented to arbitrarily denote pre-existing realities or do things exist by the grace of language? The evidence in *The Mound Builders* points in opposite directions. Sometimes reality takes after words/language/literature. Dan is called Pollyandy for his naively optimistic and benevolent character, which is a generally forgotten reference to Eleanor Porter's novel *Pollyanna* (1913). Delia occasionally allows herself "to cause a brawl or pass out in the middle of the ring because [she] knew it was good for the biographer." "The signing of an energy bill in Washington [often enough] transform[s] rural areas into resorts—fieldhands into busboys", though not in this play. Sometimes language flatly ignores reality or truth. August scornfully labels a slide of Cynthia "Horse," alluding to his comment on the previous slide, bathers at the lake involved in "Horse play." And Delia glibly purports to "know all the answers" but none "of the questions" because it sounds so good. She knows "It's a lie, but it's neat." Words do seem to have a life and mind of their own. Unfortunately they can be trapped in their proper sphere against their will.

Writing can be a self-generating, autonomous activity of one book leading to the next without much affecting the world for all its efforts. Among intellectuals like Dr. Landau, Dan's American Literature Professor at College, Delia's novel, *Spindrift,* caused a ripple or two but the "neat, sweet, meek" secretary who typed the manuscript remained very composed when confronted with this chronicle of despair. She is unlike the typist in Truffaut's *L'homme qui aimait les femmes* who staunchly refused to finish the story of the protagonist's debaucheries. At the beginning of *The Mound Builders* August tests the tape-recorder with the word, "The quick gray fox jumped over" suddenly forgets the remainder of the line used to check the keys of a typewriter, and concludes with "whatever it was that the quick gray fox jumped over." In this particular case the referential value of language is *nihil,* its circularity total. The same applies, so to speak,

to dictionaries, tautological closed systems, in which words refer to other words, without coming to terms with reality. Jean's spelling bees gave her just that, the abstract knowledge of a dictionary.

Wilson's preoccupation with the ambivalent status of language with regard to reality explains, to me, the presence of aphorisms within the play and the relevance of establishing their difference from axioms. The dictionary—that flawed but handy tool—tells us an aphorism is either a "concise statement of a principle" or "a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment." Chad calls it "a saying that tells you how to judge." In other words, it has a practical value to him, derived from experience. According to the aphorism "Beer on whiskey—Mighty risk. Whiskey on beer, never fear" he and Dan need not worry about topping the many beers they have had with a shot of whiskey. Still, Dan is afraid it might kill them because they have already had too many beers. And he is right, the point being that aphorisms convey relative truths as opposed to the absolute truths of axioms. Chad insists that the thing he is looking for is not an axiom, i.e. "a maxim widely accepted on its intrinsic merits" or "a proposition regarded as a self-evident truth, a postulate," namely something that foregoes the test of reality. The reason why people use aphorisms is that they provide a sense of superior wisdom and some grip on reality and its unpredictability. Those who do not heed them at all, are clearly in the wrong. The old Chinese proverb—"If you save someone from drowning you're responsible for them for the rest of their life"—should have warned Dan about Chad's prerogatives with regard to him and his life's dream. Strictly speaking aphorisms and proverbs may deceive, yet their practical knowledge at least has the advantage of bearing the stamp of reality as opposed to purely abstract knowledge. Thus, Cynthia parries Delia's reproach of dropping August in favour of Chad—"You're paying the gold of the realm for bazaar merchandise"—with the words "All that glitters. . .[is not gold]." She happens to know August as a husband from first-hand experience whereas Delia can only presume what he is like as a husband from having known him as a brother.

Archeology is an empirical science facing the problems of man's limited knowledge and of an uncertain, fleeting reality in acute form because it deals with the past. Most of Wilson's plays deal with the past or the passage of time and how one must cope with it in order to make the present bearable and to guarantee a future. But only in *The Mound Builders* did the playwright hit upon such a suggestive and eloquent metaphor for this concern, namely archeology. Its activity represents on a grand scale the human condition, characterized as it is by the (futile) attempt to retrieve one's personal past, to possess oneself totally. Indeed, the temporality of human existence is offering the archeologists a life task as well as thwarting it. For this reason only, and not just because the man-made lake is inundating the area and threatening excavation, *The Mound Builders* is already enacted under the sign of the "passing" and "unstable" moon, that symbol of transience which is featured on separate slides. No wonder life feels like an insubstantial dream. According to August "We do not allow ourselves"—and Time often does not permit us—" to dream of finding what we might find and dream every sweep of a trowel." Human civilizations do tend to disappear. They might not vanish entirely, "without a trace," corresponding to Delia's pessimistic forebodings, yet they do tend to perish. August's fatalism with regard to his personal past surely influences his attitude towards his archeological endeavors and vice versa. The hope and joy of small

discoveries and retrievals—an image or emotion, a bone awl or mask—must constantly jar with the feeling that too much has "vanished without a trace", like "water under the bridge."

So despite the fieldwork and the palpable evidence collected, archeology remains to a large extent a speculative business, as gets illustrated with the golden mask of the God King. Says Dan, "It's a death mask—*we guess.* It might have had feathers around it here. *We have to guess.* We've never seen anything like it before" (italics added). Considering all the imponderabilities, some claims sound rather strange, like August's about the bone awl: "We have no clear idea what the bone awl was actually used for, but it was undoubtedly used for something. This is a particularly good one." I suppose "good" means "well-preserved" and not "good at doing whatever it was made for." Still, the ambiguity remains and elicits a smile. It is a disturbed smile because from August's utilitarian viewpoint, a view which weathered times remarkably well given the primitive belief that the being of a thing lies in its use, the bone awl is a dead and meaningless object. The life and soul has left the sediments of the past when archeologists find them. After the wrecked expedition, August admits with resignation that "A great amount of work has been done on the early cultures of North America and we have found only the periphery of the culture." For all we know, there might no longer be a center, as with the gold-decorated beads of which the wooden core has disintegrated. The center may forever elude the archeologists. Somehow we get the feeling that exposing the royal tomb to the light of day and publicity has caused its disappearance. This reminds us of the frescoes in Fellini's *Roma.* Constant light and atmospheric conditions preserved them in a perfect state for centuries. But their exposure to the sun and fresh air during excavations for the subway has made them fade immediately. The same happens with the pictures Cynthia took of the artefacts. In an act of compassion for Chad, who had been cruelly deceived by Dan and August, she destroys the crucial evidence by exposing the film.

It is not so certain, though, that the pictures, had they been saved, would have been of much help. After all, they are only reflections of a bygone reality, unsuccessful attempts at fixing it, confirming in their function of mementoes time and reality's passing. "All photographs are *memento mori,*" says Susan Sontag. The pictures of the tomb should have served as evidence of the discovery but they would only have shown what was no longer attainable. The thousand photographs of Kirsten as a baby could not prevent her from growing up nor can they bring back the baby she used to be. The photo of Dan wearing the death mask must be a meagre consolation to his wife. In retrospect that picture may even, metaphorically speaking, have consolidated Dan's death. Remember primitives refuse to have pictures taken of them lest their souls be stolen. Photographs "trans-fix" living reality while reproducing it. The equivocal nature also explains Delia's contempt for the genius of Rank, the British inventor of the copy machine and a movie mogul, though in her eyes a peddlar in gross lies and illusions. Movies, copies and photographs give man the illusion of an objectified reality that can be appropriated and manipulated. A similar deception is worked by the slides of the expedition. Of course, August's subjectivity adds to the problem with these slides. Through the unreliability of his memory he may accidentally get a few facts wrong or personal feelings may color his comments. Thus objective and subjective comments alternate, at times even fuse,

as when August moves from "slides of need" to "slides of spear points." The tape-recorder fails to neutralize the human distortion. On the contrary, it fastens and compounds it by mechanical means. To tell the truth, no matter how trustworthy August is, the dice have been loaded from the start, since the slides were taken by Cynthia. Surely he cannot always fathom the meaning certain shots had for her.

Photographs slides, movies, Xerox-copies, and audio-tapes: all these material products of inventions made by the rational mind function in *The Mound Builders* as flawed mediators of reality and truth, examples of perfunctory reproduction vastly inferior to creative visions. This is at least the opinion of Delia, the exemplary artist and visionary of Wilson's play. It is an opinion she metaphorically extends to matrimonial affairs. As long as wives are satisfied with being the trapped "reflections" of the men who have assumed the responsibility for a family, Delia believes they will be a "sad old" lot. If she briefly thinks that some "women are wonderful," we may assume it is because these come closer to Sartre's cruel but more truthful "miroir aux allouettes" than to so-called *bona fide* mirrors. As for Delia herself, once she had conquered "the anxiety to please" her husband, that "strong, hirsute, sweating, horny cocksman" selling "drilling equipment", she managed to divorce him. As a visionary she could no longer reflect the image he had of himself.

And Delia is a visionary, Cynthia's sight is impaired by a blind spot, perhaps because she ignores that August has the government reroute the highway. Dan knows all about archeology but confesses to an "absolute blind spot in folklore", which goes to show how one-sided scientists specialized in one field can be. Only Delia has enough "eyes in [her] head" to carry the honors of being an artist. She is the "Gorgon" whose glare can turn people into stone. Her illness has even given her, we are told with sarcasm, the haggard outlook of a soothsayer. After the death of her father, a physiologist who had written a book on vision, Delia's inspiration flagged and she stopped reading or writing books. Yet, like a contemporary palmist she kept reading the graffiti on the wall. Like an archeologist of the human mind she kept searching for the truth in "dreams and nightmares", chasing "that graceful, trim, and dangerous leviathan in the cold depths of some uncharted secret currents where the sun has never warmed the shadows." If artistic visions excel artificial duplications it is because they go beneath bland and glossy surfaces to reveal hidden truths, or better to forge them in the smithy of reality with the help of the imagination. Because of this revelatory and (re)creative power, artistic visions possess far more truthfulness and substantiality than mere mechanical reflections.

However, as with the contrasts mentioned earlier, the one between "reflections" and "visions" is not always as radical as might be expected from Delia's remarks. Art photography and art movies are valid forms of artistic expression, too, giving full scope to human creativity and inventiveness. At present artistic experimentation with color copiers has even begun. Incidentally, the invention of such machines requires creativity as well as rational thought. And the representational value of (post)modern art may be larger than supposed, given the fact that it imitates, to some extent, a world which is continously shifting and recreating itself. Although Wilson does not resort to these

examples, he nonetheless remains true to his method of reconciling oppositions set up by his characters.

Dan wants Delia to write a "fictionalized" account of the great discovery to prove that it has not been "faked." So long as this account offers to be no more than a servile "reflection," corroboration or propaganda adding to the archeologists' glory, Delia shows no interest. Once she realizes the opportunities for ingeniously exposing the intrigues behind the enterprise, she rises to the occasion. (We have every reason to believe that Wilson took over Delia's project.) Whereas an objective and factual journalistic or photographic report may "cover" the events (in both possible senses), a subjective literary rendition, in other words a more direct falsification may "uncover" the truth beneath them. Art may well be the lie that discloses the truth. The accomplished artist does not jeopardize truth by bluntly exposing it, as the archeologists do with the royal tomb in this play. He or she provides a favorable and fertile environment for deeper truths to inhabit and develop in, whereas (abstract) scientists often scare or impale them with the light of reason. Instead of tackling reality with the orderliness and directness of rational minds, great artists approach it in a stealthy, round-about and more intuitive manner. As Jerry says in Albee's *Zoo Story:* "Sometimes it is necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly." Success is never guaranteed, though, for the artist's vision can become blurred by drugs, like Delia's when she was traveling through the exotic landscapes of "Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Cyprus, Metaxa, Ouzo, Grappa, Cinzano. . . . "

August believes archeology can survive without art lending it a hand. No sooner has Delia informed him of her renewed desire to write than he advises her to leave. Irony number one: had she, the artist, been around, she could have prevented Chad from stealing the artefacts. Irony number two: many relics of the vaunted God King are jewels and ornaments, i.e., art objects. They have long survived the person or culture they belonged to. Art, Wilson here suggests, is a substantial form of truth, whatever neo-Platonists may say to the contrary. But he subtly qualifies his claim by picking as *pièce de résistance* a fragile golden mask, the reflection or shadow of its owner's face. And he further mediates the contrast between archeology and art by having Dan ask that we use our imagination, the artistic faculty par excellence, and picture the death mask surrounded by feathers. It is symptomatic that Dan, the one to recognize the role the imagination can play in the sciences, replies to Delia's reproach of scientists for their immoderate analysis and compulsive compilation of loose facts: "Not of themselves—in association. Where are they? Why are they there?", for the imagination is invaluable in tying things up again. It is the faculty with which to reconstruct and interpret the past and to survive the future, the divine gift that allows man to defy mortality and restore the continuum of time: "Not marble nor the guilded monuments/Of princes shall outlive this pow'rfull rhyme," etc. . . .

In any case, with regard to the art objects from the Early Mississippian Culture, August overstates the common attack against aesthetics and the brainless "representatives of the humanities ransacking anthropological collections for pots they find pleasingly shaped and carrying them off to museums, where they lecture without content on form —and without the least anthropological information or understanding." His own

utilitarianism has its drawbacks, too, witness the havoc it caused in the history of the West, which includes, ironically, the destruction of large parts of our archeological heritage. The one occasion on which August has recourse to the imagination, he lapses into fancifulness. In his mind's eye "the river's currents swept the house before it as a great brown flood bears off everything in its path." Reality proves less spectacular: "The lake had risen to half-cover the house. Much of the second level was above the water. The house looked more scuttled than inundated."

As mentioned, the entire play is actually a vision originating from August's mind. Wilson's mediation here borders on confusion when we realize that Delia, the artist, shares her brother's visionary faculty. From her father's "diagrams of the eye with the retina and rods and cones and iris and lens and those lines projected out into space indicating sight," it appears to Delia "that rather than the eye being a muscle that collects light those beams indicated that the eye projects vision onto the outside." But unlike August, who spends most of his time in the seclusion of his study—the sight of the "august" Professor "with a trowel in his hand." or "up to his ass in the mud" is rather uncommon, we are told—Delia until recently totally immersed herself in life's currents. This contrast between isolation and immersion is seen at its tightest if we compare Delia's father, an erudite man with a hatred for practising physicians, writing theoretical works on medicine in the peace and quiet of his great Victorian house, with Jean who gets her kicks from the hectic work at the university clinic. In August and Delia these two extremes of isolation and immersion are associated through the image of vision and with the purpose of stressing how detrimental and alienating both are. August's retreat into his private shell after the wrecked expedition—he divorces Cynthia and resigns from his job—is as bad as Delia's former immersion, for she "went down" into "the liquid world" to the point of "drowning." For both characters the external world loses its foundation and solidity. Neither can tell in the end whether it exists outside or inside their head.

As befits the central thesis of this article, Wilson's solution to the excrescences of total isolation and immersion lies somewhere in between. In this respect the Mound Builders' way of life acquires symbolic significance. I repeat that Wilson nowhere nostalgically idealizes the past, notwithstanding Dan's childish vision of Cochise taming wild animals and of wolves gently muzzling at his thighs. From the play we learn that the Mound Builders fought, built fortifications, kept slaves and sacrificed people in honor of deceased Kings. Nevertheless, in some respects the Early Mississippian Culture, as depicted by Wilson, presents a more balanced, less alienated and fragmented life than the one modern man is leading.

We have said earlier that the Early Mississippian Culture was partly agricultural, partly urban. The land as major means of subsistence was still respected, not just possessed and exploited as real estate. The settlements in all likelihood permitted a safer life than present-day New York City. For some reason—historical or other—the Mound Builders receive the epithet "muck-a-muck," muck being "filth, manure" as well as "material removed in excavations." It is a clear indication of Wilson's intention to convey their rootedness in the earth, which did not prevent them from building mounds out of aspiration for something higher. To Dan these mounds also betray a sense of tradition

or rootedness in the past and foresightedness, in other words, a sense of continuity which modern man hooked on immediacy and impermanency may have lost. The epithet "muck-a-muck" sounds like a permanent reminder of man's earthly origin and destination, a mark of humility contrasting sharply with today's Faustian striving. The dominant tone in the Early Mississippian Culture must have been set by the anonymous Aztec poem Dan quotes:

Here are our precious flowers and songs
May our friends delight in them,
May the sadness fade out of our hearts.
This earth is only lent to us.
We shall have to leave our fine work.
We shall have to leave our beautiful flowers.
That is why I am sad as I sing for the sun.

In that remote past art still succeeded in checking blind human pride an untrammeled (scientific) progress. Like life in general art still obeyed "the dictates of nature," the way Yeats wanted it to, and Wilson, too, as Gautam Dasgupta observed.

The social organization of the Natchez, the last of the Mound Builders, is also instructive. They were an "upward-mobile" matriarchal society in which the highest classes of the "Suns," "Nobles" and "Honored Men" had to marry into the lowest one of the "Stinkards." Thus the elevated and low were joined. Also, it is to be expected that in a matriarchate the female sex was better off than in our male-dominated modern western society where intelligent women are still considered exceptions to the rule: "We're all freaks—all us bright sisters," says Delia. She is the militant defender of women's rights, including that of making a fool of herself, which is always better than to be exploited as a sexual object, like "a virgin to distract the horny unicorn." By referring to the matriarchal organization of the Mound Builders, Wilson is not necessarily advocating a simple power transfer from men to women. Rather, he is making his audience aware of the one-sidedness and restraints of the present, patriarchal situation by confronting it with its opposite, in order to convey the possible diversity of an eventual social organization in which men *and* women can claim their rights.

Wilson's criticism of contemporary society, as well as the alternative he briefly sketches, partly by imaginatively bringing to life a lost Amerindian culture, seems inspired a great deal by existentialism. Alienation of the self from the roots of Being, the feeling of absurdity overwhelming and paralyzing man, the decline of religion, the lopsided flowering of Rationalism at the expense of more intuitive values, the destructiveness and present-orientedness of modern civilization as opposed to the awareness of human transience and death resulting in a commitment to the continuity of life: all these aspects figure prominently in existentialist analyses of modern life and in *The Mound Builders*.

With regard to the existentialist influence, Wilson drops several hints, the most obvious one being the reference to Camus' *The Plague,* which is ingeniously transformed into an extra reference to Sartre's *The Flies* by an apparently innocent realistic touch. When staying at Oran, Algeria, "Camus's model for the *locus in quo* of *The Plague,*" Delia was

"host to every fly on the Mediterranean." Like Sartre's hero she believes in assuming the responsibility for her own existent. The perspective that her creed—"Nobody owes their life to anybody"—opens up, is severely curtailed, though, by her double assurance that spiritually speaking man "still crawls on its belly like a reptile." And that he is utterly transient. Temporality is the constitutive characteristic of human being which Heidegger has made much of in his monumental *Being and Time* (1927). In the face of death, which is to say of human finitude, one may easily lose heart, like August. His final attitude is one of total indifference and resignation: whether Dianne, his secretary, types up his comments or goes out to lunch, does not matter, for he feels like having wasted all his energy in a senseless "salvage operation from which was salvaged nothing." The word "nothing" is repeated seven times, which reminds us of Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" with its proliferation of "nadas." Hemingway's answer to Nothingness was a personal code of valor, the thrill and security of ritual action: fishing, hunting, or bull-fighting. Dan and Chad's fishing party—that brief, moonlit moment of male companionship and communion with nature—may well be an allusion to Hemingway, besides being, no doubt, one of the many anticipations of their deaths with which the play is studded and which color it with impending doom. It is also an indication that the play never deteriorates into cheap sentimentality as Edith Oliver claims.

Actually, the playwright's view of his subject and of contemporary life is too bleak to permit such lapses. Existentialism has frequently been accused of pessimism, even morbidity, and *The Mound Builders* seems to suffer from the same defect. There is a real demolition job going on: no dream or illusion is allowed to remain standing, whether it is Chad's dream of riches, the archeologists' hope of contributing to history or Delia's conviction that her father cared for and respected her work. Like Delia, Wilson seems to be "checking off the possibilities of the species." Her apocalyptic vision of the future, at the end of Act I, leaves little to be enthusiastic about:

You know how the world ends? You know what the
"with a whimper" is? A sad old world of widows:
wizened old women, lined up on beaches along all the
Southern coastlines looking out over the water and
trying to keep warm. (*Beat.*) Good Lord. That sounds
so horribly right I'll bet it's prophetic. The species
crawls up out of the warm ocean for a few million
years and crawls back to it again to die.

The prophecy is almost born out at the end of the play when the three women are sitting in the house on the border of the lake, waiting—in vain, Cynthia harshly insists—for the divers to find Chad's and Dan's bodies. And as if this visual image is not nihilistic enough, Wilson crowns it with August's weak appeal to his secretary before becoming speechless, while the tape-recorder continues to turn, and silence, as in *Krapp's Last Tape*, takes over.

The desolation of this finale is so absolute and devastating that the few positive and future-oriented notes tend to be swallowed by the void. Upon closer inspection the play

—like most of Wilson's—indeed possesses a comic orientation. It may seem less open-ended than usual but some questions are left dangling. The Biblical connotations of the flood goad us into expecting a new beginning, though persevering pessimists may add that, this time, the water may never retreat to allow for such a beginning. These pessimists may have hit the mark because, according to Maturin Le Petit, the French Jesuit, those Natchez who during their life had violated the laws of the chiefdom, were chastized after death by being cast "upon lands unfruitful and entirely covered with water." Still, Jean carries Dan's baby and it is due for "December, January", a date that also suggests a rebirth. Again, our pessimist may retort that Jean's "history" of miscarriages augurs ill, together with her feeling of "blinding damnation," of having "fallen from grace" after she had told Dan about her pregnancy, as if she had "breached a covenant" between her and the baby. Still, life continues, even if it takes courage and sacrifices. Remarkably enough it is Delia who sets the example, her moral strength and resolve to write another book have revitalized her. The burden of Jean's body now feels like nothing to her. There is still hope for the two of them who believe in starting another life, if only one cares enough: Delia has a capacity for "dying" and hence being reborn and Jean doubts that one lives only once. Both women are ultimately on the side of the living: Jean as a gynecologist, Delia as a writer not much given to "In Memoriam[s]." Actually, all the women, including the bitterly realistic Cynthia, exemplify the human capacity for endurance and commitment to life. There is a definitely Chekhovian touch when August, returning from his office with Dan, interrupts Cynthia's recollection of the "miracle" of pregnancy with the words, "But that has nothing to do with us", by which Wilson seems to imply that women may be better equipped than men to apprehend the mystery of life. For all his hedging Wilson does not escape the association, pervasive since the Greeks, of the feminine with (passive) nature and of the male with (active) reason.

In *The Mound Builders* Lanford Wilson set the stakes very high. The reviewers at the time agreed about this, except for Edith Oliver who gave the play short shrift as a "dim and insubstantial piece." These reviewers also agreed about Wilson's relative failure to fulfill the expectations raised by the play. O'Connor called it Wilson's "most ambitious" work to date but "also one of his more disappointing efforts." And Kauffmann scathingly reproached Wilson for having remained the "ambitious undergraduate pouring out promising scripts for his professor of playwriting." Clurman diagnosed the main problem as follows: "The play's idea is provocative and unmistakably felt. What weakens it is that many of its details are diffuse and ill-digested. The dialogue is heaped pellmell with sundry reflections that do not establish their relevance to the whole." Reflections that do not immediately establish their relevance, would have been closer to the truth, since a close reading of the play does reveal an underlying thematic unity. Actually, Clurman charges the playwright with no less than the failure to fuse the disparate elements into an organic whole. This is a serious charge, the more so since it is raised against a play about the problem of mediation: mediation between different views; between past, present and future; between abstract contemplation and sense perception, utilitarianism and aestheticism; Science and Art; between the analytical and differentiating power of Reason and the synthetic and (re)creative power of the Imagination. Truth seems better served, reality more easily apprehended in the twilight zone where these so-called opposites meet.

In this sense Wilson's view approaches the classical ideal of a balance between different faculties. With regard to Foucault's distinction between the organizing principles of thought operating in Western Culture, Wilson seems to favor a partial return to the classical "épistème" in which knowledge is a matter of discovering correspondences, away from the modern Cartesian one in which knowledge equals discrimination and the establishment of differences. By extension the classical ideal also calls for thinking engaged within the world, and not imposed upon a world conceived as separate from the mind. This is in keeping with Wilson's existentialist inclination. An important clue to Wilson's classical world view is his Baroque conviction that life is a text, a dream and that the world is inseparable from the words used to interpret it. That also seems to resolve the language issue of the play. If Wilson did not believe in the power of words to affect reality, there would be little use in his writing any further.

When leveling the charge of incoherence against *The Mound Builders*, critics forget one crucial point: that, as in *The Rimers of Eldritch*, Wilson may not have wanted to create a harmonious whole without further ado. He presents the drama through August's mind, a mind thoroughly disturbed by the wrecked expedition and driven by its consequences into isolation from the sensory world, into reasoning and reminiscing about the past. Even before the disaster, August proved, as we saw, an unbalanced character, dwelling in "eleven rooms of memorabilia" and neglecting the empirical side of his profession. The formal discontinuity due to the narrator's intervention is mirrored by the other characters' alienation and by the different views expounded. This double exemplification of fragmentation—that of the play and that within the play—demonstrates the problematic nature of mediation much more convincingly than if Wilson had merely posited it.

The other charges frequently made against *The Mound Builders* or its author—that of sententiousness, poor characterization, or lack of originality—may equally be accounted for, if not refuted. Wilson's love of language occasionally exceeds the boundaries of his realistic mode, despite the fact that, in other plays, the language has often been lyrical. But many a sententious line is uttered by Delia, the writer in residence, and is, therefore, in character. Moreover, the aphoristic quality of the writing is relevant to the opposition between practical and theoretical knowledge. The thematic burden of the play probably explains why less effort went into the characterization. With regard to Wilson's originality or lack of it the name most often dropped is that of Tennessee Williams. It may be useful to recall that Wilson adapted *Summer and Smoke* and the short story, "One Arm," for the screen. He even co-authored with Williams the script for *The Migrants*. Such a collaboration may betray an affinity of both writers' "idea of the theater" but as might be expected in such cases, the lesser figure is bound to be accused of profiting from the greater one. I have no doubt about who the greater playwright is. For any writer working in the same mode as Williams to break away entirely from his pervasive influence on post-war American drama may nearly be impossible. The universality of Wilson's theme in *The Mound Builders* belittles, however, criticisms about his so-called gift for "Sincere Imitation."

Source: Johan Callens, "When 'The Center Cannot Hold'; or, The Problem of Mediation in Lanford Wilson's *The Mound Builders,*" in *New Essays on American Drama,* edited by

Gilbert Dubusscher and Henry Schvey, Costerus series, Vol. 76, Rodopi, 1989, pp. 201-26.

Adaptations

The Mound Builders was produced for the PBS series *Theater in America (Great Performances)* in 1976, starring Trish Hawkins, Brad Dourif, and Tanya Berezin. It is available as a ninety-minute video from Insight Media.

Topics for Further Study

Research the early Mississippian cultures that thrived along the Mississippi River from about A.D. 600 to 1100. What is known about these cultures? What is still unknown?

Investigate the local tensions in your area between land developers and those who resist development. What are the developers trying to create? What are their opponents trying to preserve? Which group do you support, and why?

Interview a woman in your community who has both children and a challenging career. What challenges did she face in balancing work and family when her children were infants? How have the challenges changed as her career and/or her children have grown?

Research the Hetch Hetchy Dam, built in California in 1913. How are the controversies surrounding the building of the dam echoed in the effects of the Blue Shoals Dam in *The Mound Builders*?

Who was the Apache chief Cochise? In what ways is he an appropriate metaphor for the things Dan is trying to explain in his long speech about the Mound Builders? In what ways is Dan being respectful or disrespectful?

Compare and Contrast

1975: The first software to operate a personal computer is developed, but personal computers are not generally available. Scientists in major universities have access to large mainframe computers, but archeologists in the field make notes with pen and paper and have them typed up on electric typewriters.

Today: Many homes in the United States have at least one personal computer, and many people have portable laptop computers. Archeological projects sponsored by universities use computers, global positioning satellite systems, digital cameras, cellular phones, and other electronic equipment.

1975: The United States remains under pressure from the energy crisis of 1973 and continuing fuel shortages. The federal government passes various energy bills to help the country become less dependent on foreign oil and encourages the production of wind farms, solar panels, and dams.

Today: Foreign oil dependency is still a major concern for the United States. Federal policy concentrates on increased domestic production of oil.

1975: Although women have nearly all the same legal rights as men and many women have active and successful careers, it is still unusual for a woman to maintain her career after she becomes a mother. Few day care centers exist, and only affluent women can afford to hire child care.

Today: Many women pursue careers, even as physicians and photographers, after the birth of their children. Good quality child care is available to most middle and upper-class women, although mothers with lower incomes still find it difficult to arrange child care.

1975: The town of Bull Shoals, Arkansas, likely a model for Blue Shoals, Illinois, is a resort community with motels, restaurants, boat rentals, golf courses, and other attractions along the shores of Bull Shoals Lake, created by the Bull Shoals Dam in the late 1940s.

Today: Bulls Shoals enjoys continued prosperity, as the number of tourists and permanent residents increased by more than 25 percent in the 1990s.

What Do I Read Next?

Talley's Folly, first produced in 1979, is Wilson's most award-winning play. Like *The Mound Builders,* it deals with uncovering secrets from the past, but in *Talley's Folly* love is attainable, people can be trusted, and the atmosphere is sweet.

Fifth of July, produced in 1978, is another of Wilson's plays set in a big house near a lake in the Midwest with a small group of extended family members and friends. Ken, a wounded Vietnam War veteran, has decided to sell the family home without consulting his family or his lover and must weigh money against family to find the course of action that will make him happy.

Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost,* published in 2000, is about an anthropologist and an archeologist who examine human remains found in Sri Lanka. They suspect that the bones are not ancient but are instead the bones of political prisoners tortured with the government's knowledge.

The Mississippian Moundbuilders and Their Artifacts is available on the World Wide Web at http://www.mississippian-artifacts.com and features a collection of well-documented photographs. The artifacts pictured are similar to those found by August Howe and his team.

Cahokia: The Great Native American Metropolis, by the writer Biloine Whiting Young and the archeologist Melvin L. Fowler, was published in 1999. It offers an overview of what is known about the site, which, like the area being studied in *The Mound Builders,* was an early Mississippian city in Illinois.

Kathleen King's novel *Cricket Sings: A Novel of Pre-Columbian Cahokia,* published in 1995, tells the story of a young woman living with her family in Cahokia.

Further Study

Barnett, Gene A., *Lanford Wilson,* Twayne, 1987.

This biography provides the best introduction to Wilson's life and work. In a full chapter devoted to *The Mound Builders,* Barnett examines the play's plot, structure, and major characters and discusses the play's origins as two imagined scenes in the writer's mind.

Bryer, Jackson R., *Lanford Wilson: A Casebook,* Garland, 1994.

Twelve critical articles, an introduction, a chronology, and an annotated bibliography of primary and secondary works comprise this volume. While *The Mound Builders* is mentioned only briefly, interviews that Bryer conducted with Wilson and his collaborator Marshall Mason illuminate Wilson's creative process.

Busby, Mark, *Lanford Wilson,* Boise State University, 1987.

This brief monograph focuses on Wilson's family history as it has influenced his writing. Busby treats *The Mound Builders,* Wilson's first play set in the Midwest, as an important stepping stone toward the playwright's Talley family plays—his greatest works.

Cooperman, Robert, "Lanford Wilson: A Bibliography," in *Bulletin of Bibliography,* Vol. 48, September 1991, pp. 125-35.

Although no longer up-to-date, this bibliography is a good source for information about productions of *The Mound Builders* and other plays, including performance and publication dates, and citations for criticism and reviews. Interviews with Wilson, and performances by him, are also listed.

Ryzuk, Mary S., *The Circle Repertory Company: The First Fifteen Years,* Iowa State University Press, 1989.

This is a history of the theater company founded in 1969 in New York by playwright-in-residence Lanford Wilson and managing director Marshall W. Mason. Wilson wrote *The Mound Builders* and other plays with the "Circle Rep" company in mind; the character of Delia, for example, was created specifically for one of the company's actors.

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Simon, John, "Rum Deals Two with Coke," in *New York,* February 10, 1986, p. 56.

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Smith and Kraus, 1998, pp. 126, 128.

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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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