On Golden Pond Study Guide

On Golden Pond by Ernest Thompson

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Themes of mortality, family relationships, marriage, and generations all play out at Norman and Ethel Thayer's small lake house in Maine beside Golden Pond. Ernest Thompson's *On Golden Pond* has been embraced by theatergoers since its first off-Broadway run in 1978 and by moviegoers since its 1981 adaptation. The play's believable characters are engaging and flawed, and the curmudgeonly Norman Thayer achieves personal growth despite his advanced age and slow mental decline. The play has successfully played onscreen (adapted by Thompson himself) and stage, with a white cast and a black cast (in 2005's Broadway revival). By all accounts, the play seems to have universal appeal.

Thompson wrote *On Golden Pond* at the age of twenty-eight. While he had been able to support himself as a working actor, he had gone a year without landing any work. This dry spell allowed him to pursue his interest in writing. Although he cannot say exactly what inspired the play, he credits his boyhood summer lake trips to Maine with his family as a source of special memories. Through a series of lucky opportunities, *On Golden Pond* was produced off Broadway in 1978. It was published the following year by Dramatists Play Service. Within six months, the play was in production on Broadway and soon in theaters across the United States. It was Thompson's first play to be produced. The film version earned him an Academy Award and opened numerous career doors for the young playwright. Thompson continues to write plays and television scripts as of 2005, but his reputation rests largely on the success of *On Golden Pond*.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1949

(Richard) Ernest Thompson was born on November 6, 1949, in Bellows Falls, Vermont. His parents were Theron, a college professor and administrator, and Esther, a teacher. Esther played the piano and the violin, instilling the importance of music in their home. Thompson spent his early childhood in New Hampshire and Massachusetts and his teenage years in Maryland. His family often visited a lake in Maine during the summers.

Thompson attended the University of Maryland (1967-1968), Colorado College (1969), and Catholic University (1970) and received his bachelor's degree in 1971 from American University. After graduating, Thompson worked as a stage and television actor before becoming a playwright in 1977. Over the course of his career, Thompson has worn various hats in the television and film industry. His television work included two years spent acting on the NBC daytime drama *Somerset*. Although Thompson enjoyed acting, his desire to write scripts emerged early in his career. When he approached the producers of the television series *Emergency*, he was told that his talents were better suited to acting than writing. But in 1977, Thompson had gone a year without finding acting work, and he turned his attention back to writing. While some of his writing caught the attention of the networks, it would be a year before real success came.

At the surprisingly young age of twenty-eight, Thompson wrote *On Golden Pond*. The off-Broadway Hudson Guild Theatre produced the play in September 1978. Only five months later, it went to Broadway's New Apollo Theatre. *On Golden Pond* was the first of Thompson's plays to be produced, and it has remained his best-known work. In 1979, it won the Broadway Drama Guild's Best Play Award. In 1980, Jane Fonda saw *On Golden Pond* performed in Los Angeles. Sure that she had finally found the right script to give her the chance to act with her father, Henry Fonda, she bought the film rights and hired Thompson to adapt it. Only a year later, the movie was released. Starring the Hollywood luminaries Jane Fonda, Henry Fonda, and Katharine Hepburn, the movie garnered popular and critical praise. Thompson won a Golden Globe Award, a Writers Guild Award, and an Academy Award for his screen adaptation. Hepburn and Henry Fonda won the Best Actress and Best Actor Academy Awards, respectively. *On Golden Pond* was also nominated for an Oscar for Best Picture. In 2001, a television version was made. Directed by Thompson, it starred Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer.

Thompson received the first and what would be the only George Seton Grant for Playwrights, which enabled him to write *The West Side Waltz: A Play in ¾ Time*. Hepburn starred in the 1981 Broadway production. Her appearance in this play came before the filming of *On Golden Pond* and marked the beginning of Thompson's relationship with her. Critics praised Hepburn's performance, though they were not as dazzled by the play as they had been by *On Golden Pond*. In 1995, Thompson went a step further when he wrote, directed, and acted in the film version of *The West Side*

Waltz, an adaptation of his stage play. In 1983, an altogether different play, *A Sense of Humor*, was produced in Los Angeles, starring Jack Lemmon. The story is about a grocery store manager whose daughter has committed suicide. He tries to handle his anger and guilt with harsh jokes and a very dark sense of humor. The response from the audience was so negative that Thompson actually rewrote some passages so that the humor would be less offensive, dark, and shocking. But Thompson maintained that the spirit of the play was not negotiable; despite the controversy surrounding the play, he and Lemmon defended its importance.

In 1988, Thompson's screenplay *Sweet Hearts Dance* was produced and released, and he directed one of his own teleplays, *1969*. *Out of Time*, a 2000 television movie, was cowritten and directed by Thompson. Between writing and directing, Thompson also took acting roles in such films as *Star 80* (1983) and *Next Stop Wonderland* (1998). Thompson is strongly associated with *On Golden Pond*, despite his years of work in the industry. While he is proud of his other accomplishments, he still discusses his most famous plays in interviews and lectures. He continues to develop new ideas for plays and teleplays. In 2005, Thompson was residing in New Hampshire.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

On Golden Pond opens in May with Norman and Ethel Thayer returning to their lake house in Maine. Norman is content to sit and read a book, but Ethel is busily moving furniture back in place, dusting, and generally getting the house ready for their summer stay. Through their conversations, the audience learns that they have been married a long time, love each other very much, and have different dispositions. They will be celebrating Norman's eightieth birthday, and he makes frequent jokes about his own mortality. Ethel is not amused, not so much because it upsets her as because she refuses to allow her husband to act like a victim.

Act 1, Scene 2

It is now June, and as she putters around the house, Ethel tries to give Norman updates about their neighbors. While she is very interested in the lives of her casual friends, Norman does not care enough to remember most of their names. He is more interested in reading the local wants ads in search of an easy part-time job. This seems to be more of a fun exercise for him than an actual job search. Later, Charlie stops by with the mail. He is a local man in his forties who has known the Thayers for many years. He asks about the Thayers' daughter, Chelsea, who is only a few years younger than he is. Their conversation reveals that he still harbors feelings for Chelsea.

In the mail, Ethel receives a letter from Chelsea, letting Ethel know that she will be visiting them for Norman's birthday. She will bring her new boyfriend, a dentist named Bill Ray. Norman responds with his usual sarcasm, but the audience can tell that there is a rift between him and his daughter.

Norman is also having bouts of memory loss, a reality he struggles to accept. Ethel sends him to pick strawberries, but when he returns early with an empty basket, he confesses that he did not know where the road was. It was a road nearby, and they had been to it numerous times over the years. His fears about his mental decline are exposed, and Ethel responds with compassion and reassurance.

Act 1, Scene 3

It is now July, and Chelsea arrives for her father's birthday. She brings her boyfriend and his thirteen-year-old son, Billy Ray. The unexpected arrival of the teenager delights Ethel, but Norman is initially unimpressed. After Billy has a tour of the house, Bill enters with the luggage and meets Ethel and Norman. Not interested in making Bill feel welcome, Norman gives him a chilly reception.

Ethel, Chelsea, and Billy go for a quick canoe ride, and Billy asks Norman if it is acceptable for him to share a bed with Chelsea while they are there. Norman responds with sarcasm and makes the conversation even more difficult for Bill. When Bill asserts himself and tells Norman that he will not tolerate being treated that way, Norman warms up to him. He says he likes him and that it is okay for him to share a bed with Chelsea. Billy returns, excited about the canoe ride, and sends Bill down to be with Ethel and Chelsea, who reportedly are skinny-dipping.

Norman asks Billy questions about his interests, his posture, and his reading. He comes to like the spunky, outspoken boy and sends him to his room to read the first chapter of *Swiss Family Robinson*. Ethel returns, and Norman pretends to be surprised that she has clothes on. She tells him that Chelsea has asked her whether Billy can stay at the lake house for a month while she and Bill go to Europe. Ethel likes Bill and wants to give her daughter a chance at happiness, so she asks Norman to do this for Chelsea. Norman agrees with surprisingly little reluctance.

Act 2, Scene 1

It is August. Norman and Billy have become very close friends, and they are getting ready to go fishing, even though Ethel warns them that it looks as if it will rain. Billy invites her to come with them, but she declines the offer. As she looks over her knickknacks and sings and dances alone, Chelsea enters. Ethel is surprised to see her, thinking that she has returned early, but it actually is the day Billy is supposed to return home.

Alone with her mother, Chelsea begins to complain about her difficult childhood. She feels that she tried very hard to please Norman but could never be what he wanted her to be. She also feels that Ethel was not there to protect and defend her. Ethel has had enough and says so; she believes that Chelsea should stop complaining about the past and live her life as an adult now. Chelsea announces that she and Bill got married during their trip overseas, and Ethel is thrilled.

It is now raining, and Norman and Billy return from their fishing excursion. Billy is excited to see Chelsea, but Ethel sends him to take a warm shower before he can hear her news. Then Ethel leaves Chelsea and Norman alone, and Chelsea tells him that she wants them to have a normal father-daughter relationship. He is caught off-guard, but agrees that they can try. He asks whether that means she will visit more often, and when Chelsea says it does, he says that it will make Ethel happy. Norman goes to take a shower, and Charlie stops by to deliver the mail and see Chelsea. They reminisce with Ethel.

Act 2, Scene 2

Now that it is September, Ethel and Norman are preparing to go back home. They have repacked their things at the lake house and replaced the dust covers on all the furniture. The phone rings, and it is Chelsea. She talks to both of her parents, and they make

tentative plans for another visit. Trying to carry a heavy box, Norman strains himself and feels as if he is having a heart attack. Ethel panics but finds his medicine; as she is trying to call a hospital, he begins to feel better. She tells him how scared she was to feel that she was actually losing him. Together, they go to bid farewell to Golden Pond.

Act 1, Scene 1,

Act 1, Scene 1, Summary

On Golden Pond is a two act play written by Ernest Thompson. The play is about an older couple, Norman and Ethel Thayer, who return to Golden Pond for their forty-eighth summer together. The couple is visited by their adult daughter, Chelsea, her boyfriend, Bill Ray, and his son, Billy. The summer takes a turn when Chelsea and Bill leave Billy to stay with the Thayers while they vacation in Europe. Young Billy brings Norman back to life, changing his focus from his imminent death to fishing and the slang of youth. This is a heartwarming play that will stay with the reader long after the final act is done.

The play opens in a summer home on Golden Pond in Maine in mid-May, an old house with a plaque that proclaims it was built in 1914. There is a heavy door that leads out onto a porch with a screen door on it. There is a stairway that leads to a closed door behind which are the upstairs bedrooms. There is also a dining area and a kitchen off to the left of the main stage with a swinging door that separates it from the living room. The room is disorganized, with cloths covering much of the furniture. There are lots of pictures around the room and the furniture is cozy, giving the room a lived-in look. Norman Thayer appears on the stairs. Norman is an older gentleman of seventy-nine with glasses and the charm of a young boy, although he also appears regal and larger than life. Norman is in good health although he has occasional bouts with senility, often forgetting things he once could easily recall.

Norman looks around the room before picking up the telephone. Norman calls out that the phone works but receives no response. Norman picks up the phone again and calls the operator. While waiting for a response, Norman studies a picture on the mantel before him, unable to recall who the person in the photograph is. The phone is answered. Norman can not remember calling the operator and believes she has called him, asking what she wants. Finally Norman recalls making the call and requests that the operator call him back to make sure the phone works. However, Norman cannot remember the number and asks the operator to look it up.

There is a knock on the door. Norman calls for his wife to open it, but it is his wife outside. Norman opens the door and finds his wife, a casually dressed woman of sixty-nine, standing there with a basket full of branches. Ethel tells Norman that she has been in the woods collecting firewood. Ethel says the woods are coming alive with wildlife and that the place is just as beautiful as ever. Ethel asks why the screen door is not attached to the door where it should be and Norman explains that he pushed on it and it fell. Norman promises to fix it later. While they remove the cloths from the furniture, Ethel tells Norman that she met a couple in the woods. The couple, the Melciorris, is using the Putman's nearby summer home. Ethel says the Melciorris have invited them to dinner and she has accepted although Norman is concerned they will serve some Italian dish he will not enjoy.

Ethel turns her attention to the rugs and informs Norman that she also saw Charlie in the woods. Charlie is the local postal carrier and was also a boyfriend of their daughter's when she was young. Charlie offered to put their dock in the water since the man who normally does it for them has died. Norman remembers a time when Charlie was a child helping his uncle to deliver the mail. Charlie had a package for the Thayers but fell into the water with it. It turned out to salt water taffy, something they did not want anyway. Everyone laughed until they realized Charlie had not come out of the water. They finally discovered he was hiding under the dock because he did not want Chelsea to see. Once they assured him that Chelsea was nowhere around, he came out.

Norman turns his attention to the rack of hats, picking one after another to try on. Ethel tells him that Charlie does not expect Miss Appley, another neighbor to make it up that year. Miss Appley and Miss Tate are both in their nineties and Ethel can remember them being together since she was a teenager. Ethel thinks about what it would be like to be together that long, excited by what must have been a great love affair between the two women. Ethel then changes the subject to the mouse tracks she has seen in the kitchen, blaming the mice knocking her old doll Elmer into the fireplace. Ethel tells Norman that Elmer is due to turn sixty-five in the spring. Her father gave her the doll for her fourth birthday and she has had him every since. Norman suggests that Elmer might have been attempting suicide when he fell into the fireplace and that he might try that some day himself, to end the waiting game that he feels has begun for him. Ethel attempts to distract Norman from his gruesome discussion, but he will not be distracted. Ethel finally tells him that he is obsessed and it bothers her.

The phone rings. Ethel answers it but there appears to be no one there. Norman takes the phone and discovers it is the operator. At first Norman does not recall asking the operator to call, but remembers and is polite. After Norman hangs up, Ethel asks him if he has checked out his fishing poles yet. Norman tells her he does not plan to fish this year. Norman makes many excuses why not and Ethel does not argue, but there is tension in the air anyway. Norman changes the subject by asking about the photo of the people he did not recognize. Ethel tells him it is the daughter of their neighbor at home in Wilmington.

Norman picks out a picture of their daughter Chelsea when she was on the swim team in school. Norman criticizes Chelsea's swimming ability at the time. Ethel says she was only on the team to make Norman happy. Ethel suggests they invite Chelsea out this summer and Norman changes the subject by asking if Ethel wants to play a game. Ethel refuses, saying there will be plenty of time for that later, but now they need to get the house into shape. Norman picks up a book and begins to settle into his chair. Ethel has not seen him but begins to talk of all the things they need to do to get the house ready for the summer. Norman begins to stand when Ethel suggests that he take it easy and let her do it all. As soon as Norman begins to read, Ethel calls to him. The loons are out on the lake. There are two, perhaps mates. They stand there together, watching the loons, and the scene ends.

Act 1, Scene 1, Analysis

This scene begins by introducing the set and the main characters. The set is a wonderful old house in the woods beside Golden Pond in Maine. The two main characters, Ethel and Norman Thayer, are an older couple who have been coming to this home for more than forty years. Norman is older by ten years and a little senile, obsessed with the idea of his own death, touching on the theme of death and old age. Ethel is younger and more energetic, with her mental capacity still intact. Ethel and Norman clearly love each other, but Ethel is deeply disturbed by Norman's obsession with his own death. Norman on the other hand appears to find his forgetfulness amusing. Norman is a funny guy who has no need for things that do not interest him, including housework and what he sees as the menial tasks of everyday life. Ethel, on the other hand, appears to thrive on these things.

The screen door is broken, something that will come up again later in the play, foreshadowing several conversations and the eventual repair of the door later in the development of the play's plot. Several minor characters are introduced in this scene, again foreshadowing a later point within the play in which each of these characters will play an important role for the development of the plot. There is tension when Ethel and Norman speak of their daughter Chelsea. From the tension that comes between these two, it appears that Norman and his daughter are not close. Perhaps Chelsea never pleased him as suggested by the comment that she could not swim well but joined the team to please Norman. Ethel does seem to have a good relationship with their daughter, however, providing a source for the tension between Ethel and Norman when the subject of their daughter comes up. This too foreshadows a time when Chelsea will become a bigger part of the plot by visiting her parents at Golden Pond.

The introduction of Charlie, the mailman, tells a little of their past, showing the reader that Norman and Ethel have been visiting Golden Pond long enough that they knew Charlie when he was a child. Charlie apparently had a crush on Chelsea when they were both children, was perhaps her boyfriend, suggesting tension should Chelsea come to visit. The mention of Charlie also foreshadows a time when he will come to visit the Thayers, perhaps to bring them their mail.

Act 1, Scene 2,

Act 1, Scene 2, Summary

This scene opens in the middle of June, a month later, mid-morning. The room now looks more lived-in, with all the furniture in its proper place and without its cloth coverings. Norman is sitting in a chair reading the classifieds with a magnifying glass. Norman calls out the details of an ad looking for a chauffer to do errands five days a week. There is no answer. Norman continues to discuss it, wondering if having owned more than twenty cars over the years would qualify as experience. A knock comes on the door and Norman calls for Ethel to open it. However, it is Ethel knocking.

Norman lets Ethel in. Ethel has been in the woods picking berries. Ethel complains that Norman never goes outside and he tells her he is too busy reading the classifieds, telling her about the chauffer ad he has just found. Ethel thinks his whole idea of getting a job is foolish and suggests he go pick more berries so she can make shortcake for desert. Norman is not sure he wants to, thinking that he might have to bend over and that would be uncomfortable. Ethel empties the buckets, tells Norman where to find the berries, and sends him on his way.

Shortly after Norman has gone, Ethel hears Charlie's boat pull up to their dock. Ethel invites him in to have some coffee. Charlie, a big, charming man, comes into the house, commenting on the broken screen door. Ethel tells him that Norman plans to fix it. Charlie thinks it is just missing the nails from the hinges and suggests that he fix it, but Ethel insists that Norman will do it. Ethel asks about Charlie's brother and learns that he visited recently and got pulled over twice, once coming and once going. Charlie thinks it is funny that his brother did not learn his lesson the first time. Ethel asks about Charlie's mother and Charlie tells her how his mother fell a few months ago gardening and that it made her more stubborn than before.

Norman comes back in without a single berry in his bucket, though he hides this fact from Ethel. When Norman joins them, he asks Charlie about their mail. Charlie brings it in from where he left it on the porch. Again Charlie knocks the screen door off its hinges and offers to help repair it, but Norman refuses his offer. Among a package of Norman's pills for his heart, the paper, and a few other things, there is a letter from Chelsea. Charlie thinks he ought to leave, but Ethel insists he stay. Charlie admits he only has a few more stops. Ethel begins to read the letter from Chelsea. Charlie asks how she is, but Ethel is distracted and Norman does not know much about his daughter, only aware of her age because Ethel told him last month while they were unpacking for the summer. Norman is reading the sports page and is not paying attention anyway. Charlie comments on Chelsea's age, finding it sad that she has never had any children. Charlie asks where Chelsea is living now and Norman tells him she lives in California. Then Ethel announces that Chelsea will be coming for Norman's birthday later in the month, telling him that she now has a new boyfriend and she will be bringing him along, stopping in Maine before moving on to a vacation in Europe. Charlie asks about

Chelsea's husband and learns that they got divorced some time ago. Through this whole discussion, Norman is attempting to discuss baseball with Charlie who seems more interested in Chelsea.

Norman becomes interested in Chelsea's letter when Ethel announces that Chelsea's new boyfriend is a dentist. Norman wants to know if he is Jewish, but all Chelsea tells Ethel in the letter is that his name is Bill Ray. Norman says all dentists are Jewish, except Charlie's dentist who lives in Maine. Norman says there are no Jews in Maine. Ethel leaves the room after this, annoyed with the direction of Norman's thoughts. Norman immediately asks Charlie why he never married Chelsea. Charlie says it is because Norman would not let him. Charlie asks how old Norman will be on his next birthday. Norman says one hundred and three. Charlie then tells Norman that Miss Appley was ninety seven on her last birthday. However, Miss Appley died last week. Ethel returns then and is saddened by the news of Miss Appley's death. Charlie decides then he must get back to work. Ethel tells him to come by and see Chelsea. Charlie figures it has been eight years since he has seen her and is excited at the idea of seeing her again. When Charlie is gone, Ethel confronts Norman on why he did not pick any berries. Norman admits that he got lost in the woods and became frightened, so he came back to the house. Ethel reassures him and promises to take him to the berries herself after lunch.

Act 1, Scene 2, Analysis

Charlie's visit has been foreshadowed in the previous chapter. Charlie is a happy person, charming and quick to laugh. Ethel clearly thinks highly of him, inviting him in to have coffee despite the protest she expects to hear from him. Charlie offers to help fix the screen door, another bit of foreshadowing from the previous chapter, but Ethel says that Norman will fix it. Norman does not want to do these things himself, as evidenced by the fact that it has been a month and he still has not done it, but he does not want someone else to do it either. Norman is stubborn. Charlie and Ethel talk when Charlie first enters the house, discussing the past and Charlie's family, when Norman enters the house. Norman was supposed to be picking berries but he has not, foreshadowing the end of the chapter when Ethel learns why Norman did not pick the berries.

Charlie has brought a letter from Chelsea. From Charlie's reaction to this letter, it is clear that he still cares about her. Charlie asks many questions about Chelsea, establishing for the reader Chelsea's background, such as where she lives and the fact that she was once married but never had any children. Ethel tells everyone also that Chelsea will be coming to Norman's birthday party and that she will be bringing a new boyfriend, a dentist. This foreshadows the next scene in which Chelsea arrives with her boyfriend and another surprise. Ethel then leaves the room and Norman asks Charlie why he never married Chelsea, clearing establishing for the reader that Charlie did in fact have a relationship with Chelsea and still cares about her. This brings the foreshadowing of tension to the plot as the reader anticipates Charlie and Chelsea meeting again in the presence of the new boyfriend.

Finally Charlie leaves and Ethel badgers Norman into telling her why he did not pick the berries as she told him to. Norman admits that he could not remember when the road was that she told him to go to, even though he has been to the place many times over the years, and he became scared. This explains many facets of Norman's behavior, specifically why he refuses to go fishing this year in the previous scene even though that seems to be something he has always enjoyed, and why he stays in the house all the time as Ethel notes in the beginning of this scene.

Act 1, Scene 3,

Act 1, Scene 3, Summary

It is mid-July, early in the evening. There are banners in the living room, one wishing Norman a happy birthday, the other welcoming Chelsea home. Ethel enters the room and attempts to shoo the moths off the screen door. Norman comes into the room with a tie on. Ethel comments on his appearance, complaining that she has yet to get dressed herself. Norman asks Ethel if she realizes that Chelsea has gone through her childbearing years without having children. Ethel admits that she knows that and comments that all of Chelsea's boyfriends were timid around Norman. Norman suggests that perhaps he should have told her husband or one of her boyfriends how to get her pregnant.

Ethel suggests pointedly to Norman that he should try to get along with Chelsea and her new boyfriend. Norman agrees. The loons began their cry and Ethel calls back to them. Norman suggests she not do that in front of Chelsea and her friend, but Ethel sees nothing wrong with it. Just then, Chelsea and Bill pull up to the house. Ethel is upset at how she is dressed, but does not dare go upstairs to change. Chelsea comes into the house and greets her mother warmly. Chelsea then speaks formally to her father. Chelsea tells them that they rented a car that broke down every few miles. Norman wants to know what sort of car it is and is not impressed when Chelsea does not know.

Ethel asks about Chelsea's friend. Chelsea opens the door and calls to someone. A moment later, a boy of about thirteen comes into the house. Norman says he looks too young to be a dentist and Chelsea explains that he is Bill's son, Billy. Bill is out parking the car. Chelsea goes out to help Bill. Norman and Billy begin to discuss age. Ethel comments on how they did not know the boy was coming and so had no room prepared for him. Norman suggests they let him sleep out on the lake. The boy is happy with this suggestion. Instead, Norman shows him upstairs. Downstairs, Chelsea reappears, asking Ethel about Norman. Ethel explains that he is doing well despite his memory problems and his angina. Chelsea also reveals that she has only come to Golden Pond at her mother's request because she does not like to visit her father due to the fact that he constantly picks on her.

Bill comes into the house and tries to convince everyone that he has seen a bear, but no one will believe him. Billy and Norman return downstairs, with Billy commenting on how they have indoor plumbing since Bill apparently thought the house would be more primitive. Chelsea decides she wants to go say hello to the lake. Ethel and Billy join her, but Bill does not want to go back outside. Norman decides he would rather stay inside as well. Norman and Bill begin to talk, first about nothing, baseball mostly. Bill asks what he should call him and Ethel, getting permission to call them by their first names. Then they discuss cars and books, with Norman suggesting that Billy be encouraged to read *Swiss Family Robinson*. Norman asks Bill what he charges for fillings in his dental practice and is alarmed by the large price. Then Bill asks Norman if it would be okay for

him and Chelsea to share the same room during their stay. Norman teases Bill, talking about how he and his wife have always slept together as well. Then Norman sees that Bill means it as a way to avoid a moral issue. Norman finds this amusing. Finally Bill becomes irritated with Norman's teasing and tells him that Chelsea has warned him about Norman, but that he will not let Norman get under his skin. Bill stands up to Norman. Finally Norman gives him permission to sleep in the same room with Chelsea.

The conversation turns to dancing and Norman expresses regret that he has never taken Ethel dancing. Billy comes in then and announces that the ladies have decided to go skinny dipping. Bill hesitates about joining them, still worried about bears. Bill finally leaves, leaving Billy alone with Norman. Norman suggests that they go fishing together sometime. Norman also encourages Billy to walk straighter and to take the book, *Swiss Family Robinson,* upstairs and begin reading it before the party begins. Ethel returns. Ethel wants to know if Norman has been torturing Bill. Norman says he was nice, but complains about the prices Bill charges in his practice. Ethel then announces that Chelsea has asked that Billy stay with Norman and Ethel while she and Bill go to Europe on their vacation. Ethel is excited at the idea and pleased when Norman agrees.

Act 1, Scene 3, Analysis

Chelsea's arrival not only illustrates the theme of child-parent relationships, but confirms what the reader has suspected from the beginning of the play, that Chelsea and her father do not get along. Chelsea rushes into the house, greeting her mother warmly, but she addresses her father by his first name, giving the reader a quick bit of insight into their relationship. There is tension between the two of them; they clearly do not get along very well, as foreshadowed in the last two scenes. This tension rules the rest of the scene as each time Chelsea enters the room she and Norman either do not speak or they have words that clearly make Chelsea upset. The cause of this tension is not at first known, except for the reference in the first scene in regards to Chelsea attempting to please Norman and finding it difficult. Perhaps it has something to do with Chelsea being a girl rather than a boy. The reader watches Norman interact with Billy and gains the perspective that perhaps Norman feels he has more in common with this young boy than with his grown daughter. This interaction also foreshadows the next few scenes as Norman and Ethel take custody of Billy while Chelsea and Bill are in Europe.

Chelsea's opinion of her father is underscored in the scene when Norman and Bill are left alone together. Norman talks to Bill like he talks to everyone else, as though he is a complete idiot. Bill plays along, answering Norman's unusual questions and allowing himself to be baited as he attempts to seek Norman's permission to share a bed with Chelsea while staying with the Thayers. Finally Bill becomes upset and tells Norman that he knows about him, the way he likes to play with people's heads, and how he does not intend to fall for it. Ethel mentioned at the beginning of the scene how all of Chelsea's boyfriends were always intimidated by Norman. This foreshadows the meeting between Bill and Norman and Bill resists being intimidated, suggesting that he is different from the other boyfriends. Chelsea is clearly important to Bill, motivating him to fight Norman rather than allowing himself to be uncomfortable or otherwise

intimidated by Norman. This foreshadows the final scene in which Chelsea announces that her relationship with Bill has taken another step.

Act 2, Scene 1,

Act 2, Scene 1, Summary

It is early morning in mid-August. Norman is sneaking through the house, gathering fishing supplies, and silently calling for Billy to get up and join him. Norman goes out the screen door, which is fixed now. Billy comes down the steps and sets the bait bucket on the steps before going into the kitchen. Unbeknownst to Norman, Ethel appears on the stairs. Ethel spots a spider on one of the living room beams and leaves the room in search of a rake. Norman reenters the house, finds the bait bucket, and calls for Billy again, telling him not to wake Ethel. Billy returns to the living room with a stack of cookies. Billy hides behind the couch when Ethel comes back into the room. Norman returns again, calling to Billy. Ethel nearly hits him with the rake.

Ethel tells Norman about the spider. Norman yells for Billy even as Ethel tells him to be quiet. Ethel does not think Norman should take Billy fishing again since they have so many fish she does not know what to do with them. Besides, Ethel tells him, it is going to rain. Norman does not think so, despite the fact that Ethel heard the loons singing about it the night before. Norman and Ethel discover Billy behind the couch. Ethel sees the cookies and takes them from Billy, replacing them with a large bag full of sandwiches, milk, and raspberries. Norman and Billy head out, with Norman talking in slang like Billy, talking about the trip, about the fish, and Norman's habit of making Billy clean all the fish. Ethel is concerned that Norman is working Billy too hard, but Billy confides that they talk a lot in the boat, with Norman telling him old stories and helping him with his French. Billy even confesses that Norman calls him Chelsea from time to time. Billy promises to keep an eye on Norman.

Ethel is left alone. Ethel stops fighting the spider and picks up her old doll, Elmer. Lost in memories of days spent at the camp across the lake, Ethel holds her doll and begins to sing the Camp Koochakiyi song. Ethel is embarrassed when Chelsea catches her. Ethel had not thought that Chelsea would be there so soon, but is happy to see her. Chelsea is alone. Bill returned to California as soon as their European trip ended. Chelsea tells Ethel they had a wonderful time. Chelsea asks about Norman and Billy, surprised to learn they have gotten along so well. Chelsea jokes that Norman should have traded her in on a male model when she was born. Chelsea never did well when fishing with her father. Ethel suggests that Chelsea talk to her dad about the bad feelings between them, saying that they may not have much longer to make amends.

Chelsea tells Ethel that she and Bill got married in Brussels. Ethel is pleased for her. Ethel mentions that Norman will be pleased. Chelsea again makes a few comments about her difficult father and Ethel becomes exasperated with her. Again Ethel suggests that Chelsea make amends with her father because he is old and will not live much longer. On this note, Norman and Billy reenter the house since it has begun to rain. Norman is surprised to see Chelsea as well. Ethel sends Billy upstairs to take a bath, going after him to help. Chelsea and Norman are left alone. Norman attempts to talk to

Chelsea about baseball, but Chelsea forces the conversation on the two of them. Chelsea apologizes for her part in their feud, for the chip she has had on her shoulder all these years. Chelsea apologizes for not going to Norman's retirement dinner, suggesting that now maybe they can be friends and stop being mad at each other. Norman thinks they were not mad; they simply did not like each other. Chelsea promises to start coming around more often. Chelsea tells Norman that she has gotten married. Norman likes this.

Norman goes up for his bath. Charlie appears at the door. Charlie and Chelsea are alone for a few minutes. Chelsea tells him that she has gotten married. Charlie mentions that now he has no chance with Chelsea. Chelsea says they are too good of friends to be married. Charlie begins to talk about the past, remembering a time when he and his brother would go swimming near the camp in order to see the girls. This brings Chelsea and Ethel to think about the camp song and they begin to sing it together. The three of them dance and laugh together.

Act 2, Scene 1, Analysis

Suddenly Norman is a youthful man again, fishing and fixing things around the house. The first part of the play has Norman playing it safe, never leaving the house alone, never fixing anything. Now the screen door hands on the hinges the way it should and he is going fishing so often that Ethel does not know what to do with the fish. This is all because of Billy. Billy has reminded Norman what it is like to be alive, adjusting his motivations and, if not causing character growth, at least giving him courage. Ethel has not changed so much, but she seems happier, more relaxed, though she still worries deeply about Norman. Ethel is lost in her memories, thinking about her past and her doll, dancing through her living room where her daughter finds her.

Tension returns to the story with Chelsea's appearance. Chelsea begins almost immediately, talking about her father and her childhood as though they were the worst years any child could possibly spend. It is clear to the reader now that Norman wanted a male child, as witnessed by his rebirth in Billy's presence. This has always been clear to Chelsea and is clearer now that she sees her father with Billy. Chelsea is angry with her father for not loving the person she was, for resenting her for not being a boy. Chelsea does not see that her father is old and sick, that he is still her father despite his inability to accept her gender. However, Ethel does tell her that if she ever wants to make up with her father, now is the time.

When Norman returns from his fishing trip that has been rained out, he is not happy to see Chelsea because it means Billy will be leaving soon. There is clear tension between Norman and Chelsea just like before, again touching on the theme of parent-child relationships. However, as foreshadowed by Chelsea's previous talk with her mother, Chelsea attempts to make amends with her father. Chelsea apologizes and promises to come see him more often. Norman takes it the same way he takes everything else, by saying Ethel will be happy. When Chelsea tells Norman that she has married Bill, Norman is clearly pleased. Whether this pleasure is due to the fact that a marriage

means that Billy will remain a part of Norman's life or because he is truly happy for his daughter is unclear. Finally, when Charlie arrives, he takes the news of Chelsea's marriage in stride and brings up some memories that make both Chelsea and her mother happy as they sing and dance to the same song Ethel sang alone earlier in the chapter.

Act 2, Scene 2,

Act 2, Scene 2, Summary

It is late morning in mid-September. The house is packed up and cluttered again. Ethel is moving through the house with a box, puzzled that one of the boxes she laid down a minute ago has moved. Norman is studying a collection of hats when Ethel comes back into the room. Norman wants to mail a fishing pole and hat to Billy, though Ethel does not think he can mail the fishing pole. The phone rings. Ethel answers. It is Bill. Bill wants Ethel and Norman to fly to California to visit them. Ethel says they will, maybe in January, if she can talk Norman into it. Chelsea comes on the line and Ethel talks to her for a minute before giving the phone to Norman. Norman hesitates about agreeing to a trip to California. Then Norman asks to talk to Billy. With Billy, Norman quickly agrees, clearly anxious to see the boy again.

Norman suggests they play Parcheesi before leaving. Ethel says he already owes her too much for that. Norman picks up one of the last of the boxes to help Ethel and discovers that it is full of Ethel's china and very heavy. Norman begins to have pains in his chest and drops the box. Ethel quickly gives him his medication, but Norman does not think it is working. Ethel tries to call for an ambulance, but the operator is slow to answer. Ethel begins to look for the phone book, but Norman calls her to him. Norman is feeling better now. Norman apologizes for dropping the china. Ethel confesses that until this moment, she had never taken the idea of Norman's death seriously. Now, however, it feels more real than anything else. Norman suggests they go say goodbye to the lake and begin the trip home. When they stand up, Norman asks for a dance. The loons begin to sing. Ethel says their baby has moved away and they are alone now.

Act 2, Scene 2, Analysis

The story has come full circle now. Norman and Ethel are packing up the house for the winter just as they unpacked it in the first scene. Chelsea calls and invites them to visit. Norman, true to form, will not commit directly to Chelsea but promises Billy he will be there. Norman thinks highly of Billy, perhaps because he can relate to the boy. Norman is a man who has trouble getting along with people and does not know what to do with his daughter. This does not mean he does not love her, because he clearly does by the fact that he has become quite good friends with her stepson. Norman clearly loves his daughter, he simply does not know how to talk to her or to get past the chip she has on her shoulder.

Norman and Ethel finish their packing. Norman attempts to carry a heavy box out to the car and has an angina attack. For the first time, Ethel sees the possibility of his death and is very scared. Norman means everything to her since he has been her husband for more than forty years. Norman is Ethel's motivations, caring for him and protecting him. Not only does this touch on the theme of death and old age, but it illumines the theme of

love and marriage. Norman is Ethel's reason for getting up in the morning, and not just because he needs someone to care for him or because it is her duty as his wife to care for him. Ethel cares for Norman because her love for him is deeper than her love for herself or her child. Nothing else matters in Ethel's eyes, nor will anything else ever matter. Finally, the scene ends with the symbolism of the loons. Ethel mentions how the loons' baby moved to Los Angeles or somewhere like it. This symbolizes their own lives, their own place in time, and their own love.

Characters

Charlie Martin

Charlie is a local man who has known the Thayers most of his life. He is described as big and round with a weathered face from spending so much time on the lake, and he has been the mailman for many years. Only two years older than Chelsea, he has been harboring feelings for her since their youth. Charlie is helpful, sincere, and sociable, but he has never married. Charlie laughs a little too often and does not understand the subtlety of Norman's sarcasm, although he is drawn to Ethel's hospitality.

Bill Ray

Chelsea's fiancé, Bill Ray, is a dentist from California. He is father to thirteen-year-old Billy. Bill is an honest person who confronts issues in a straightforward way. When Norman tries to intimidate him, Bill stands up to him. This shows a great deal of maturity and self-confidence, and it wins Norman's approval and respect.

Billy Ray Jr.

Billy Ray is the thirteen-year-old son of Bill Ray. Billy is short, smart, and struck by the awkwardness that comes with his age. Like Norman, Billy masks his self-doubt by appearing confident and comfortable with himself. Billy is unusual in that he is not intimidated by Norman, as many people are. He is adaptable, open-minded, and expressive. As his friendship with Norman deepens, he becomes wiser and more sensitive. The friendship helps him mature, and it teaches him how to be a caregiver and a true friend.

Ethel Thayer

Ethel is Norman's sixty-nine-year-old wife. She is energetic, loving, and sociable. She is good at handling Norman's crankiness and fatalistic outlook, and she challenges his negative behaviors and attitudes. She is also decisive and calm under pressure. When she thinks Norman is having a heart attack, she panics but finds and administers medicine to him. Ethel is also very compassionate with Norman's health problems and memory loss. Her nurturing attitude extends to the rest of her family and friends, and she likes to make their lake house feel like a home. Among her favorite things about the lake are the loons. She looks for them, listens to them, and watches what they do all summer.

Unlike Norman, Ethel is very interested in maintaining relationships with her neighbors and extends her warmth and welcoming to them. When Charlie first visits, she is delighted to see him and wants him to stay and have coffee, so they can talk about the

other people on the lake and recall old memories. Ethel is nonjudgmental, good-natured, and encouraging.

Norman Thayer Jr.

Norman is an eighty-year-old retired college professor who is spending the summer with his wife at their lake house in Maine. He has many of the ailments common to people his age, including arthritis and palpitations, but his most pressing health issue is his slow mental decline. He is described as a white-haired man with glasses who dresses comfortably. Although Norman's pace has slowed, Thompson tells the reader that he retains his humor and boyishness. At the same time, he is distinguished and respectable. Despite his curmudgeonly attitude, his wife, Ethel, adores him and likes spending time with him. Norman enjoys solitary activities, such as reading and fishing. He is not a sociable person, and he has little interest in the lives of his neighbors. He has a sarcastic sense of humor, and he can be impatient, insensitive, and intolerant. Norman's tough exterior intimidates most people, so when someone stands up to him (like Bill) or answers sarcasm with sarcasm (like Billy), Norman shows respect.

Norman has a strained relationship with his adult daughter, Chelsea. According to Chelsea, the strain has come because she tried so hard to please him when she was a child and never felt that she met his expectations. Norman does not seem to understand this, and so he never apologizes or explains his parenting. As Norman spends the summer grappling with issues of aging and mortality, he makes a surprising friend in Billy, Chelsea's boyfriend's teenage son. Softened by this unlikely friendship, Norman is more open to the idea of trying to mend his relationship with his daughter.

Chelsea Thayer Wayne

Chelsea is the only child of Ethel and Norman. She is forty-two and divorced, and she has a strained relationship with her father. Chelsea is described as pretty, tan, and athletic-looking, but slightly heavy. She calls Ethel □Mommy,□ but calls Norman □Norman.□ At the request of her mother, she has come to the lake house to celebrate her father's birthday, but she has also brought her fiancé (whom she marries by the end of the play) and his teenage son. She wants her parents to watch the son for a month, but because she knows her parents so well, she brings up the subject to Ethel. In this way, the reader sees that despite her age, Chelsea still feels a bit like a little girl around her parents. She talks to her mother openly about her own resentment toward her father, and although she complains that Norman never really talks to her, she is reluctant to talk to him about matters of substance, too. Chelsea takes a great stride toward maturity when she tells her father outright that the two of them have been mad for long enough and that she wants a healthy father-daughter relationship with him.

Objects/Places

Golden Pond

Golden Pond is a lake in Maine where the Thayers have a summer home.

The Living Room

The majority of the play takes place in the living room of the Thayers' summer home.

Screen Door

The screen door falls off the hinges during the first scene and Norman promises to fix it but he does not until Act 2, Scene 1.

Swiss Family Robinson

Swiss Family Robinson is the novel Norman suggests Billy read on his first night at Golden Pond.

Chelsea's Letter

Chelsea sends her mother a letter in the second scene of the first act announcing that she has a new boyfriend and will be bringing him with her to visit for Norman's eightieth birthday.

Fishing Poles

When Billy comes to stay, Norman gets out all the fishing gear and takes Billy fishing nearly every day.

Hats

Norman has a group of hats that he is continuously trying on. Ethel does not like any of them.

Tollhouse Cookies

Ethel makes Tollhouse cookies that Billy really likes and requests she send to him after he returns to California.

Camp Koochakiyi

Camp Koochakiyi is the camp across the lake from the Thayers' summer home. Both Chelsea and Ethel went to the camp as children.

Plymouth Volare

Plymouth Volare is the name of the car Chelsea rented when she returns to Golden Pond to pick up Billy. Chelsea is careful to learn the name of the car this time because her father criticized her lack of knowledge the last time.

Los Angeles, California

Los Angeles is where Chelsea lives with Bill and Billy.

Themes

Facing Mortality

Early in the play, Norman starts making references to his own mortality in jokes and offhand comments. He talks about living on borrowed time and preparing to celebrate his last birthday. In one way, he seems to have a healthy attitude about his mortality, but, in another, his incessant joking makes one wonder whether he is trying too hard to maintain that facade. Cleaning the living room, Ethel finds that her old doll, Elmer, has fallen into the fireplace. Because it is a sentimental item for her, she is sad to find it in such a place, but Norman speculates that Elmer threw himself into the fireplace. He then says that when it is time for him to die, Ethel should prop him up on the mantel so that he can do what Elmer did. Ethel tries to get Norman to stop, but he is having too much fun making jokes about his mortality. Making jokes not only enables him to make light of a serious subject but also offers him the opportunity to push Ethel's buttons.

Ethel endures Norman's morbid comments, but she tries to get him to stop. If she were really upset by them, however, her reaction would be intense and emotional. Instead, her tone is more like a reprimand. When, in the second scene of act 1, he says, "I'm on borrowed time as it is," she replies, "Would you please take your cheery personality and get out of here?" And at the end of his Elmer rant, she tells him, "Your fascination with dying is beginning to frazzle my good humor." She is reacting more to his flippant attitude than to the reality that she will have to go on without him. She knows that he is older than she is and that his health is beginning to decline, so she is aware that she will be a widow at some point in the future. But she will not indulge Norman's self-pity masked as humor. She also does not like him to interrupt a nice moment with the suggestion that their time at Golden Pond may be drawing to a close. At the end of the first scene, she says, "Our forty-eighth summer on Golden Pond," to which he responds, "Probably be our last." She tells him, "Oh, shut up." This exchange has a slightly more serious tone, because Norman is only half-kidding. Given his declining health, he thinks it may be their last summer in the house. Her response is directed at the part of him that is kidding, as well as to the part that is not.

Generation Gap

Thompson first introduces the theme of the generation gap in the conversation between Bill and Norman about the sleeping arrangements. Bill is a straightforward man who asks Norman whether he and Chelsea can sleep in the same bed while they are staying at the lake house. When Norman seems somewhat confused and asks whether Bill is referring to a moral issue, Bill responds, "Well, it's just that we're of different generations." To Bill, the moral issue stems from the generational issue, and he assumes that there is a difference in their thinking. As he soon learns, however, Norman does not object to his daughter's sleeping with her boyfriend at the lake house. The generation gap was only perceived by Bill, but he quickly discovers that there is no gap.

The gap that exists between Norman and Chelsea is a result of their particular relationship, not generational issues.

The most obvious illustration of the generation gap is in the friendship between Billy and Norman. Here, Thompson's approach is to show that the idea of a generation gap is false, at least among these characters. An eighty-year-old man whose mind is slipping has nothing in common with a bright, feisty thirteen-year-old, and yet in *On Golden Pond*, these two are best friends. Not only do they find that they enjoy each other's company, but they also begin to take on each other's characteristics. The second act opens with Norman livelier than he has been: the screen door is fixed, and he is getting his equipment to go fishing, even though at the beginning of the play, he had told Ethel that he was not sure if he would do any fishing this year. Billy is then heard using Norman's expressions while wearing one of his hats. He is as anxious to go fishing as Norman is. This unlikely pair has formed a bond that demonstrates that there actually is no generation gap.

Marriage

In depicting the relationship between Norman and Ethel, Thompson makes it very clear that they are still completely in love after almost fifty years. Their interactions are realistic enough for the reader to understand that they have certainly had difficulties, but their marriage has been strong enough to withstand their trials. Norman and Ethel are two very different people. Where she is gregarious, he is standoffish; where she is energetic, he is still; and where she wants everyone to be happy, he is more concerned about his own happiness. Ironically, it is because of their differences that they have a strong marriage. They counterbalance each other and create stability.

As Norman's memory continues to decline, Ethel provides much-needed reassurance and security for him. His future must frighten her terribly, but she remains positive and compassionate toward her husband. Thompson provides a very poignant picture of marriage in the way Ethel and Norman interact in these circumstances. Readers and audiences have the comfort of knowing that whatever happens to Norman, he will be cared for by his loving and devoted wife.

Parent-Child Relationships

One of the major themes in *On Golden Pond* is the strained relationship between Norman and his adult daughter Chelsea. Chelsea feels as though her father was never proud of her because she could never perform to his standards. Norman wanted a son and did not know how to deal with a daughter. Norman wanted someone who could go fishing with him, an athlete who could make him proud. Chelsea failed at all of these things as a child and still feels like a failure in her father's eyes now that she is a grown woman. Chelsea has had a failed marriage and many failed relationships, perhaps based on her rocky relationship with her father. Chelsea sees these things as just another way she has disappointed her father, therefore their relationship is rocky at

best. Later in the play when Chelsea confronts her father about their relationship, he says that he thought they simply did not like each other.

Chelsea and Norman's relationship challenges are common to father-daughter relationships. The daughter often feels her father's disappointment in not having a son and feels the need to compensate. However, the daughter will always fall short because she simply is not the gender her father would like for her to be. This can cause a woman trouble in her adult life if she does not work out these problems with her father and goes into adult relationships with the idea that she is a disappointment to all men. This is what has appeared to have happened to Chelsea. However, when Chelsea meets Bill Ray, a man who refuses to be bullied by Norman, Chelsea seems to have found a man who can overcome Chelsea's feelings of inadequacy. By meeting Bill and gaining new confidence, Chelsea is able to express her feelings to her father and attempt to make an offering of peace. Norman's reaction is not the one Chelsea might have hoped for, but the reader may see between the lines of what Norman is saying and understand that he loves his daughter despite their differences.

To a small degree, Norman's relationship with Billy also falls into this theme. Billy is a young man who has been used as some sort of rope in a tug of war between his divorced parents and is now struggling to fit in with his father and Chelsea's new relationship. Billy is rebellious and in need of an authority figure he can trust. Norman fulfills this role for Billy, bringing himself back to life as he finds a purpose to the remainder of his life beyond waiting for his various ailments to kill him. Although Billy is not Norman's son, he finds himself embracing the boy as if he were.

Death and Old Age

Norman is seventy-nine when the play begins. Norman has recently begun to have memory problems and angina, two health problems that remind him of his own mortality. Norman is obsessed with the idea of death, a fact that drives his wife mad with frustration. The dialogue within the first few scenes of the play suggests that Norman has always been an outgoing, robust sort of man who loves to go on long walks and fish during these long summers. However, this year Norman refuses to leave the house. Norman would rather stay inside and read the classified ads, looking for jobs that he might qualify for. Perhaps Norman looks for the jobs to prove to himself that he might still be useful to someone. Norman stays in the house because he is afraid of not being able to find his way home. The one time Norman does leave the house he cannot find a road he has known most of his life, becomes frightened, and rushes home again.

Norman's obsession with his own death is probably typical of a man his age. It is true the older a person becomes, the closer his inevitable death is. However, most people choose not to dwell on such morbid ideas. Norman has become obsessed with the idea because of his recent health problems and likely because he is an educated man and does not want to live to see his mind turn to mush. Norman is horrified by the changes going on with his body and his mind. Ethel attempts to belie these problems, telling everyone that it is not as bad as it seems. However, at the end of the play when Norman

has an angina attack, Ethel finally realizes what Norman has known all along, that his problems are serious. However, thanks to Billy, by this point Norman is no longer obsessed with his own death because he has discovered that living life to the fullest is the only thing that matters, regardless of, his health. Norman dances with his wife, grateful to be able to hold her in his arms a while longer.

Love and Marriage

One of the strongest but subtlest themes of this play is love and marriage. This play is based on two people, Ethel and Norman Thayer, who have been married so long that they cannot remember a time when the other was not around. The length of their marriage is not discussed throughout the play, it is simply stated as fact. However, as the play progresses, the importance of this marriage becomes more and more evident to the reader. Norman relies on Ethel not only to care for him but for her companionship and protection. Ethel too relies on Norman, to have him to care for and for his companionship as well. These two people are clearly in love even after more than forty years of marriage. In the end, after Norman's angina attack and they are dancing in each other's arms, the reader can feel their love for each other, realizing that it is their marriage and love for each other that sustains these characters and makes their story significant.

Chelsea has had her trouble with marriage as well. Chelsea's story is not as romantic as her parents, with a divorce and broken relationships behind her. However, Chelsea has finally met the man that she believes will change that for her and secretly marries him in Europe. Chelsea is finally happy and has married a man that her father actually approves, probably one of the first things she has ever done that her father approves. Now it is Chelsea's turn to make her marriage and love work for her, the way her parents have done for themselves.

Style

The Lake House as Setting

Thompson keeps all the action of the play in the setting of the lake house. Every scene is played out in the same set of rooms, with the only changes showing in what is packed or unpacked, based on what time of the summer it is. Setting the play in a place that is so familiar and comfortable for Norman and Ethel communicates a sense of who they are and what their history is. Their house by Golden Pond has been a home to them for decades, and it reflects their personalities and their life together. Everything of importance that happens in the play—Chelsea's return to their lives, Billy's introduction to the family, Chelsea's attempt to make amends with her father, and all of the interactions between Ethel and Norman—happens in the setting that is most comfortable for them.

The Lake House as Symbol

Thompson uses the lake house as a symbol of Ethel and Norman's aging. The house was built in 1914, and Thompson's stage directions say that "it has aged well." The house has the character and patina of an old, well-loved house, just as the Thayers are advanced in years but are still doing well. Their marriage has lasted close to fifty years, and they are healthy enough to make another annual trip to the lake. At the same time, they are showing signs of age. Norman walks slowly and suffers from a variety of ailments.

The aging couple feels completely at home at the lake house. Toward the end of the first scene of the play, Ethel gazes out the window and says, "It's so good to be home, isn't it?" This remark lends insight into the way the couple feels about the house. They have presumably left their regular home to come to the lake for the summer, but her comment indicates that it is actually the lake house that feels like home to them. Ethel and Norman feel a special kinship with the house and recognize the parallels between it and themselves. Norman makes an interesting comment in the first scene, when Ethel complains about the mouse tracks in the kitchen. She does not like the thought of the "little rascals" settling into their house, but Norman replies, "It's nice to think there was life here. Keeps the house company, it doesn't get lonely."

Chelsea responds to the house in an emotional way, too. When she arrives at the house, she surveys it and concludes that it looks the same. Norman responds, "The old house is exactly the same. Just older. Like its inhabitants." Later, in the first scene of act 2, Chelsea comments on the house again, but this time she acknowledges the emotional presence of the house. After reflecting on how frustrating it was for her to grow up trying to please Norman, she says, "This house seems to set me off. . . . I act like a big person everywhere else. I do. I'm in charge of Los Angeles. I guess I've never grown up on Golden Pond. . . . There's just something about coming back here that

makes me feel like a little fat girl.□ Chelsea does not have the same warm, homey feelings about the house, but she somehow equates it to her parents, or at least to Norman. That her first comment about the house was that it looked the same indicates that, in her mind, nothing about Norman changes over the years.

Point of View

There is not a traditional point of view in this book because it is a play and written in the form of a play with stage cues and dialogue. However, it can be argued that the play is seen from the point of view of the two main characters, Ethel and Norman Thayer. Ethel is a young sixty-nine year old woman who loves her husband more than anything else in the world, including her child, and who is still energetic enough to pick berries and find fire wood. Norman is older by ten years and is obsessed with the idea of his own death due to a few recent health problems. Norman has always been something of a bully, keeping people off guard and playing mind games with them. Norman's own daughter dislikes him and feels as though he has never liked her because she is a girl and not a boy.

This point of view is not as clear as the first person or third person points of view of a basic novel, but if the reader can ignore the stage cues and the oddly written dialogue, it is possible to see how the story follows closely the story of Norman and his wife, therefore making them the point of view characters, though a reader cannot call them the narrators. The story revolves around Norman and because Ethel is such a large part of his life, around her as well. This makes them the central characters, the characters that the entire plot develops around. In a novel, the narrator is typically the main character or characters, although there are exceptions, so it would not be wrong to say that Norman is the main character of this novel and could have been the narrator.

Setting

The novel is set entirely inside the living room of Ethel and Norman's summer home on Golden Pond. The room is described as being large and high-ceilinged, all wood and glass with a warm and comfortable look to it. There is a nice selection of furniture in the room with many pictures, a large window that looks out at the woods and the lake, and a bookshelf full of books. There is a set of stairs that leads up to the bedrooms and a revolving door that leads out to the kitchen. Finally, there is a heavy oak door behind which there is a screen door that becomes a part of the story as it continuously falls off the hinges until the second act when it finally gets fixed. The house is a warm, inviting place, the kind of place that suggests family and love.

Also part of the setting is the lake and the woods that are often talked about but never seen. From the descriptions within the play, the lake is rather large, large enough for the mailman to utilize it while delivering mail. The woods are also large, surrounding the house, and filled with wild animals, such as the bear that Bill is convinced he sees the first night of his visit. It is a wonderful place to visit during the summer, a place the

Thayers have visited every year for more than forty years. The lake is almost a character in the play as the human characters talk about the impact these visits have had on their lives and the fun they have had while visiting. This makes the setting, both the house and the lake, important to the development of the play because of its impact on the people visiting there.

Language and Meaning

The play is written in simple English, easy to read and understand. It is written in a traditional play form, each scene beginning with stage directions describing the characters and their movements, as well as any changes to the set. The dialogue is extensive and set off by the name of the character speaking. Each scene begins with the time of month and day that the scene takes place, beginning with stage directions that allow the reader to know who is supposed to be on stage and what that character or characters are doing at the time.

Language becomes an important part of the play when Billy Ray comes to stay with Norman and Ethel. Billy is a teenager, only thirteen years old, and he has a unique way of speaking based on youth slang at the time the play was written. Billy speaks to Norman in this slang-filled language and at first Norman finds it uninteresting, but as their relationship develops, Norman begins to pick up Billy's style of speaking and emulates him. Billy does the same, picking up many of Norman and Ethel's most frequently used phrases. This is important because it not only shows a budding friendship, but it also illustrates Norman's enlightenment, his reemergence into the world of the living. Norman no longer obsesses on death, but on his time spent with Billy.

Structure

The play is written in two acts with three scenes in the first act and two in the second act. The play is written mostly in dialogue with small sections of stage direction and character descriptions. The dialogue takes up the bulk of the scenes, occasionally set off with small bits of stage direction, expressing emotions or movement. The dialogue is well written, easy to understand, and important to the development of the plot.

The plot of the play is singular, with only two subplots. The main plot follows Norman and Ethel Thayer, dealing mostly with Norman's obsession with death and Ethel's distaste at his obsession. Norman has become ill with angina and memory problems that have caused him to anticipate his own death very soon. When Billy comes to stay with them, Norman suddenly has a reason to think about something other than his death and he comes back to life, fishing and fixing things where Ethel could not get him to do it before. The story ends with Norman having a bad angina attack and realizing that his life with Ethel has only just begun. The subplot follows the trials and tribulations of Chelsea's love life. Chelsea has had a failed marriage and is involved with a new boyfriend, one of many. There is an old friend at Golden Pond who is still in love with her, but Chelsea has finally found her one true love and gotten married. The final

subplot has to do with Chelsea's relationship with her dad. Chelsea believes she was a disappointment to her father due to the fact she was not a boy. Whether this is true or not, Chelsea finally realizes she must get over her anger or she will never have a chance of telling her father how she feels.

Historical Context

New York Newspaper Strike of 1978

In 1978, a prolonged newspaper strike meant there were no issues of the *New York Times*, *Post*, or *Daily News* being published. Theater producers turned to television and other media to promote their plays, but reviews of those plays were not available. As a result, theatergoers had no way of reading new reviews and had to rely on chance and word of mouth to find good productions. It was during this time that *On Golden Pond* opened off Broadway and began building its base of support from theater enthusiasts. The strike ended in early October, and by then Thompson's play already had a solid reputation. Whether the reviews would have helped or hindered its success will never be known. Regardless, *On Golden Pond* did well and was soon moved to a theater on Broadway, where it continued to enjoy success.

Broadway in the 1970s

Many of the nonmusical plays in the 1970s reflected the cynicism of the era, which made *On Golden Pond* unique. In an era so dominated by youth culture and music, musicals seemed to characterize theatrical expression. Broadway in the 1970s saw various styles of musicals vie for the attention of theatergoers. There was the new brand of musical called the rock opera, which included shows such as *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, *Godspell*, and *The Me Nobody Knows*. Other shows, such as *Grease* and *The Wiz*, proved that rock music was a popular element in modern musicals. Broadway also saw the rise of concept musicals. A concept musical is a musical based on an idea or theme (such as love, finding a job, or dying) rather than being driven by a plot. While concept musicals often have story lines, they are secondary to the presentation of the main idea. Such musicals included productions like *A Little Night Music*, *Pippin*, *A Chorus Line*, and Bob Fosse's sexy dance masterpiece, *Chicago*. In the midst of these new approaches to the Broadway musical were revivals of traditional musicals, including *Hello, Dolly*!, *Man of La Mancha*, *My Fair Lady*, and *The King and I*.

Critical Overview

In the □Author's Note□ to the Dramatists Play Service edition of *On Golden Pond*, Thompson recalls an early performance of the play that was attended by the acclaimed American playwright Tennessee Williams. Thompson says that Williams loved the play but hated to see the characters go, adding, □Let them stay the winter.□ While there is little critical commentary on the script of *On Golden Pond*, theater critics often comment on it in their reviews of productions of the play. The play has remained a critics' favorite, even though it was written in the 1970s. Reviewers find that the characters are believable and likeable and that the themes are both worthwhile and relevant. In the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, Kay Kipling writes, □Familiarity is what makes Ernest Thompson's play work,□ adding that □the dramatic situation□an aging couple faces mortality□[is] familiar to just about all of us on a personal level.□

Reviewers often praise Thompson's use of humor and sensitivity in the play. In the *New York Amsterdam News*, Linda Armstrong deems *On Golden Pond* a □very funny and sometimes moving play.□ She describes it as □a play about what all people can go through when they become old,□ adding that □it deals with the love that lasts over decades between a couple.□ Armstrong praises Thompson for writing □a piece that is filled with human frailty as well as laughter. Norman becomes a very sympathetic character.□ She concludes her review by declaring the play □a flawless piece of theater□ with a □fabulous script.□ One reviewer, Paul Harris of *Variety*, recalls the impressive cast members who have acted in *On Golden Pond* over the years. Harris notes, □Ernest Thompson's touching *On Golden Pond* has always been a perfect vehicle for star turns.□

A few reviewers over the years have noted flaws in the play. *Daily Variety*'s Joel Hirschhorn, for example, remarks, □Some of the staging by Ernest Thompson is almost bizarre,□ citing the scene in which Norman falls to the floor with chest pains, and Ethel does not first call a doctor. Recalling the entire scene, Hirschhorn writes, □The events flash by with no logic.□ In *Back Stage*, Julius Novick criticizes the play's lack of action or emotional depth. He comments, □Instead of plot, Ernest Thompson's sentimental comedy offers a beloved way of summertime life and the pathos of old age encroaching on it. Nostalgia flourishes and cuteness abounds.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature and is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she explores the tense relationship between Norman and his daughter, Chelsea, in On Golden Pond*.*

Thompson's play *On Golden Pond* portrays various kinds of family relationships, some healthy and some not. Norman and Ethel Thayer have been married for almost fifty years, and their marriage represents enduring love and respect. Their daughter, Chelsea, gets married in the course of the play, and her union represents the hope of a new marriage. Norman's relationship to Chelsea's new stepson is both friendly and grandfatherly. All of these relationships are generally healthy and satisfying, but Norman's relationship with Chelsea is an altogether different story. This is the only relationship in *On Golden Pond* that is hurtful and destructive.

From the first words they say about each other in the play, Norman and Chelsea communicate that their relationship is fraught with tension. Norman barely acknowledges Chelsea's pictures on the mantel in the lake home by Golden Pond, and the few comments he makes are negative. In the first act, he notices a picture and says, □Here's Chelsea on the swim team at school. She wasn't exactly thin.□ Ethel reminds him that Chelsea joined the team only to please him. Norman's tendency is to find something to criticize about Chelsea, rather than to see a picture of his daughter doing something for the sole purpose of winning his approval. When Chelsea arrives for a visit at the lake house, she calls Ethel □Mommy,□ and she calls Norman □Norman.□ When Bill, Chelsea's boyfriend, asks Norman about it, he merely states enigmatically that there are reasons for it. Chelsea's attitude toward Norman is courteous but devoid of emotion, at least in his presence. The reader will notice that Ethel quietly defends Chelsea and Norman to each other and that she obviously wishes that they would make amends. Chelsea is guilty of putting Ethel in the middle of her conflict with her father, as when she asks her mother privately about leaving Billy at the lake house for a month. This kind of behavior shows the audience that Chelsea is not willing to address her father directly about potentially volatile subjects, much less about the root of their problem.

In her conversation with her mother in the first scene of act 2, Chelsea reveals the source of her problems with her father. As a child and a teenager, Chelsea always felt that she did not measure up to her father's expectations. She chased after his approval by joining the diving team and going fishing with him, but her heart was in neither activity. The sting of his criticism has not healed after all these years. As she puts it, □He always makes me feel like I've got my shoes on the wrong feet.□ She also tells Ethel that being at the lake house still makes her feel like □a little fat girl.□ Chelsea feels as if she is so far removed from what her father wanted that she wonders if he really wanted a son. When she returns from Europe to pick up Billy and finds him out fishing with Norman, she remarks, □Billy reminds me of myself out there, way back when. Except I think he makes a better son than I did.□

Chelsea and Norman are very similar in their passive-aggressive way of dealing with their broken relationship. They both make snide remarks and act uninterested. Even when Chelsea vents her anger about Norman's overbearing parenting style and her mother's failure to do anything about it, she does so in front of Ethel, not Norman. This scene reveals, however, how angry Chelsea still is about her childhood. Norman appears to be apathetic or, at most, inconvenienced, but his feelings lack the passion that Chelsea's outburst expresses. When she finally talks to him, she tells him that she is sorry, adding, "We've been mad at each other for too long." He is slightly confused, stating that he just thought they did not like each other. Again, their experiences of the relationship are completely different, which makes reconciliation even more difficult.

Thompson could have used a flashback technique to show the audience exactly what Norman was like when Chelsea was a child, but he seems to have known that it would not be necessary. Although the audience can assume that Chelsea's memories are colored by her emotional pain, the audience can also suppose that the younger Norman was probably at least as insensitive and sarcastic as the older Norman is. The objective truth about who was wrong, and how wrong he or she was, is irrelevant. The relationship between Norman and Chelsea is defined by their hurt, anger, and indifference toward each other.

The unlikely friendship between Norman and Billy, Bill's son, has a great deal of relevance to the difficult relationship between Norman and Chelsea. It reveals that Norman is capable of change, even though he is not a man who embraces it, as evidenced by his well-worn hats, familiar books, and tendency toward routine. So when Billy arrives unannounced, he is not pleased at the prospect of hosting a teenager. When Billy shows that he can handle, as well as return, Norman's sarcasm and irreverent attitude, he wins Norman over. Norman senses in this thirteen-year-old boy, of all people, a kindred spirit. He warms up to Billy in short order, and, when given the chance to have him stay at the lake house for a whole month, he agrees without hesitation. From what is known about Norman, his agreeable attitude is unexpected. His decision is the turning point in the play.

Norman's willingness to watch Billy for a month while Chelsea and Bill go to Europe is fascinating. That Ethel wants to have the boy stay with them is no surprise at all, but Norman is a different story. Because he is not emotionally demonstrative or expressive, one is compelled to consider why he is so willing to embrace this major change in his summer plans. There are three possibilities. First, Norman, like Ethel, may genuinely want to help Chelsea. This is her chance to go to Europe with the man she loves and to pursue long-term happiness. As it happens, she and Bill get married in Europe. Perhaps Norman wants to do something to help Chelsea and support her chance for stability and happiness, but, because of their relationship, he feels that he can make only an indirect gesture. If that is the case, then agreeing to host Billy at the lake house accomplishes it. The second possibility is that Norman really likes the boy and feels that spending time with him will not be a burden at all. Billy is bright, receptive, and spunky. This means that he will probably be teachable and enliven the lake house during his stay. Norman may recognize a second chance to do a better job with a child than he did with Chelsea.

Second chances are rare and unexpected; in Norman's fatalistic state of mind, it is too valuable to let pass.

Billy tells Ethel that sometimes when he and Norman are fishing, Norman calls him by Chelsea's name. Ethel explains that Billy probably just reminds Norman of Chelsea, but there is more that she is not telling him. On one hand, Norman is losing his memory and becoming easily confused. On the other, he may be trying to do a better job of being a father to Chelsea through Billy. In a sense, Norman is proving to himself that he now knows how to be a better father, even though it is too late to take Chelsea fishing. It may be healing for him to feel as if he is being a good father to Chelsea.

The third possibility is that Norman wants to draw Chelsea closer to him by being a grandfather to Billy. After the frank discussion with Chelsea's boyfriend, Norman could reasonably assume that Bill is going to marry his daughter. That would make Chelsea a mother for the first time in her life, at the age of forty-two. And it would make Norman a grandfather at last, at the age of eighty. The play takes place during the summer that Norman worries may be his last (or at least the last one with all his faculties), so being a grandfather to Billy for himself and for the sake of Chelsea would be a gratifying experience.

Another way in which Billy's friendship with Norman is relevant to Chelsea's relationship with Norman is that it brings about their reconciliation. After all, Chelsea has to come back to the lake house to get Billy, and it is during this visit that she finally tells Norman that she wants the relationship to be better. Her motivation for trying to make amends with her father, however, is less clear. She seems a bit more mature when she returns from Europe, presumably because her relationship with Bill requires more maturity from her. She has found love with Bill, and she has also found a family. At the age of forty-two, it is time for her to learn what it is to be a parent. This realization, along with the realization that Norman has already forged a grandfatherly bond with Billy, leads her to make an effort to repair her relationship with Norman. Clearly, she is still angry (as evidenced by her tirade in front of her mother), but she has come to the end of that part of her life when she can justify her anger with blame. She realizes that living far away from her parents will no longer be a good enough reason not to see her father. She has a stepson who needs a family and likes hers.

The reconciliation scene is a bit awkward, but then so are the characters. Chelsea struggles to express herself to her father in a way that will enable him to see her point of view, but he is emotionally detached, as he always has been. She characterizes their relationship in one way, and he characterizes it in another. It is important to note that the reason Chelsea's offer of reconciliation is accepted by Norman is that she does not attack him with her anger and put him on the defensive. Instead, she adopts his calm disposition (probably unknowingly) in her approach, making him more receptive to what she has to say. Given the years of tension, the brevity of this scene is a bit surprising and even unsatisfying. But it is consistent with Norman's way of doing things, and so it is believable. He and Chelsea are not sure what their new relationship will mean to them, but they know it will be friendlier. Thompson shows that Norman and Chelsea struggle a bit to become accustomed to the new arrangement; when she calls at the

end of the summer, her conversation with her mother comes much easier to her than the one with her father. Still, they are working to overcome the awkwardness in the interest of the relationship.

The problem of strained relationships between parents and their adult children is very common, and Thompson's handling of it is believable and hopeful. Norman and Chelsea are alike in many ways, and they do love each other, but the years of destructive patterns have weathered away their motivation to treat each other better. This play is about coming to terms with change□aging, mental deterioration, marriage, the possibility of saying good-bye, and entering into a family. Both Norman and Chelsea face change, and these changes make them willing to find each other's humanity and see whether they can discover a loving father-daughter relationship in the process. Thompson gives a message of encouragement that it is never too late to make a significant relationship right.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *On Golden Pond*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Aubrey holds a PhD in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, he discusses the changes made to the play in the 1981 movie version.

Since its first appearance as a play on Broadway in 1978, *On Golden Pond* has been made into a film, a television show, and a musical as well as being revived on Broadway, with some dialogue rewritten, in 2005. In a review of the revival in *Variety*, Thompson was quoted as saying that none of these versions were very different from each other. While this is certainly true in terms of the major themes and characters, readers of the play (or those fortunate enough to be able to see a live theater performance) might note a few significant differences between the play and the 1981 movie version starring Henry Fonda, Katharine Hepburn, and Jane Fonda. Thompson, who wrote the screenplay for the film, used the opportunity to sharpen the dramatic conflicts and resolutions to meet the expectations of a mass audience accustomed to the conventions of Hollywood.

Translating a play into a movie is not as simple a task as it might at first appear. A film appeals more to the eye than to the ear, so the visual element in a movie is as important as the spoken word, and often even more so, whereas in a play, language dominates. There are a number of scenes (or sequences, to use the language of film) in the movie version of *On Golden Pond* that exploit the visual opportunities of the medium, such as when young Billy Ray, in a purely visual scene, goes out on his own and joyfully drives the Thayers's boat in large circles and figure eights all over the lake; or the action sequence that takes place in Purgatory Cove, which was created especially for the movie; or Chelsea's backflip from the diving board near the end, which adds a visual dimension, not present in the play, to her reconciliation with her father. Another visual symbol is the second shot in the movie's opening sequence, which shows in long shot (a shot taken from a considerable distance) the sun setting over Golden Pond, the water shimmering in the golden light. This is a perfect metaphor for the relationship between Norman and Ethel Thayer, which has stood firm for a long day of forty-eight years and is now, because of Norman's age and ill health, probably approaching its end. A similar shot of a sunset on Golden Pond returns at the end of the film, just as the credits begin to roll. It effectively frames the film as a tale of human lives in the □sunset□ years. It is a touching, if sometimes sentimental story, which shows that even near the end of life, there are still possibilities for growth and change and the healing of old hurts. It is never too late.

The character who is most in need of change is also the one who appears to be the least inclined to make the effort that change requires. This, of course, is Norman. The opening scene of both play and film brings out the contrast between Norman and Ethel in this respect. Ethel is fully alive, open to the beauty of nature on Golden Pond, and still able to make new friends. She may be in her late sixties, but she has lost none of her zest for life. Norman, the old curmudgeon, is locked into his small, rigid world, verbally sparring with Ethel while frequently giving expression to his morbid thoughts about

approaching death. Many of his comments in this respect are meant to be facetious, a way to keep his fears at bay. Still, to the devoted Ethel, they are not funny, although she understands her husband well and either ignores his provocations or gives as good as she gets.

In the play, much of the dialogue in the first scene conveys memories and reminiscences□Charlie as a boy; Elmer, the doll that Ethel has had since she was four□that express how long the Thayers have been together and how much of their lives is in the past. In the film, this dialogue is cut, the director Mike Rydall opting instead for a couple of telling shots of Norman peering at photographs, the first of which is of himself as a younger man. (Beside it is a newspaper clipping dated 1966, with the headline □Professor Thayer Retires.□) The second is of himself and Ethel when they were much younger. It seems that the past stretches back as far as memory can reach, but the future beckons hardly at all. Although, in many ways, *On Golden Pond* is a light, sentimental play and film, the shadow of approaching death hangs over it.

This theme is presented even more strikingly in the film than in the play. The film adds a scene in which Norman and Ethel refuel their boat, and one of the teenagers at the gas station makes fun of Norman's old age. Norman berates them both in a poignant outburst that conveys the infirmities and indignities of age: □You think it's funny being old? My whole goddam body's fallin' apart. Sometimes I can't even go to the bathroom when I want to.□ The film also shows directly the frightening incident that the play can only describe□when Ethel sends Norman out to the woods to pick strawberries, and he quickly becomes disoriented and has to come home. Quick cuts and rapidly shifting camera angles suggest his confusion and fear. At one point, a low angle shot looks up at a big tree with a gnarled pattern that resembles a face. The effect is menacing and even spooky, and the whole sequence reduces the gruff, combative Norman to a frightened and frail old man.

Old age may be advancing rapidly, but Norman has unfinished business to take care of before he dies. Unfortunately, he does not realize this until the issue is forced upon him. The issue, of course, is his failed relationship with Chelsea and the anger and frustration that she feels on account of it. In the film, Chelsea expresses her anger at her father in a far more direct, overt manner□if only to her mother□than she does in the play, and Norman is also supplied with a reason to be angry with her, which he does not have in the play.

In the screen version, the moment when Chelsea arrives and awkwardly hugs Norman is a telling one. In the play, the stage directions state that Norman □hesitates only the briefest instant□ before hugging Chelsea, but Henry Fonda's Norman actually flinches as Chelsea goes to kiss him, pulling his head back before recovering himself and responding to her. This is clearly a man who is deeply uncomfortable with receiving affection from his daughter, perhaps from anyone except his wife. He then alienates Chelsea immediately with his comment about □this little fat girl.□ He does not mean it unkindly, but Chelsea (Jane Fonda in the movie) is not fat, and she is humiliated by this thoughtless reference to her younger self. It is as if the relationship between them has frozen in time. Although she is now forty-two years old, her father still makes her feel

like a child, and an unwanted child at that, since the clear implication is that Norman would have preferred to have had a son rather than a daughter.

Given the emotional impasse between them, it is not surprising that Chelsea seldom visits her parents, and it is this that supplies Norman with his resentment toward his daughter. The filmmakers obviously thought that Norman should have a grievance against Chelsea to match hers against him, so lines not in the play are added to the movie dialogue. □I'm frankly surprised Chelsea could find the way,□ Norman says sarcastically, after Bill Ray comments on how pleased he is that Chelsea has brought him and Billy to Golden Pond. Just in case anyone in the audience misses the point, Norman then quizzes Bill Ray about whether he visits his own parents. None of this dialogue is in the play. For her part, when Chelsea talks to Ethel, she explodes in anger and resentment, several times using profanities to describe her father, none of which occurs in the play. She goes so far that Ethel is forced to slap her face and rebuke her, and this also takes place only in the screen version.

The effect of all these changes in the film version is to sharpen the tensions all round, the purpose being to set up more effectively the final emotional reconciliation. In real life, of course, such longstanding blocks and resentments in family relationships are hard to overcome, but in a Hollywood movie, usually all it takes is some straight talking and a hug or two for everything to be magically transformed. And so it is with Norman and Chelsea. Chelsea tells him that it is time that they had a real father-daughter relationship; she finally manages the backflip that she could not do to please him as a child; he says what she had always wanted to hear, that it does not matter whether she can do the backflip; and, in a final embrace, she calls him Dad rather than Norman. The reconciliation between father and daughter is therefore more smooth and complete (if more sentimental and less convincing) in the film than in the play. In the play, Chelsea and Norman do make progress but remain somewhat wary of each other, and the more oblique dialogue leaves much to the interpretation of director and actors.

Another theme that is expanded on the screen, when compared with the stage, is the relationship between Norman and Billy. This is largely because film gives the opportunity to show their fishing expeditions on the lake directly, whereas onstage they can only be described. The theme is hardly an original one. Young people reinvigorate tired old hearts in works as diverse as the British novelist George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861), in which an old miser finds new purpose in life when he adopts an orphaned two-year-old girl, and the movie *Secondhand Lions* (2003), starring Michael Caine and Robert Duvall, in which a fourteen-year-old boy stays for the summer on the Texas farm of his two eccentric great-uncles and duly softens them up with his youthful innocence. This is close to what happens in *On Golden Pond*, as Norman, for a short while, gets the son he always secretly wanted, and Billy, an initially disgruntled and sometimes rude young teenager who is angry at being left behind by his parents when they go to Europe, grows affectionate toward the cantankerous old man who becomes his fishing companion. Billy's comment □I'll miss you,□ made after Norman says that he will not be around much longer, typifies the sentimental way in which the film develops the relationship. (That line is not in the play.)

If, on occasion, the film provides enough Hollywood-style syrup to fill up Golden Pond, it also has its moments, as the play does, of insight, wisdom, and genuine feeling. Indeed, it would be hard not to be moved by the final shot, of Ethel and Norman standing still on the shores of Golden Pond, saying goodbye to it, perhaps for the last time, as the camera pulls back and up, making them smaller and smaller and revealing more and more of the natural world to which, as human beings whose stay on earth can only be brief, they will soon return.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *On Golden Pond*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Heims is a writer and teacher living in Paris. In this essay, he argues that On Golden Pond *is an actors' play.*

Whenever Norman Thayer, the eighty-year-old protagonist of *On Golden Pond*, speaks, he camouflages the expression of his thoughts and feelings using clever and evasive verbal tricks and riffs of language. These contrivances allow him simultaneously to express and to avoid confronting unpleasant realities, such as his disquiet at aging or his anxiety about death. Likewise, he can avoid making direct contact with other people, like his daughter□which he finds embarrassing. These verbalizations serve to distance him from his real emotions and to permit him to stand aloof and apparently unaffected, as if with an academic detachment□he is a retired college English professor□above and outside everything, offering wry commentary.

The behavior is so characteristic of him that it is impossible to know whether it is deliberate□that he is aware he is doing it and aware of the feelings he is camouflaging□or whether it has become so ingrained in him that he is unaware of it or of the feelings he is avoiding. Is it so deeply his manner that, in fact, one identity has usurped another and his □real□ meanings are hidden from even himself? Perhaps they have actually been obliterated so thoroughly that they exist beneath the surface of the self he seems to be, like unburied ghosts condemned to wander disembodied among the living. The actor playing Norman must be able to convey two simultaneously interconnected and alienated personalities moving, as it were, in opposite directions. One is expressed and seen, and the other is repressed and invisible. The antecedent, submerged personality or self, however, suffuses everything about him and covers him like a shadow or an aura.

It is just this tension between what is expressed and what is withheld, yet suggested in Norman Thayer's character and the profound challenge it presents to the actor playing him that give *On Golden Pond* a subdued emotional force and make it an actors' play. A similar challenge, indeed, confronts the actress playing Ethel Thayer, Norman's wife of forty-six years. She must portray a woman who sees the man beneath the man Norman presents to the world and even, frequently, to her. She must portray a strongly independent woman who is beset, even irritated, by the frustration of his flinty and distracted character but who has a deep, abiding, and even submissive love for him, just because she can understand the language he speaks and, in a sense, translate it. She must convey Ethel's ability to see what is admirable in Norman when he appears foolish and what is generous about him when he appears cranky. The words that Norman and Ethel speak must serve to express things that are not being said but which are palpably present. The dramatic tension that gives *On Golden Pond* vibrancy depends on the actors' subtle portrayal of the characters much more than on the plot, for there is really very little plot. Without virtuoso performances by charismatic actors who can command a stage and hold an audience, what plot there is can come across as relatively hackneyed, sentimental, and even manipulative.

Much of the □action□ of *On Golden Pond* is concerned with conveying the local color of rural Maine and, more significantly, establishing Norman and Ethel as endearing characters, despite everything, characters with whom the audience is supposed to bond. If the audience does not become fond of their environment and enchanted by these characters and is not indeed seduced by them, what little plot there is will go by, leaving no impression. So Norman is shown in his bumbling interactions with the telephone, the want ads in the newspaper, a rack of hats, and a broken screen door. He is made to deliver gently bigoted observations about the neighbors and wry comments about the past and the landscape. He is given a verbal dexterity that shows that while he may be forgetful, he is still intellectually sharp. Ethel's ongoing battle with spiders, blackflies, and mosquitoes takes up a fair share of her dialogue, as do her reminiscences about her childhood on the pond, her □conversations□ with the loons that live there, and her affection for her childhood doll. If the actors can establish a convincing relationship with each other and a rapport with the audience, then the three elements that constitute the plot□Norman's failed relationship with his daughter, his April-December friendship with his daughter's thirteen-year-old stepson-to-be, and his confrontation with his own approaching death□will resonate with the audience. It will cause a catch in the throat, a tear in the eye, and a melancholy smile.

Despite its reliance on characters, *On Golden Pond* is not a deeply psychological play. It simply presents what is. Norman, for example, is ill at ease with his forty-two-year-old daughter, Chelsea, it seems certain, because she is not male. Joie de vivre is restored to his life because young Billy Ray, who spends the summer with him, *is* a boy and can, therefore, be the son Chelsea never was. Chelsea is angry with her father and has made only infrequent visits to the family, because she has never been cherished as a girl or a woman and, consequently, as a person. She has been kept at a distance by her disappointed father, whose only topic of conversation with her has always been baseball, as if he were ignoring the fact that she is not male. As an adult, she has kept herself at a distance, infrequently visiting her parents.

Very little in the script seems to motivate Chelsea and Norman's reconciliation toward the end of *On Golden Pond*, except her sense, encouraged by her mother, that if she does not make peace with her father now, there will not be much time left in his life for her to do so. Perhaps her own aging and the need to be □normal□ are also factors. Her meeting Bill Ray, the decent, successful, straightforward dentist with the son who brightens her father's summer and brings verve to his life, may also have given her the strength to give up needing her father's approval and to let go of the anger that has resulted from getting so little of it.

Their reconciliation, consequently, is much more the result of Chelsea's capitulation to the reality of her need to love her father and her accepting that she wishes him to love her than it is of a dramatically developed, mutual realization of each other or a recognition on his part that she is a person. To make contact with him, she apologizes to her father, □I just wanted to say . . . that I'm sorry.□ His response□□Fine. No problem.□□seems to show no more interest in her than he has ever shown. But she persists, □Don't you want to know what I'm sorry about?□ He ventures, □I suppose so.□ And she tells him, □I'm sorry that our communication has been so bad. . . . That

I've been walking around with a chip on my shoulder.□ He says only, □Oh.□ When she continues, apologizing for not attending his retirement dinner, he only talks about what a funny speech he gave.

She persists in searching for some traction: □I think it would be a good idea if we tried . . . to have the kind of relationship we're supposed to have.□ He asks, □What kind of relationship are we supposed to have?□ □Like a father and a daughter,□ she replies. □We've been mad at each other for too long.□ He answers in a telling fashion, □I didn't realize we were mad. I thought we just didn't like each other.□ The audience may infer from this exchange that she was □mad□ at him because he did not like her. In view of the close and mutually gratifying relationship Norman has forged with Billy, the reason for his dislike of Chelsea seems quite simply to be because, being a daughter, she frustrated his wish for a son. Despite her father's apparently cool response, she forges ahead. □I want to be your friend,□ she says. Rather than yielding verbally, he retorts with what seems like a passive reproach: □Does this mean you're going to come around more often?□ She says yes, and he responds, still remaining distant, at least on the surface, □It would mean a lot to your mother,□ overtly saying nothing about himself. She answers, □Okay,□ and the stage direction reads □*They look at each other a moment, nothing more to say*.□ She picks up the dialogue where he left off before her intervention, □Now you want to tell me about the Yankees?□

In print, Norman comes off as rather cold and unsympathetic in this exchange and Chelsea as perhaps more generous than she ought to be. Many in the audience might think that she has a valid grievance, rather than a chip on her shoulder. But the written text itself is only scaffolding, something like a musical score that must be brought to life through the interpretation of performers. The meaning and intensity of the confrontation depend on how the actors play it and what they bring to it. Norman's dialogue is hardly Shakespearean, but all of what Norman says can be delivered by an actor in such a way as to suggest everything that he might feel but is unable to say. What comes across on the page as dry, detached, and cold may be used onstage to show desperate struggle, inner turmoil, the conflict between love and embarrassment, and quiet self-conquest. Thus, when Chelsea finally tells Norman that she has married Bill, his elaborate but familiar ritual of teasing, evasion, and punning can signify a real connection with her rather than withdrawal. The one word, □Yes,□ he directs at her, in response to Ethel's rhetorical, □Isn't that wonderful?□ in the midst of his usual verbal high jinks, can be fraught with an immensity of acceptance. The revelation that the actor playing Norman can bring to the scene is that the reason Norman longed for a son, rather than a daughter, was not that he valued a boy more but that he was unable to tolerate the emotion having and loving a daughter might provoke in him. He was too embarrassed by his love for her to express it or even to permit it. The strength of his evasion, then, can serve to indicate, in inverse ratio, the strength of his love, a love too strong for him to express, a current too powerful for the wire. Even his expressions of love for Ethel, after all, are often tinged with protective irony.

One further challenge is given to the actor playing Norman. His characteristic evasiveness and witty digressive tangents, his professorial absentmindedness, might no longer be only what they seem but instead indications of an incipient senility and the

approach of death. Death does pay a warning visit in the last scene of the play, when Norman suffers a minor heart attack. The combination of the real awareness of mortality, contact with Billy, and reconciliation with his daughter creates in him a renewed desire for life, which he expresses with his familiar ironic reserve. But through Norman's characteristic understatement, cynicism, and detachment, the actor playing him can clearly signify his connection with life and his family, instead of evasion. Indeed, Ethel's closing words of the play□□Hello, Golden Pond. We've come to say goodbye.□□are moving because they encapsulate in one utterance the melancholy awareness at the core of the play, which Norman, too, has come to realize and accept, that greeting and parting are inextricably implicated in each other.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on *On Golden Pond*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Quotes

"The setting is the living room of a summer home on Golden Pond, in Maine. The room is large and old and high-ceilinged, all wood and glass, not sparkling like a picture in *House Beautiful*, but rich and wrinkled and comfortable-looking." Act One, Scene 1, p. 3.

"Norman Thayer, Jr. appears on the steps. He is 79. He wears baggy pants and sneakers and a sweater. His hair is white. He wears glasses. He walks slowly b upright. On the one hand he is boyish and peppery, having hung onto his vigor and his humor but at the same time, he is grand, he has a manner, a way of speaking and carrying himself that seem to belong in another era."

Act One, Scene 1, p. 5.

"In walks Ethel Thayer, his wife. She is 69, small, but energetic beyond belief."

Act One, Scene 1, p. 8.

"After a moment Charlie Martin appears on the porch. He's a big, round, blond-haired man, weatherbeaten face, smiling eyes, strong Maine accent." Act One, Scene 2, p. 41.

"Norman. Ever had white perch cacciatore, Charlie?

Charlie. No.

Norman. You're a lucky man." Act One, Scene 2, p. 50.

"Ethel. Tsk. Lord. Why can't you just pick berries and catch fish and read books, and enjoy this sweet, sweet time?

Norman. (After a pause.) Do you want to know why I cam back so fast with my little bucket? I got to the end of our lane, and I...couldn't remember where the old town road was. I went a little way into the woods, and nothing looked familiar, not one tree. And it scared me half to death. So I came running back here, to you, to see your pretty face, and to feel that I was safe. That I was still me." Act One, Scene 2, p. 68.

"Norman. There's a reason for that, too. (He pauses.) I am her father, if you're trying to figure it out. I'm her father but not her daddy. Ethel is her mommy, and I'm Norman."

Act One, Scene 3, p. 95.

"Bill. Chelsea told me all about you, about how you like to have a good old time with people's heads. She does it, too, sometimes, and sometimes I can get into it. Sometimes not. I just want you to know that I'm very good at recognizing crap when I hear it. You know it's not imperative that you and I be friends, but it might be nice." Act One, Scene 3, p. 105.

"Norman. Are you up? Let's go. Don't wake up the old lady." Act 2, Scene 1, p. 121.

"Ethel. Here we go again. You had a miserable childhood. Your father was overbearing, your mother ignored you. What else is new? Don't you think everyone looks back on their childhood with some bitterness or regret abut something? You're a big girl now, aren't you tired of it all? You have this unpleasant chip on your shoulder which is very unattractive. You only come home when I beg you to, and when you get here all you can do is be disagreeable about the past. Life marches by, Chelsea, I suggest you get on with it." Act 2, Scene 1, p. 143.

"Chelsea. I don't want anything. We've been mad at each other for too long.

Norman. Oh. I didn't realize we were mad. I thought we just didn't like each other."

Act 2, Scene 1, p. 153.

"Ethel. You've been talking about dying ever since I met you. It's been your favorite topic of conversation. And I've had to think about it. Our parents, my sister and brother, your brother, their wives, our dearest friends, practically everyone from the old days on Golden Pond, all dead. I've seen death, and touched death, and feared it. But today was the first time I felt it."

Act 2, Scene 2, p. 181.

"Ethel. My word, Norman, the loons. They've come round to say goodbye.

Norman. How nice.

Ethel. Just the two of them now. Little baby's grown up and moved to Los Angeles or somewhere.

Norman. Yes. (They kiss. A long gentle moment passes. They look at one another, and then look away.)" Act 2, Scene 2, p. 184.

Adaptations

On Golden Pond, adapted as a film by Ernest Thompson and starring Katharine Hepburn and Henry Fonda, was produced and distributed by Universal Pictures (1981).

Topics for Further Study

After reading the play, watch the 1981 movie adaptation of *On Golden Pond*. Was the director's vision of the play the same as yours, or did you picture some of the scenes and characters differently? As you watch the film, think about how different a stage production is from a movie. Make note of these differences and the ways in which you think they alter the presentation of the story. For example, a theater script does not call for close-ups, but a movie director can use them. How does this affect the actors' expressions and, in turn, the audience's experience? What about other issues, such as lighting, sets, and the presence (or absence) of a live audience? Write a review of the movie focusing on the fact that it is a stage adaptation. Compare the movie to the script you have read and decide whether you think it works well as a movie.

Alzheimer's disease and other forms of mental decline are devastating for sufferers and their families. Research Alzheimer's disease to find out about common experiences of people in the beginning stages of the disease and the types of available support for families of sufferers. Prepare a presentation for your class that will encourage awareness, compassion, and discussion.

Many people find lake homes to be relaxing getaways. What is it about this particular setting that is both calming and rejuvenating? Write a poem or essay expressing your thoughts on this subject.

What do you think the Thayers were doing the summer after the events of *On Golden Pond*? Write a plot summary of a sequel, along with one scene from any part of your play.

Throughout the play, Ethel is fascinated by the loons on the lake. What purpose do the loons serve in the play? Do they reveal something about Ethel's character? Lead a group discussion about Ethel's personality and perspective, including a consideration of the loons. Introduce passages from the play in your discussion. Encourage the people in your group to think of other literary characters to whom particular animals have special meaning.

The relationship between Norman and Billy suggests that younger generations not only accept but also fully embrace the older generation. What do you think American society's attitude is toward the elderly? More specifically, what do you think teenagers' attitudes are? Facilitate a discussion among your peers on this topic.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: Although the medical community can recognize and diagnose Alzheimer's disease, treatment options are very limited and do not yet include medications. Patients and families are encouraged to seek support as doctors monitor the disease's progression.

Today: Since 1993, doctors have been able to add medication to their treatment plans for Alzheimer's patients. While the disease is still not reversible, the constantly improving medications make it possible to slow down the mental degeneration.

1970s: The traditional family structure is challenged by increasing divorce rates and acceptance of couples living together. During the 1970s, premarital sex becomes more common, and more women are making the decision not to have children.

Today: Divorce rates remain high (over 50 percent), and the decision to live together is very common among couples who date seriously. Premarital sex is also common and starting at younger ages than ever before. Many women still feel comfortable choosing not to become mothers, though more women now decide to become mothers later in life.

1970s: As a result of the large number of college professors hired in the 1960s and early 1970s, college faculties are relatively young. In fact, in 1977, the median age of college professors is forty. Until 1978's Age Discrimination in Employment Act raises the age of mandatory retirement to seventy (from sixty-five), college professors tend to retire in their early to mid-sixties. Retiring at this point in their lives gives professors many more healthy, productive years to pursue personal interests, traveling, guest speaking engagements, and second careers.

Today: College professors are, on average, older than they were in the 1970s. In 1996, the median age of college professors is forty-eight. Over the course of the 1990s, the percentage of professors who are fifty-five or older rises from 24 percent to 32 percent. This aging of college faculties is due in part to the fact that in 1993, the mandatory retirement age for college professors was eliminated.

What Do I Read Next?

Thomas DeBaggio offers a firsthand account of his slow descent into Alzheimer's disease in *Losing My Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer's* (2003). DeBaggio shares his fears, hopes, regrets, and joys, along with memories from his distant and recent past. The daily challenges and disappointments are described honestly in an effort to help readers understand better what life with Alzheimer's disease is really like.

Harvey and Myrna Katz Frommer's *It Happened on Broadway: An Oral History of the Great White Way* (2004) offers an extensive oral history of Broadway. The Frommers include interviews and musings by actors, producers, writers, composers, set designers, and critics, to name a few. Their combined experiences give a unique understanding of the history of Broadway.

Professor Roger Hall teaches playwriting and captures his lessons in *Writing Your First Play* (1998). Hall covers the basics of characterization, plot development, setting, and other important elements, along with examples and writing exercises for students new to the process.

Pete Hamill's 1998 novel *Snow in August* tells the story of a friendship between an eleven-year-old Catholic boy and an elderly rabbi who is new to the United States. The rabbi learns to speak English and love baseball, and the boy learns to deal with his difficulties with greater maturity and insight.

Edited by David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (1999) presents the reader with interviews of some of the foremost playwrights of the American stage. Savran inquires about their inspirations, their processes, and their techniques for writing great plays. Although Thompson is not included here, among the playwrights featured are David Mamet, Stephen Sondheim, and August Wilson.

Thompson's *The West Side Waltz: A Play in ¾ Time* (1981) is his second-best-known play, after *On Golden Pond*. It is about an aging piano teacher who mentors a young actress, only to find that she might be better off reconnecting with an old friend.

Further Study

Bigsby, C. W. E., ed., *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

This book provides comments and insights from America's best-loved modern playwrights, including Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, and Arthur Miller. Plays, biographies, and essays make this an important volume for anyone wanting to understand the breadth and importance of modern drama.

Mamet, David, *Three Uses for the Knife: On the Nature and Purpose of Drama*, Vintage, 2000.

David Mamet, one of the foremost playwrights of the contemporary stage, offers three essays about the centrality of drama to human nature. He discusses the theory of drama and gives experienced insights into the craft of writing plays.

Nielsen, Linda, *Embracing Your Father: How to Build the Relationship You Always Wanted with Your Dad*, McGraw-Hill, 2004.

This how-to book provides daughters with the support, awareness, and encouragement they need to reach out to their fathers and build stronger, healthier relationships. She reviews the importance of the father-daughter relationship, along with a review of the common conflicts.

O'Reilly, Evelyn M., *Decoding the Cultural Stereotypes about Aging: New Perspectives on Aging Talk and Aging Issues*, Garland Publishing, 1997.

O'Reilly presents the results of her study about the aging process and the place of the elderly in American culture. Considering aging issues from the perspective of the elderly, she explores issues such as language, conflict, and social engagement.

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Thompson, Ernest, *On Golden Pond*, Dramatists Play Service, 1979, pp. 3, 5, 13, 15, 18, 20-21, 35, 43, 58, 60, 62.

□□□, *On Golden Pond*, Dodd, Mead, 1979, p. 79.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

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

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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