The Odd Couple Study Guide

The Odd Couple by Neil Simon

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Introduction

When The Odd Couple appeared on Broadway in March of 1965, Neil Simon was already a fairly well-known playwnght. His successful comedy, Come Blow Your Horn, had initiated his Broadway career in 1961 and Barefoot in the Park in 1963 had been an even bigger hit. But The Odd Couple, with its unforgettable pair of mismatched roommates, made Simon a cultural phenomenon, and he subsequently became in his own lifetime the most commercially successful playwnght in the history of theatre. After its long run on Broadway, The Odd Couple was turned into a successful film in 1968 and then became a popular television series (on the American Broadcasting Company network) running from 1970 to 1975. Thus, Oscar Madison and Felix Ungar, the odd couple of the title, were steadily prominent in the popular entertainment industry for ten years and, as a result, became a part of American culture. Though some may forget which one was "sloppy" and which one "neat," almost everyone understands the phrase "odd couple" as a way of descnbmg a mismatched pair. The television show is still syndicated in reruns, the movie version appears frequently on television, and regional and local theatre groups mount productions of the play with great regularity. In 1985 Simon responded to the continued popularity of his odd pair by writing a female version for Broadway, in which all the characters' genders were reversed. Though not as popular as the original play, this new version helped perpetuate the "odd couple" as one of the most memorable pair of characters in the history of commercial theatre.

Author Biography

Neil Simon was born on July 4,1927, in the Bronx, New York, the younger son of a father who sold cloth fabric to the dress manufacturers in Manhattan's garment district. At the age of fifteen Simon teamed with his older brother Danny to write comedy sketches for the annual employee party of a Brooklyn department store; their success in this endeavor convinced Simon that he wanted to be a comedy writer. He and Danny eventually wrote sketches for popular radio and television shows, but the partnership split in 1954 and Neil went on to write for television comedians like Sid Caesar, Garry Moore, Phil Silvers, Red Buttons, and Jerry Lewis.

Though successful enough to earn two Emmy Awards for television writing in 1957 and 1959, Simon found writing for television unfulfilling and in the fall of 1957 began working, in his spare time, on his first play. *Come Blow Your Horn*, based on his relationship with Danny and their parents, took him three years to write, and he went through twenty-two completely different versions. When the finished *Come Blow Your Horn* finally appeared on Broadway in 1961, however, its success launched Simon's playwriting career. His second comedy, *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), was based on the life he and his first wife, Joan Bairn, had lived in a small apartment in New York City's Greenwich Village. With a young Robert Redford in one of the lead roles this comedy was even more successful than his first. In his third and most famous comedy, *The Odd Couple*, Danny served as the model for the meticulous Felix Ungar. By all standards, the play was an enormous success. By the mid-1960s Neil Simon was rich, successful, and very famous. He was so prolific with his comedy hits in the late 1960s and early 1970s that he sometimes had as many as four shows running simultaneously on Broadway.

In 1973, Joan, Simon's wife of twenty years, died of cancer, Simon subsequently married actress Marsha Mason, who would star in several productions of his work. His *Chapter Two* (1977) was based on Simon's complex emotional response to Joan's death and his second marriage. While still a comedy, this play represents a turning point in Simon's career, introducing more serious shadings to his palette. Many of his subsequent plays adopted this new pattern and from 1983 to 1986 a trilogy of such autobiographical plays *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *Biloxi Blues*, and *Broadway Bound won* Simon greater praise from critics. In the 1990s, his fourth decade of playwriting, Simon's success continued, and in 1996 he published the first half of his memoirs, Rewrites, which covers the period from his birth to the reception of *Chapter Two*.

Plot Summary

Act I; The Initial Poker Game

The Odd Couple opens on a hot summer night in the large, twelfth-floor apartment of New York City sportswriter Oscar Madison. A few months earlier, before Oscar's wife left him, the apartment had reflected the modest luxury of its Riverside Drive neighborhood on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. But the apartment is now a mess because Oscar is very sloppy and his weekly poker game is in progress. Dirty dishes, empty bottles, half-filled glasses, ashtrays, and other messes created by the poker game have been added to the discarded clothes, old newspapers, magazines, mail, and disarrayed furniture that are part of Oscar's everyday sloppiness.

As the curtain rises on this smoke-filled room we see Murray, Roy, Speed, and Vinnie around the poker table. They are concerned about the unusual lateness of one of their regular poker players, Felix Ungar. Oscar enters from the kitchen with food for his buddies, the phone rings. It's Oscar's wife complaining about his overdue alimony payments. Two more phone calls, one from Murray's wife and another to Felix's wife, Frances, inform everyone that Felix is missing because earlier in the day his wife declared an end to their twelve-year marriage. The poker players worry that the sensitive Felix might be contemplating suicide, and when he finally arrives at Oscar's apartment they try to pretend that everything is normal while simultaneously interpreting everything Felix does as a preamble to suicide. Felix admits that earlier in the day he swallowed a whole bottle of pills but then vomited them up. After heartfelt expressions of concern, Murray, Roy, Speed, and Vinnie go home, and scar tries to console Felix, massaging his neck and back, pouring him a drink. When Felix hums and hops from leg to leg, bellowing like a moose lo clear his ears, we get an indication of the eccentricity that might have led his wife to expel him. Felix confesses that he was unbearably obsessive about such things as petty finances, cleaning house, and cooking. Oscar sympathizes by describing the traits that led his wife to leave him. He invites Felix to move in with him, admitting that he doesn't like living alone. Felix agrees, imagining all the ways he can help Oscar from fixing things to cooking and cleaning. During this discussion, Felix's wife calls but only to find out when Felix is coming back for his clothes (she wants to have the bedroom repainted). Felix declares his acceptance of the failed marriage and starts to clean up Oscar's apartment, responding to Oscar's goodnight by calling Oscar by his wife's name, Frances.

Act II, Scene 1: The Second Poker Game

Two weeks later, about eleven at night, another poker game is in session, but this time the apartment is immaculately clean. Felix appears from the kitchen with carefully prepared food and reminds all the players to use their coasters to preserve the carefully applied finish on the table. Some of the players, like Vinnie, are quite pleased with the new atmosphere. Others, like Oscar and Speed, are aggravated by the excessive

concern for tidiness. The game breaks up prematurely and Murray is the last to leave, commenting on how happy he thinks Oscar and Felix must be living the bachelor life. But in the argument that ensues following Murray's departure, Oscar makes it clear that he is very unhappy living with the excessively tidy Felix. He asserts that Felix is obsessive about controlling things, including his own emotions, and ought to loosen up, relax, and have more fun. But when Felix tries to express his anger by throwing a cup against the door, he hurts his shoulder. Oscar's plan for loosening up and having more fun is to invite to dinner two attractive sisters from the upstairs apartment. Gwendolyn and Cecily Pigeon are British (they say "solicitor" instead of "lawyer"). Oscar met them on the elevator a week earlier, and he is eager to get to know them belter. Felix, however, feels a loyalty to his estranged wife that makes "dating" seem wrong to him. Following an argument, Felix finally relents and agrees to help entertain the Pigeon sisters provided he can cook the dinner. He calls his wife to ask for her recipe for London broil.

Act II, Scene 2: An Evening with the Pigeon Sisters

A few days later, about eight at night, the dining room table is set elegantly for four. Felix is in the kitchen when Oscar enters cheerily. But Felix is angry because Oscar had told him he would be home at seven and that the sisters would arrive by seven-thirty. The dinner, planned for eight o'clock, is nearly ruined. Gwendolyn and Cecily arrive and they all sit, but Felix does not join the conversation until he comments, quite inappropriately, on the weather. When Oscar goes into the kitchen to fix drinks, Felix becomes the center of attention for the Pigeon sisters and tells them how much he misses his wife and children. This is not what Oscar had in mind for trying to romance the women, but Gwendoyn and Cecily find Felix "sensitive." When Oscar comes from the kitchen with their drinks all three are crying. Felix rushes into the kitchen to inspect his burned London broil and when he dejectedly returns, Gwendolyn and Cecily suggest that they all go upstairs to their apartment for dinner. The sisters leave to prepare but Felix tells Oscar he won't go because it would mean being unfaithful to his wife and children. Oscar goes upstairs alone, angrily accusing Felix of being unwilling to change, suggesting sarcastically that if he wants to commit suicide the apartment is indeed twelve floors from the pavement.

Act III: The Last Poker Game

The next evening, about seven-thirty, the apartment is set up for yet another poker game. Felix is vacuuming when Oscar comes in, still angry about the previous evening's failure with the Pigeon sisters. They argue and Oscar begins to sabatoge Felix's efforts at cleaning, finally throwing a plate of linguini against the kitchen wall. Oscar gets Felix's suitcase and demands that Felix move out. Felix leaves just as the other poker players arrive. His friends are worried about him but have started to piay poker nonetheless. The doorbell rings and Gwendolyn, Cecily, and Felix appear. They have come for Felix's things because he is going to move in with the Pigeon sisters for a few days until he gets settled. Oscar and Felix shake hands just as Oscar's wife calls on the phone.

Oscar sent her money to pay all his alimony, and he expresses a desire to talk with her agajn. As he is going out the door, Felix promises to come back for the next week's poker game. The poker game begins and Oscar admonishes the players to be careful of their cigarette butts.

Act 1, Scene 1 and Analysis

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

**Writer's Note: The summary and analysis portions of this study guide have been combined for efficiency and effectiveness.*

The curtain rises on a poker game in progress. The air is thick with cigarette and cigar smoke. The players sweat so much that the cards stick together. The air conditioner is broken, and though the windows are open, they provide little fresh air on this stifling night. This is the spacious apartment of successful New York City sportswriter, Oscar Madison. The players are all Oscar's friends who have played here every week for years. The poker players are: Murray, a New York City police officer; Speed, a sarcastic, acerbic man who has some of the funniest lines in the opening act; Roy, who is Oscar's longtime accountant: Vinnie, who tosses out one-liners to match Speed; and, of course, Oscar.

Though the apartment is, indeed, spacious it is also a mess. Beer bottles, half-eaten sandwiches and empty pizza boxes are everywhere. Oscar, whose wife left him, is a slob and since her departure, the apartment has become cluttered and messy.

Though there is a poker game in progress as the first act begins, there is very little poker being played. The friends are worried about their missing buddy, Felix Ungar. Felix, the audience learns, has never been late before and the table talk focuses on their absent friend, much to the annoyance of Speed, who is the only player who seems to want to play poker rather than worry about Felix. The one-liners continue to fly as the friends banter during their game.

As the game continues, a telephone ring interrupts game play three separate times. The first call is from Oscar's wife, Blanche, who is calling to nag Oscar about his late alimony payments. It is obvious from Oscar's reaction that Blanche calls frequently, trying to get Oscar to meet his responsibilities - something Oscar simply does not do. He is, in fact, irresponsible with money and his family, which becomes clear within five minutes of the curtain's rising. The second call is from Murray's wife asking him to pick up some things at the store on his way home. The third call is from Frances, Felix's wife, asking if Felix has arrived at the game. Oscar learns that Felix has been missing all day because that morning, Frances told Felix that she wants a divorce, ending their 12-year marriage. Oscar informs the group of what happened earlier that day and tells them that Felix might be suicidal. Earlier, Felix sent a telegram to Frances threatening to take his own life.

The poker players become even more concerned because they know just how sensitive Felix is. They are convinced that Felix either has killed himself, or that he is thinking about it. Figuring that Felix might not want to talk about his troubles, the friends decide to act as though nothing is wrong when Felix shows up.

Simon has created one of the funniest, best-crafted opening scenes in the history of modern theater. As in most of his plays, Simon avoids "large" issues and "broad" themes. There is no complicated subtext here, just the exchange of banter between friends. Part of Simon's craftsmanship is his ability to create believable dialogue. The back-and-forth that takes place during the game is peppered with zingers, one-liners and conversations that reveal the different personalities of the players. Simon's ear for the way these New Yorkers talk is perfect. This opening scene has a rhythm to it characterized by the staccato, fast-paced exchanges between the different poker players.

Through these exchanges, the audience learns that Murray, the policeman, is a gentle soul who seems most concerned about the missing Felix. Roy is the nerdy accountant of Oscar, who also expresses genuine concern for the missing Felix. Speed and Vinnie try to stay focused on the game and become annoyed when the other players become distracted. In the middle of all of this is Oscar, the 'engine' that moves this first scene forward.

Simon has created an eclectic group of personalities - all long-time friends - and placed them in a hot, smoky room that is covered with the debris of Oscar's newfound bachelor life. Despite the insults and digs, this is clearly a group of middle-aged men who enjoy each other's company - even when they are not playing poker. Each member of the group is secure in his place; each feels comfortable; each feels as though he belongs.

This is part of the genius of Neil Simon - the ability to create believable characters and believable dialogue while making us laugh. Therefore, the stage is set for the arrival of Oscar's best friend and total opposite, Felix Ungar.

Act 1, Scene 2 and Analysis

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

Half way through the first act, Felix Ungar finally arrives at the apartment of Oscar Madison. His poker buddies, believing that Felix might not want to be reminded of his marital problems, have decided not to mention the telephone call from Felix's wife and to pretend that everything is "normal." However, Felix, clearly a broken man, continues to drop clues that not all is right. He sighs heavily. His downcast demeanor provides ample evidence to his friends that something is very, very wrong. The friends attempt to "read" Felix's actions and words, looking for any sign that he might be considering suicide. Every movement he makes, like going to the bathroom alone, is analyzed for possible warning signs that Felix is considering suicide, and though suicide is hardly a humorous topic, Simon manages to create a hilarious portrait of the hapless friends trying to be helpful but not knowing how.

Finally, Felix breaks down and reveals what has taken place that day. He admits to taking an entire bottle of pills but reassures his friends that he could not keep them down so that potential crisis is averted. However, given Felix's situation and his mood, the friends realize that the poker game is over. As Murray, Vinnie, Roy and Speed leave, they all express their concerns and offer to help in any way they can. Oscar reassures them that the situation is under control and that Felix will be staying at Oscar's apartment that night.

The two friends talk while Oscar tries to comfort Felix by massaging his neck and pouring him a drink. At one point, Felix jumps up, starts hopping on one leg while holding the side of his head and honking loudly like a goose. He has sinus and ear problems and this comical dance is how he copes with the problem. The audience learns, by this one incident, that Felix is a bit eccentric. He then launches into a description of his marriage to Frances. Felix is obsessive about neatness, cleanliness and order. He tells Oscar how he micro-manages the family finances, house cleaning and cooking. This exposition starts to clarify why Frances threw Felix out.

There is another telephone call. It is Frances, but she is only calling to find out when Felix will be dropping by to pick up his clothes so she can have the room repainted. For Felix, this phone call brings into focus the reality of his situation. He understands that this is not a small disagreement and, in fact, his 12-year marriage is over.

Oscar shows compassion by asking Felix to move in with him. He admits that he has been a little lonely since Blanche moved out and would actually enjoy Felix's company. Felix, accepting his situation, braces himself. He looks around at the clutter and trash strewn throughout the living room and begins to warm to the idea of living with Oscar. He lists all of the things he could do around the apartment to help - the cooking, shopping, cleaning and so on. The stage is set. Felix and Oscar have become "the odd couple" - an incurable slob who wallows in filth and a fastidious nitpicker who must be in

control of his surroundings. As the curtain comes down, Oscar is off to bed as Felix busily begins to clean up the clutter. The first act ends with Oscar calling out, "Goodnight, Felix." to which Felix responds, "Goodnight, Frances." Fade to black.

Oscar is the messy half of the Oscar-Felix duo. Not only does Oscar care little about the mess in which he lives, he seems to enjoy it. With Blanche, his wife, gone, Oscar's apartment has taken on the look of certain college dorm rooms, littered from one end to the other. While Oscar is, indeed, careless about his appearance and his surroundings, he is not careless when it comes to his friends. It is clear that there is a bond between Oscar and his poker pals and despite the back-and-forth between Oscar and his friends, it is evident to the audience that all of the jibes are well intentioned.

Felix is the complete opposite of the messy Oscar. While Oscar is comfortable living the life of a slob, Felix is obsessively fastidious in his appearance and his surroundings. Thus, he makes the perfect foil for the sloppy Oscar.

Conflict is an essential element of a story's plot. The relationship between Oscar and Felix, and their conflicting views of life, will be the driving force throughout the play. Oscar tries to be a good friend to Felix while attempting to maintain his most "casual lifestyle." Felix is compelled to bring order to the chaos that fills his new home with Oscar. Thus, all of the pieces are in place for the conflict that will follow as the play progresses. In literary terms, this set-up in the first act is sometimes called foreshadowing - an indication of what is to come. The audience, knowing the traits of the two main characters, is now properly set up for the conflict that will follow.

Oscar feels sympathy for Felix. He expresses loneliness since Blanche left him and welcomes Felix to move in. Of course, this is where the trouble starts. What has changed? Why do these two best friends set themselves up for what is certain to be a conflicted relationship? Both know each other's habits, yet both readily agree to the new living arrangement. Could the two friends have foreseen the problems ahead? Could a better solution to the problems facing Felix have been found? All of these questions have been planted in the minds of the audience as the second act gets underway.

Act 2, Scene 1 and Analysis

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary and Analysis

The curtain rises on the second poker game; only the setting looks quite different. In the 11 days that Felix has lived with Oscar, it is apparent that Felix has taken over Oscar's apartment. In the first act, the apartment is in shambles. As the second act opens, Oscar's apartment has been completely transformed. It is now spotless, thanks to Felix.

In fact, the atmosphere, the game and the food have changed from the first act. Now, Felix prepares little sandwiches with the crusts removed. Contrast that to the "brown sandwiches" Oscar had served only a few days before. One thing that had not changed was the pace of the poker game. As in Act 1, the poker game is constantly interrupted, primarily by Felix, who chides his fellow poker players to be a little neater, "Fellahs, please use your coasters," something that does not sit well with some members of the group. Vinnie likes the new look, and Murray enjoys Felix's little sandwiches. However, Speed complains about the antiseptic smell, and Oscar shows his annoyance because Felix is spending all of his time in the kitchen, thus slowing the game.

The bickering continues, and once again, the playwright peppers the dialogue with one-liners and zingers. When some of the players start to complain about the new conditions, Oscar says, "Don't come to me with your petty problems. You get this one stinkin' night a week. I'm cooped up here with Mary Poppins 24 hours a day."

After much bickering, the game breaks up early because "this is no way to play poker." Murray, the softhearted police officer, is the last to leave, remarking that Felix and Oscar seem to be having such a good time living the carefree, bachelor life. Clearly, Neil Simon uses this ironic observation as the jumping off point for the argument that ensues between Oscar and Felix. Oscar expresses to Felix just how unhappy he is with their living arrangement. He complains that Felix must control everything and that Oscar's slovenly existence has been turned upside down. Of course, Felix, unaware of the anger that has built up inside Oscar, attempts to defend himself.

Despite his anger, Oscar still believes he can help Felix. He tells his roommate about two, single sisters whom he met in the elevator - the Pigeon sisters - who live a couple of floors above Oscar's apartment. Oscar wants to arrange a double date with Gwendolyn and Cecily and he pressures Felix, saying that Felix needs to relax and have some fun. Of course, Felix, just a few weeks removed from his wife, is not ready to start dating but to appease Oscar, he reluctantly agrees. Oscar is delighted.

The conflict, an essential part of the plot, is well established at this point in the play. Oscar and Felix have revealed their true feelings as they bicker about what has taken place since Felix moved in.

In this scene, Simon makes it clear that opposites do not attract. Nor do they understand each other. Oscar is angry that his world has changed so dramatically, so drastically. Thinking he was doing a good deed by inviting Felix to move in, Oscar has been pushed to the edge by Felix's fussy habits and obsessions. Felix is oblivious to Oscar's unspoken anger until Oscar expresses his frustration in a barrage of examples of just how finicky Felix has been. Oscar wants to enjoy his newfound bachelorhood while Felix wants to reunite with his estranged wife. Simon carefully constructs the dialogue between Oscar and Felix so the audience will feel sympathy for both characters. Oscar is not portrayed as a 'bad' person, just someone who does not care about neatness in his self or living space. Felix is portrayed as a friend trying to improve Oscar's life and living conditions. He does not intentionally annoy Oscar. He thinks he is doing something that Oscar should appreciate.

The plot is moved forward through this conflict with the introduction of an outside force - the Pigeon sisters. The two roommates finally find common ground (though reluctantly in the case of Felix) when they agree to double date with their upstairs neighbors. Simon has now pointed the way to the rising action by creating a situation that will most certainly bring out the worst in both Felix and Oscar, thus heightening the conflict between the two roommates.

Act 2, Scene 2 and Analysis

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary and Analysis

It is the evening of Oscar and Felix's double date with the Pigeon sisters, Gwendolyn and Cecily, their upstairs neighbors.

Felix has spent the day cleaning the apartment and preparing a lovely dinner for the night's festivities. He is naturally anxious, which borders, at times, on panic. Before the Pigeon sisters arrive, Oscar and Felix reveal their expectations for the evening. Felix is doubtful about his readiness to start dating. Oscar's plans include many drinks and the possibility of spending the night with Gwendolyn or Cecily. Oscar's excitement stands in stark contrast to Felix's glum expression. He tells Oscar that he is not ready for this, because his separation from Frances is still too painful. Oscar, seeing that Felix could ruin his plans for the evening, warns Felix to cheer up and threatens to throw him out, if he ruins things. This prelude to the arrival of the dinner guests sets up the disaster to follow, another instance of foreshadowing. The audience anticipates the action that will follow this exchange between the two main characters.

When the Pigeon sisters do arrive, the audience is introduced to two of the best-drawn characters in contemporary drama. In a word, the sisters are "silly." They are young, attractive women from Britain. Their accents are, in themselves, hilarious. They giggle uncontrollably at Oscar's lame jokes and make fun of Felix's name: "Oh, like in 'Felix the Cat'." Oscar has visions of a wonderful evening ahead. He leaves to prepare drinks while Felix remains uncomfortably with the dinner guests.

At first, Felix attempts to make conversation but, as usual, it is impossible for him to keep his feelings to himself. The Pigeon sisters recognize that something is wrong with Felix and encourage him to talk about it. Felix, ignoring Oscar's earlier warning, then launches into the story of his marriage and his recent break up with Frances. He details the happy times with Frances and the empathetic sisters do their best to comfort him. In doing so, they relate their own failed experiences with marriage and romance. One anecdote leads to another until Cecily and Gwendolyn begin to cry uncontrollably over their own lost loves. At this precise moment, Oscar enters from the kitchen carrying a tray of beverages and shouting, "Is everybody happy?"

Oscar is stunned to see the change in mood that has taken place in just a few short minutes. When he left to prepare the drinks, things were going his way. In the time it takes to fix a round of drinks, Felix has turned the evening into a sob fest and Oscar sees his romantic plans vanishing before his eyes.

Felix smells something burning and rushes into the kitchen to save the London broil he has prepared. He returns, downtrodden, because the meal is burned and beyond salvaging. The Pigeon sisters suggest that they go up to their apartment to prepare a light supper. Gwendolyn and Cecily leave to get things underway and Oscar expresses

his gratitude to Felix for this sudden turn of events. Felix tells Oscar that he cannot go, that it would be a betrayal of his wife and kids. Oscar begs Felix to come but he refuses, which naturally, angers Oscar even more.

Finally, a furious Oscar leaves for the apartment of the Pigeon sisters alone and knowing that his chances for a romantic evening are over. In his anger, he suggests to Felix that, if he really does want to commit suicide, the apartment is 12 stories up from the street below.

In this scene, the action continues to rise, slowly at first. Oscar is as excited as a schoolboy is. Felix is anxious and worried about the evening. He knows it is too early for him to start dating. The action picks up pace with the arrival of the Pigeon sisters. Oscar greets them with enthusiasm; Felix shyly introduces himself. The conflict between Oscar and Felix, and the consequences of this conflict, are now clearly laid out by the playwright.

Oscar knew how nervous Felix was about their date with the lovely Pigeon sisters, yet he does not attempt to cooperate with his roommate. Oscar even gets the time wrong. Felix thinks dinner will be served at 7:30 but the Pigeon sisters do not even show up until 8:00. Clearly, both of them have been unable to adapt to the idiosyncrasies of the other. The evening was doomed to fail from the start.

It is difficult to distinguish the Pigeon sisters, one from the other. They look alike, they talk alike and both are silly. They are, for the most part, interchangeable. Through the dialogue between Oscar, Felix, Gwendolyn and Cecily, we learn that Gwen is the more serious of the two, though that is relative. Gwendolyn has difficulty remembering Felix's name because she is so scatterbrained. Cecily is the fun-loving Pigeon sister. She makes suggestive comments to the feigned embarrassment of her sister, and it is clear that Cecily has plans for a fun evening.

Both Cecily and Gwendolyn empathize with Felix's sadness because of their own experiences. Simon uses these characters, first, as comic relief. When the sisters arrive as Felix and Oscar are arguing, the tone of the scene changes. The audience takes delight in Oscar's obvious excitement and the sheer daffiness of these women. However, Simon has another purpose in mind for Gwen and Cecily. They are the only females in the play (other than telephone calls from ex-spouses) and, as such, provide a different perspective on the problems of Felix and Oscar.

Act 3 and Analysis

Act 3 Summary and Analysis

The curtain rises, once again, on the living room of Oscar Madison. Felix is vacuuming the rug and the poker table is set up in readiness for another poker game. Oscar enters and it is obvious that he is still angry about Felix's behavior the night before with the Pigeon sisters. The two argue and Oscar begins to mess up the apartment simply to anger Felix. At one point, in his rage, Oscar orders Felix to remove a bowl of pasta from the poker table. He begins so angry when Felix mocks his ignorance at not knowing the difference between spaghetti and linguini that he throws the bowl of past at a wall, saying now "it's garbage!"

This physical act of anger identifies the play's climax, the height of the rising action. At this point, Oscar orders Felix to leave the apartment, even retrieving Felix's suitcase for him. Of course, Felix cannot just leave quietly. As he is preparing his things, he puts a curse on Oscar - a thinly veiled threat: "Whatever happens, let it be on your head," he says ominously.

As Felix slowly makes his way out of the apartment, the other poker players begin to arrive. The table talk quickly turns to Felix despite Oscar's efforts to keep everyone focused on the game.

After the game has been underway for a while, there is a knock at the door. Oscar answers to discover Felix and the Pigeon sisters standing there, a unified front. The Pigeon sisters are indignant that Oscar could be so insensitive as to throw poor Felix out onto the street. The three of them have come to collect Felix's clothes and other belongings so that Felix can move in with Cecily and Gwendolyn for a few days.

As the poker players listen in, Oscar and Felix make amends, each recognizing his role in their disagreement. Felix promises to attend next week's poker game, indicating that all is forgiven. The two friends part with a handshake and Oscar returns to the game.

Once again, the banter starts up. The curtain closes with Oscar asking his poker buddies to "be careful with your cigarette butts. This is my apartment, not a pig sty."

The conclusion comes when the two part as friends. The audience is assured that the friendship is in tact and the playwright leaves the audience with an ironic laugh as Oscar asks his poker buddies to be a little neater, something Felix would do.

As stated earlier, Neil Simon's plays do not take on "big issues," or "life and death" situations. Simon's plays focus on human relationships, in this case the relationship between two complete opposites.

Oscar and Felix are characters that, although they have many inherent personality differences, are very much like one another. They have lived through many of the same

life experiences and are actually very good friends. Despite the best intentions of both Felix and Oscar, they are still unable to find a common ground.

However, the characters of Oscar and Felix do change dramatically from their shared experiences between the first and final acts of *The Odd Couple*. Consider that Felix, shy, unsure, starting a new stage in his life, would never have moved in with two strangers - the Pigeon sisters. Yet, in Act 3, Felix starts a new adventure and a new life when he moves out of Oscar's apartment. This must be seen as a huge step for Felix, given his unconventional nature and his eccentricities. Felix has grown. He is more willing to accept events that are out of his control. He is more willing to take a risk, in this case, moving in with the upstairs neighbors.

Oscar has changed, too. He has become softer and more responsible. At one point, he receives a call from his ex-wife, Blanche, thanking Oscar for paying all of the back alimony he owed. Oscar responds that it is simply the "right thing to do." Clearly, this is a change from the Oscar introduced in Act I. In the first act, Blanche threatened to have Oscar thrown in jail for the back alimony. Oscar has accepted more responsibility in his relationship with Blanche. Additional evidence of the changes in Oscar can be found in the play's closing admonition from Oscar to his poker buddies to be careful with their cigarette butts, that this is his apartment, not a pigsty. Contrast this with Oscar's views on neatness presented in Act 1.

In *The Odd Couple*, two best friends simply cannot live together. They share the same social group, interests and other common characteristics, yet they are unable to get along, or even find accommodation for their differences. The playwright asks what are the responsibilities associated with friendship. Are there obligations that go hand-in-hand with having friends? Oscar is a good friend. He offers Felix a home when Felix has nothing. Felix is a good friend who tries to help in the only way he knows - by bringing order to Oscar's chaotic life. In this instance, two good friends who care for each other are simply incompatible.

The Odd Couple is, first and foremost, a comedy. Though playwright Neil Simon is not known for his broad themes, even so, there are several interpersonal conflicts explored in this amusing presentation.

First, Simon deals with the issues of compatibility and friendship and the responsibilities that come with both. He has created two memorable characters - exact opposites - that are the best of friends. In fact, the characters of Felix Ungar and Oscar Madison have become part of American pop culture. People refer to a person obsessed with neatness as a "Felix Ungar," and someone who lives like a slob as an "Oscar Madison." This is due, in part, to the popularity of the TV show, *The Odd Couple* that ran from 1970 to 1975. However, that is only part of the reason these two characters have left such an indelible imprint on the collective psyche of Americans. The other reason is because these two characters are easily identifiable. We all know someone like Oscar or Felix, and maybe we see a bit of ourselves in these two friends.

In many of his plays and screenplays, Simon draws other recognizable characters with absolute precision and clarity. This is his genius, the ability to create recognizable characters with whom we can all identify. Therefore, despite Simon's own admission that he does not set out to create "deep" dramas or complex plot lines, nonetheless, these are present in his works. It is inevitable that they would be. With characters so carefully constructed, so universal in their feelings, critics and scholars continue to study Simon's works and, we can be certain, that these works will continue to entertain, educate and provide insight into our most important relationships. After all, that is what a playwright of Simon's magnitude does. He makes us laugh at foibles, our eccentricities and our limitations. That is his gift, one we can all appreciate whenever we are entertained by his work.

Characters

Oscar Madison

Oscar Madison is the "messy" half of this famous "odd couple." Oscar takes pity on his best friend, the newly separated and nearly suicidal Felix Ungar, and invites Felix to live with him in his New York City apartment. Within two weeks, however, Oscar regrets the invitation. The 43-year-old Oscar is carefree, pleasant, and very appealing as a character. When asked by one of the poker players what kind of sandwiches he's serving, Oscar looks under the bread and says, "I got brown sandwiches and green sandwiches." The green, he says, is "either very new cheese or very old meat." At the end of the play there is a suggestion that Oscar's experience with Felix has provoked a change in his personality because Oscar's last words in the play are an admonishment to the poker players to be less messy. In both the original Broadway stage production in 1965 and in the movie version of 1968, Oscar was played by Walter Matthau. In the five-year television series beginning in 1970, Oscar was played by Jack Klugman.

Murray

Murray, one of the poker players, is a policeman and a methodical, even slow, thinker. He is also very gentle and caring, and demonstrates the most concern for Felix. Murray is fairly unflappable, but he is also a bit simple and naive.

Cecily Pigeon

Cecily Pigeon is a little more uninhibited than her sister, Gwendolyn; she is the one who makes such suggestive remarks as,"Oh, we've done spectacular things but I don't think we'd want it spread all over the telly."

Gwendolyn Pigeon

Though the Pigeon sisters seem almost indistinguishable, Simon describes Gwendolyn as the "mother hen." Like her sister Cicely, Gwendolyn is in her 30s, British, attractive, and works as a secretary for the Slenderama Health Club. She is a little slower mentally than her sister she has trouble remembering Felix's name.

Roy

Roy is Oscar's accountant and a man with an acute sense of smell. He is the poker player who complains most about air quality and bad odors in Oscar's apartment. In the second act he storms from the game because the fastidious Felix has put disinfectant on the playing cards.

Speed

As his name implies, Speed is always in a hurry. He is the impatient poker player sarcastic, complaining, and even a little mean. As the curtain rises on Murray shuffling the cards with agonizing slowness, the caustic Speed has the play's sharp first line: "Tell me, Mr. Maverick, is this your first time on the riverboat?"

Felix Ungar

Felix Ungar is the "neat" member of the "odd couple," originally played on Broadway by Art Carney (he also played the character Norton on the popular Jackie Gleason television comedy *The Hon-eymooners*). In the movie, the role was rendered by Jack Lemmon, and in the television series Tony Randall portrayed Felix. A 44-year-old news writer for CBS, Felix responds to his wife's decision to end their marriage by considering suicide, but in Simon's comic world, attempted suicide is runny rather than serious; the compulsively tidy Felix sends his suicide note to his wife in a telegram. Oscar claims that Felix's problem is an obsession with control and urges Felix to "let loose" once in a while, to do something he "feels" like doing rather than always doing what he thinks he's "supposed" to do. At the end of the play, when Felix accepts the invitation from the Pigeon sisters to stay in their apartment, he is perhaps demonstrating a less conventional aspect of his personality.

Vinnie

Vinnie, the last of the poker players, is nervous and eccentric. At the initial poker game he is constantly checking his watch because he wants to leave early he's departing for a vacation in Florida (in July) the next morning.

Themes

Order and Disorder

When two good friends newly separated from their wives decide to live together, the arrangement fails miserably because the two friends have personal habits and domestic lifestyles that are diametrically opposed. Felix likes to live in an extremely ordered and tidy living space while Oscar not only tolerates living in disorder and messiness but even seems to prefer it.

Simon is more interested in creating compelling character types and raucous laughter than he is in investigating ideas, but to the extent that *The Odd Couple* deals with theme it focuses on the friction between radically different personalities. There is never a sense that either Oscar or Felix is "right" and the other is "wrong. *' They are simply different and attempting to live together was a bad idea. Oscar initiated the idea because he was lonely and concerned for Felix, but in his carefree approach to life he did not anticipate the conflict that should have been apparent from his knowledge of Felix's habits. Oscar describes Felix as "apamcky person" obsessed with controlling everything in his life. Specifically, Felix panics when he is confronted with disorder in any form, and he attempts to "fix" things by restoring his concept of order thus giving himself the illusion of control. When Felix accepts the invitation to live with Oscar, he characteristically adopts the very behavior patterns that drove his wife to dismiss him. At the end of Act I, Oscar repeatedly asks Felix to go to sleep, but Felix insists on staying up to clean, saying he needs pencil and paper "to start rearranging my life." He says, "I've got to get organized," and the malleable Oscar finally gives in. When Felix unconsciously calls Oscar "Frances," Felix's wife's name, it is clear that Felix is looking to Oscar as some sort of substitute for the relationship he had with his wife.

Public vs. Private Life

Oscar and Felix are best friends, but before moving in together they share only a public life with one another. When they finally share a living space, they discover that the pressures of private life are much more demanding. The transition from "good friends" to pseudo "husband and wife" tests compatibility in a way that only experience can prove. The same living space and the experience of round-the-clock sharing magnifies differences and makes the discord inescapable and intolerable. Oscar and Felix were certainly aware of their personality differences before they lived together, but they encountered these differences only briefly in their public relationship, largely at the Friday night poker game. In Act in, when Oscar throws Felix's suitcase on the table and insists that Felix leave, he says, "all I want is my freedom." Even with his unusual tolerance for disorder, Oscar cannot live in inescapable proximity with behavior that is so different from his own. He admits that it's not a question of right or wrong: "It's not your fault, Felix. It's a rotten combination." '

Very clearly, Simon is suggesting that heterosexual marriages can also suffer from the same hopeless conflicts when they exchange a "public" relationship for an intimate and "private" one. Simon communicates this theme by drawing attention to the way the relationship between Oscar and Felix is very much like a marriage. In Act I, when Oscar is trying to convince Felix to take advantage of his offer, he says, "I'm proposing to you. What do you want, a ring?" In the second scene of Act II, Oscar and Felix sound like the cliched married couple when they argue "If you knew you were going to be late, why didn't you call me?" Similarly, the opening of Act HI, when Oscar and Felix are not "talking," perfectly mimics the archetypal marriage spat. When Oscar tells Felix he must leave, he says, "it's all over, Felix. The whole marriage. We're getting an annulment." And Felix responds, "Boy, you're in a bigger hurry than Frances was."

Simon strengthens this aspect of the theme by calling attention to the marital and near-marital relationships that surround Oscar and Felix. It's clear that Speed's marriage has its rocky moments because he compares the aggravation he feels in the poker game to the aggravation he gets at home. Murray responds to Oscar's pretending on the phone that he is having an affair with Murray's wife by saying, "I wish you *were* having an affair with her. Then she wouldn't bother *me* all the time." Murray perhaps speaks for the general skepticism about marriage by saying, "twelve years doesn't mean you're a *happy* couple. It just means you're a *long* couple." In contrast with these rocky relationships, Vinnie appears to have a happier marriage, dedicated as he is to his frequent travels with his wife. In direct contrast to Oscar and Felix, the Pigeon sisters seem to live together without serious conflict perhaps because, unlike Oscar and Felix, they are so much alike.

Finally, Simon puts this theme into perspective by using the public relationships between the poker players as a backdrop for Oscar and Felix The poker players meet once a week and as a result know one another well, but their apparent camaraderie is never tested by the more demanding situation of living together over a long period of time. And Simon is careful to show that their relationships are filled with potential conflict and tension due to personality differences. The irascible Speed, for example, seems always on the verge of quitting the group. But at the end, even Felix vows to come back to the next poker night. He's not going to "break up" the game because "marriages may come and go, but the game must go on."

Change and Transformation

The only way that marriages survive is through the compromise that must occur when inevitable conflicts arise. Oscar and Felix's experience shows that some conflicts are too great for compromise, but they point the way toward the necessity for compromise by demonstrating slight changes in then- personalities by the end of the play. Oscar's change becomes clear when he receives a phone call from his ex-wife and reveals that he paid up his alimony in full. He says, "you don't have to thank me. I'm just doing what's right." Oscar's relationship with his wife and son appear to be improving because he has become a more responsible husband and father. And, of course, he ends the

play with his admonition to the poker players to "watch your cigarettes, will you? This is my house, not a pig sty "

The change in Felix is much more mysterious. Moving in even temporarily with the Pigeon sisters, nearly total strangers, is something Felix would not have been able to do when the play began. But is he merely "loosening up" as Oscar suggested he ought to? Or is he making a huge change and considering a romantic relationship with either or both of the sisters? As he gathers his things in Oscar's apartment, Felix passes the poker players and smiles in a way that is open to interpretation. When he moves in with Gwendolyn and Cecily will he try to tidy up their lives the way he attacked Oscar's? There is no way to know, but it is clear that he has gone through some kind of change for he asks Murray to tell his wife that "if I sound different to her, it's because I'm not the same man she kicked out three weeks ago."

While the play's ending leaves Oscar and Felix' s future relationship open to some speculation, it seems reasonable to assume that the two men will not live together again. It is interesting to note then, that the popular television series presumed a different scenario. In the television situation comedy version of *The Odd Couple*, Oscar and Felix remain roommates, each having reached a kind of mutual tolerance for the other's idiosyncracies. The series did, however, preserve much of the friction between the two characters, in order to maintain comical conflicts similar to the play. This is something of a reversal of Simon's suggested outcome, but one that can be seen as necessary to perpetuate a weekly comedic series.

Style

Conflict

In November of 1963, Simon sold the screen-rights for *The Odd Couple* to Paramount Pictures before he had even written a single word of the play upon which the movie was eventually based. In his memoir, *Rewrites*, Simon quotes the single sentence he and his agent used to close the deal: "'Well, it's about two men who are divorced, move in together to save money to pay their alimony, and have the same fights with each other as they did with their wives.'"

This anecdote illustrates the effectiveness of the play's main dramatic conflict. One sentence was all Paramount needed to know that Neil Simon could deliver another hit. The inherently funny conflict between the fussy Felix Ungar and the messy Oscar Madison is subtly established by the end of Act I, is effectively intensified in Act n and the beginning of Act in, and then finally is resolved by their separation and small changes in personality at the end of the play. The conflict is comically ironic because the solution the two men come up with for their separate divorces ends up creating yet another kind of divorce.

In Simon's memoir he recounts that the most difficult part of writing the play was writing the resolution of the conflict in Act IE. From the beginning of the rehearsal period, it was clear that the first two acts were effective but that the third act was a disastrous failure. This last act did not get a satisfactory rewrite until well after the first out-of-town performances had begun and Simon had realized that the key to resolving the conflict was bringing the Pigeon sisters back into Act III.

Character

What was not obvious in Simon's one-sentence synopsis for Paramount is that the conflict was based on the clash of extremely different personality types. Ultimately, it is the creation of Oscar and Felix as an "oil and water" mix that makes it possible for *The Odd Couple* to be tremendously funny.

Simon creates these contrasting character types with the effective use of theatrical detail, most notably with carefully crafted dialogue. Sometimes it is the words of the character himself that establishes the "type" as when when Oscar enters hurriedly in Act I carrying a tray with beer, sandwiches, a can of peanuts, and already opened bags of pretzels and chips. In the visual context of the slovenly apartment, Oscar's balancing act with the snacks already characterizes him as the probable source of the living room mess but his opening words very subtly reinforce this impression. The impatient poker players ask Oscar if he's "in" or "out," that is, whether or not he plans to play this hand. "I'm in! I'm in!" Oscar says, "Go ahead. Deal!" Vinnie asks, "Aren't you going to look at your cards?" and Oscar answers,"What for? I'm gonna bluff anyway." The messy

condition of Oscar's apartment has prepared the audience to understand his carefree type immediately, and his opening words characterize him perfectly with elegant economy.

Sometimes Felix and Oscar are effectively characterized by what others say about them. The third line of the play, for example, is Roy's "Geez, it stinks in here," a line that is quickly followed by Vinnie's, "What time is it?" Roy's line implies that the yet-to-appear host is the main cause of the mess they find themselves in, an impression he solidifies with a later line, "You know, it's the same garbage from last week's game. I'm beginning to recognize things." Felix doesn't enter until nearly half-way through the first act, but when he does the following comment from Murray has already characterized Felix as one who organizes his life in a way very unlike Oscar "Hey, maybe he's in his office locked in the John again. Did you know Felix was once locked in the John overnight. He wrote out his entire will on a half a roll of toilet paper! Heee, what a nut!"

As fictional creations, Oscar and Felix, like the other characters in the play, are "types" rather than multifaceted characters. They mostly embody single, predominating traits as in Oscar the carefree, irresponsible, and sloppy type and Felix the precise, uptight, and extremely orderly type. Multifaceted characters are generally considered more artistically sophisticated, but character "types" can be used to great artistic purpose, as in the novels of Charles Dickens for example. Simon draws his character types precisely, using carefully crafted dialogue to reveal their characteristics.

Comedy

When one thinks of comedy one thinks first of laughter, and the *The Odd Couple* generates belly laughs, mainly because of the verbal cleverness captured in its "one-liners." The "one-liner" is a short response in which the character's retort surprises because of exaggeration or incongruity. For example, when Murray agrees to eat the "brown" sandwich that Oscar brings out of the kitchen, Roy says, "are you crazy? His refrigerator's been broken for two weeks. I saw milk standing in there that wasn't even in the bottle." The laugh comes from the surprising and exaggerated image of milk so sour it has become a solid substance. Simon perfected his skill at one-liners writing for television shows in the 1950s and no dramatist has ever been more adept at this skill. It has, however, been something of a hindrance to his reputation as a serious artist. Though audiences have been enthusiastic in their response to Simon's comedies, critics have generally been less admiring, often citing the reliance on "one-liners" as a cheap trick more appropriate to the world of sitcom entertainment than the world of art.

Historical Context

Vietnam

1965 was a period of considerable turmoil in the United States because President Lyndon Johnson, despite his claims to the contrary, was escalating U.S. involvement in Vietnam and many citizens (mostly young people) were protesting, especially on college campuses around the nation. In February, a month before *The Odd Couple* opened on Broadway in March, U.S. bombers were retaliating against North Vietnamese forces for attacks on American military advisors in South Vietnam. By March the first deployment of U.S. combat troops was landing in Da Nang and student protests had begun to mushroom. In May, a nation-wide student protest including more than 100 U.S. colleges proclaimed its opposition to the war. Despite this public outcry, Congress authorized the use of U.S. ground troops in direct combat operations and by the end of June full-scale combat involving American troops had commenced Continued anti-war rallies ultimately divided the Amencan public between "hawks" and "doves," those who supported the escalation of the war and those who opposed it. Often these lines divided on grounds of age and education, with college faculty and students usually leading the ranks of the "doves." As draft calls were doubled to enlist troops for Vietnam, university enrollments rose sharply with young men taking advantage of the draft deferral for college students as a way of avoiding military service.

Racial tensions

Adding to the turmoil created by Vietnam were continuing tensions over race relations. In Selma, Alabama, throughout February and March, Martin Luther King Jr. was leading civil rights protests against state regulations that limited black voter registration. Demonstrations were marred by violence as 200 Alabama state police used whips, night sticks, and tear gas to control the largely black crowds. The Governor of Alabama at the time, George Wallace, finally refused police protection for the demonstrators and President Johnson responded by sending 3,000 U.S. National Guard troops to Selma. Elsewhere, in New York City's Harlem, on February 21, civil rights activist Malcolm X was assassinated by black extremists as he prepared to deliver a speech asserting the need for peaceful coexistence between blacks and whites In the Watts section of Los Angeles in August, race riots erupted in this predominantly black section of the city and nearly 10,000 rioters destroyed 500 square blocks of the city and caused an estimated $40 million of damage. In 1965, race relations in America were obviously volatile and even dangerous to peace and public safety

"Flower Power"

An idealistic youth culture m America responded to this turmoil by asserting its belief in the power of a non-denominational spiritual awareness. Poet Allen Ginsberg coined the

term "flower power" when anti-war demonstrators responded to Oakland city police with a strategy of non-violence. Images of young people inserting daisies in the barrels of police anti-riot weapons helped popularize the epithet. Identifying more with Eastern religions than with traditional Christianity, these "flower children" embraced "love" and "peace" as attainable foundations for social and political order. This movement was led by "gurus" like Ginsberg, the Hare Krishnas, and Harvard psychology professor Timothy Leary, who espoused the use of consciousness-altering drugs such as LSD and marijuana.

The Insulated World of Simon's Play

As with most of his comedies, Simon's *The Odd Couple* is not seriously concerned with the social, political, and cultural climate of the times in which he wrote. Simon admits that he is not a "political" writer but said in *Rewrites*: "[I] hope that my plays become a documentation of the times we lived in, at least from the perspective I had to view it all." *The Odd Couple* might document an upper-middle-class New Yorker's world in 1965 but it would certainly be a very insulated world, quite unconnected to the significant turmoil most of the country was experiencing outside of Oscar's apartment.

It is most likely that this insulated quality derives from Simon's dedication to light, comedic entertainment, a desire to provide the audience with an engaging but untroubling evening of laughter and sentiment. In fact, *The Odd Couple* might even have been designed to provide its audience with an escape from the sometimes gruesome realities that were taking place on the street and being reported on the evening news. As with most of Simon's comedies, *The Odd Couple* is a pleasant night in the theatre rather than a disturbing or even thought-provoking one. Its most "serious" issue is divorce, and, in the spirit of light comedy, divorce is treated as a human experience without significantly troubling consequences or ramifications.

Critical Overview

The Odd Couple has been Neil Simon's greatest popular success, running for 964 performances in its Broadway debut and then spawning a popular movie version, an even more popular television series, and eventually a kind of sequel or "female version" that tells the same story with the genders reversed. Added to these successes is the fact that all of these manifestations of his play have entertained the public for more than thirty years as regional and amateur theatre groups continue to perform both versions of his play and television stations rerun the movie and sitcom series. But Simon has always been more popular with audiences than he has been with critics who tend to classify him as a merely entertaining comedy writer rather than as a serious artist with a comic vision.

In 1965, *The Odd Couple* was Simon's third straight comedy hit (the 1962 musical *Little Me* had been less successful with audiences despite Simon's collaboration as librettist). The critics had responded in 1961 to his first Broadway hit, *Come Blow Your Horn*, with reserved praise, finding it (in *New York Times* critic Howard Taubman's words) a pleasant "confection," a play with "hilarious moments" that "aims low" and only seeks "to entertain." This would become the general critical opinion of Simon's work throughout his career, as his next two hits, *Barefoot in the Park* and *The Odd Couple*, gathered basically similar responses. Through succeeding decades the critical response might vary slightly from play to play but the overall assessment stayed roughly the same. Consistently recognized as a sound theatrical craftsman and a genuinely funny writer, the critics nonetheless found Simon lacking in intellectual and emotional depth and often reduced him to the simple epithet, "gag-man."

Reviewing the original Broadway production of *The Odd Couple*, Taubman found the opening scene "one of the funniest card sessions ever held on a stage" and the play's humor "unflagging" but labelled the play finally as a "farce," and not of the "higher art" of "true comedy." Taubman's appreciation of the play's hilarity was thorough and genuine but he finally had to separate himself from the audience's more unreserved applause.

Some critics, like Walter Kerr, have been kinder to Simon during his career; Kerr, for example, once called Simon "a man of sense, using just the jigger and a half of substance that will make a decent drink." Other critics, like subsequent *Times* writers Frank Rich and John Simon (no relation), have been generally harsher. John Simon once proclaimed that Neil Simon's work was "devoid of ideas" and "an outrage ... against human intelligence and art." He admitted that "audiences, of course, may find trash to their taste; but the critic's first task is to identify it as such. Then, if people still want to eat it, let them; only let no one pretend it's food " Academicians have generally been harshest of all when they deign to comment on such a popular writer. College and university professors well-studied in classic comic dramatists like Shakespeare and Moliere (pronounced "Mole-yair") and even more contemporary writers like Alan Ayckbourn (pronounced "ache-born") and Joe Orton have often been brutal with Simon. For example, in the third edition of *Contemporary Dramatists*, Martin Gottfried admits that "Neil Simon must be reckoned with if only because he is the most popular

playwright in the history of the American theatre" but adds that "Simon is generally dismissed as aback." Similarly, Gerald Berkowitz, writing in *Players* magazine begins by declaiming that "Neil Simon is a critical embarrassment... it is universally agreed that [his plays] offer no specific insights into the human condition." But even critics as harsh as these must admit to certain strengths in Simon's comedies, most notably the indisputable fact "that a Neil Simon comedy makes the audiences laugh, and [that] this laughter is louder, longer and more constant than that produced by any other modern dramatist," according to Berkowitz.

On the other hand, Simon has had his champions. In fact, two book-length critical assessments of his work are both quite effusive in their praise. Edythe McGovern, in her *Neil Simon. A Critical Study*, puts Simon in a class with writers like Moliere and George Bernard Shaw, who "successfully raised fundamental and sometimes tragic issues of universal and therefore enduring interest without eschewing the comic mode." Of *The Odd Couple* McGovern asserts that Simon has "captured the essence of incompatibility among humans who repeat again and again their self-defeating patterns of personality." In *Neil Simon*, Robert Johnson asserts that "Neil Simon has not received as much critical attention as he deserves," and that "Simon's work also explores a larger number of serious themes and points of view than he is credited with presenting." Johnson concludes that "Oscar and Felix's attempt to share living quarters... is the most captivating dramatization of incongruity Simon has yet created."

The individual interested in Neil Simon's comedies can come to his or her own opinion about the merit of Simon's comedy or about *The Odd Couple* in particular by seeking out learned definitions of comedy and comparing them to a multitude of works in literature and in the popular media.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Nienhuis is an associate professor of English at Western Carolina University. Here he discusses the mechanics of humor, Simon's facility with comedy, and the playwright's struggle to be recognized as more than a gag writer.

Neil Simon has been so successful financially and has become so popular with audiences that there is only one ambition left for him to be taken seriously as an "artist." The reluctance of critics to give him this respect continues to goad Simon and *The Odd Couple* is a worthy ground for examining this issue because it is his most famous play and still quite typical of his best work.

In the long history of English and American cultures there has always been a dichotomy between entertainment and art, but this cultural division and conflict has been intensified in America in the twentieth century as popular media have become more powerful and pervasive in American life. The radio, movies, television, cable television, and the wide availability of video recordings have made popular entertainment and popular culture an increasingly powerful force as we approach the beginning of a new century. Alongside or even against this rising tide of popular culture and entertainment stands a declining interest in books, in reading, and in classic literature. In some circles this situation is taken very seriously, as in the well-known book by social critic Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Postman claims that the public's demand for entertainment has trivialized and even in some cases destroyed the culture's capacities for rational discourse and careful analytical judgment. He compares the situation in twentieth-century America to the one in Aldous Huxley's futuristic novel, *Brave New World*, where "people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."

Putting such diatribes aside, it is still clear that in the comedies of Neil Simon in general and in *The Odd Couple* in particular there is much to enjoy and admire. Initially, there is Simon's verbal wit and his capacity for creating raucous laughter: *The Odd Couple* might be Simon's most perfectly funny play. Those who study laughter analytically tell us that laughter usually comes from surprise from our perception of incongruity, our delight in superiority, and our relief when forbidden subjects are brought out into the open so we can experience a release of psychic tension. In *The Odd Couple* our laughter comes predominantly from the surprise and perception of incongruity that occurs when we encounter Simon's famous "one-liners."

For example, in the play's initial poker scene Murray chides Oscar for not paying his alimony, asking Oscar if it doesn't bother him that his kids might not have enough to eat, and Oscar retorts: "Murray, *Poland* could live for a year on what my kids leave over from lunch!" This exaggeration takes us by surprise on many levels and can cause wild laughter in a typical audience. Psychologically, we probably are also laughing because we recognize that alongside the surprising incongruity there is a certain truth to Oscar's remark that Oscar's wife still has plenty of money and that American children are very frequently spoiled. This is one way the comic one-liner can be described sharp surprise

from perceiving wild incongruity followed by a cognitive recognition that there is a paradoxical truth in the incongruity. The surprise catches our attention and the recognition gives us the pleasure of understanding. However, with Simon the weak link in the equation is usually with the recognition element. His one-liners are often fairly shallow on the cognitive side.

Compare, for example, a "one-liner" from Shakespeare. In *Romeo and Juliet* Mercutio has been fatally stabbed by Tybalt and Romeo says, "Courage, man, the hurt cannot be much" and Mercutio replies, "No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man." This will be funny even in the context of Mercutio's death because the incongruities are so striking, but the difference is that the "recognition" part of the one-liner is so much more important than the surprising incongruity. Mercutio's quip is a sad reminder of our own mortality, a recognition that even a vital (though perhaps rash) human being like Mercutio can get caught very easily by mortal circumstances. Death will finally make the merry Mercutio "grave." As Mercutio pays a price for his exaggerated vitality, perhaps too great a price to our way of thinking, Shakespeare insists that even in our laughter we must consider life in all its complexity. Even when he is being very funny, Shakespeare is more interested in the cognitive side of humor than he is in the belly laughs.

But Simon can also be appreciated for his exquisite theatrical craftsmanship; he is very adept at creating the effects he wants to achieve. The opening poker scene in *The Odd Couple* is a perfect example. Simon knew that if he established Oscar and Felix's poker-playing buddies as an interesting and varied group before he introduced Oscar and Felix themselves he would be able to prepare his audience much more effectively for the entrance of his mam characters. And with characteristic theatrical skill Simon does this from the first moment of the play. The play opens with the striking visual impression of Oscar's messy and smoke-filled apartment and of Murray, Roy, Speed, and Vinnie sitting around the poker table with two chairs empty. Vinnie has the largest stack of poker chips and one of the early jokes will be Speed's impatience at Vinnie's desire to leave early with his winnings. Vinnie is nervously tapping his foot and checking his watch but Speed is even more impatient, an emotion that will be highlighted throughout the play by Oscar's eventual reaction to living with Felix. Roy is watching Speed and Speed is glaring "with incredulity and utter fascination" at Murray, who is shuffling the cards with aggravating slowness. Thus, Simon creates tremendous theatrical interest and laughter even before anyone has spoken a word. With this tableaux established so exquisitely, Speed's line, which opens the play, creates a laugh that few comic playwrights can so easily create: Speed "cups his chin in his hand," "looks at Murray," and says, "Tell me, Mr. Maverick, is this your first time on the riverboat?" Already the audience is hooked. They want to know about these men and how they relate to one another. They wonder who will fill the two vacant chairs. And when Oscar finally arrives on stage, it has been clearly established that one of the missing chairs belongs to an eccentrically fussy person named Felix and that the messy condition of this apartment is a result of the carefree attitude of the host. Even Simon's critics usually agree that in terms of play construction and theatre craft, Neil Simon takes a back seat to very few comic dramatists.

However, the critics have also been quick to point out that craftsmanship is only pan of dramatic artistry. The most important aspect of art is what the writer has to say about human experience. The critics often refer to Simon as a mere "gag-man," and if laughter were the deciding factor in evaluating comedy, Simon's quality would be much easier to discern. Someone could simply use a machine to measure the audience's laughter, and the longest and loudest guffaws might easily declare Simon the greatest of comic writers. But more academic critics have implied that volume and duration of laughter are not sufficient and perhaps not even necessary conditions for great comedy. In fact, many great comic moments provoke smiles rather than laughter and sometimes comedy even evokes pathos. What is essential to a great comedy appears to be not laughter but a provocative comic vision.

What is a "comic vision"? It is an approach to comedy that includes not only laughter but also a thoughtful, even philosophical way of looking at the human experience. The eighteenth-century English politician and man of letters Horace Walpole once said that "this world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel." The tragic vision has been defined in many ways but perhaps tragedy shows us that our defeats can be partial victories The comic vision, on the other hand, might show us that our victories always imply partial defeat, if for no other reason than that we can never completely extinguish our follies or life's hardship and pain. In the most powerful comedies, the happy ending always has an alloy of harsh reality, as in the ending of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, for example, where many lovers are paired up and happy but the noble Don Pedro is left conspicuously alone.

Some of Simon's comedies have flirted with darker materials, plays like *The Gingerbread Lady* (1970), *God's Favorite* (1974), and *Lost in Yonkers* (1991), but they have been unconvincing for audiences and critics alike. Simon seems to lack the intellectual and emotional depth to tread in such waters, and *The Odd Couple* is yet another example, Johnson reports that Simon "originally envisioned *The Odd Couple* as 'a black comedy,'" but there is nothing left of that original conception. Oscar and Felix are lovable eccentrics and their conflict has no convincingly serious or thought-provoking elements. This is perhaps clearest at the end when Oscar talks on the phone with his wife. Here Oscar becomes a merely sentimental hero as he turns over a new leaf and reveals that underneath he was always a better person than he appeared to be. Felix, on the other hand, departs shrouded in a little more mystery, but Simon does not exploit the thematic possibilities in this mystery and simply terminates the conflict between Oscar and Felix with an echo of the joke that closed Act I. Oscar and Felix address one another by their wives' names, saying, "So long, Frances. So long, Blanche." The audience will laugh once more at this verbal surprise because yet another incongruity has struck them. However, after the laughter passes there is no significant recognition phase where the incongruity reveals something thought-provoking and profound about Oscar, Felix, or human life in general.

Source: Terry Nienhuis, m an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this review, Taubman recounts the Broadway debut o/The Odd Couple *and praises Simon's comedic skills*.

The opening scene in *The Odd Couple*, of the boys in their regular Friday night poker game, is one of the funniest card sessions ever held on a stage

If you are worried that there is nothing Neil Simon, the author, or Mike Nichols, his director, can think of to top that scene, relax The main business of the new comedy, which opened last night at the Plymouth Theatre, has scarcely begun, and Mr, Simon, Mr, Nichols and their excellent cast, headed by Art Carney and Walter Matthau, have scores of unexpected ways prepared to keep you smiling, chuckling and guffawing.

Mr. Simon has hit upon an idea that could occur to any playwright. His odd couple are two men, one divorced and living in dejected and disheveled splendor in an eight-room apartment and the other to be divorced and taken in as a roommate.

One could predict the course of this odd union from its formation in misery and compassion through its disagreements to its ultimate rupture. Mr. Simon's way of writing comedy is not to reach for gimmicks of plot; he probably doesn't mind your knowing the bare outline of his idea. His skill and it is not only great but constantly growing lies in his gift for the deliciously surprising line and attitude. His instinct for incongruity is faultless It nearly always operates on a basis of character.

Begin with that poker game Mr. Matthau, the slovenly host, is off stage in the kitchen fixing a snack while Nathaniel Frey, John Fiedler, Sidney Armus and Paul Dooley are sitting around the table on a hot summer night, sweating and grousing at the luck of the cards. The burly Mr. Frey is shuffling awkwardly, "for accuracy, not speed," and the querulous Mr. Fiedler, the big winner, talks of quitting early.

The cards are dealt. Mr. Matthau walks in with a tray of beer and white and brown sandwiches. They're brown in his scheme of housekeeping because they' re either new cheese or very old meat. As he opens the beer cans, sending sprays of lager over his guests (surely a Nichols touch), the dealer inquires whether he intends to look at his cards. "What for," Mr. Matthau, the big loser, grumbles, "I'm gonna bluff anyhow."

The sixth member of the Friday night regulars, Mr. Carney, is missing. Evidently he has been away from his known haunts for 24 hours, and a phone call from his wife informs his friends that she hopes he never turns up. Since they know that he is a man who takes such blows seriously, they fear that he will do something violent to himself.

With Mr. Carney's arrival as Felix, the discarded husband, the principal action begins. Mr. Carney is truly bereaved, a man of sorrows, His eyes are stricken, his lips quiver, his shoulders sag. Even poker gives way before his desolation. The players are too

concerned about possible moves by Felix toward self-destruction. When at last they go home, they depart softly and gravely like chaps leaving a sick room.

Mr. Matthau as Oscar, the host, consoles Felix, massaging away the spasms in his neck and enduring the moose calls with which the unfortunate fellow clears ears beset by allergies. Nothing much happens during the rest of the act except that these two inevitably blunder into a domestic alliance, but there is scarcely a moment that is not hilarious.

The unflagging comedy in the remainder of the play depends on the fundamental switch of the odd couple. Felix is a compulsive house keeper, bent on cleaning, purifying the air and cooking. When the gang assembles for its poker game, Felix has special treats ready for snacks.

Mr. Carney handles the housewifely duties with a nice, delicate, yet manly verve. But he is strict. When he serves a drink to Mr. Frey, he wants to know where the coaster is. The answer and this is Mr. Simon, the marks-man at firing droll lines is, "I think I bet it."

Mr. Matthau for his part is Wonderfully comic as a man who finds his companion's fussy habits increasingly irksome. He walks about with a bearish crouch that grows more belligerent as his domestic situation becomes both familiar and oppressive. There is a marvelous scene in which he and Mr. Carney circle each other in mutual distaste Mr. Matthau looking like an aroused animal about to spring and Mr. Carney resembling a paper tiger suddenly turned neurotic and dangerous.

To vary the humors of the domestic differences, Mr, Simon brings on two English sisters named Pigeon yes Pigeon, Gwendolyn and Cecily for a date with Oscar and Felix. The girls induce more laughter than their names promise. Carole Shelley and Monica Evans are a delight as the veddy British and dumb Pigeons.

Mr, Nichols's comic invention, like Mr. Simon's, shines through this production and the comfortable Riverside Drive apartment invoked by Oliver Smith's set. Just a sample: Mr. Carney left alone with the Pigeons is as nervous as a lad on his first date. When one of the girls takes out a cigarette, he hastens to her with his lighter and comes away with the cigarette clamped in its mechanism.

The Odd Couple has it made. Women are bound to adore the sight of a man carrying on like a little homemaker. Men are sure to snicker at a male in domestic bondage to a man. Kids will love it because it's funny.

Source: Howard Taubman, review of *The Odd Couple*, in the *New York Times*. March 11,1965 .

Critical Essay #3

In this review of the play's original Broadway run, Kerr lauds The Odd Couple *as a greatly entertaining evening of theatre*.

Kerr was a longtime reviewer for the New York Times, *as well as the author of several book-length studies of modern drama, he was one of the most influential figures in the American theater*.

I'm sorry the Moscow Art players have returned to Russia. I'd like them to have seen the first-act poker game in *The Odd Couple*.

I don't necessarily say they'd have learned anything from it. I just feel pretty sure they'd have liked it. It has so much interior truth. Director Mike Nichols has staged an absolute summer festival of warm beer, sprayed toward the ceiling like those terraced fountains municipal designers are so fond of, and I suppose we can credit author Neil Simon with providing the sandwiches. The sandwiches have been made of whatever was left over in host Walter Matthau's long-defrosted refrigerator, ("it's either very new cheese or very old meat" Mr. Matthau volunteers as he offers his cronies a choice between brown sandwiches and green) and the members of the party are happy enough to munch them as they gripe, growl, snarl, and roar over their hands, their wives, their lives, and the high cost of losing.

This is where the art comes in. Instead of isolating each one of Mr. Simon's dozens of laugh-lines and milking it for all it's worth, director Nichols flings all the gags into the pot together, letting them clink and spin like so many chips, until everything overlaps and you can't tell life from lunacy. Nat Frey shuffles the pack as though he were crushing glass in his strong bare hands, John Fielder sings his piping little song about having to leave by twelve until it takes on the piercing sound of counterpoint from another planet, Sidney Armus and Paul Dooley fling their arms up and their cards down like men freshly accused of treason, and Mr. Matthau grunts and bellows m his homespun way to put a moose-like bass under the whole hot summer-night orchestration. The interplay is true, blue, and beautiful.

After the poker game comes the play, which is jim-dandy, ginger-peachy, and good. Mr. Matthau is a divorced man, which is why he is able to have all his friends in on Friday nights and also why the eight-room apartment looks like one of those village bazaars at which underprivileged citizens can exchange their old refuse. (Oliver Smith has caught in his setting just the right muddy and mottled note for ramshackle bachelor quarters, with the trousers back from the cleaners hanging where they ought to be, from the bookshelves, and with a nice fat hole burned in the what used to be the best lampshade).

Into the dissolute comfort and the brawling bliss of Mr. Matthau's menage comes a thin note of warning. One friend, who turns out shortly to be Art Carney, hasn't shown up. News is received that he, too, has left his wife. Furthermore, he is threatening suicide,

sort of. Now it is time for Mike Nichols to set his mother-hen actors pacing, pacing, pacing the floor, as they brood and cluck and worry inordinately about their deeply disturbed buddy When Mr. Carney does finally appear, the rush to save him from himself all windows are locked tightly against jumping, and he is scarcely allowed to go to the bathroom alone is sympathetic, solicitous, and rough as a maddened hockey game. We may not have had as funny a first act since "The Acharnians."

Naturally, Mr. Matthau and Mr, Carney now settle down as roommates, making as nice a couple as you'd care to meet if they could only get along. Mr. Carney is death on dust and a fast man with an Aerosol bomb (one reason his wife threw him out is that he always insisted on recooking the dinner) and he drives Mr. Matthau stark, staring mad. In short, both of them might just as well have wives, and that constitutes the meat, the moral, and the malicious merriment of this brief encounter.

The contest thins out a bit, I am honor bound to say, during the second act, while Mr. Carney worries desperately over his London broil and reduces a couple of visiting pigeons (they're girls, they're sisters, and their name is Pigeon) to tears. But the repeated joke is at least a good joke, the Pigeon sisters ultimately prove to be funny and useful, Mr. Simon's comic invention keeps re-igniting, and the poker players are coming back, so I wouldn't even notice if I were you.

Now a word about Mr. Matthau, and I do hope the Moscow Art is listening. Mr. Matthau could play all of the parts in "Dead Souls" with one hand tied to one foot and without changing makeup. He is a gamut-runner, from grim to game to simple hysteria, and when he finally does have his long overdue nervous-breakdown, with his voice sinking into his throat like the sun in the western sea, he is magnificent. Of course, he is good, too, impersonating an orangutan as he leaps furniture in his wild desire to make certain alterations in Mr. Carney's throat, and again when he shows his old pal the door (only to be haunted by the memory of that despairing face and by a parting remark that he comes to think of as The Curse of the Cat People). But perhaps our man is best of all when he is merely intimating contempt in his sneering dark eyes, with a baseball cap peaked backwards on his untidy head and his face curled in scorn until it looks like the catcher's mitt.

We mustn't overlook Mr. Carney, who is immensely funny quivering his lip like an agitated duck, clearing his ears by emitting foghorn hoots, and clawing his hands through what is left of his hair to indicate pride, despair and all of the other seven deadly virtues. His problem is tension ("It's tension. I get it from tension. I must be tense," he says) and ours is to keep from laughing through the next good line.

It's a good problem to have, and I urge you to drop in on *The Odd Couple* any night at all, Fridays included.

Source: Walter Kerr, in a review of *The Odd Couple* in the *New YorkHerald Tribune*, March 11,1965

Adaptations

The Odd Couple was adapted by Simon himself as a 1968 film starring Walter Matthau as Oscar and Jack Lemmon as Felix. Gene Saks, who directed the stage version, also directed the film which is very faithful to the play script, though occasionally expanded to include street scenes in New York City. In technicolor, running 106 minutes, available from Paramount Home Video and at many video rental stores. A videodisc (Laservision) version is also available from Paramount.

An animated cartoon called *The Oddball Couple* premiered in September of 1976 on ABC and was based on the odd couple concept as it featured a slob-like dog named Fleabag and a fussy cat named Spiffy, both freelance magazine writers.

The Odd Couple was adapted as a 30 minute television show that ran on ABC from September of 1970 to July of 1975 and included 114 episodes. Jack Klugman played Oscar and Tony Randall played Felix, but in the series many other characters like Oscar's secretary, Myrna, and Felix's daughter, Edna had to be invented to satisfy the need for greater variety. Available in reruns on some cable television channels like Nickelodeon.

The Odd Couple was adapted again by ABC in October of 1982 as another 30 minute television series called *The New Odd Couple* and ran until June of 1983 with black actors Demond Wilson and Ron Glass playing Oscar and Felix. Most episodes were simply recast versions of previous *The Odd Couple* scripts.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the movie version of *The Odd Couple* with the television series. Which is more effective and why? How does each differ from the stage play?

Research to discover how rising costs have affected Broadway and how economic pressures have contributed to the dichotomy between commercial entertainment and art in American theatre.

Read several theoretical discussions that attempt to define comedy philosophically, as distinct from laughter, and then apply your definition of comedy to *The Odd Couple*, your favorite television sitcom, and to a Shakespearean comedy.

Identify the techniques that Simon uses in *The Odd Couple* to establish the conflict between Oscar and Felix by the end of Act I, to intensify that conflict in Acts II and III, and to resolve the conflict by the end of the play.

Compare and Contrast

1965: The divorce rate stood at 2.5% per 1,000 people, down from its high after World War n but up from a lower rate in 1960. The divorce rate had risen from 0.9% in 1910 and had jumped dramatically during the second World War to 3.5% in 1945, peaking in 1946 after the war had ended but then dipping steadily to 2.2% in 1960.

Today: The divorce rate stands at around 4.6% per 1,000 people, down from its all-time high of 5.3% m 1981. The rates had risen steadily from 1965 and into the 1970s before peaking and starting another decline in the mid 1980s.

1965: The issue of racial prejudice dominated the news and the social consciences of the American people, but there was no evidence of black characters in the lives of Oscar, Felix, or their poker-playing buddies. The issues of gender consciousness and homophobia were much less prominent, and, in this social climate, few, if any, considered it homoerotically suggestive that two bachelors chose to live together.

Today: Though the issue of racial prejudice is still very much "in the air," it has now been joined or even eclipsed in importance by the issues of feminism and homophobia. Increased awareness of gay issues has made many people more observant of homosexual subtext, and the relationship between Oscar and Felix can, on some levels, be perceived as homoerotic. The feminist movement can also be seen as a factor in Simon's decision to create a "female" version of the play m 1985. In 1982, ABC produced a second sitcom version of the play that featured black actors in the roles of Oscar and Felix.

1965: America was becoming deeply mired in the Vietnam conflict and open hostilities at home over the war would dominate the rest of the decade, culminating in the National Guard opening fire on Kent State University student protestors, killing four and wounding eight on May 4, 1970.

Today: The memories of Vietnam still weigh heavily on America's psyche, though the 1991 Persian Gulf War was seen by many as a ritualis-tic military victory that in part exorcised the
ignominy of that earlier military failure. Novels, plays, and popular films about Vietnam began appearing in the mid 1970s and became so numerous in the 1980s and 1990s that an entire genre of Vietnam War literature has arisen.

1965: The "cold war" begun in the early 1950s was still raging and Communist Russia was seen as a great and dangerous political and military power.

Today: The fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989 signaled the economic and political decline of Russia, which is now splintered into many independent states and is suffering from internal dissension and severe economic problems as it attempts to assimilate the Western concepts of democracy and free market capitalism.

1965: Stock prices and trading volume reached an all-time high, with the Dow-Jones industrial average gaining about 11% in 1965 to finish the year at a historic high of 969.

Today: After a major "crash" in 1987, the stock market continues to climb to dizzying heights, fueled by "baby-boomer" investors who worry that they will not have sufficient funds for retirement. In the greatest "bull" run in the history of the market, the Dow-Jones industrial average flirted with the 7,000 mark and some analysts predicted a 10,000 point Dow by the year 2000 while others predicted another crash of monumental proportions.

1965: Simon's opening allusion to "Mr. Maverick" was funny for his audience because the hit television series starring James Garner and Jack Kelly as Bret and Bart Maverick had just ended its 124 episode run on ABC in 1962.

Today: A new generation has become familiar with the Maverick character through the popular 1994 movie starring Mel Gibson as Bret Maverick and Jodi Foster as his spunky romantic interest. James Garner, the original Bret Maverick, took a supporting role in the film as Marshal Zane Cooper and lent considerable nostalgia to the film for an older generation of viewers.

What Do I Read Next?

Any of the plays of Britain's Alan Ayckbourn, who is often referred to as the "British Neil Simon" because of his commercial popularity, his ability to create laughter, and his prolific number of hits. More respected by critics, Ayckbourn is signficantly more daring technically and much more profound in his use of comedy than Simon.

Taking Laughter Seriously, by John Morreall, SUNY Press, 1983. A concise discussion of the psychological elements that underlie laughter, with a concluding chapter discussing humor as a way of looking at life.

The Gingerbread Lady (1970), *God's Favorite* (1974), *Chapter Two* (1977), or *Lost in Yonkers* (1991) as examples of Neil Simon plays that work with darker materials and make more of an attempt to balance humor with seriousness.

The Sunshine Boys (1972) for another fascinating Neil Simon "pair," this time two, old, vaudevillian comics who have a love-hate relationship with one another.

Further Study

Bryer, Jackson R., editor. *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary Dramatists*, Rutgers University Press, 1995, pp. 221-240

Interview with Simon responding to questions as varied as "how did you get started writing plays"" to "how do you feel about theatre critics1"'

Johnson, Robert K. *Neil Simon*, Twayne, 1983.

The second and currently last book devoted to Simon's work; includes chapter on *The Odd Couple*.

McGovern, Edythe. *Neil Simon: A Critical Study*, Frederick Ungar, 1978.

First book-length discussion of Simon; includes chapter on *The Odd Couple*.

Simon, Neil *Rewrites*, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Simon's autobiography through his writing of *Chapter Two*. Offers some interesting insights into his inspirations and writing processes.

Weise, Judith "Neil Simon," in *Critical Survey of Drama-English Language Series*, edited by Frank N. Magill, Salem Press, 1985.

An insightful analysis of Simon's comedies in general (through *Biloxi Blues*) including perceptive commentary on *The Odd Couple*.

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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

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

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