The Other Shore Study Guide

The Other Shore by Gao Xingjian

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Introduction

The play's title refers to the concept of "paramita" or "nirvana," the land of enlightenment in Buddhism. According to Buddhist belief, humans experience an actual visible life full of suffering, but by living according to the virtues of "paramita"□morality, patience, meditation and wisdom□they can cross the "river of life" to the other shore and experience enlightenment.

The Other Shore reveals many themes and traits characteristic of Xingjian's writing. Thematically, the play addresses issues of collectivism and individualism□themes that Xingjian has addressed throughout his career, and ones that are considered to be highly political in the Communist Chinese context. *The Other Shore* also addresses the more personal theme of salvation: the actors cross the river of life to reach nirvana, only to find that nirvana does not exist.

Stylistically Xingjian is considered avant-garde; his works seldom follow conventional narrative modes, and *The Other Shore* is no exception. The play comprises a series of seemingly disconnected scenes with no discernible plot or character development. The play clearly shows the influences of Jerzy Grotowski, the Polish dramatist who devised the concept of "poor theatre," in which the "non essentials" of theater such as costumes, sound effects, makeup, sets, and lighting are eliminated as a way to emphasize and redefine relationships between actors and the audience. In *The Other Shore*, the actors take on multiple roles and must quickly change personas several times in the course of the play. In conventional theory of acting, best represented by Constantin Stanislavski's theory of "total immersion," an actor fully takes on the persona of the fictional character. In *The Other Shore*, the actors never fully leave their role as actors. The purpose of the play is not to reproduce life realistically, but rather to provide a hypothetical world that allows the actors to continually reinterpret their roles.

While the play itself has not garnered any awards, Xingjian has been widely acclaimed as a writer. Prior to his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000, he was the recipient in France of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1992; Prix Communauté francçaise de Belgique in 1994; and Prix du Nouvel An chinois in 1997.

Author Biography

Gao Xingjian (pronounced *gow shing-yan*) was born January 4, 1940 in Ganzhou of Jiangxi province in eastern China. The son of a bank official and amateur actress, Xingjian grew up in a creative environment and became an avid reader, painter, and writer at an early age. He was schooled at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute from 1957 to 1962 where he studied French literature. His mother was relocated to the countryside by the government in the early 1960s□as he was later□where she died in a drowning accident. The details surrounding her death are largely unknown. During the Cultural Revolution (1966—1976), Xingjian was sent to a reeducation camp and was not able to publish any of his work until 1979. It was during this time that he also destroyed several of his manuscripts out of fear of recrimination by the authorities.

During a seven-year period beginning in 1980, Xingjian wrote prolifically for Chinese literary magazines and published his first four books: *A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction* (1981); *A Pigeon Called Red Beak* (1985); *Collected Plays* (1985) and *In Search of a Modern Form of Dramatic Representation* (1987). Although several of his plays during this period were produced at the Theatre of Popular Art in Beijing□including *Alarm Signal* (1982) and *Bus Stop* (1983)□his work began raising the ire of Communist Party members. In 1986, *The Other Shore* was banned, and between then and the early 2000s China has prohibited the publication and production of all of Xingjian's plays.

In 1982, Xingjian was mistakenly diagnosed with lung cancer, the disease that killed his father, and the following year the Communist Party criticized his works as "spiritual pollution." In response to these events, he set out on a ten-month-long walking tour along the Yangtze River that ultimately resulted in his most famous work, *Soul Mountain* (1989). In 1987, Xingjian became a political exile and settled down in Paris. In 1998, he became a citizen of France and continued to live there. After he voiced his opposition to the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, he was kicked out of the Chinese Communist Party for good, and in 1999 his autobiographical account of the Cultural Revolution, *One Man's Bible* was published. In 2000 Xingjian became the first Chinese Nobel Laureate.

In addition to his writing, Xingjian has exhibited his art widely and has translated many European dramatists into Chinese, including Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Antonin Artaud, and Bertolt Brecht. In addition to the Nobel Award for Literature, he has been the recipient of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government in 1992, Prix Communauté Française de Belgique 1994, and Prix du Nouvel An chinois 1997.

Plot Summary

According to Xingjian, *The Other Shore* was originally written as an exercise for actors, and indeed, the play opens up with a troupe of actors, acting as themselves, playing a game with ropes. The Lead Actor instructs the troupe how to handle the ropes, providing possible ways to interpret the meaning of the game. The game the actors are playing is a serious one, but as serious as a game played by children: there is playfulness in the game as well as profound concentration.

After a time, the Lead Actor beckons the group to follow him across the water to the other shore. It is dark, and the actors turn into the Crowd as they reach the other shore. Upon their arrival, they have all lost their memories and their speech, and they have come to realize that their destination is not the nirvana or the shore of enlightenment that they had expected: it is a dead shore, with only oblivion surrounding them.

Woman emerges from the oblivion and walks through the crowd, teaching them words, and helping them to learn how to differentiate themselves from one another. Man soon appears and addresses Woman, but as the Crowd grows confident in its use of language, it turns against Woman and threatens her. To no avail, Man tries to protect Woman, but the Crowd presses in and kills her.

Man has become the de facto, albeit reluctant leader of the Crowd. He lectures the Crowd on the murder of Woman and then proceeds to meet Young Girl, whom he recognizes from his childhood, and Mother, with whom he has a brief argument concerning his future. Man leaves Mother and meets Card Player, sitting beneath a lamp drinking and playing cards. All the while, Crowd is following behind Man.

After some basic instructions, Card Player convinces Man and Crowd to join him in his game. Winners will receive a taste of wine, while losers must stick a slip of paper against their faces, marking themselves as losers of the game. Man soon discovers that the game is rigged, and that there is no way for him or the Crowd to win. But the Crowd wants nothing to do Man's assertions; they side with Card Player and turn against Man, trying to convince him that he is wrong. Man becomes confused and begins to second guess himself.

A Zen Master briefly appears, chanting, and Young Man is then seen trying to convince Young Girl□who has been meditating□to allow him to touch her. She refuses, and Father enters the scene, scolding Young Man on several accounts. Young Man walks away and notices a wall of people. Old Woman is standing in front of a "crack" in the wall, and he talks her into allowing him through to see the goings-on behind the wall. Young Man enters and observes what seems to be a side-show of sorts, in which a man is trying to sell the Crowd Dogskin Plasters. Mad Woman appears, taunting the Crowd. The men in the Crowd want her taken away. Mad Woman claims they have all slept with her and do not want the secret revealed. Soon the Crowd has had enough of Mad Woman, and she is tied up and gagged.

Meanwhile, Young Man disappears, and Man, who has until now been meditating off to the side, reappears with Shadow. As they walk, Shadow echoes Man's inner thoughts and words. They soon encounter several individuals, each of whom is looking for something specific. Some of these individuals ask Man about his own search, but Man does not know what he is seeking. Soon he is badgered by the individuals and by Stable Keeper, who all insist that he must be looking for something, or if he is not, perhaps he has already found it, or perhaps he is nothing more than a troublemaker. But Man simply wants to be left alone.

When Stable Keeper finally confronts Man, Man crawls through Stable Keeper's crotch and finds a key on the ground which opens a door that's never been opened. Inside Man finds pieces of mannequins, which he begins to rearrange and which, in turn, begin to take shape as female figures. The figures take on a life and begin to move around Man, gyrating and eventually taking control of their own bodies. Man becomes exhausted, crawls away from the figures like a worm, and the figures disappear.

Shadow speaks to Man, narrating Man's lonely journey. After accusing Man of vanity, Shadow disappears and is replaced with the Crowd who surround man, badgering him and criticizing him and laughing at him in cold and sinister voices. When Shadow returns to take Man away, claiming that he is Man's heart, the Crowd retreats and everyone exits the stage.

One by one, each of the actors reappear on stage, as actors, and talk idly about the play and about this and that. The sound of a baby crying is presumed to come from the baby of one of the actors, and the sound of a car starting is heard in the background as the actors talk of the play and of how they will be getting home now.

Summary

The Other Shore is Gao Xingjian's one-act play which explores the human struggle to reach a state of nirvana by crossing the river of life to the other shore. The unconventional staging and characterizations shadow the individual human experiences of solitary struggle for meaning and enlightenment.

The play begins with a small group of actors showing their interactions with each other by the use of ropes. Different emotions are exhibited by various constraints and pulling motions of the ropes. The main actor points out the lessons to be learned by the use of power and force or collaboration depending on the person's strength or willpower.

When the rope lessons are completed, the main actor asks the other actors to let down the ropes and imagine a river in front of them. The actors exhibit different personality characteristics and emotions during this imaginary river crossing. Some people embrace the adventure. Some fear drowning; some have fun imagining fish tickling their toes.

The exertion from the river crossing exhausts the actors, who lie down to rest until individually touched by a woman. She beckons each person to rise. The woman attempts to instruct the people in the basics of language as their knowledge and memories have been erased. The frustration of not being able to speak as before is coupled with the bleak oblivion facing them on this side of the river.

The woman is able to help each person begin to communicate again and to tell each other apart. Soon the actors begin to gain confidence in their abilities once more and converge on the woman, beating and eventually killing her. After the woman's death, the actors gather around her body and comment on her beauty and peacefulness as if she were a statue of Bodhisattva.

One man in the group resisted killing the woman, and this man now chastises the others for killing this woman. She offered only good and wisdom to the people who had just arrived on the other side of the river. The man wants to separate from the crowd, but they persist in following him as their designated leader.

In an effort to elude the crowd, the man encounters his mother, who tells him that he is too ambitious. The man wants to know if he is now in the land of the dead, but the mother cannot answer and walks away.

As the man turns around, he sees a young girl whom he knows from some other time, but he cannot remember her name. The girls disappears into the crowd of actors, and the man tells all the actors that they need to leave this place and find homes where they can dry their clothes and drink hot tea.

The young girl appears again, but her name still eludes the man. She breaks free of his grasp when he tries to catch her. In exasperation, the man tells the crowd to stop

following him because of his need for some peace and quiet. The man does not feel capable of being the group's leader, as he has experienced the same pains and frustrations as they have.

This sense of misery makes the man collapse to the floor and wail while writhing in the fetal position. Eventually, the man rises, and the crowd follows him. They encounter another man playing cards and drinking under a dim light. The card player engages the crowd to play a card game with him, and some welcome it while some are skeptical. Eventually, all take a turn at playing.

During the game, losers must stick a piece of paper on their faces, and the eventual winner will have some fine wine. After awhile, it becomes obvious to the man that the game is rigged and that no one in the group will prevail. He tries to get the crowd to move away. The other actors in the crowd enjoy the game and will not go with the man, and he starts to question his own logic.

Suddenly, a woman appears onstage in a white skirt and envelops herself and the man in the cloth of her garment. Drumbeats sound, and a monk appears followed by a Zen Master and the rest of the crowd. As the Zen Master chants, the man sees the young girl again and tries to touch her, but he is stopped and reprimanded by his father.

The young girl disappears, and the man does not understand why he has to leave the scene because it is not raining. The father says that is will rain sooner or later. The man does not understand why the father has carried an umbrella his entire life and feels that the father has brought it upon himself. The father is hurt by the man's insolence and sends his son away from him.

The man turns and finds himself facing a wall of people, and he can break through only by paying an old woman with something more than the single coin he has in his pocket. The man surrenders a gold-nibbed pen, which had been a gift from his mother, and the old woman allows the man to enter through the hole in the wall.

On the other side, the man encounters a carnival-like scene. A man is selling dogskin plasters to cure a variety of ailments, and a woman is being taunted for being a whore. The woman responds to the people in the crowd by saying that the men have slept with her and that the women are afraid that their husbands have been with her. Eventually, the crowd tires of the woman. They bind and gag her and take her away.

The man reappears on the stage followed by his shadow, which responds to statements the man makes about the stages of life. The shadow tells the man that it is able to say things that the man cannot say. The man tells his shadow that he is looking for something that he cannot find, and the shadow taunts the man by telling him that he probably does not even know what he is looking for.

The man and his shadow then meet a few other people, who tell the man what they are looking for; a comfortable place to sit, a rice bowl and someone to love are some of the responses. The man admits that he does not know what he is looking for, and the others taunt him for being strange.

The man still desires to be left alone to go to another place, but the others will not let him even though the man declares that he is not interested in searching for anything. The other people are still searching, though, and will not let the man go anywhere until they have finished.

A man called the stable keeper will not allow the man to pass by, and the crowd thinks the man is a troublemaker for wanting to leave them. Finally, the stable keeper tells the man that he may pass but that the man must crawl under the stable keeper's crotch. The man does this to the delight of the crowd and finds a key which the man uses to open a huge imaginary door.

Inside the imaginary room mannequins await. They move at first to the man's ministrations, but they soon take on movements of their own, dancing around the man. He escapes by crawling away from the scene. The mannequins disappear, and the man's shadow returns and begins to talk about the man's life passages through dark and lonely periods.

The man's shadow claims that the man is full of self-pity, willing to give up and never be found. The man begins to move through a crowd of people symbolizing trees, which all berate the man for not being generous and brave in his lifetime. The man's shadow intervenes, and the crowd retreats. The shadow tells the man that it is his heart and drags the now exhausted and feeble man off the stage as the crowd follows.

The actors reappear onstage once more, and various conversations are heard about dinner plans, someone's kitten, poetry and even love. The sound of a crying baby is heard, and a voice responds in comfort. One of the actors comments on the stupidity of the play, and they discuss their plans to get home as the sound of a car's ignition is heard offstage.

Analysis

The significance of the play's title is derived from the quest for nirvana, which is achieved by human beings only after they have crossed the river of life to "the other shore." This iconic place of peace and understanding can be reached only after trials meant to educate and advance the soul.

The play presents the concept that perhaps things are not what humans may expect in nirvana. Once the actors have crossed the imaginary river, they lose their memories and even their ability to speak. An attempt to teach them language again is met with derision, and the people ultimately kill the woman whose only intention was to help. It is as if the people do not want any memory of a former state of being. Although the actors are not familiar or comfortable with their new state of consciousness, they know that they do not want to return to what they knew.

The main character, the man, encounters experiences and trials on the other shore that mimic the trials he experienced before crossing the river. Murder, betrayal, disappointment, sexual impropriety and other human challenges still exist in this life

state. The man's mother cannot assist him in his quest for answers, and his father surfaces once only to reprimand the man.

The staging and acting of the play mirror individual human experiences. There are no predefined rules or guidelines. All movement and costuming is freeform, and the author even provides some direction that the actors may be in the audience while the audience may be onstage. This is consistent with the play's message of the universal human experience and quest for perfection and peace. The minimalist staging and direction allow the play's message to shine through without the encumbrance of costuming, props or even character names.

Xiangjian's ultimate message is that man will never reach nirvana because he will never escape the pain and disappointments of human life. The only hope that humans have of experiencing ultimate bliss is in the striving itself, which creates a higher consciousness and refined spirituality.

Xiangjian gives the actors another chance at the goal by symbolically bringing them back onstage at the end of the play to discuss their mundane activities with the author's hope that they will realize this concept and not wait until they cross over to the other side.

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Characters

Actors

Actors playing themselves open and close the play, helping to give the drama its circular movement: the play ends as it begins. When the play opens, a single actor leads the troupe in an exercise with ropes and, as the play ends, the actors reflect upon the play they have just acted in as they leave for their non-theatrical lives. Xingjian originally conceived of *The Other Shore* as a training piece for actors.

Card Player

The Card Player offers the Crowd and Man a chance to win a drink of wine with a deceptively simple card game, but Man discovers that the game is rigged, and it is impossible for him or the Crowd to win. When Man tries to point this out to the Crowd, the Crowd doesn't believe him and jeers Man. The Card Player manipulates the Crowd and convinces its members and Man that Man is wrong. One possible interpretation is that the Card Player represents the manipulative and coercive state, able to play the masses against dissenting individuals.

Crowd

As the actors make their way across the river, they exhaust themselves and awaken on the other shore without their memories or language. In the process they have been transformed from actors on a stage into a Crowd, made up of countless nameless individuals. This Crowd will be present throughout the play, acting as a counterpoint to individuals such as Man and Woman who attempt to realize their own identities within the drama, but unable to do so because of the Crowd. Upon being taught language by Woman, members of the Crowd learn to distinguish themselves as individuals within the collective force, and soon the Crowd turns against Woman and kills her. Later the Crowd also turns against Mad Woman and Man, and in turn is cheated by Card Player. Several times throughout the play it is clear that the Crowd is in need of a leader, but it is as equally clear that it will turn against anyone who stands up to take on that role.

Father

Father approaches Young Man when Young Man touches Young Woman against her will. As a cautious man, Father has prepared for rain by carrying an umbrella despite the dry weather. Father tries to advise Young Man, but to no avail, and when they argue with one another, Father denies that Young Man is his son. The argument is portrayed as a classic generational disagreement between father and son.

Lead Actor

As the play opens, an actor leads the troupe in an exercise with ropes. The game is a simple one, with each participant holding an end of a rope, and moving according to the rules established by the Lead Actor. Although the Lead Actor compares the game to a children's game, it is nevertheless a serious one, and the leader makes it clear that the rope held by each actor represents the forces that push and pull at relationships, from the simple to the complex, whether they be that of husband and wife, for instance, or each individual's relationship to God. When the Lead Actor takes hold of one end of each of the ropes, with each member of the troupe holding on to the other ends, the relationship becomes, in effect, between that of the individual and society. The rope holds and binds the actors together, with the Lead Actor acting as the social force, able to manipulate both individual actors as well as the entire troupe. Through these series of games, the Lead Actor and the troupe establish the themes that will be developed over the course of the play.

Mad Woman

After Young Man enters through a "crack" in a wall of people to view a side-show lead by a Plaster Seller, Mad Woman approaches him. She is clearly a scapegoat for the Crowd. She claims that the men are afraid of her because they have all secretly slept with her and don't want to be revealed. The men's wives, she claims, are afraid of becoming like her: nothing more than a mere prostitute for their men who will dump them when the sex has ended. The Crowd wants her taken away but she continues to taunt the Crowd until the Crowd takes action by tying her up and gagging her.

Man

Man establishes himself early in the play as the first individual character to stand apart from the Crowd. Originally a part of the Crowd, once he leaves the Crowd to stand on his own he is looked upon by the Crowd as a potential leader; however, Man is reluctant in this leadership role. He is indecisive, largely in part because of his inquisitiveness; he has a stronger desire to learn the truth than he does to be a leader. He also does not want to raise a family, as Mother wants of him; he has ambitions he wants to pursue first. As a result, he pleases no one. The Crowd continually taunts him and keeps him from completing his search. Man pleads with the Crowd to leave him alone. Only in the end is he finally able to escape the pressures of the Crowd by following his heart.

Mother

Mother plays a small role in *The Other Shore*. She meets Man after the Crowd has killed Woman and tries to talk him into settling down to raise a family, but to no avail.

Shadow

Shadow acts as an alter ego to Man, following him at first in synchronous steps, echoing his voice and his thoughts. After a time, Shadow addresses Man directly, giving Man advice. Shadow eventually stands apart from Man, narrating Man's movements and thoughts in the second person. In the end, after Man has found the key he has been looking for, Shadow reappears as Man's heart and slowly drags Man offstage.

Woman

Woman emerges on the shore across the river and is the first person the members of the Crowd meet when they awaken from their sleep. Woman offers them the gifts of language and wisdom, which they then use in return to kill her. She pleads with the Crowd before her death, but to no avail.

Young Girl

Young Girl makes her first appearance when Man sees her and recognizes her as a girl he had always longed for years earlier. Young Girl wordlessly listens to Man then disappears into the Crowd. Later, Young Man tries to touch Young Girl while she is meditating, but she refuses him.

Young Man

Young Man appears in three separate but linked scenes. First, he appears with Young Girl, unsuccessfully trying to convince her to let him touch her. He then enters into an argument with Father, who disowns him as result, and in his final scene he talks Old Woman into letting him in to a side-show in exchange for his Mother's gold pen.

Themes

Collectivism

The theme of the collective is introduced in the first scene of the play when the Lead Actor instructs the other actors to hold one end of their rope while he holds the other. Thus, the entire group is bound together through the ropes and through the Lead Actor, giving him the ability to manipulate the entire group. Bound together collectively, the action of any individual will now affect the entire group; thus it becomes essential for the individual actors to consider the collective when they act. And throughout the play, the Crowd acts as an organic unit, collectively expressing its feelings. Its first actions result in the death of Woman, and throughout the play it works against the desires of Man to express himself individually. This theme, in the context of Communist China where the rights of the collective have historically been given precedence over the rights of the individual, is a highly political issue.

Conformity

Related to the collectivism theme, the theme of conformity stresses the need of individuals to conform to the needs and desires of the larger collective. This is cogently expressed toward the end of the play with Man in his indeterminate search. The Stable Keeper and the Crowd taunt him, claiming he's "looking for trouble" and that he should admit his wrongs and repent. Man simply wants to be left alone and the Crowd is unable to accept this. In the context of Communist China, with its priority on the needs of the collective, one's ability to conform is an essential attribute for success.

Control

Control is a necessary component not only of any totalitarian government, but also of any human relationship. Issues of control arise in friendships, work relationships, marriages, and communities. The game with the rope elucidates the various ways men and women, individually and collectively, exert control over one another, through language, body movements, and physical force. The Crowd is irrepressible in trying to control Man. Father, Mother, and Stable Keeper also try to exert their forms of control over Man, but in the end, once Man is able to follow his heart, he is able to finally act on his own, apart from external controlling factors.

Freedom

Man's ultimate goal is to liberate himself from the controlling forces weighing him down. The actors' early attempt at reaching the other shore, or nirvana, falls short once they realize that there is no nirvana. Man then sets out in a life-long search that will, if he is successful, ultimately liberate him. While it is clear that Man is not at all certain of what

he is in search of, it becomes equally as clear as the play progresses that his ultimate goal is to be able to continue his search unimpeded by external pressures. Man is essentially searching for the freedom that will allow him to continue his search.

Individualism

Man and the Mad Woman are two individuals in *The Other Shore* who stand apart from the Crowd and who are continually pressured by the Crowd to conform. Mad Woman has become the Crowd's scapegoat; she is accepted by the Crowd as long as she keeps silent with her rants, but when she refuses to bend to the Crowd's wishes, the Crowd ties her up and gags her. The Crowd cannot kill Mad Woman for it needs her as a scapegoat. Man, on the other hand, is able to survive the pressures of the crowd with his individualism intact; he is able to follow his heart and continue his search despite the Crowd's best efforts.

Language

During the game with the ropes, the Lead Actor discusses how people can "pull" and "be pulled" by language. Simple phrases such as "Good Morning" and "How are you!" can act as invisible ropes between people. The stage directions during the game also call for the actors to express several emotions and states of beings, such as intimacy, abandonment, and repulsion, in "all kinds of sighs and screams but without resorting to the use of language." Language here is both expressed with and without words, but in both cases it has immediate effects on relationships. Right after the rope game, the actors journey across the water to the other shore where, when they awaken, they find they have lost all language and must be taught anew. Without language, the individuals have no way of differentiating themselves from one another; they have lost the concept of self. It is only through the teachings of Woman that they are able to regain their language; however, in this case, once they have fully acquired language, they turn on Woman collectively and kill her. Language, in its many forms, has the ability to bring people together, pull them apart, and even destroy them.

Power

At the heart of all the relationships in *The Other Shore* is power. Whether it is the Lead Actor expressing his power by controlling the rope game, the Card Player expressing his power by manipulating the Crowd, or the Crowd expressing its power by killing Woman. Power is an intrinsic component of every relationship. Under a collective system, the power of the individual is far less than that of the collective; individuals are thus in a constant state of vulnerability vis-à-vis the collective. However, as *The Other Shore* seems to show, the individual can attain a certain amount of power over the Crowd by following his or her own heart.

Relationships

The Other Shore is a play of relationships. The play opens with actors defining and redefining their own relationships with one another. Soon the relationship of the individual, as expressed primarily in the character of Man, to the collective, as expressed by the Crowd, becomes the play's focus. Other relationships include the archetypal parent-child and boy-girl relationships. None of the relationships in *The Other Shore* exists free of the constraints imposed by the social constraints in which they exist. The pressures of the Crowd have a continual effect on all relationships in the play.

Salvation

There is no salvation in the classic sense of the word in *The Other Shore*. The actors' journey across the river to the other shore where they hope to achieve nirvana is for naught: not only do they not attain enlightenment, but the journey causes them to lose their language, and they must be taught to speak as children are taught. Ultimately, there is no escape from the suffering of this world; humans will never realize the ultimate truth that is known only in nirvana. The only hope for humans is to continue their search without fear of reprisal, for it is in the search itself that, quite possibly, salvation may be found.

Style

Improvisation

While Xingjian provides some stage directions, the actors are expected to improvise throughout their performance. Xingjian provides little direction for the actors, telling them only to communicate "without resorting to language" or to play with "imaginary ropes." This allows the actors to explore their characters more fully, without the impediment of direction. This also fits into his criticism of what he calls the "spoken drama" of contemporary theater in which literal words and their meaning become the driving force of drama. Xingjian is interested in the ways humans communicate, control, coerce, love, and live with one another non-verbally, without words and their various constructs. Improvisation allows the actors to offer a multitude of possibilities of how humans interact with one another.

Minimalist Setting

Following the theories of Jerzy Grotowski, Xingjian has removed all but the most essential props. With the exception of the necessary lighting and some ropes, the stage is barren. This allows the director to emphasize the relationships between the actors themselves, and between the actors and the audience.

Shifting Points of View

In the Chinese language, because there are no verb conjugations, the subject of the sentence can be omitted, leaving the reader with several possible interpretations of meaning. Often the context can help one determine whether the narrator is speaking in the first, second, or third person point of view, but with Xingjian, who is most interested in exploring the many facets of the self, this linguistic shift offers him a multitude of ways to explore the characters. Although this effect is largely lost in translation, the idea of exploring the multitude of dimensions that each character inhabits is vital to understanding Xingjian's drama.

Suppositional Theater

A term coined by critic Sy Ren Quah, "suppositional theater" refers to the hypothetical setting created by the playwright. Although the play clearly has cultural and political overtones relevant to contemporary Chinese society, the setting itself gives off no particular time frame or setting. The stage directions indicate that the time "cannot be defined or stated precisely," and that the location is "[f]rom the real world to the nonexistent other shore." Furthermore, the directions state that the play can be performed in virtually "any empty space as long as the necessary lighting and sound equipment can be properly installed."

Theater of the Absurd

The Theater of the Absurd refers to the dramatic movements of the 1940s and 1950s and was portrayed in the plays of writers such as Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Eugene Ionesco. The term was used by existentialist French philosophers Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Xingjian was profoundly influenced in his writing by French existential thought and much of *The Other Shore* is directly influenced by French absurdist drama.

Tripartite Actor

The term "tripartite actor" is Xingjian's and refers to the three states of existence the actor experiences at the time of a performance. While traditional acting theories, such as Constantin Stanislavski's theory of "total immersion" call for the actor to completely enter into the state of the character, Xingjian attempts, in his drama, to have his actors employ three separate states of existence: their own "non-acting" state, the "neutral" state they enter as they are preparing to become the character, and the state they must embody to become the character. The "neutral" state interests Xingjian the most, and in *The Other Shore* he explores this state by having the actors play both themselves as actors, and quickly move into the roles assigned to them by the play. By embodying all three states simultaneously, the actor can sympathize, empathize, pity, admire, and even criticize his or her own character.

Historical Context

The Other Shore is not set in any particular time or place. Xingjian's original intention with the play was to create what he called "pure drama" and to use the play as an exercise for actors. To that end, the actors who participate in *The Other Shore* must change roles throughout the performance quickly and dramatically, moving in and out of multiple personas and using improvisational techniques throughout.

However, none of this is to say that the play does not have an historical or political context. The play's themes of collectivism and individualism recur throughout Xingjian's writing, and one need look no further than his native China and its political structures to see the reasons for Xingjian's preoccupation with those themes.

In 1949, nine years after Xingjian was born, Mao Zedong, as the leader of the Communist Party and the Red Army in China, helped found China as a united country, quickly reversing the years of humiliation the country suffered at the hands of occupying forces dating back to the British in 1842. Under Chairman Mao, as the masses referred to him, China grew to be a world power but not without horrible human consequences. One of Mao's many goals was to create a "New Socialist Man" through a widespread program of cultural purification. Many of the various political and economic programs Mao initiated to that end□including various five-year plans and the "Great Leap Forward" of 1958□proved disastrous and resulted in massive famine and widespread unrest. Over time the Communist Party would amass greater and greater political and social power, to the point that it would effectively become a totalitarian party that, for the stated good of the masses, would dictate where individuals worked and what they could read and write.

Mao's rule eventually led to the Cultural Revolution, also known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a decade-long movement that would have a profound impact on all arts and intellectual development in China for years. From 1966 to 1976, this social experiment, led by Mao and designed to "purify" the Communist Party ranks, saw Mao's Red Guard attack intellectuals and remove all vestiges of "bourgeois" influences from society. Millions of people were forced into manual labor, tens of thousands were executed, and countless others denounced by the state and imprisoned or sent into forced labor, never to be seen again. In short, the Cultural Revolution exhorted individuals to sacrifice themselves for the good of the larger masses. Over the course of the nearly three decades that he ruled China, Mao was directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of an estimated thirty to forty million people, primarily through starvation, putting him in league with Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler as one of the twentieth-century's most brutal political leaders.

Xingjian's mother was one of the many victims of Mao's social policies. In the early 1960s, as Xingjian started coming into his own as a young writer, she was sent by the government to the countryside to work, and later drowned there. The details of his mother's relocation and death are obscure and largely unknown. Although theater became the vehicle of choice for the Communist Party to extol their propaganda

throughout the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, Xingjian was not in a position to benefit. The drama that was used by the state was written and performed under strict ideological guidelines, and Xingjian himself was sent to a reeducation camp in the countryside. It was during this period that he destroyed several of his manuscripts out of fear of recrimination by the authorities.

Following Mao's death in 1976, party moderates took control of China and many of the policies initiated by Mao were abandoned. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, and he proceeded to open China to outside investments and initiated a movement referred to by some as "Market Socialism." While ordinary people could not theoretically open up new businesses, outside investors could take stakes in Chinese companies. While there seemed to be a general opening up of society the government continued to crack down on political and intellectual dissent. It was during Xiaoping's reign that Xingjian saw several of his works banned. Shortly after *The Other Shore* was banned in 1986, Xingjian left China for Paris where he could live and write without restriction.

Although *The Other Shore* is not an overtly political work, its focus on the individual and the stifling pressures of the collective run counter to the precepts of China's Communist Party. While it is possible to appreciate Xingjian's play outside of his native land's political context, the play can only be fully understood in light of the historical and political forces under which Xingjian was raised and grew as a writer and artist.

Critical Overview

When news spread in 2000 of Xingjian being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, China quickly responded negatively. "This shows that the Nobel Prize for Literature has virtually been used for political purposes and thus has lost its authority," the then director of the Chinese Writers' Association declared in the online edition of the *People's Daily*. He further commented that "China boasts many world-famous literary works and writers, about which the Nobel Committee knows little." China's Foreign Ministry also called the award a political maneuver the nation took no pride in.

While most other commentators around the world praised Xingjian for his brave dissident status, the fact was that most Westerners□and most Chinese□had never heard of Gao Xingjian. True, he had received several awards in France, where Xingjian had been living in exile since 1987, and most of his major works had been translated into English and the major European languages, but the esoteric worlds of his plays and prose works had never appealed to a broad audience. In fact, prior to the Nobel committee's decision, several United States publishers rejected *Soul Mountain*, the novel that he has become best known for.

The Other Shore was written for the Beijing People's Art Theater in 1986 but not produced until 1990 in Taiwan and again in Hong Kong in 1995. After the Nobel Prize Award in 2000, Xingjian's dramatic work finally began receiving more widespread attention in the United States.

In a 2000 review of *The Other Shore*, the Chinese University Press edition of the anthology in which the English translation of the play was included, Howard Goldblatt, writing in *World Literature Today*, does not refer to the play itself, but calls Xingjian a "major figure in world drama, and the most innovative, if not the most famous, playwright China has produced in this century." He goes on to call the translations by Gilbert C. F. Fong "smooth, idiomatic, and lively." "Elegant when called for, colloquial when demanded," he adds, "the language retains the illusion that the characters are speaking in English, and contemporary English at that."

In a 2002 *Journal of Asian Studies* review, Deirdre Sabina Knight calls "the wretched loneliness of the characters" that inhabit Xingjian's plays the one element that unites the plays collected in the anthology. As for *The Other Shore* itself, she writes that as Man's "beleaguered search for direction lays bare the dangers of collectivism for any sort of moral rectitude, he ends so bereft of counsel that he resorts to compulsively rearranging mannequins." Knight calls the translation successful "in conveying much of the effect of Gao's inventiveness, particularly the repetitive chanting timbre of the dialogues," but concludes by saying that the "plays are above all performances, and their power comes forth when they are acted aloud by multiple overlapping voices."

In 2003, Sons of Beckett's West Coast in Los Angeles premiered *The Other Shore*. In a *Los Angeles Times* review of the play, Rob Kendt called the play

essentially a series of individuation psychodramas: The group discovers the communion of language, then turns it against one another; the group, under the sway of a demagogue, gangs up on an honest man; a young man finds himself spurned by mother, father, girl and society.

Kendt writes that the performance itself was "nothing so much as an experimental theater class in which very green actors rehearse/emote/create a purportedly avant-garde show."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

White is the publisher of the Seattle-based Scala House Press. In this essay, White argues that The Other Shore *can be read both as a critique of China's collectivist system and as an example of absurdist drama.*

A casual reader of Gao Xingjian's *The Other Shore* might conclude that the play is little more than a plotless, disjointed work made up of a series of seemingly unrelated scenes. That such a reading is possible should not be surprising, given Xingjian's original intention that the play be a training exercise for actors.

In defense of such a reading, the play can be viewed as an exercise for actors, designed to test their versatility by forcing them to take on multiple and quickly changing roles. And in further defense, not only does the play lack a coherent plot with the dramatic complications and resolutions that most dramatic works embody but there is also little, if any, perceivable character development in the course of the play's single act.

Nevertheless, limiting oneself to such a reading is ultimately shortsighted, for *The Other Shore* can also be read as a structurally sound and coherent dramatic work, written in the vein of the Theater of the Absurd, that explores the impact the collective has on individual consciousness. While not overtly political, *The Other Shore* addresses profound psychological, social, and political issues that have been, literally, matters of life and death for millions of men and women in Xingjian's native China.

One of the characteristics of Xingjian's works□and one that has kept Xingjian from being published in China and ultimately led him to settle in exile in France□is his decidedly western, existentialist, individualistic, and, ultimately, apolitical worldview. Xingjian's earliest influences were the European existentialist philosphers and absurd dramatists of the 1940s and 1950s□writers such as Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Becket, Jean Genet, and Jean-Paul Sartre. China, under the intellectual stranglehold of Mao Zedong, was narrowing its definition of what it considered to be acceptable, and therefore publishable: literature that the government believed could further the country's authoritarian and collectivist ends. Xingjian, meanwhile, was expanding his influences to include writers who were decidedly anti-authoritarian and individualistic in their orientation.

As China's many reform movements under Mao□notably the Cultural Revolution of 1966—1976□led to the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese and the banishment and imprisonment of tens of thousands of intellectuals and artists, Xingjian's commitment to maintain the purity of his artistic vision deepened. The brief publication and attempted production of *The Other Shore* in 1986 offers an example of this commitment and marked a dramatic turning point in the writer's life. When the authorities banned the play, rather than remain in his native country to continue to write under the constant shadow of governmental and self-censorship, Xingjian decided to leave China so that he could continue his art unhindered.

The Other Shore is not an explicitly political work. Xingjian, in fact, has clearly stated his position on the relationship of politics to art numerous times. "In order that literature safeguard the reason for its own existence and not become the tool of politics," Xingjian writes in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "it must return to the voice of the individual, for literature is primarily derived from the feelings of the individual and is the result of feelings." In the Chinese context, in which the needs of the collective are rendered far more important than those of the individual, any work that explores the relationship of the individual to the larger society can have profound political reverberations. On one level, *The Other Shore* is just that: an exploration of the impact the collective, as represented by the Crowd, has on the individual, as represented first by Woman, and then by Man. This theme is introduced in the opening scene in which the actors are playing a game with ropes.

As the game begins, each actor is holding onto an end of a rope, with another actor holding on to the other. In this way numerous relationships are created, with the Lead Actor existing autonomously of the larger group and offering only verbal instructions. But when the Lead Actor instructs each of them to give one end of their rope to him, each actor then becomes directly connected to him. "This way you'll be able to establish all kinds of relationships with me," he tells the group, "some tense, some lax, some distant, and some close, and soon your individual attitudes will have a strong impact on me. Society is complex and ever-changing, we're constantly pulling and being pulled."

A representation of a collective organism, with a single leader□not unlike that of the structure of the Chinese state□has now been created. Each individual can only act now with the knowledge that his or her actions will be felt by the leader and will also impact the whole, and the leader can act unilaterally on any number of the ropes at any given time. Although there is no authorial intrusion by Xingjian that renders judgment on this model, it is obvious that the structure will severely curtail the actions of the individual. Not only will the individual be unable to act autonomously of the larger organism, but when he or she eventually does act, the collective leader will know immediately. Anonymity has been made impossible here; the leader will know the precise actions of each of the individuals at all times.

As the play continues, the actors arrive to the other shore, having left their roles as actors and subsumed the roles of members of the Crowd. On the shore, they discover that they have lost their language and their memories. Woman emerges from the mist and helps them to speak again, but the Crowd soon uses their language against Woman. Man emerges to intervene, but to no avail: the Crowd accuses Woman of ulterior motives and threatens her. The Crowd, having been seduced by the power of its "own increasingly venomous language," drags Woman away from Man and strangles her to death.

From this point on, the relationship of the individual to the Crowd will be the theme that ties the subsequent scenes together and provides the work with much of its structural unity. Crowd wants Man to lead them, but Man refuses. When Man meets Card Player, he quickly realizes that the game that Card Player is inviting him and the Crowd to play is impossible to win. Man tries to help Crowd see the truth of this manipulation, but the

Crowd sides with Card Player and taunts Man, at one point even trying to pull his pants down in an act of both humiliation and comic relief. Does Card Player represent the state in this scene, continually manipulating the Crowd, the masses, for its own ends, and convincing them to work against their own self-interests by isolating dissenters? This interpretation is certainly possible, but regardless, Man, like Woman before him, has become the Crowd's object of scorn.

Man continues on his journey, briefly transforming into himself as a Young Man meeting his young girlfriend, his Father, and taking in a side-show. He then returns as a Man to continue indeterminate search, taunted relentlessly by the Crowd and others until Shadow, acting as Man's heart, takes him away.

In Man's search, it becomes clear that he is uncertain of exactly what he is looking for, but it becomes equally clear that the search itself is what continues to drive Man; he simply wants to be left alone to do as he pleases. "I'm going my way!" Man is finally able to say. "I'm not bothering anybody, and nobody's bothering me, okay?" But the Crowd, along with Stable Keeper, continues to taunt him and even accuses him of being a trouble maker.

The ability of the Chinese political system to survive for so long has in part been the result of the success its had in rigidly controlled the intellectual lives of its citizens by controlling what books and magazines can be published, what plays and movies can be produced, and what art work can be exhibited. As much for the purpose of controlling the public intellectual life of the country, these acts effectively control the very thoughts of the individual. At various times in its history, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, average citizens have been afraid to speak their minds even to their closest friends and family members, from fear of being turned in to the authorities. Man's need to control his own destiny in *The Other Shore*, his yearning to simply go his own way without being badgered by the crowd, is Xingjian's representation of the individual's plight within this collective structure. Man can not pull his own rope as he sees fit; his rope is tethered to the Crowd and as a result he must suffer extensive restrictions.

Is there a way out? Yes and no. The system is so relentless in its pursuit of Man that even when Man is finally able to follow his own heart and leave the Crowd, he does not experience the ecstasy, or even the slight happiness, one would expect. His heart is described as "extremely old," and he can only weakly follow, as if not only the long struggles he has endured has worn him down, but the uncertainty of what lies ahead also weighs on him. This exhaustion may also be the result of Man realizing what an absurd situation he is in. A reading of *The Other Shore* in the context of its lineage as an absurdist drama can help speak to this interpretation.

By the time *The Other Shore* was written in 1986, Xingjian had long established himself as a playwright in the vein of the existentialists and absurdist writers of Europe, especially the French. The Theater of the Absurd, a dramatic movement that originated in Paris in the 1940s, had its philosophical roots in the existential thought of philosophers such as Sartre and Camus, who maintained that the idea that man can grasp the true meaning of life is a false one and that the ultimate truth, if it exists at all,

is unattainable. Life, therefore, is absurd. Perhaps the most famous of plays in this school is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in which two men sit on a park bench throughout the entire performance awaiting the arrival of a man who never comes.

In Buddhist belief, the "other shore" refers to the state of enlightenment, or nirvana, that humans who have lived a righteous life can reach once they cross the river of life. Once the actors have crossed the river in the opening scenes, they quickly realize that there is only "oblivion." There is no nirvana, no state of enlightenment. Perhaps this is why Man, in the play's final scene, is exhausted, and his heart is portrayed in such lifeless terms. Perhaps he has come to the realization, that after a life of struggling, to be left alone, ultimately makes no difference and that his search has been a fruitless one.

This fruitless search for the truth, and the characters' inner turmoil and sense of confusion and anxiety, is not only portrayed in absurdist drama through explication, it is also conveyed through seemingly absurd images and dialog. Absurdist plays do not attempt to render the world realistically; instead, they tend to bring out the inner life of the characters caught in this absurd life through dream-like and nightmarish imagery. There is also a tendency of plays to end, more or less, where they have begun, thereby adding to the absurdity.

So what may appear to be disjointed, seemingly unrelated scenes that give *The Other Shore* its structure are, in fact, Xingjian's renderings of the inner life of Man as he vainly tries to find meaning in the absurd world into which he's been born. There is no logic to his turmoil, just as there seems to be non logic to the movement of the play. Man has been given an absurd situation to try to understand, but comprehension is impossible. And the play coming full circle at the end, with the actors once again on stage no longer in character, but as themselves, only adds to the absurdity, and enhances the tragedy of the individual trying to make sense, and free himself, of it all.

Source: Mark White, Critical Essay on *The Other Shore*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

The Nobel Prize committee maintains a Xingjian web page at http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2000/index.html with links to other interesting sites.

Topics for Further Study

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech (which can be found at http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/2000/index.html), Xingjian wrote, "In order that literature safeguard the reason for its own existence and not become the tool of politics it must return to the voice of the individual." What does Xingjian mean by this statement? Does this mean that literature should never be "political" and that it should only concern itself with the concerns of the individual?

Xingjian has been deeply influenced by the writings of Jerzy Grotowski, the Polish dramatist who devised the concept of "poor theatre." Research Grotowski and his theory of "poor theatre" and explain its influence on *The Other Shore*.

Research the existentialist movement in France during the 1940s. What were the primary beliefs? Did they share political goals? Do you consider Xingjian an existentialist? Why or why not?

While *The Other Shore* can be read in the context of the controlling forces Chinese Communism has upon the individual, can the play be read in the context of democratic countries such as the United States? Are there social forces at work in the United States that one can apply Xingjian's play to?

Research the Buddhist concept of "the other shore," or "*bi'an*." How does one reach the other shore? Where does the phrase come from? Are there Judeo-Christian parallels to the other shore? Muslim parallels? Do you think Xingjian is criticizing Buddhism in *The Other Shore*?

What Do I Read Next?

The August Sleepwalker (1990), by Bei Dao, one of China's premier poets, collects Dao's poems written between 1970 and 1986. Like Xingjian, Dao reaches beyond Chinese tradition to create his art and has come to be known for his highly experimental and subjective style. And like Xingjian, Bao's commitment to artistic freedom has forced him to live outside of his native China, in exile.

One Man's Bible (1999) is Xingjian's fictionalized account of his life during the Cultural Revolution. Told from the third person point of view, the book draws on the narrator's life as an aspiring writer, surrounded by colleagues, neighbors, friends, and even family members he cannot trust out of fear of investigation by the authorities.

Although best known for his writing, Xingjian has become internationally recognized as a painter as well. His paintings, in fact, have been used as the designs for many of his book covers. *Return to Painting* (2002) collects more than one hundred of Xingjian's paintings that span a forty-year period beginning in the 1960s, along with an essay on art by Xingjian.

Famous for his novella *Raise the Red Lantern* (1993), which was made into a popular movie, Chinese writer Su Tong has created a raw, unflinching portrait of societal and familial life in 1930s China in his novel *Rice* (2004). Tong is considered one of China's leading avant-garde literary figures. Although his novels and stories take on themes familiar to mainstream Chinese writers, his work is characterized by a style uniquely his own that relies on dream-like imagery and narrative gaps that leave room for interpretation.

Soul Mountain (1999) is Gao Xingjian's fictional account of his ten-month journey along the Yangtze River after he was misdiagnosed with lung cancer. A wandering, almost plotless novel with a narration that moves between the first, second, and third points of view, *Soul Mountain* touches upon themes of mortality, environmental catastrophe, and sexuality and is considered by many to be Xingjian's masterpiece.

To Live (2003) is Yu Hua's often brutal novel recounting the horrors that have beset China. Influenced by the Cultural Revolution, Hua's work is noted for its violence and stark imagery. After Fugui gambles his family's fortune away, he is eventually conscripted into the army, and upon his release, has to deal with the country's land reform and the famine it creates, while members of his family die bitter deaths.

Further Study

Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Theatre*, translated by John Willett, Hill & Wang Publishers, 1964.

Bertolt Bertolt was the most influential German dramatist and theoretician of the theater in the twentieth century and had a profound influence on Xingjian's development as a dramatist. This book includes selections of Brecht's critical writing, including his seminal essay, "A Short Organum for the Theatre."

Chen, Xiaomei, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2002.

A cultural history of *huaju*, or modern Chinese drama, from 1966 to 1996, this book covers the period of the Cultural Revolution when theater was chosen as the state's primary vehicle to promote proletarian art.

Chen, Xiaomei, ed., *Reading the Right Text: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2003.

Six new plays from contemporary China, translated into English for the first time, are included in this collection. Unlike Xingjian's plays, none of these plays has been banned by Chinese authorities. As a result, this collection gives a good counter balance to Xingjian's style and subject matter.

Grotowski, Jerzy, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, edited by Eugenio Barba, Routledge, 2002.

Grotowski, the founder of Poland's Theatre Laboratory in 1959, became known for his concept of a "poor theatre," in which "non essentials" of theater such as costumes, sound effects, makeup, sets, and lighting are eliminated, as a way to emphasize and redefine relationships between actors and the audience. His work had a great influence on Xingjian.

Heng, Liang, and Shapiro, Judith, *Son of the Revolution*, Vintage, 1984.

Heng's account of his youth during China's Cultural Revolution was a ground-breaking and seminal treatment of that dark and tumultuous period of Chinese history.

Stanislavski, Constantin, *An Actor's Handbook*, Methuen Publishing, 1990.

Stanislavski has had perhaps the greatest influence on acting than any other individual. His theory of "total immersion," in which the actor immerses himself completely into his character, has long been the standard theory of acting and one which Xingjian rebelled against in his dramatic works.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

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:

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