Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Momma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad Study Guide

Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Momma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad by Arthur L. Kopit

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Introduction

Arthur Kopit wrote *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* while he was studying European theater on a postgraduate travel scholarship earned at Harvard. His aim was to enter the work in a school playwriting contest, never anticipating that it would bring him worldwide acclaim at the age of twenty-three. As its subtitle indicated, he wrote the play as a parody□ "a pseudo-classical tragifarce in a bastard French tradition"□in the new, avant garde French theater of Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett. It was this subgenre of the theater that, in 1961, Martin Esslin labeled the Theatre of the Absurd.

Kopit's work won both the contest and an undergraduate production at Harvard. The play created such a stir that it was moved into a Cambridge, Massachusetts, commercial house, the Agassiz Theater, where it garnered very positive reviews. The favorable notices attracted the attention of the Phoenix Theatre in New York, a major Off-Broadway house that staged alternative theater works. The play opened there on February 26,1962, running for 454 performances, an extraordinary achievement for an unknown playwright with no previous New York production credits. The work also won both the Vernon Rice and the Outer Circle Awards.

The offbeat, dysfunctional characters□especially Madame Rosepettle and her son, Jonathan□ caused some critics to complain about a lack of serious purpose in the play as well as its derivative elements, but the farcical and fanciful treatment of an overly-protective, domineering mother and her neurotic son gave New York and European audiences little pause. Most commentators could not argue with success and found the play a engaging spoof of everything from Tennessee Williams's *Rose Tattoo* to Freudian psychology.

Although Kopit, like Edward Albee *(Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?),* was initially tagged an absurdist, his subsequent work showed him to be capable of a wide variety of theatrical styles. A careful craftsman, over his career he has experimented widely with both form and content, establishing himself as one of the most diverse and innovative playwrights that America has produced. *Oh Dad* remains a psychedelic romp, a popular chestnut for small theaters and repertory groups both at home and abroad. It can be argued that the play's characters lack psychological complexity but most viewers agree that they are unforgettable.

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Author Biography

Kopit's earliest professional works□mostly one-acts□were parodies and tragicomic or black farces, prefiguring the play which solidified his reputation, *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* (1960). After being staged at Harvard and a local commercial theater and later in London, *Oh Dad* began a New York run of 454 performances at the Phoenix Theatre on February 26,1962. The play subsequently enjoyed a successful tour of the United States and Europe.

On the basis of *Oh Dad,* critics identified Kopit as a promising absurdist playwright, a judgment that, given Kopit's great diversity, proved to be both premature and too restrictive a label. With the bow of *Indians,* first produced in London by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1968, Kopit gave notice that his work defied categorization. A protest play, *Indians* simultaneously debunks the American myths created to vindicate both the massacre of native Americans and the Vietnam War, using Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show as its central metaphor.

Again, with *Wings* (1978), Kopit demonstrated that he was too much an innovator to be bound to a particular dramatic movement or subgenre. The work first appeared as a radio play, from research undertaken after Kopit's father had a debilitating stroke. It was refashioned for the stage, becoming what many consider the writer's best and most original work. It is almost a monologue, a dramatization of a stroke victim's inner struggle to cope with the loss of coherent speech. Concurrent with his work on *Wings,* Kopit began teaching as a playwright in residence, first at Wesleyan and thereafter at other universities in New York and New England.

Throughout his career, Kopit has shown that he is one of the most careful and deliberate craftsmen in the American theater. He is also one of its most inventive and far-ranging playwrights. In addition to a variety of stage plays, many of which reflect an abiding interest in history and contemporary social problems, he has written librettos for musicals and diverse works for radio and television, including documentary mini-series. His grants and awards include a Vernon Rice Award (1962), Outer Circle Award (1962), American Academy Award (1971), CBS Fellowship (1976), Italia Prize (1979), and an Antionette (Tony) Perry Award (1982).

Plot Summary

Scene I

Oh Dad opens in a luxurious hotel suite in the Caribbean Port Roy ale hotel. A squad of bellboys scurry in, bearing the exotic belongings of Madame Rosepettle and her son, Jonathan. Two bring in a coffin and, confused by Madame Rosepettle's directions, pull the handles off and dump the coffin on the floor.

Madame Rosepettle begins issuing orders with a wilting, supercilious sneer. She also begins an endless litany of complaints with both the hotel's personnel and the accommodations. She directs two bellboys to put the coffin in the master bedroom, next to the bed, while other bellboys continue carting in more things, including two black-draped Venus flytraps, a dictaphone, and mourning drapes. When the Head Bellboy asks where to put the dictaphone, she scoffingly remarks that any nincompoop would know where.

Bristling at the Madame's contempt, the Head Bellboy at first tries to be tactful, but as she grows more insulting, he demands her respect. Madame Rosepettle, however, quickly reduces him to compliant jelly. She is, she reminds him, a very rich Tourist, greatly outranking him. She sends him off to hang the drapes on the windows in the master bedroom, then tells Jonathan to remind her to have him fired. Jonathan, variously called Edward, Albert, and Robinson□names belonging to his deceased father□dutifully begins taking notes on a pad.

More bellboys enter with chests containing Jonathan's stamp and coin collections. When Madame Rosepettle asks Jonathan where he wants his things, he is barely able to stutter out an answer, using instead his trembling "paw" to direct the bellboys. The Head Bellboy, without tools to hang the drapes, re-enters and apologizes. Madame Rosepettle pulls a hammer and nails from her large purse and sends him back. After complaining about the poor service, she begins tipping the bellboys with coins randomly selected from Jonathan's collection. She also presents Jonathan with a 1572 Javanese Yen-Sen, proclaiming it the rarest of all coins, if only because none were ever minted.

Hearing the hammer beating in the master bedroom, the Madame recalls cavorting to the sound of a pneumatic drill in Buenos Aires and begins dancing around the room. She stops when other bellboys carry in Jonathan's trunk of books. They open it, depositing hundreds of books on the floor. Jonathan falls on them voraciously, stuttering out the names of famous writers and reading from their works "in wild abandon."

Rosalinda, Madame Rosepettle's silver piranha, is carted in next. When the fish's bowl is uncovered, the widow uses a pair of tongs to extract from it the skeleton of the fish's last meal, an alley cat. Madame Rosepettle complains that Rosalinda must be fed pedigreed Siamese cats, preferably warm and cuddly kittens. Then, before dismissing the completely cowed bellboys, Madame Rosepettle asks about a large, 187-foot yacht

she has spied in the harbor, learning that it belongs to one Commodore Roseabove. Finally, after speaking affectionately to her little fish, she begins recording her memoirs on the dictaphone as Jonathan slips off to the balcony to look down on a carnival now heard in the street.

Scene II

It is two weeks later. In the suite, Jonathan is talking with Rosalie, two years his senior but dressed "in a sweet girlish pink." She asks why he can not go out. He haltingly explains that he has duties, that he must stay to feed the Venus flytraps. She presses him further, and he explains that he has at least gone out to the balcony and watched her, which encourages her to make him tell her more. She learns that he has watched her through a homemade telescope, fashioned from a blowgun and some lenses used to examine his stamps. Rosalie tries to look through the telescope but sees nothing on the horizon, prompting Jonathan to respond that the failure to see anything is what his mother calls "a Lesson in Life."

When Jonathan admits to spying on Rosalie and the children after whom she looks, the girl explains that she is their baby sitter. She tries to entice Jonathan to visit her after the children are asleep, but she only sets him to trembling and stuttering incoherently. He explains that he has too much to do inside. He admits that Madame Rosepettle locks him in, but he says that it is only for his own good.

When a cuckoo clock sounds, Jonathan tries to usher Rosalie out. He begins to panic when it sounds again and urges Rosalie to leave before it is too late. Delaying, she makes him promise to call. Terrified, Jonathan pleads with her to go, then suddenly collapses, confessing that he loves her. The cuckoo clock goes completely haywire as Madame Rosepettle enters from the master bedroom, demanding to know why Rosalie is still around.

When Rosalie accuses Madame Rosepettle of eavesdropping, the older woman calls the babysitter a slut, denouncing her for playing a sexual variation of blind man's bluff with one of the older children in her charge. She tries to make Rosalie leave, but the girl begins asking the Madame why she treats her son as she does, questioning the mother as to why she let Rosalie visit Jonathan in the first place. Madame Rosepettle admits that she wanted to let Jonathan see what Rosalie was really like, then once again tries to get the girl to leave.

Madame Rosepettle insists that Rosalie is unworthy of Jonathan, who is "as white as fresh snow" (while Rosalie is "tainted with sin"). The girl finally leaves. Before she does, however, Jonathan pleads with Rosalie to return another time, and she and Madame Rosepettle go to their respective doors, leaving Jonathan alone in the center of the room.

Scene III

It is night, a week later. Jonathan, alone, sits in a chair near Rosalinda, the fish. Exotic carnival sounds invade the room, and Jonathan jumps up to shut the French windows but the panes come alive and sway with the music before crashing on the floor. Jonathan moves to the balcony, past the two growing Venus flytraps that begin to growl and lunge at him.

Madam Rosepettle and Commodore Roseabove waltz into the room under a follow spot. They dance around the table, stopping momentarily as he romantically pleads for her hand and she, coyly at first, resists. The intoxicating interlude is fleeting, for Madame Rosepettle takes charge and makes a mockery of the Commodore's suite. She spins him around, makes him dizzy, then violently kisses him, making him gasp for air. He tries to sit down at the table, but his chair suddenly pulls out from under him.

Finally seated, he attempts love overtures again. He pours champagne, but when the pair clink their glasses in a toast, the glasses break. Madame Rosepettle snaps her fingers, and a waiter appears from the shadows with another table, complete with tablecloth, candles, glasses, and a bucket with champagne.

Madame Rosepettle admits that the Commodore' s money is attractive, but she complains that he is "a bit too bulky" to make him worth her while. Then she begins a long, meandering confessional, explaining her dark views on life and love. She tells Roseabove that she had killed her husband and now carts him about like a trophy. He grows apprehensive and wants to leave, but she insists that he remain to listen to her "bedtime story." She divulges that she only slept with her husband once, a union that produced Jonathan. She also reveals that she spied on her husband, trying to understand him, more like a specimen than a human. She also admits that she hid Jonathan from him. She almost gleefully recounts, too, that Mr. Rosepettle had died and lain next to his last mistress for six hours without her knowing the difference. Horrified, Roseabove tries to escape, but the door knob comes off in his hand. He is able to crawl out only after Madame Rosepettle mocks him, sending him back to the "world waiting to devour those who trust in it; those who love."

Madame Rosepettle then prepares for her nightly beach outing and exits, leaving Jonathan alone. He appears from behind the Venus flytraps, which, even larger now, threaten to snatch and devour him. He deftly evades them but accidentally jars the table and starts up the dictaphone. In panic, he retrieves a fire axe from a glass case and attacks and destroys the plants. As he turns next to the fish, Rosalie enters followed by drunken bellboys. She is dressed garishly, in a girlish, pink party dress, complete with crinolines. She commands Jonathan to put down the axe, for a moment thinking that he has killed his mother. But, after smashing the bowl and killing the fish, he explains that Madame Rosepettle would not let him see Rosalie again or even communicate with her by mail. Rosalie tires to get him to run off with her, but he is terrified at the prospect of actually leaving the suite. She then tries to entice him into the master bedroom, but he

is very frightened. She goes in the room, pulls the black drapes from the windows, and gets on the bed, inviting him to join her.

When Jonathan finally enters the room, she begins to undress, but after he sits down, the closet door suddenly opens and the corpse of Mr. Rosepettle drops on the bed. Rosalie stuffs it back in the closet and continues with the seduction, but the body tumbles out again. Rosalie simply shoves it onto the floor. Jonathan begins to respond, but when she admits to having seduced all kinds of men, he is repulsed. He smothers her to death with her skirt, then begins burying her body under a funeral mound consisting of his stamps, coins, and books. Horrified by what he has done, he tries to run out, but his father's dead hand grabs one of his ankles and he falls to the floor. He manages to free himself and retreat to the balcony as his mother returns

Disheveled and sand-covered, Madame Rosepettle briefly and triumphantly describes her sand-kicking interference with moonlit lovers but soon discovers the dead fish and destroyed plants. She spots Jonathan and asks for an explanation. He merely scans the sky with his telescope, spotting a plane and waving at it. She goes into the master bedroom, trips over the corpse of her deceased husband, and discovers Rosalie. At the curtain, more insistently, she once again demands an explanation. Jonathan has none to offer.

Scene 1

Scene 1 Summary

The play opens in a fancy hotel in Havana, Cuba. Two bellboys struggle to move a coffin into the bedroom of the hotel room. As they carry it, the handles break off and the coffin falls on the ground. The bellboys are horrified. Madame Rosepettle scolds the young men as her son Jonathan follows her around the room.

The nervous bellboys do not know exactly what to do with the coffin. Madame Rosepettle continues to berate them. A third bellboy arrives with a Dictaphone that also needs to be properly placed in the room. Madame Rosepettle will not be satisfied with the bellboys. Finally, the third bellboy stands up for himself. He is a lieutenant bellboy and does not appreciate being yelled at by Madame Rosepettle.

Madame Rosepettle refers to her son by different names each time she speaks to him. He hesitantly answers her while she directs the bellboys to rearrange her hotel room. She does not want any sunlight to enter the room while she is in mourning. She tips the bellboys with loose stamps from an untidy stamp collection and random coins from a coin collection, claiming they are very valuable.

Madame Rosepettle is very eager to teach her son not to care about bellboys or other people in the service industry. Jonathan struggles with a stutter and does not wish to make the bellboys upset. As Madame Rosepettle has more and more things sent into her hotel room, the growing corps of suffering bellboys is subject to her sharp tongue and manic behavior. She refers constantly to the excellent treatment she received in Buenos Aires compared to the horrible treatment she thinks she is getting here in Cuba. She asks her son to make note to have the bellboys fired in the morning.

Madame Rosepettle gives a final rant about the bellboys not feeding her piranha the proper type of cat before inquiring about the owner of a large yacht in the harbor. As the curtain falls, Madame Rosepettle makes plans to meet Commodore Roseabove, the owner of the largest yacht in several countries.

Scene 1 Analysis

Written in 1960, this play is a reaction to absurd theater and Dadaism. In such plays, dialogue, plot, and characters are often meaningless, unconnected, and dream-like. From the very beginning, the play "Oh, Dad, Poor Dad", clearly features ridiculous and absurd features. The plot of the first scene seems shocking. The characters have such bizarre personality quirks that audience members are taken aback by the unfolding events.

It is immediately clear in this play that Madame Rosepettle is quite mad. She is the type of wealthy, bossy, and eccentric person who makes people feel uncomfortable and

nervous. Because she so frequently refers to her son by the wrong name, always Albert, Edward, or Robinson, and treats him and the staff so poorly, the audience infers that she is very self-centered. She admits to not being trustworthy.

The son Jonathan is given few lines in this opening scene. Readers get the sense that the boy has been placed in the constant shadow of his mother's forceful, rude behavior. She repeatedly asks him to make notes to fire the staff, and Jonathan simply draws "X's" on a piece of paper. This passively rebellious behavior indicates that Jonathan might be just waiting for his chance to stand up to his mother. While he stammers nervously through the entire scene, he is always careful to do exactly the opposite of his mother's wishes and is still kind to the bellboys.

The word "rose" is incorporated into all of the characters' names apart from Jonathan. The main character personifies the metaphor of a rose - she is a beautiful and extravagant woman on the surface but is sharply thorned and painful underneath. This metaphor allows the audience to predict her new love interest, Commodore Roseabove, will also not be very pleasant.

Scene 2

Scene 2 Summary

Two weeks later, Jonathan sits in the hotel room speaking with Rosalie, a girl about his age. He has not left his room in this time, except to sometimes sit on the porch. As Jonathan stutters through his conversation, he tells Rosalie about his adventures feeding his mother's Venus flytraps. Rosalie is fascinated.

He admits to her that he spends time on the porch watching her. He grows upset when Rosalie calls him Albert and begins insisting that his name is Jonathan. Returning to his confessions, he explains how he watches her through his telescope. Jonathan finds out that Rosalie does not watch him through a telescope and offers to make her one so she can.

Jonathan gets very worked up explaining how he originally made his telescope to see airplanes as they flew past. He first saw Rosalie babysitting a rich couple's children. Rosalie tells him how she has never met the parents, but corresponds with them through letters. Rosalie tells Jonathan how lonely she is watching the children all the time. She asks him to visit her in the evenings.

As Jonathan grows increasingly nervous, Rosalie questions him about why he will not visit her. He tells her how he can never leave his mother's rooms, how she locks him in with his coins and stamps and plants. Jonathan's mother wants him to be great, but will not let him into the world. He is modest and weak and she makes his decisions for him.

A cuckoo clock chirps four times as Jonathan tells Rosalie she must go. He tells her he loves her and she tries to kiss him, but Madame Rosepettle storms into the room. She has been listening from the master bedroom and calls Rosalie a slut. She rants about Rosalie's escapades with men. Rosalie retorts that Madame Rosepettle should not keep her son locked up.

Madame Rosepettle responds that "Albert" is "susceptible" to things like sunburn that might harm him out in the world. They argue for a while longer and Rosalie turns to leave. Jonathan takes her hand and begs her to visit again. The curtain falls on him staring after her as she leaves.

Scene 2 Analysis

This scene pulses with the theme of loneliness, particularly Jonathan's. His desperate loneliness seeps through every aspect of his bumbling conversations. He becomes quite pitiable as he describes how fulfilling he finds his stamp collection and his coins and plant feedings. Through the holes in his life's pleasures, the audience can see how badly he wishes he were in the garden with Rosalie, enjoying the hectic life surrounded by children.

Rosalie is also a lonely character. It is very significant that she thinks her employers are wonderful parents because they have so many children, yet they never interact at all with their children, who are being raised entirely by Rosalie. It is even more telling that the only parental act these parents enforce is to make certain their babysitter does not forget the names of their children. Madame Rosepettle, who is at least a present parent, cannot even remember her son's name.

The theme of sexuality also comes to light in this scene. Jonathan has been watching the pretty Rosalie from afar through a telescope. Kopit uses such symbols in this scene to symbolize Jonathan's budding sexual awareness. Rosalie appears to be a very innocent nanny, yet yearning for a family of her own. Madame Rosepettle calls her a slut and hints at a very active sexual life for this seemingly innocent young flower.

Scene 3

Scene 3 Summary

One week later, Jonathan is alone in the room. He sits motionless listening to a clock ticking until the silence is interrupted by a cacophony of laughter and Cuban music. Jonathan's Venus flytraps and fish begin speaking to him and reaching to grab him. As voices from the party below move toward the hotel room, Jonathan hides behind his plants.

The bellboys return to the room, carrying supplies for a party. The joke about how picky Madame Rosepettle is as they carefully arrange the furniture and then leave as Madame Rosepettle and the commodore waltz into the room.

The commodore flirts with Madam Rosepettle, speaking about the romance of the surroundings, as they dance. He asks to kiss her and she will not let him. She begins to push him away, saying he holds her too tightly as they dance. She asks to lead the dance and begins to critique him in the same manner she critiques her son and the hotel staff. Suddenly, she kisses the commodore while he is spinning.

They kiss for a long time until the commodore pulls away, gasping for breath and blaming his asthma. Madam Rosepettle suggests they sit down and drink champagne. As the commodore sits, his chair seems to magically pull itself out for him and slide in as he sits. He and Madame Rosepettle toast their budding relationship, but the Commodore breaks his glass against hers as they clink flutes.

He is aflutter with nerves and proceeds to spill his water glass all over the place as well. Madam Rosepettle summons a waiter, who arrives with a new, dry table and they try again at their romantic toast. The Commodore drinks his champagne, but Madame Rosepettle does not sip from hers. She asks him to tell her about himself.

The Commodore confesses to being in love with Madame Rosepettle. He says that many women have loved him because of his wealth, but she treats him poorly and thus he loves her back. Because she plays hard to get, he cannot help but love her. Madame Rosepettle says she thinks she will leave Havana tomorrow. She never stays in one place long, she says, and only stopped in Havana because it was on her way.

The Commodore begs her not to leave, says it is worth a fortune to him for her to stay. She responds that she would take the money but could not think of loving him. She thinks he is too fat for her tastes. The Commodore asks why she has brought him to her room just to make fun of her. He leans in and kisses her hand.

Madame Rosepettle asks the Commodore if he would like to see her husband, whom she has had stuffed by a taxidermist and has hidden in her closet. She says seeing her husband hanging from a hook in her closet by her clothing makes her happy every

morning. The Commodore grows more and more uncomfortable as he begins to suspect she is not joking.

Madame Rosepettle offers the Commodore more champagne as she tells him she killed her husband. He grows very uncomfortable at this point and attempts to leave. The waiter emerges and holds the Commodore in his seat. Madame Rosepettle encourages him to stay and see her husband. He concedes and she tells the Commodore they are alike in their shared desire; he desires her with love in his heart and she desires his heart.

Madame Rosepettle begins to tell a fairy tale, which quickly becomes evident as the story of her husband's demise. The late Albert Rosepettle was an ugly man who was constantly clammy with sweat. Madame Rosepettle married him as a virginal, naive girl. She had secluded herself in her room, but gentleman callers came to see her anyway. Madame Rosepettle decided she would not leave her room until the world was exactly as she wanted it.

Soon after this decision, Albert came to call on her. He asked her to marry him and she agreed, deciding she would like to have a man of her own. She lists "her own to kill" as one of the perks of having a husband. Madame Rosepettle decided she was in danger if she slept in the same room as her husband. After they made love, she dragged a mattress into another room to sleep until she could learn more about him.

She began hovering above him all night long, watching him as he slept. Then she found out she was pregnant but decided not to tell her husband. She was pregnant for twelve months and finally delivered a boy so developed he had teeth at birth. She took her son home and put him in a cage. She quickly corrects herself and says she put her son in a crib.

Madame Rosepettle still did not feel safe around her husband, still did not understand why he married her. She continued to hide the infant from her husband. Soon, Albert began giggling in his sleep. He moves his ugly mistress into the house and Madame Rosepettle takes this in stride and does not mention the presence of this other woman. She simply prepares meals and beds for the mistress and says nothing.

Madame Rosepettle continued her nightly hover sessions and discovered that her husband speaks passionate words of love in his sleep to the mistress. This fills Madame Rosepettle with rage. One night soon after, Albert died in his sleep. The mistress did not discover he was dead until dawn. Madame Rosepettle begins to laugh maniacally at this fact. She finds it hilarious that her husband was such a poor lover his mistress could lay for hours with him and not realize he was dead. She reasons that his inactivity negates the affair and Albert remained hers after all.

After this story, the Commodore finds he is able to stand up from his chair. He rushes to the doorknob and soon collapses. Madame Rosepettle slyly asks him whether he wants her to marry him. The Commodore responds that he feels sorry for young Jonathan and then crawls out of the room as Madame Rosepettle raves about her son.

Some time later, Madame Rosepettle leaves the room dressed to go to the beach at night. Jonathan emerges from his hiding spot on the porch. The plants and fish are talking to him again, but this time he is aware of them and chops them to pieces with a fire axe. As Jonathan is destroying his fish and plants, Rosalie enters the room wearing a childish outfit.

Rosalie is confused and thinks Jonathan has killed his mother. Jonathan is emotional because he never thought he would get to see Rosalie again. As he cries, he confesses that he is so lonely he writes letters to strangers from the phone book. He doubts his mother ever mails the letters. Rosalie tries to change the subject and says she had a key made and got a new dress as Jonathan continues to ramble about his mother's mental abuse.

Jonathan tries to work out why his mother would have let him hear her speech to the Commodore as Rosalie desperately tries to get his attention. She asks Jonathan to run away with her and get married. Jonathan is frightened and wants to stay in his room. He tells Rosalie that his mother goes to the beach every night at midnight to look for lovers. She kicks sand at them and shoos them away when she discovers couples on the sand.

Suddenly, Rosalie tries to enter his mother's bedroom and Jonathan has a panic attack. The room is distorted and bizarre, with strange lights and abnormal shapes and shadows. Rosalie settles herself on Madame Rosepettle's bed and Jonathan grows increasingly uncomfortable. He is not allowed in her room. Rosalie tries to make love to Jonathan in the bed and he protests, increasingly more upset at being in his mother's room.

Through this scenario, Rosalie speaks in a calm steady voice as she undresses and removes Jonathan's clothes as well. As eerie music swells in the background, the stuffed body of Albert Rosepettle falls from the closet. Jonathan is in shock. Rosalie simply comments that the closet is a silly place to store a body. She pushes Albert back into the closet and continues seducing Jonathan.

The body falls on the bed again and Rosalie pushes it to the floor. She admits that everything Madame Rosepettle said was true. She has prostituted herself in Havana for ages. She tells Jonathan this is all in the past and she wants and loves only him. Jonathan is scared to leave the bed because the body of his father is on the floor. Rosalie continues speaking, urging Jonathan not to look at his father but to look at her pure, living body. Jonathan cannot take anymore and smothers Rosalie with her skirts, killing her.

He rushes from the room and dumps his stamp and coin collections on her. As he goes to leave, the corpse of his father reaches for his ankles and pins him to the ground. Jonathan is momentarily terrified, but strange music begins to play and he floats from the room onto the balcony.

Madame Rosepettle comes back and sees her dead fish and plants. She starts yelling for her son, calling him by the wrong name as always. She finds her husband's body out

of the closet and discovers Rosalie's body. As the music swells and the lights flicker, she shakes Jonathan's shoulders and asks him he meaning of the mess.

Scene 3 Analysis

In this scene in particular, Kopit plays with the elements of absurd theater. He uses strange lighting and mystical special effects to create a dream-like sensation while the elements of the plot unfold. This scene combines all the bizarre elements of the previous ones to result in a tension-filled and dramatic confusing mess. The character of Rosalie ends up being quite similar to that of Madame Rosepettle. Both women share the symbolic "rose" at the start of their names. They both reveal some nasty thorns and undesirable characteristics when the audience looks closely at their true selves. Rosalie even speaks with the same maniacal calmness when she discusses horrific events like child prostitution and the storage of corpses.

Building on the theme of sexuality, both of the female characters in this play spend a great deal of time coercing would-be lovers and holding them captive while they reveal disturbing stories about their pasts. Both of the male characters in the play are passive-aggressive victims to these crazed women, held prisoner by their inability to react to the sexual scenarios presented to them.

The author uses music and lighting throughout this scene to increase the dramatic tension. As the women speak in their frighteningly calm voices, the background music swells and the lights either focus on specific characters or flash to heighten the suspense.

The action and dialogue in the play grow increasingly bizarre until the last line. Madame Rosepettle is appropriately shocked at the state of her hotel room, but is not, as a normal person would be, terrified by the presence of so many dead bodies. The play ends leaving viewers with the impression that all of these characters have seen their share of death and mutilation and have lost their abilities to react properly or function in society, hence their seclusion and constant movement through the world. This concept of frivolous death and non-reaction to corpses captures the essence of absurd theater - there is no meaning in the universe, no meaning to life. The plot of the play can take whatever twists Kopit likes, and so he chooses to end with Madame Rosepettle asking the meaning of the situation. Kopit uses her last line to parody this notion of meaninglessness.

Characters

Albert

See Jonathan Rosepettle

Edward

See Jonathan Rosepettle

Head Bellboy

The Head Bellboy, holding the rank of lieutenant, is in charge of a platoon of bellboys. He takes issue with Madame Rosepettle's lack of respect for his position when, in the opening scene, she repeatedly insults him as he and his troop escort her, Jonathan, their luggage, and menagerie into their suite in the Port Roy ale hotel. After she reminds him that she is a well- heeled tourist and that she can get him another stripe, he immediately becomes her creature, contrite and meekly obedient. He is the first victim of the overbearing and outlandishly capricious Madame Rosepettle.

Robinson

See Jonathan Rosepettle

Rosalie

Rosalie is a combination baby sitter and nanny for a dozen children left in her charge by wealthy parents who travel about and periodically send her an addition to the tribe. She is two years older than Jonathan but in terms of experience might as well be twenty years his senior. Although she is decked out in pink and white girlish innocence, she has had many sexual encounters (if her claims are to be believed). Madame Rosepettle proclaims that Rosalie has even sexually dallied in the bushes with the oldest of the male children that she supervises.

Madame Rosepettle hopes to quell Jonathan's interest in Rosalie by allowing the girl to pay him a visit, assuming that Rosalie will reveal herself to be well-used baggage, but matters do not quite work out as Madame Rosepettle expects. In their initial meeting, against all odds, Rosalie and Jonathan become intrigued with each other. She finds in him a new challenge, a timid and frightened youth who desperately needs to get out from under his mother's dominance.

It becomes Rosalie's mission to liberate Jonathan and thwart the will of Madame Rosepettle by seducing him. Later, visiting the suite on the sly, her seduction is interrupted in the most macabre sequence in the play, when the corpse of Jonathan's father falls out of the closet on top of her. Rosalie pays with her life for her sexual advances after admitting to Jonathan that she is no innocent. What hope there might be for freeing Jonathan from his mother's smothering control ends up under a mound of books, stamps, and coins on Madame Rosepettle's bed.

Commodore Roseabove

A wealthy yachtsman, owner of the largest yacht in the Caribbean, Commodore Roseabove is a dissipated playboy with romantic designs on Madame Rosepettle. During her stay in the luxurious Port Royale hotel, he wines and dines her but to no avail.

The Commodore only appears in the final scene of the play, when Madame Rosepettle makes a shambles of his suite. He tries to ply her with champagne, music, and endearing words, but she turns the affair into a travesty by blocking all his overtures of love. As she confesses her feminine shortcomings and carnivorous motives, he grows increasingly wary and finally terrified. She quite literally wants his heart but not the rest of him, though what she would do with his heart, short of feeding it to one of her pets, remains a mystery. In any case, she watches him crawl through the door after having reduced him to a weak, stuttering fool, apathetic "nothing," in Madame Rosepettle's view. The Commodore may have risen above the rank and file, but the domineering and emasculating Madame Rosepettle easily turns him into an incompetent old codger.

Jonathan Rosepettle

Son to Madame Rosepettle and Albert Edward Robinson III, deceased, Jonathan suffocates from overprotection. His mother's conviction that he should remain a total innocent, pure as snow, has reduced him to a stammering, trembling neurotic, full of abnormal fears and thinly veiled hostilities.

Madame Rosepettle keeps Jonathan locked up in their hotel suite along with her menagerie of omnivorous pets. Convinced that he is destined for some unspecified greatness, she encourages him to learn about the world from its coinage, its stamps, and its books, not from experiencing it firsthand. He is extremely curious, however, and spends time out on the balcony, looking through his home-made telescope and watching the people celebrating life in the street below.

Under his mother's tutelage, Jonathan has become wary of others, suppressing all his instinctive longings, including sexual needs. He is challenged by Rosalie, who, by Madame Rosepettle's design, visits Jonathan. His mother knows that Jonathan has been watching Rosalie through his telescope and assumes that Rosalie, in person, will offer bracing evidence of her immorality, turning Jonathan against her and women in

general. But Jonathan is attracted to Rosalie, and though his fears render him almost helpless, he manages to stammer out his interest in her and pleads with her to return.

During her second visit, however, things go wrong. Rosalie begins an aggressive seduction routine, coyly enticing Jonathan onto Madame Rosepettle's bed in the suite's master bedroom. When she admits that she has engaged in sexual adventures with others, confirming what Madame Rosepettle had said about her, Jonathan smothers Rosalie with her skirt and then buries her under his stamps, coins, and books.

Madame Rosepettle

Madame Rosepettle is a highly eccentric and extremely wealthy matron, mother to Jonathan and widow to Albert Edward Robinson Rosepettle III. Presumably, she is in mourning. She dresses in black and carries her husband's coffin with her as she treks around the Caribbean with her son and their odd assortment of belongings and pets.

From the outset, it is clear that Madame Rosepettle is in charge. As a nightmarish variation on the "Ugly American" tourist, she barks out intimidating orders and threats, cowering the horde of hotel bellboys who carry the Rosepettle's strange possessions into their regal suite. When the Head Bellboy tries to protest her lack of respect for his rank, she quickly transforms him into a humble and compliant underling by reminding him that she is the "Tourist," the one with the money, the one who must be obeyed.

The Madame carries the same sort of impatient authority into her relationship with Jonathan, whose development she attempts to shape by sequestering him in their hotel suite and strictly controlling his activities. She allows him to read, play with his stamps and coins, and tend to her bizarre pets: the pair of man-eating Venus flytraps and the silver piranha, Rosalinda. In the process of shaping her son for some destined but undetermined greatness, she has reduced him into a frightened, timid, and extremely insecure human specimen. She is, in brief, the overly-protective mother gone amok.

Madame Rosepettle is also the castrating female gone manic. She treats the idea of love between men and women as a sickness needing a cure. Her favorite pastime is to patrol the beach at night, kicking sand on those passionate souls that she finds necking in the moonlight. When she is wooed by Commodore Roseabove, she suggests that she is willing to accept his proffered heart if he is willing to cut it out and give it to her. In her confessional, she admits that she spent only one night with her husband, the ugly man she married when she was twenty-eight and still a virgin. She also extinguishes the Commodore's romantic designs on her by revealing her utter contempt for the simple male breed, the easily manipulated and abused fools about whom she has nothing good to say. She even confesses her belief that men are hers to kill, as she killed her husband, whose body she keeps in the closet like a trophy. The frightened Commodore with the long yacht is lucky to escape with his life.

Madame Rosepettle's driving purpose in life is to protect her son from such unpleasantries as sex. In order to stem Jonathan's burgeoning interest in Rosalie, she

pays the girl to visit Jonathan, convinced that the girl will reveal that she is little more than a slut. That does not happen right away, however, and Jonathan's interest in Rosalie increases. His mother's view of Rosalie seems vindicated in the girl's later visit with Jonathan, when she tries to seduce him admits that she has been promiscuous in the past. Rosalie at least evidences a spunk that challenges Madame Rosepettle's authority, but all ends badly when Jonathan chokes her to death and Madame Rosepettle is left demanding to know just what the death of her pets and Rosalie's book-stamp- and coin-buried body all means.

Themes

Absurdity

As Kopit indicated in the subtitle of *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad,* he was influenced by the "bastard French tradition," meaning the plays of the avant garde Parisian dramatists, some of whom, like Beckett and Ionesco, were expatriates living in France. Elements of the absurd include highly exaggerated, dysfunctional familial relationships, which is most notably present in the play in the maltreatment of Jonathan by his mother, whose overprotectiveness is simply destructive.

There are many other absurdist elements in the tragic or black farce, however. Among them are the surrealistic, nightmarish motifs, including the ever growing Venus flytraps and the body of Mr.Rosepettle, which not only falls out of its closet at a most inconvenient time but also, momentarily, comes to life to grab Jonathan's ankle and trip him. There are also the absurdist anomalies, like the haywire cuckoo clock that sounds not to measure regular time units but to reflect human moods, as do the growling Venus flytraps, gleefully gulping piranha, and the dancing French windows. There are, too, the lapses into pure nonsense, like the comic bits in which Madame Rosepettle produces a hammer from her purse or explains that a 1572 Javanese Yen-Sen that she gives to Jonathan for his collection is the rarest of all coins because it was never minted at all, and that, in fact, she had made it herself. Like most of the absurdists, Kopit attempts to show that language and logic are both inadequate and unreliable tools in human discourse, more likely to mask honesty than reveal it.

Obedience

Jonathan Rosepettle's obsessive fears arise from his total obedience to his mother and her tyrannical control of him. He is a devastating caricature of the dutiful son, locked away from the outside world that his mother believes would corrupt him and turn him into another despicable man. His repressed hatred for her emasculating authority starts to well up in him, but he is so afraid of her that the most he can manage is an attack on her pets, surrogate targets that in the most primitive sense embody what she herself is: a man-eating carnivore.

With the squad of bellboys who first accompany the Rosepettles into their suite, Madame Rosepettle issues orders like a military drill instructor, with mocking comments on the inadequacies of the staff and whispered promises to see them all dismissed. Her wealth cowers them, and they hop about like Keystone cops under her wilting barrage of threats and enticements. Although the segment is humorous, it is also an indictment of the incivility and thoughtlessness of the idle and capricious rich, those who abuse the authority that wealth affords them.

Death

A common feature in the Theatre of the Absurd is a farcical treatment of both death and the dead, matters that are normally treated with solemn reverence. It is their disrespectful and at times zany approach to such things that explains these plays' paradoxical description as tragifarces. In a very twisted sense, *Oh Dad* is a threnody (a dirge or lamentation of loss). Initially, Madame Rosepettle is decked out in mourning black. She and her son accompany the coffin of her departed husband in something like a funereal procession. She even totes around black drapes, used to cover the windows in the master bedroom, where she keeps Albert Edward Robinson Rosepettle III's remains in the closet, as if the suite somehow serves as a transitional mortuary for the yet to be buried corpse.

The atmosphere, however, is outlandishly irreverent. The coffin no sooner enters the suite than it is dropped unceremoniously on the floor. The widow grieves not a jot, and before the play draws to an end, Mr. Rosepettle's corpse tumbles twice from the closet and is finally kicked to the floor as Rosalie tries to seduce Jonathan. Rosalie's own death and burial on the bed under a mountain of stamps, coins, and books is merely dark slapstick, more funny than shocking or serious. Death in *Oh Dad* wears a clown's face and makes audiences laugh, if at times uncomfortably.

Alienation and Loneliness

Sequestered in the hotel suite by his mother, Jonathan's sole companions are his mother's pets and his books, stamps, and coins. She deliberately cuts him off from the outside to ensure that he will remain innocent and pure. His is an enforced alienation. He begins to experience some natural though terribly confused longings, but until Rosalie appears in the suite, he is restricted to observing life vicariously, looking off the balcony and reading his books. He is otherwise afraid, having bought into his mother's jaded view of the world, especially her attitude towards love, which she finds repulsive. His hope is Rosalie, in whom he takes an interest. Madame Rosepettle's own sexual frigidity□passed on to Jonathan□wins out in the end, however, and he smothers the girl to death. Madame Rosepettle's triumph seems complete, though she herself seems unable to find the meaning of the bizarre situation at the play's end.

Rites of Passage

Oh Dad plays off against a traditional sexual rite of passage into adulthood, both parodying the process and aborting it. Jonathan's initiation into the joys of sex is initiated by Rosalie, but because Madame Rosepettle's has instilled her warped world view in Jonathan, the process ends badly, with Rosalie's seriocomic death. All hope for Jonathan's sexual maturation seems to die with her, whatever the implied aftermath to the situation that exists at the play's end.

Victim and Victimization

Madame Rosepettle is a power figure, an emasculating and demanding woman who tolerates no ideology save her own. She is a victimizer, and everyone else in the play is her victim, even her deceased husband. Her chief victim is, however, is Jonathan, whom she browbeats unmercifully. From the outset, it is clear that she has reduced him to a terribly insecure, frightened, and emotionally arrested youth incapable of functioning without her.

Commodore Roseabove is also a victim, as is the Head Bellboy. The former is quickly put in his proper, subservient place by Madame Rosepettle, who has not a shred of respect for any male. Roseabove has the temerity to romance the frigid widow, for which he is both savagely mocked and terrorized. Indirectly, Rosalie is also the woman's victim, for it is Madame Rosepettle's aberrant views infecting Jonathan that lead him to kill the girl.

Style

Setting

Although the immediate setting of *Oh Dad* is an elegant suite in a luxurious resort hotel, the exotic sounds and lights of the world outside invade the room and suggest both an exotic and romantic atmosphere. It is the world of Port Royale, the Caribbean city that exists only in fantasy. The location throbs with the sounds of a life denied to Jonathan, who is locked away from it.

The light, music, and other sounds awaken in Jonathan some primitive longings. Madame Rosepettle's warping influence on his psyche has been so total, however, that he is terrified at the prospect of doing anything more than watching life pass by him from a distance. She intends to keep in a world of "light," beyond "the world of darkness," the "sex-driven, dirt-washed waste of cannibals eating each other up while they're pretending they're kissing."

Absurdism

Although in part a parody, Kopit's play also makes use of absurdist drama. For example, language falters, making communication difficult, particularly for Jonathan, who stammers and stutters his way through the play. Characters are also dysfunctional and exaggerated types. Madame Rosepettle is a monster of maternalism, for example, while Jonathan, her victim, is a hyperbolic bundle of inhibitions and fears. There is also an irreverent treatment of serious matters, especially love and death. Havoc is played with logic as well, when, for example, the stuffed body of Jonathan's father momentarily comes to life, or when the Venus flytraps start growing at an unnatural rate.

Black Humor

A specific quality of much absurdism in both drama and fiction is black humor, evoked in places in which grotesque elements commingle with serious concerns□especially death. The bellboys who carry in the coffin of Madame Rosepettle's dead husband comically pull its handles off and drop it on the floor, and later, while Rosalie is attempting to seduce Jonathan, Rosepettle's corpse becomes a macabre Jack-in-the-box, interrupting the seduction by falling twice from the closet on top of the pair.

Parody

Kopit parodies other playwrights in *Oh Dad,* especially Tennessee Williams. Madame Rosepettle's long confessional in the third scene is a send up of confessionals made by tormented females in Williams's plays□Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire,* for example. In his bizarre use of "rose" in all the characters' names, including

Rosalinda, the fish, Kopit also takes comic swipes at another Williams play, *The Rose Tattoo*. Presumably, Kopit is also taking an irreverent swipe at the heavy-handed Freudian underpinnings of much realistic drama, especially Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956).

Femme Fatale

Rosalie is a comically distorted familiar type, the *femme fatale,* a female character who brings misfortune, often death, to men. Rosalie attempts to seduce Jonathan, an ironically fatal enterprise, as it ends up costing Rosalie□not Jonathan□her life. She is bundled in the robes of girlish innocence, a frilly, pink party dress that suggests that she is a young innocent; this presentation is comic misdirection, since, as she finally admits to Jonathan, she has already had many sexual encounters.

Grotesque

Among the grotesque elements of *Oh Dad* is Madame Rosepettle's menagerie of pets. These are not warm and cuddly animals but rather malicious creatures, like the piranha Rosalinda, that eat such traditional pets. Rosalinda's favorite meal is a fresh Siamese kitten. The other pets, two large Venus flytraps, grow enough in size to threaten Jonathan or any other man□much like Madame Rosepettle herself. These omnivorous pets seem ideally suited to the woman, for, metaphorically speaking, she is on a mission to chew up and spit out any male she meets.

Pathetic Fallacy

Madame Rosepettle's pets are animated and endowed with human-like responses, expressing a consciousness of what is happening around them. For example, the Venus fly traps growl and bob and weave like fighters when Jonathan tries to cut them to pieces with an axe. When he turns the axe on the mocking, giggling Rosalinda, the fish screams in terror. Even Madame Rosepettle's dictaphone comes to life on its own when Jonathan jars the table on which it rests, issuing a "strange noise" before "speaking" in Madame Rosepettle's voice.

Satire

Through the two main characters in *Oh Dad,* Madame Rosepettle and her son, Jonathan, Kopit satirizes the sexual mores of what the avant garde in the early-1960s viewed as an "uptight" America. Both are bizarre exaggerations. Madame Rosepettle is the chaste and moral matron turned into an emasculating monster, while Jonathan is the protected son reduced to a neurotic mess, full of inhibiting fears of natural desires. They provide a mordant commentary on middle-class, sexual morality, and the destructive potential of such trappings.

Symbolism

Kopit's play is rife with symbolism. Madame Rosepettle's pets are vivid representations of the woman's omnivorous nature. Just as the pets literally devour living things, the Madame symbolically devours men; she has more than likely killed her husband, and she has "devoured" any shred of independence that Jonathan may have had. The recurrent use of the word "rose" in many characters' names also serves an ironic, symbolic purpose. A rose is typically associated with love and purity. Yet none of the characters named after the flower are even remotely connected to such concepts. Rosalie, while making a superficial attempt to appear pure, is actually something of a sullied tramp. Commodore Roseabove, while professing to "love" the Madame, is really after sex. Rosalinda, the piranha, is a carnivorous killer of cuddly kittens. And Madame Rosepettle, whose name most explicitly evokes the flower ("rose" "petal"), exhibits behavior in direct contrast to the common ideals associated with the rose.

Historical Context

The 1960s was a decade of tremendous turmoil and change in the United States. It was a Cold War decade, a period in which the threat of a nuclear holocaust seemed almost probable, especially after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, a failed attempt to assassinate Cuba's communist leader Fidel Castro, in 1961. At that time, Castro put Cuba firmly in the Soviet camp. Billboards across America reminded people that Communism was only ninety miles off the Florida coast. When the Soviets put missiles in Cuba, the greatest crisis of the Cold War met the administration of President John F. Kennedy head on.

Despite Cold War fears, when Kennedy took office as the country's thirty-fifth president, there was hope for a new government that would redress domestic social problems, including racial unrest and poverty, and achieve justice for all Americans. The hope seemed to end with Kennedy's assassination on November 22,1963, despite the fact that his successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, committed himself to securing passage of much of the civil-rights legislation first proposed under the Kennedy Administration. Still, a darker mood settled on the country, leading to new demonstrations, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights march on Selma, Alabama, in 1965, and new outbreaks of violence, including the Newark, New Jersey, race riots of 1967.

By the mid-1960s, the U.S. was also bogged down in Vietnam, fighting a war that for many Americans seemed both strategically unwarranted and morally reprehensible. Along with racial problems, the war divided the country and led to unrest and open dissent that coincided with the rise of a counter-culture with its memorable "make love, not war" slogan and uninhibited sex and open use of illicit drugs like LSD and marijuana. In the last year of the decade, 300,000 young people gathered at Woodstock, a music festival in upstate New York, to celebrate life and hope for peace. In that same year, 1969, Chicago police gunned down Black Panthers Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, and Neil Armstrong became the first man to tread on the moon.

The divisiveness of the 1960s produced terrible violence, including more assassinations. Besides John Kennedy, the decade claimed the lives of important leaders Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. There was senseless violence abroad as well. In 1968, American soldiers killed five-hundred unarmed Vietnamese men, women, and children in the Vietnamese peasant village of My Lai. The violence continued into 1970, when four students protesting the Vietnam War were gunned down by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University.

The violence was partly prompted by changes threatening the establishment, much of it springing from Vietnam War dissent and a quest for racial justice. However, other movements emerged in the 1960s that forced the nation to reassess its values and social mores. Almost single-handedly, with her publication of *The Silent Spring* in 1962, Rachael Carson launched the environmental movement, resulting in, among other things, the Clean Air Act of 1963. Three years later, in 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was organized to promote women's rights. The American Indian

Movement's foundation followed in 1968, fighting for the rights of Native Americans. The next year, 1969, at a bar in New York, the so-called Stonewall Rebellion initiated a crusade for gay rights and equality before the law.

Culturally, the 1960s were also a decade of great change. Rock music became the most popular form, turning artists like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin into icons for a generation. Film also evolved into a social voice, as independent productions such as *Easy Rider, Medium Cool,* and *Zabriskie Point* spoke directly to the youth culture. In theater, the Off- and Off-Off-Broadway movements were thriving, introducing important new voices like Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and Kopit. Dramatic works like the rock-musical *Hair* (1968) broke down barriers against such things as on-stage nudity and obscene language and openly assaulted the values of the establishment. In general, the arts reflected the new political and social currents and helped foster change.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Overview

Kopit's *Oh Dad* has the distinction of being a relatively rare phenomenon: an extremely successful first work staged in New York by a new and virtually unknown playwright. When *Oh Dad* opened at New York's Phoenix Theatre on February 26, 1962, beginning a run of 454 performances, it already had a production history, both in the United States and abroad. In fact, the play was published in 1960, the same year in which it was first staged at Harvard and then, professionally, at the Agassiz Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was during it's run at the Agassiz that it came to the attention of the staff of the Phoenix. Before the Phoenix mounted its extremely successful production, however, the work had already been staged in London, where it was directed by Frank Corsaro and starred Stella Adler as Madame Rosepettle.

In the New York staging, directed by Jerome Robbins, an experienced cast headed by Jo Van Fleet as Madame Rosepettle, Austin Pendleton as Jonathan, and Barbara Harris as Rosalie kept audiences delighted, making it a major box-office success. It also garnered the Vernon Rice and Outer Circle Awards, both significant honors.

Still, the play proved to be something of an embarrassment for some commentators, though none of them had enough influence to put out the Phoenix's lights in the critical first month of the production. Some of the critical reception placed Kopit's play at the center of a minor controversy lying at the base of Martin Esslin's brief observations on the work in his landmark study *The Theatre of the Absurd*. For Esslin, *Oh Dad* illustrated "how difficult it seems in America to use the convention of the Theatre of the Absurd," as if, like fine French wines, the techniques of the absurd dramatists simply did not travel well, as if, in fact, such techniques lost their serious purpose in America.

For many hostile critics, Kopit's play simply lacked the metaphysical implications of the European brand of absurdism, its apocalyptic vision and existential ennui, thereby turning (in their estimation) *Oh Dad* into superficial silly-putty, a watered-down variation on the genre, or what a reviewer in *Theatre Arts* termed "theatre of the absurd, junior grade." To the *Commonweal's* Richard Gilman, in trying to emulate the masters of the Theatre of the Absurd, Kopit produced an example of "the merely foolish," a work in which "there is no sense of ideas at work and there is assuredly nothing metaphysical, and nothing mysterious." A similar complaint was made by Robert Brustein in the *New Republic,,* who claimed that with Kopit's play "the avant-garde fashion turns chi-chi." In imitating the avant-garde dramatists, stated Brustein, the playwright "tends to reduce the Absurd to the ridiculous."

Even in some favorable assessments of *Oh Dad* Kopit is warned of the risks of imitation. The *New York Times'* s Howard Taubman, who saw Kopit's potential as "an important playwright," opined that the day must come when "imitators of a fashionable style are revealed as charlatans," a time of judgment when "an all-encompassing revulsion may set in." The critical caveat often made is that Kopit should strive to be less derivative, particularly as the fashionable string of the Theatre of the Absurd was quickly playing itself out. Yet, at the same time, Kopit was praised for his comic genius,

something that is purely instinctive and can not be derived, even in parody. Despite the luggage Kopit borrowed from the Theatre of the Absurd, many critics, like Priscilla Buckley in the *National Review,* found him "a truly original and comic playwright."

In *Oh Dad* Henry Hewes of the *Saturday Review* saw a play "full of opportunity for stage fun." While admitting that Kopit's technique is borrowed, the critic also found great originality in the playwright's subject and theme, "the area he so brilliantly, entertainingly, and cruelly explores." For Hewes, the play was the best thing seen at the Phoenix in several seasons.

If some critics at the time viewed *Oh Dad* as a rather sophomoric romp and Kopit himself as a sort of artistic *enfant terrible,* the playwright's succeeding works, beginning with *Indians* (1968), quickly forced some re-assessments and from some of the original nay sayers, including Brustein, a begrudging apology. Fears that Kopit's parodic pilfering from absurdists and other dramatists, including Tennessee Williams, would turn him into a theatrical flash in the pan were quickly dispelled. The playwright simply set out in new directions, as he has done throughout his career; he has repeatedly proven himself one of the most innovative and experimental playwrights in American theater and one of its most deliberate and careful craftsmen. *Oh Dad* is still viewed as a play that shows the dramatist's great comic promise, creative elan, and failsafe theatrical sense. It is also a play that, like Rosepettle's corpse, keeps popping up on stage.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Fiero is a retired Ph. D. and former teacher of drama and playwriting at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. In this essay he examines Oh Dad *as parodic satire using the techniques of what Kopit himself, in the play's subtitle, called "a bastard French tradition."*

More than any other commercially successful American play identified with the Theatre of the Absurd, Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad* exemplifies a widely-held belief among experimental playwrights: the social and political climate of America in the early-1960s was inhospitable to the reputed nihilism underlying the tragic farces of European playwrights of the absurd like Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugene Ionesco. What was clearly missing in the post-World War II American consciousness was the pervasive existential despair and pessimism left in the wake of the war's death and destruction□a condition from which the civilian United States was largely insulated but from which most Europeans had been unable to escape or hide.

Although not expressed in such terms, that view seems to lie behind much of the criticism directed at American artists influenced by the European avant garde. For Richard Gilman, writing in *Commonweal,* what distinguished "the absurd from the merely foolish" was, in the final analysis, a sense of the absurd "in a metaphysical and not just a behavioral sense." Kopit's *Oh Dad* seemed to exemplify the problem for some early commentators, who claimed that although the playwright successfully aped the manner of the "bastard French tradition " in the play, he did so superficially, achieving form without substance, shock without meaning, and laughter without reflection. The *New Republic's* Robert Brustein, for example, opined that Kopit merely evidenced "a desire to join a parade rather than to communicate a unique vision," a deficiency that tended only "to reduce the Absurd to the ridiculous."

The point, to a degree, is justly made. The world most often evoked by European absurdists, especially Beckett and Ionesco, is either a desolate or senseless world or sometimes both, as it is in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) and *Endgame* (1957). In this world, humanity seems like it is being herded towards the mass grave of an extermination camp, where naked bodies are dumped to tumble over each other like discarded manikins. It is a world in which life or death become indifferent choices, for it is less a world than a spiritual void one in which, as in Ionesco's *The Lesson* (1950), authority has devolved into a mere exercise of brutal, dehumanizing, and meaningless power exercised over and over.

Kopit's *Oh Dad* does seem far removed from that sort of apocalyptic vision. Still, the playwright never indicated that his purpose in constructing the play was to present such a world. Moreover, he does not try to convey a sense that the world that he does create is *the* world, that it is a microcosmic representation of humanity's common plight in a purposeless universe. He simply uses absurdist techniques in a parody that approaches burlesque□ though a parody deliberately more of manner than of matter. His purpose is

not in the least metaphysical; it is, first and foremost, satirical. That was Kopit's choice, and it seems only fair to approach his work on his own terms.

And *Oh Dad* is pungent and savage satire. Madame Rosepettle is almost pure caricature, a monster mother who turns her child into a neurotic bundle of fears that bar any progress he might otherwise make towards maturity. She is an outrageous, otherworldly character, but she is very, very funny. Furthermore, Kopit's lack of metaphysical concerns not withstanding, in the figures of Madame Rosepettle and Jonathan as well as the plot of *Oh Dad* the playwright does in truth address at least some of the same thematic concerns of first-generation Theatre of the Absurd writers. As Doris Auerbach pointed out in *Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, and the Off Broadway Theater,* like Ionesco, Kopit spoofs the tendency of social-thesis drama to lean too heavily on psychological plausibility and confirms that language is more often than not a barrier to human communication.

Like Arthur Adamov, another bona fide charter member of the Theatre of the Absurd, the playwright also attacks the overly-protective mother who tries to keep her son from experiencing a mature, sexual relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Kopit rolls two stereotypes into the single figure of the widow Rosepettle, however, for she is also a frigid, castrating bitch goddess, incapable of any normal kind of love. Her favorite pastime, besides measuring yachts (a blatant symbol for the male genitalia she wishes to destroy), is to patrol resort beaches with a large flashlight to find lovers to annoy by kicking sand on them. She despises sex as something dirty and unwholesome, and, if she could, she would rid the world of its blight. Her strategy in Jonathan's case is to frustrate his pro-creative instincts by keeping the nasty world of sex beyond locked doors and filling his mind with her poisonous ideas.

Kopit uses parody trenchantly, depicting the destructive effect of such excessive parental control and violent anti-sexuality through hilarious exaggeration. Yet it is precisely this hilarity that gives some critics pause in considering the play. There is about *Oh Dad* a comic gusto that blunted and disguised the work's serious assault on the American Mom, a figure that since the 1960s has been roasted to pieces, even in the holiest of holies, television sitcoms (see Peg Bundy, the inept nurturer of *Married with Children)* . When Kopit took on the maternal archetype in 1960, she still had her sacrosanct image largely in tact, modern psychology (ie, psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's Oedipal theories) notwithstanding.

The result seems to have been a discomforting uneasiness in the laughter Kopit evoked in his play. Somehow it did not seem quite right to find Madame Rosepettle and her antics as funny as they appear. Some reviewers even seemed guilty of some critical misdirection, finding the chief fun in the play in its spectacle and giving almost exclusive credit to the production cast and technicians for the play's popular success. Gilman, for example, while admitting that the staged play had "engaging moments," claimed that they were "more a matter of performances and decor than of any intrinsic excellence." "Verbally," for the critic, the play had "almost no existence at all."

A playwright's contributions to a play are not limited to its words, however. Kopit's imaginative vision included all the major non-verbal elements and special effects. These, clearly tied to his text, are not a production staff's invention. Furthermore, they have a definite organic function, particularly Madame Rosepettle's bizarre pets□an outlandish extension of the woman's own all-consuming nature; the pets are omnivores ready to pounce on and devour any victim, including Jonathan. The creatures are not present simply "to hide the thinness and immaturity of the play," as Brustein claimed.Moreover, as Harold Clurman argued in the *Nation,* the shocking subject□the castrating, overly-protective mother□is blunted by being "masked in extravagant paradox, magical (visual) stage tricks and festively macabre color."

The play, after all, is not just parody and satire, it is also a nightmarish fantasy with many surrealistic elements. There is even a cartoon quality to the work, at least until Madame Rosepettle begins her rambling confessional to the Commodore in the last scene of the play. The action even seems "framed" by the play's non-verbal elements: the garish, psychedelic colors that intrude from outside with neon intensity and the exotic music with its primitive beat that suggests a torrid world beyond the cage in which Jonathan is held, a virtual prisoner of his mother's misanthropy.

The action, always bordering on lunacy, also has a cartoon-like illogicality. Things happen for which there is no plausible explanation. There is, for example, the body of Mr. Rosepettle, that falls from the master bedroom closet at the most inopportune moment, not just once but twice, and then, briefly but conveniently (or perhaps inconveniently), seems to come to life, strangely reanimated. Coffin handles and door knobs come off and a chair suddenly moves from under a would-be sitter as if some puckish and invisible gremlin were playing devious tricks for its own perverse delight.

Most of all, there is the animation of non-human entities: the Venus flytraps, Rosalinda the piranha, a cuckoo clock, and even windows frames. In their behavior, they all exhibit human traits. For example, in the last scene, quite inexplicably, the plants start expanding, growing from flytraps into mantraps trying to snatch and devour Jonathan. Here and elsewhere probability simply goes by the boards, as it always has in the loony-bin world of cartoons and, it should be added, in the absurd world of Ionesco, at least in a play such as *Amedee, or How to Get Rid of It* (1954), a play in which a corpse expands and threatens to shove the living characters into the wings.

As Auerbach noted, these cartoon elements offer a "perfect parody" of an absurdist strategy, the tendency to externalize inner, subconscious realities in outward projections exhibiting the irrationality of dream and fantasy, much in the manner of surrealism. Rosalinda and the plants, argued Auerbach, "concretize the dangers of maternal love and the unresolved Oedipal conflict."

Kopit may have had no metaphysical row to hoe in *Oh Dad,* but he did have a serious purpose. In "The Vital Matter of Environment," an article he wrote for *Theatre Arts* before the play opened in London in 1961, he lamented the fact that the American playwright had to work in a "creative environment" that was inimical to innovation.

Moreover, he insisted that theater in America had "been singularly outstanding in its inability to assimilate traditions," unlike theater in Europe.

In creating *Oh Dad,* Kopit was attempting to assimilate the new tradition of the European avant garde, fitting it to a theme relevant to his own creative environment. He was also countering what he called "a Puritan-influenced attitude toward the theatre" in America, the strong current against which the Off-Broadway, alternative theater movement was resolutely moving.

It is ironic that the prevalent American optimism of the early-1960s began eroding soon after the successful New York run of *Oh Dad* ended. Images of senseless and violent death□whether in Dallas (the assassination of President Kennedy) or Saigon (the first stirrings of the Vietnam War)□ courtesy of the evening television news, began putting the country much closer to the heart and soul of the absurd.

For Kopit, however, it was a bit too late. The absurd had in fact become passe and had jumped from the fringe into the mainstream. Kopit, with a seemingly bottomless bag of new tricks, absorbed what he had learned through parodic imitation and simply moved on, becoming over his long career one of the most diverse and innovative playwrights in the American theater.

Source: John W. Fiero, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2000.

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Critical Essay #2

Ballet provides an overview of Kopit's farce in this essay, explicating the plot and offering a brief history of the play's creation.

The setting is a lavish suite in a Caribbean hotel, where Madame Rosepettle, her son Jonathan, and her dead husband (in a coffin) as well as their very large, carnivorous plants and assorted treasure, have ensconced themselves. Entering their restricted quarters is Commodore Roseabove, who attempts to court Madame Rosepettle, followed by Rosalie, who seduces and tries to free the imprisoned Jonathan from his mother. In addition to this collection of characters, there are a platoon of bellboys as well as Rosalinda, the rare (and talking) goldfish, which apparently eats cats voraciously. This peculiar, not to say zany, ménage has intimations of something more, and in the 1960's it seemed very avant-garde to some scholars and no doubt to much of its Broadway audience. A number of writers put the play into the absurdist camp, and perhaps it belongs there still, but for all those dark implications it seems to have settled into being accepted simply as a "farce in three scenes", which is all that Mr. Kopit claims for it.

Jonathan, a stuttering, frightened young man, lives out his meager life by looking out at the world through binoculars, and he sees a world, into which his mother has forbidden him to venture. And then Rosalie enters: vamp and liberator who comes over to flirt and eventually lure Jonathan into bed in the very room where Dad is stuffed in the closet. The goofy actions of the beginning of the play in time give way to both long monologues and to some serious (or at least gruesome) goings on. The plants, for example, must not be put "close together ... they fight". Jonathan is terrified, it would seem with good reason, of everything and everyone, especially of Mother, the indomitable Madame. Exaggeration, of course, is the manner in which the play is cast, but at its heart there is a reality which is both recognizable and horrifying.

Jonathan tries to avoid this reality by constantly having "so much to do". There is here, it seems, an echo of Tennessee Williams' s *The Glass Menagerie* and of its pathetic Laura. Instead of a unicorn to keep him from truly experiencing life, Jonathan has his stamps, his plants to feed, his coins to examine, and above all his spying on Rosalie, the baby-sitter across the street. He will do almost anything to avoid facing the facts of his closed world. When he is asked why he never goes out, he responds, "Because Mother locks the door".

Not surprisingly, Rosalie notices that "there's something very strange here". This is not a normal family by any standard, and the farce challenges the concept of "normality" and effectively exposes major eccentricities which may be funny to the outsider but terribly destructive to the intimates. Madame Rosepettle philosophizes that, in any event, "life is a lie" and that one must be very careful, for life " isn't what it seems"□implicating both the shenanigans on stage and in the audience's world in her comment.

Audiences today may find the play nothing more than an undergraduate prank by Arthur Kopit, who has since moved on to more serious theatre writing. But *Oh Dad, Poor Dad,* remains a funny, sometimes surprising and startling reaction by a young writer against parental domination. "True love" in the form of the alluring Rosalie, who may be an innocent or may be a slut, liberates the young Jonathan (perhaps, by extension, all youngsters) from the mad, material restrictions of his mother. When the outraged Madame Rosepettle discovers the seduction of her son, she announces that "this place is a madhouse" and she is quite right. By the end of the play Jonathan, the sweet *naif,* has destroyed the plants, the goldfish, his own hopes for liberation, *and* poor Rosalie, leaving Madame Rosepettle asking: "What is the meaning of all this?"

Source: Arthur Ballet, *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad"* in *The International Dictionary of Theatre,* Volume 1: *Plays,* edited by Mark Hawkins-Dady, St. James Press, 1992, pp. 567-68.

Critical Essay #3

In this short essay, Brustein examines Kopit's dramatic career as of 1966. In addition to discussing the playwright's other work to date, he touches on the significance of Oh Dad.

Kopit also borrows avant-garde techniques without adding anything original of his own, but whereas Schisgal wants to entertain the middle classes, Kopit wants to ridicule them: his short pieces are semi-disguised acts of aggression against the very, domestic values Schisgal celebrates. Kopit's derision, however, is often combined with petulance, and since it is primarily aimed against overprotective mothers and insensitive fathers, it hardly seems very daring or brave. There is something a little juvenile about Kopit's writing; for him, the theater is mainly a medium for pranks, an intention he suggests in his looping, longitudinal titles. In his most notorious work, *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad,* the title is ultimately the most revealing part of the play, since it sums up this author's major characteristics: his Oedipal fixation, his hatred of maternal women, his skittishness, his black humor, and, especially, his nostalgia for childhood. The play itself is an exercise in the absurdist mode which borrows freely from various avant-garde styles, blends in the fruity atmosphere of a Tennessee Williams play, and comes off as a curious mixture of satire, irony, fantasy, and farce. Kopit is most interesting when he is most outrageous—the funniest scene in the play concerns a young boy and girl prevented from making love by a corpse which keeps falling on top of them—but aside from this brief necrophiliac episode and a few other isolated passages, the play fails to rise above a certain brittle archness.

The two short plays that follow this famous sketch are also limited by deficiencies in attitude and feeling. *Sing to Me Through Open Windows* is a fantasy of childhood about a sensitive boy, a cute clown, and a wise old man which is embarrassing in its cloying sentimentality: the sort of thing that appeals to drama coaches in boys' camps and elocution schools. *The Day the Whores Came Out To Play Tennis,* though facile in its satire, is a better work, and its basic notion—that a group of prostitutes should attempt to wreck a country club by hitting tennis balls against it—is wacky enough to promise real amusement. But once again, the author is unable to sustain his action or to find a meaningful target for attack: the crude manners of wealthy country club Jews are hardly a universal subject for satire. Kopit has wit, a good sense of the bizarre, and a developing satirical talent, but he is still impeded by a certain undergraduate peevishness and cuteness.

Source: Robert Brustein, "Arthur Kopit" in *Modern Occasions,* selected and edited by Philip Rahv, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966, pp. 133-34.

Critical Essay #4

In this excerpt from his book, Lewis discusses the unique nature of Kopit's play, noting in particular its "grotesque, surrealist attack on sex, mother, and the devouring female."

Arthur Kopit, a recent Harvard graduate, created a sensation with his first play *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mamma's Hung You in the Closet, and I'm Feeling So Sad,* which is subtitled "A Pseudoclassical Tragifarce in a Bastard French Tradition." A fortunate combination of circumstances also helped in the success of his first venture. Jerome Robbins, well-known choreographer, directed the play and achieved movement close to modern ballet, which the play required. Josephine Van Fleet, a resourceful actress, romped through the leading role with bravura vindictiveness, ably assisted by Barbara Harris, a rising talent in the American stage and the most successful of the recent graduates from the little theatres.

The play is unique for many reasons. It is a grotesque, surrealist attack on sex, mother, and the devouring female. The characters are comic-strip exaggerations, symbolic and ludicrous on the level of a grand hoax or a sophomoric parody of Tennessee Williams, Ionesco, and all avant-garde writers. On stage, it is a technician's delight, with its Venus's-flytraps that grow larger and the piranha fish which has spoken lines, doors that open and close on their own power, chairs that slide away or remain fixed, and a corpse that embraces the young Rosalie as she attempts her seduction of Jonathan.

Kopit's titles for his earlier student plays were preparations for the long-winded nonsense of this fantasy of cannibalism and mockery of romance. The names of many of the characters begin with the prefix Rose. Madame Rosepettle says she wanted her husband to be "Mine, all mine□mine to love, mine to live with, mine to kill; my husband my lover my own ... *my very own."* She achieved her purpose by murdering him, and now drags his corpse around with her on her travels as a physical symbol of her triumph. She keeps her son Jonathan at the perpetual age of ten, warding off the destroying problems of growing up. She amuses herself by kicking sand in lovers' faces on the beach, and lures Commodore Roseabove into a disillusioning and embarrassing tête-a-tête. Rosalie, a constant teenager, tries to win possession of men by being all sex. She would seduce Jonathan and free him from his mother's hold so that she can possess him completely. The women do not always triumph. In the end, as Rosalie manages to get Jonathan on his mother's bed, the father's corpse hops out of the closet, falls between them, and raises a dead hand in warning to Jonathan. Rosalie is suffocated under the stamp and coin collection.

The form of the play is a single conceit developed in multiple ramifications, a succession of tricks which grow thin and repetitious. Madame Rosepettle essays a serious explanatory note, which sounds hollow when surrounded by the high jinks that keep the play bubbling. Instead of confessing on a couch to her analyst, Madame Rosepettle confesses on her feet to her captive lover:

"... it is I who have saved him [her son]. Saved him from the world beyond that door.... A world waiting to devour those who trust in it ... A world vicious under the hypocrisy of kindness, ruthless under the falseness of a smile.... A Leave my room and enter your world again, Mr. Roseabove□your sex-driven, dirt-washed waste of cannibals eating each other up while they pretend they're kissing. Go, Mr. Roseabove, enter your blind world of darkness."

The play is far too discursive, and incompatible with Rosalie's more direct, "Take off your clothes.. . . Drop your pants on top of him [your father], then you won't see his face."

As a first play, *Oh Dad, Poor Dad* was a lighthearted contribution on a much overworked theme. It perhaps would have been better as a long, concentrated, one-act play. A college-boy hoax on the present trend of being anti-woman, anti-sex, and anti-life can be amusing for a short time. Kopit now faces the tensions imposed on the writer of a first-play success. He wrote two short one-acters, *The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis* and *Mhil'daiim,* which were scheduled for production at the University of Minnesota but withdrawn when the issue of obscenity was raised. When presented at the Actors Studio, they elicited little enthusiasm. Another full-length play, *Asylum or What the Gentlemen Are Up To Not to Mention the Ladies,* which he describes as a sinister comedy dealing with the transformation of a man from sanity to insanity, has had production problems and has been withdrawn by the author for further revisions.

Kopit's first efforts are insufficient for definitive judgment. If he can sustain the macabre laughter at the expense of our sacred cows, he may become a valued demonic clown, but he is too preoccupied with his personal and seemingly sensational rebellion.

Source: Alan Lewis, "New-Play Madness and Some New Voices" in his *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre,* Crown (New York), 1965, pp. 200-02.

Adaptations

Oh Dad was adapted to film in 1967 under the play's full title. Directed by Richard Quine, it starred Rosalind Russell, Robert Morse, Barbara Harris, Hugh Griffith, Jonathan Winters, Lionel Jeffries, and Cyril Delevanti. The film is available on videocassette.

Topics for Further Study

Research Off-Broadway Theater and its significance for young, experimental playwrights in the 1960s and 1970s.

Identify the "bastard French tradition" named by Kopit and its influence on the playwright as evidenced by *Oh Dad*.

Investigate and compare the treatment of dysfunctional families in *Oh Dad,* Edward Albee' s *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,* and one other American play identified as belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd.

Investigate the techniques of parody and relate your findings to Kopit's purpose, techniques, and characterizations in *Oh Dad*.

Research the assaults on American "momism" that preceded Kopit's depiction of Madame Rosepettle in *Oh Dad,* using Philip Wylie's *A Generation of Vipers* (1942) as a resource.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: The Cold War and the threat of communism looms large in the American consciousness throughout the decade, cresting during the Cuban missile crisis of 1963.

Today: The Cold War threat has largely evaporated with the dissolution of the Soviet empire. There remain communist strongholds, including China, North Korea, and Cuba.

1960s: The Civil Rights Movement begins, struggling against segregation and social injustice. The decade will also see the flowering of the women's and gay rights movements.

Today: Some now say that the Civil Rights Movement has gone too far, particularly in quota and set aside programs, called reverse discrimination by their critics. However, statistics argue that Black Americans still have a long way to go to achieve social justice and a fair share of the economic largess of the country. Similarly, while women, gays, and minority groups such as Native Americans and Chicanos have made some progress towards achieving social justice and equitable treatment, none has seen its goals completely met.

1960s: The Theatre of the Absurd in the early-1960s offers a fresh theatrical perspective. The new, shocking, and perplexing drama is an important catalyst in the rise of the experimental Off-Broadway movement.

Today: Works by first generation absurdist playwrights like Ionesco and Beckett are now considered classics, and although the techniques and some of the themes of the Theatre of the Absurd have left an indelible mark on drama, its most famous pieces are now more venerated than imitated.

What Do I Read Next?

Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942) offers a jaundiced view of the American values, institutions, and traditions, including what he calls "momism," the hypocritical American mother, and sexual mores.

Terance McNally' s *And Things That Go Bump in the Night* (1964) is a play that, like *Oh Dad,* has absurd, nightmarish elements and deals with a dysfunctional family.

Edward Albee's plays *The American Dream* (1961)and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) are contemporaries of *Oh Dad* and invite comparison with Kopit's play in respect to both theme and technique.

Arthur Adamov's absurdist plays *Les Retrou-vailles* ("The Recovered," 1952) and *Comme Nous Avons Ete* ("As We Were," 1953), like Kopit' s *Oh Dad,* examine the theme of destructive parental control.

Further Study

Auerbach, Doris. *Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, and the Off-Broadway Theater,* Twayne, 1982.

Besides offering useful critical analyses of Kopit's early work, especially *Oh Dad, Indians, The Day the Whores Came Out to Play Tennis, and Wings,* this study has an important chapter surveying the history of the Off-Broadway Theatre.

Bordman, Gerald. *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1930-1969,* Oxford University Press, 1996.

This work documents the production history of American theater over four decades and provides a good survey of the dramatic milieu in which Kopit and other early American absurdists wrote. For Bordman, the American theater went into a decline in the 1960s, after having passed through "Golden" and "Silver" periods.

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd,* 3rd edition, Peregrine, 1987.

Important chapters on the absurdity, tradition, and significance of the absurd remain mandatory for an understanding of the aims and methods of those writers lumped under the absurd rubric by Esslin. In "Parallels and Proselytes," Esslin gives Kopit early notice as an American example, along with Edward Albee and Jack Gelber.

Kopit, Arthur. "The Vital Matter of Environment" in *Theatre Arts,* Vol. XLV, April, 1961, pp. 12-13.

In this brief article, Kopit offers important insights into the state of the American commercial theater□its "inability to assimilate traditions" and its lack of invention. Although not an artistic manifesto, the article reveals the playwright's mind set at the time *Oh Dad* was being readied for its London production.

Little, Stuart W. *Off Broadway: The Prophetic Theater,* Coward, McCann, & Geoghegan, 1972.

Little's study is a documentary history and useful guide to the Off-Broadway movement from 1952-1972, the period during which Kopit rose to prominence.

Wellworth, George. *The Theater of Protest and Paradox,* New York University Press, 1964.

This study discusses the new, alternative theater of the 1950s and early-1960s and is valuable for its coverage of the early critical responses to *Oh Dad*.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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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.

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535