Overtones Study Guide

Overtones by Alice Gerstenberg

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Introduction

Alice Gerstenberg's *Overtones* is considered the earliest example of a play that dramatizes the unconscious on stage. In it, Gerstenberg uses two actresses for both Margaret and Harriet to represent the single character of Margaret and Harriet. Each embodies a disparate part of the character's personality; or, to put it in Freudian terms, one is the id and the other the ego. In *Overtones*, Harriet and Margaret are the cultured and refined selves, while Hetty and Maggie represent the wild, primitive desires of these same women. Using two women to play one character was a unique convention that had not been seen before. This new technique, along with Gerstenberg's ability to write witty, interesting dialogue made the play an instant success. *Overtones* was first produced November 8, 1915, by the Washington Square Players at the Bandbox Theater in New York. At the time of its production, Sigmund Freud had recently made his first trip to the United States, and the publication of his works had spread interest in the workings of the unconscious mind. Freud's theories were a common topic of discussion and the play capitalized upon this fad. The play influenced many later playwrights including Eugene O'Neill, who used a similar technique in his play *Strange Interlude.*

Overtones was Gerstenberg's second New York success. Earlier that same year, she had received accolades for her adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*. *Overtones* was to become her most popular and most widely produced play, however. It was presented by numerous theatres across the country, had a successful run on vaudeville, and was performed in London by the great actress Lily Langtry. *Overtones* was originally published in 1921 in Gerstenberg's *Ten One-Act Plays* and has appeared in many subsequent anthologies. It is still presented by regional theatres and universities today and remains one of the finest examples of the dramatization of Freudian theory to date.

Author Biography

Alice Gerstenberg was born August 2, 1885, in Chicago, Illinois. Her parents, Julia and Erich, were wealthy socialites who were regularly featured on the society pages of the day. She was educated at Kirkland School and then attended Bryn Mawr, a college known for providing education to many high society women. During this time, she began writing plays and performing in college theatrical productions. She graduated from Bryn Mawr in 1907 and returned to Chicago.

The following year, Gerstenberg enrolled in classes at Anna Morgan's studio and became active in Chicago's theatre circle. Morgan encouraged Gerstenberg to write some one-act plays and the four resulting plays were published later that year in a volume entitled *A Little World*. Two years later, Gerstenberg studied theatre in New York, where she composed her first full-length play, *The Conscience of Sarah Platt*.

Gerstenberg continued her writing career and had some moderate success in 1912 with a production of *Captain Joe* at the Academy of Dramatic Arts. Also that year, her first novel, *Unquenched Fire*, was published. Later in 1912 she returned to Chicago and became one of the founding members of the Chicago Little Theatre. Unfortunately, personality clashes with Maurice Browne, the theatre's director, caused Gerstenberg to quit at the end of the first season.

In 1915 Gerstenberg had her greatest success with the plays *Alice in Wonderland* and *Overtones*. *Alice in Wonderland* was presented by the Fine Arts Theatre, and again by the Booth Theatre in New York. Also in 1915, the novelized version of *The Conscience of Sarah Platt* was published. The book won strong reviews in the New York press. Gerstenberg had finally established a strong reputation as a novelist and playwright. *Overtones* was first produced in New York by the Washington Square Players. It was an immediate success and became a popular choice of many performers in the United States and abroad. The production played on vaudeville, and the great actress Lily Langtry starred in a 1917 London production.

Despite her growing reputation, Gerstenberg remained in Chicago. Although she never matched the success of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Overtones*, she continued to write popular plays for the Chicago theatre. In 1921 she co-founded the Chicago Junior League Theater, a group that sponsored plays for children, and in 1922 she founded the Playwright's Theater, a group dedicated to providing opportunities for local artists to develop and present their work. She ran the Playwright's Theater until 1945. In 1938 she received the Chicago Foundation for Literature Award.

Gerstenberg died July 28, 1972, in Chicago. Although Gerstenberg's connections with the wealthy families of Chicago helped provide contacts and backing to foster her early writing career, her talent took her beyond the need for help from family and friends. Her novels and plays quickly became recognized for their own merit by the publishing and theatrical communities. Gerstenberg is now considered an influential member of the "little theatre" movement in the United States and an innovator of theatrical form.

Plot Summary

At the beginning of *Overtones*, Harriet is preparing for the arrival of a former acquaintance, Mrs. Margaret Caldwell, whom she has invited to tea. She is also having a discussion with her primitive "inner self," Hetty. The two women establish that they are indeed very different parts of the same person. As Hetty notes, "I'm crude and real, you are my appearance in the world." Harriet concedes that they are one and the same, but refuses to admit that Hetty is also the wife of Charles Goodrich. Harriet asserts that she alone is Charles's wife because it is she who manipulates him and manages him through her social airs and artifice. Eventually the conversation turns to John Caldwell and to Hetty's despair over not having married him when she had the opportunity. Harriet reminds her that John's desire to be a painter made for too uncertain a future and that, "It was much safer to accept Charles's money and position." Hetty then begins to coach Harriet on what she must say and do when John's wife Margaret arrives. She is to make sure that Margaret knows she is rich, and should try to make her jealous. Harriet then decides she will make Margaret ask if John can paint her portrait. She will then have the opportunity to make him fall in love with her again.

Margaret arrives with her primitive counterpart, Maggie. Immediately, Hetty tries to goad Harriet into mentioning how rich and influential she is. Harriet resists Hetty's prodding, however, and greets Margaret sweetly and politely. Maggie instantly faces off with Hetty and the two trade insults and each tries to get the truth out of the other. All the while Harriet and Margaret continue their pleasant conversation, complimenting each other and affirming how wonderful their respective lives have turned out. Maggie admits that Margaret is starving because John has no orders for paintings. When Harriet offers tea, Maggie makes sure Margaret takes it with cream because it is "more filling." The pleasant chit-chat between Harriet and Margaret continues, while Hetty and Maggie return to prodding their respective counterparts to try and win the game and obtain what they want. Harriet gives in a bit and casually lets drop she has an automobile and a chauffeur. Margaret also gives in to Maggie and brings up the subject of John perhaps painting Harriet's portrait.

The subject then turns to John's time as a painter in Paris. Margaret speaks as if John has become an artist of great renown, while Maggie admits that John is actually drawing advertisements and is "growing weak with despair." Hetty and Maggie finally get down to business once the conversation turns to the subject of Harriet sitting for a portrait done by John. Hetty vehemently urges Harriet to negotiate a low price, while Maggie warns Margaret to be careful not to lose the opportunity. Finally, it is agreed that John will paint Harriet, and with that, both women think they have won. Throughout the entire conversation Harriet and Margaret have remained reserved, with a false air of polite decorum, while Hetty and Maggie have become more and more desperate. In the final moments of the play, Hetty and Maggie face off viciously, each vowing to "rob" the other and take what they covet the most. After a cymbal crash and a brief blackout, Harriet and Margaret end their conversation with false niceties by telling each other what a pleasant time they have had and bidding each other a sweet "goodbye."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Overtones is Alice Gerstenberg's three-act play about male and female relationships and the roles that social conventions, fear of intimacy, and rejection play in those interactions. The play is important because of the author's novel use of separate actors to portray the alter egos of the main characters.

The play opens in the anteroom of a dining room in a large hotel in 1920. A bellboy and a cigarette girl cross back and forth in their duties as a man named John Caldwell enters. John is a starving artist, indicated by his nervous disposition and slightly shabby clothes. John's wife, Margaret, follows John into the room looking tired and worn in spite of her youth. John is irritated with Margaret's obvious attempts to locate some wealthy art patrons in order to secure some work for John. Unfortunately, it is teatime and the patrons are only women whose wealthy husbands are not in attendance. John would prefer to be painting in his studio, but Margaret considers that futile if there is no one to buy the work.

Margaret is a realist who knows that pandering to the egos of the wealthy is the surest way of securing painting commissions. Margaret also tells John that he is fortunate he has her for a wife rather than a girl named Harriet, whom he had once loved, because at least Margaret is ambitious. Margaret wishes to see someone she knows at the hotel who might invite her and John to eat, as they have no food at home and are very hungry. John is ready to leave, but Margaret remains steadfast as her counterpart named Maggie appears behind her. Maggie represents Margaret's inner self. She is dressed in the same shade as Margaret but her face is veiled in tulle.

When the headwaiter returns John is embarrassed and wants to leave, but Margaret makes a scene about the poor service in the restaurant as the cause of their departure. John and Margaret exit and a large businessman named William Sterling enters the room, followed soon by his expensively dressed wife, Harriet. Harriet petulantly berates her husband for not yet securing a table for them even though she has just decided that she wants to dine here. Harriet is embarrassed by William's boorish attempts to bribe the headwaiter for a table and William apologizes for being himself. William is a successful businessman and it seems as if Harriet abhors everything about him but his money. William enjoys making money but despises the trappings of the wealthy and their societal pretenses.

When William leaves Harriet to secure a table, she looks into the mirror wondering what would happen if people's true natures were visible. At that moment, Hetty, Harriet's alter ego, appears in the mirror dressed in the same color as Harriet, but Hetty's face is also veiled with tulle. Harriet cries to the mirror about how much she hates William and how her entire life is a lie and that her real self must break through at some point to show her true self to the world.

Hetty moves from behind the mirror, stands behind Harriet and tells her that she embodies all the thoughts that Harriet will not allow to be released in public. Harriet cannot see Hetty although Hetty is able to see Harriet and stares at her outright. Harriet still looks into the mirror and tells the invisible Hetty that Harriet is her subtle overtones. Hetty tells Harriet that Hetty is the one who has suffered in the miserable marriage to William because Hetty has given up true love with John Caldwell in favor of William's money. Harriet is able to play the role of society wife while Hetty suffers in silence. Harriet silences Hetty by reminding her that she saved Hetty from poverty. Harriet believes that John then married Margaret out of spite, and Hetty still hates Harriet for making Hetty give up John.

Suddenly Margaret (with Maggie) appears to retrieve a notebook she had left behind. The two women embrace and exchange pleasantries while their alter egos express their disdain for the other. Margaret (along with Maggie) is pleased to hear that Harriet has married a wealthy man while Hetty encourages Harriet to make Margaret jealous of her enviable position. Maggie urges Margaret to convince Harriet to order a painting from John so that they can get some desperately needed income.

Harriet inquires about Margaret's life with John and Margaret exaggerates by answering that John is deluged with commissions commanding four-thousand-dollars for a portrait. Margaret declines Harriet's invitation to tea much to the chagrin of Maggie who reminds Margaret of how hungry she is. Margaret makes the excuse that John is waiting for her and the mention of his name is music to Harriet who suggests that Margaret and John have tea with Harriet and William. Margaret starts to leave the room to get John as Maggie jumps for joy at the anticipation of a meal.

William returns and Harriet introduces her husband to Margaret who pours on the charm in hopes of a painting commission. William quickly reveals himself to be less than an aesthete and Harriet is mortified, but only Hetty can show misery. Harriet orders tea for four and the starving Maggie is delighted when she adds cinnamon toast to the request.

Margaret leaves the table to get John and William takes the opportunity to give Harriet a huge bouquet of flowers, which she rejects for being too gaudy. William still tries to please his wife and comments on her exceptional beauty today, but Hetty states that Harriet only wants to be beautiful for John. William quickly kisses Harriet much to Hetty's disgust and Hetty hopes that she will still be beautiful in John's eyes.

William comments on Harriet's jovial mood and moves to embrace her but she discourages his public display of affection. William tires of Harriet's retreats and Hetty quickly saves the situation by encouraging Harriet to charm William by validating her love for him and encouraging him to flatter Margaret when she returns. It is important to Harriet that Margaret believe that Harriet's marriage is perfect and Williams' cordial behavior will confirm it.

Margaret returns with John and Harriet greets John sedately even though Hetty is wild with joy to see him again. John comments on Harriet's beauty and William interrupts

them so that Margaret can introduce William to John. Harriet excuses herself and Margaret for a few minutes leaving John and William alone at the table.

Suddenly John's alter ego, Jack, appears from behind a screen and stands behind John. William cannot see Jack who is in shock that Harriet chose to marry William instead of John. As William makes pleasant conversation with John, Jack thinks that he would like to make Harriet pay for her mistake for marrying the boorish William.

William shares his background with John telling him that he has had no formal education and has earned his wealth by learning as he went along. William does admit to the desire to learn about art someday and asks John to explain how to tell a real artist. Jack encourages John to flatter William for the possibility of a commission and John tells William that there are many ways that a man in William's position can be invaluable to the world of art. William's only desire is to please Harriet and he seems to be doing a miserable job of it.

Margaret (and Maggie) and Harriet (and Hetty) return to the table. Margaret exaggerates John's painting celebrity and John feigns embarrassment over the attention. Harriet passes the cinnamon toast and Jack and Maggie bemoan the paltry offering. Soon the sound of the hotel's orchestra fills the room and the foursome sit in silence to listen. Hetty is quite sure that John can still read her thoughts and Jack wonders if Harriet still cares about him. Maggie wonders how Harriet feels to see John again. Hetty moves to Jack, they reminisce about their lost love, and Jack shares the pain of Harriet's rejection of John's marriage proposal due to her fear of living with a poverty-stricken artist.

Jack still stings from Harriet's rejection and Maggie wonders how Harriet must feel now that John is married to Margaret. Jack and Hetty begin to flirt with each other and Maggie is incensed; but Jack is challenged by Harriet's seeming indifference. When the music stops, all the alter ego characters resume their positions behind their respective characters.

Margaret takes the opportunity of a lull in the conversation to comment to John about Harriet's lovely posture and John quickly sketches a rough portrait of Harriet. Margaret determines that William does not have any portraits of Harriet and William is amazed at the quick sketch that John has done. The willow trees in the background of the sketch indicate to Hetty that John remembers the location of his marriage proposal to Harriet. John accuses Margaret of imagining things when she identifies two people beneath the willow tree but William loves the sketch of Harriet and wants a large one painted.

Harriet senses John's hesitation and suggests that John may be already committed to other works and Margaret confirms that fib but offers to make adjustments to John's schedule to accommodate Harriet. Maggie and Jack are anxious for John to commit and Hetty is ecstatic at the chance to be near John again. John lies and says that he can delay another one of his patrons in order to paint Harriet and both Maggie and Jack are deliriously happy that there will be money in the house again.

Arrangements are made for Harriet to come to John's studio tomorrow morning and the foursome part, but not before Maggie vows to get Harriet's money and Hetty vows to get Margaret's husband.

Act 1 Analysis

The play is an extreme example of the third person omniscient point of view. The use of alter egos for three of the main characters provides the reader with access to, not only the plot, but also the thoughts and emotions of these characters. The use of the alter egos portrays distinct feelings and emotions, which is a unique literary device for a theatrical production. The separation of the characters into their public personas and their secret darker sides allows the author to fully develop the characters in a brief period of time. By allowing the alter ego characters to interact, the author is providing another dimension not normally explored in theatre.

It is interesting to note that the women's alter egos are dressed in chiffon gowns of a darker shade than the ones worn by Margaret and Harriet. This symbolizes the darker side of each woman's personality. John's alter ego, Jack, is dressed in a purple painter's smock, belying his true essence as opposed to the suit he must wear in public to appear respectable.

The significance of the play's title is first addressed when Harriet tells Hetty, "I am your subtle overtones." Hetty is a brasher character. Even her voice is more abrasive than Harriet's melodious sounds, and Harriet asserts her superiority by claiming to be subtle and more cultured.

The author touches briefly on the topic of women's rights, which was critical at the time the play was written in 1920. William cannot understand Harriet's unusual behavior, passes it off as typical women's behavior, and tells John that he cannot understand what women could possibly find to talk about since they know nothing of baseball, business, or prohibition. There is a reference to women's right to vote when William urges the women back to the table because "...this tea is getting strong enough to vote." One of the main platforms of the burgeoning women's movement of the time was the right to vote, which gathered considerably stronger support until its acceptance in 1915.

The author is sensitive to the issue of women's rights in the play, but makes a derogatory reference to a Chinese cigarette girl in the hotel when William says, "Well, the little chink doesn't look like such a vampire, more as if she just stepped out of a musical comedy." It is possible that calling a person of Chinese ethnicity a chink was acceptable in the early 1900's when the play was written, but the reference would not be acceptable in today's vernacular because of the derogatory meaning.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

This scene opens in John and Margaret's apartment, which also serves as John's studio. Margaret sets the table for breakfast while Maggie stands in the background. Margaret calls to John to get up, pours coffee, and tries to decide how to cook the one remaining egg in the apartment. Maggie urges Margaret to scramble the egg so that it can be shared but Margaret boils it so that John may have it. Maggie wonders when Margaret will ever stop devoting herself to John and start taking care of her own needs, but Margaret ignores Maggie.

Margaret moves to view the almost-completed portrait of Harriet and Maggie wonders why John is deliberately drawing out the time to complete the painting. Margaret tries to silence Maggie who claims that John thinks only of Harriet. However Maggie is intent on getting the money as soon as possible so that she may eat heartily again. John enters the kitchen and gripes that he must drink his coffee black but Margaret cannot bring herself to tell him that she could not afford cream. Margaret also stops John from eating a piece of fruit from the fruit bowl so that the arrangement will prove to Harriet that there is abundance in the home.

Margaret also has the unhappy task of telling John that the advance money from William is almost exhausted from the purchase of paints and for some aesthetic improvements to the studio for Harriet's sake. Jack enters the room grumbling about the couple's meager existence and cannot tell Margaret that he could not sleep because he spent last night dreaming of Harriet. Margaret moves to tend to John but Jack is irritated by Margaret's attentions and John pushes Margaret away. Of course, Margaret is offended by the slight and demands to know if John still loves her. John replies that he loves Margaret and would love her even more if she would give him butter for his roll, to which Maggie replies that they cannot afford butter.

In an attempt to change the subject, John reads the newspaper and notices an ad for an upcoming art exhibition at the gallery of Maximillian Brush. John attempts to drink his coffee but finds it too weak and chastises Margaret for her domestic skills. Sarcastically, Margaret enters into an imagined dialogue with an imaginary butler whom she reprimands for the weak coffee.

Margaret is anxious to change the subject and asks John if he will finish Harriet's portrait today but John is noncommittal in his answer. Harriet is running late this morning so John puts on his painter's smock and begins working on the portrait without her. Margaret asks John if he feels that Harriet is beautiful and John guardedly answers that he supposes she is. Margaret brings up the subject of John's one-time marriage proposal to Harriet, trying to get some idea of John's feelings for Harriet; but John continues to be evasive while Jack wishes Margaret would stop her rattling on.

Margaret is once again anxious to change the subject and asks John if he has had enough breakfast. He sarcastically replies effusively. John mentions the breakfasts he and Margaret shared at a restaurant in Paris and the two of them are lost in the visual and aromatic memories of those fabulous meals.

Once more, Margaret broaches the topic of the completion of Harriet's portrait and John can no longer hide his irritation and asks Margaret to stop nagging. In exasperation, Margaret sarcastically declares that John is the only person who matters and consumes her entire world. John implores Margaret to leave him in peace with the project, while Margaret attempts to tell John of her loneliness ever since he started the painting. John's mood is increasingly irritable and Margaret lapses into her typical role of soothing his ego. Margaret reminds John of her exceptional housekeeping efforts in spite of the financial bind they are always in, but Maggie notices that John is so wrapped up in the portrait that he does not even hear Margaret.

At the sound of the doorbell, John's mood brightens in anticipation of greeting Harriet. Harriet, dressed in a yellow-orange outfit, is followed by Hetty dressed in darker orange chiffon. Margaret and Harriet embrace in greeting. Harriet apologizes for being late and John pretends not to notice. Margaret tells Harriet that John stays absorbed in Harriet's portrait to the exclusion of all else and Harriet gushes at the flattery. Maggie states that she will soon have Harriet's money and Hetty replies that she will soon have Margaret's husband.

John interrupts the women and asks Harriet to assume her pose position on the dais. Hetty guides Harriet into an alluring posture and Margaret continues to fuss about in the room offering to clean brushes or be of any other service. Jack wishes Margaret would just leave the room, and finally Harriet asks for a glass of water, which Margaret is happy to get it. In the brief time they are alone, John and Harriet move closer together as John adjusts Harriet's pose. Jack and Hetty remark on the excitement of being close together and Hetty admits to still loving John. Jack realizes the intensity of feelings from Hetty but John will not acknowledge them in Harriet.

Margaret (with Maggie) returns to the studio, gives Harriet the water, and sits at the table on the pretense of tending to the household accounts. As John paints in earnest, both Hetty and Jack are earnestly wishing that Margaret would leave the apartment for a while. Suddenly, Harriet suggests that Margaret take Harriet's purse and go out to buy food items for an indoor picnic for all three of them. Margaret balks but Harriet insists and Margaret (along with Maggie) leaves the apartment.

Neither John nor Harriet moves after Margaret's departure, but Hetty and Jack are filled with joy and anticipation at the potential for moment. Suddenly Margaret returns feigning interest in any special food requests of Harriet and John and is secretly relieved to find that Harriet and John have retained their positions as artist and subject.

After Margaret's second departure, Harriet descends from the dais to look at her portrait and Jack admires her form wishing that he could make Harriet pay for all the emotional harm she caused John. John and Harriet speak cautiously but Jack and Hetty flirt

openly and sense the love that John and Harriet still feel for each other. Harriet begins to cry because of their failed love and John embraces her and the two kiss just as Margaret returns to the studio.

Harriet and John fail in their attempts to tell Margaret what has transpired and Margaret accuses Harriet of coming back into their lives to steal John away from her. Harriet tries to tell Margaret that John had insulted her, but Margaret replies that it was Harriet who suggested that Margaret leave the apartment to shop for food. John tries to pass off the incident as minor, but Margaret is incensed that he can be so cavalier about their love and her sacrifice in their financially burdened marriage.

John's attempts to calm Margaret are futile as she can see the love John still has for Harriet by the way he has painted her so vividly. Margaret attempts to slash the painting with a knife but John stops her and accuses Margaret of being mad. Harriet tells Margaret that if she had really wanted to take John away she would not have waited so many years to do it. Hetty cautions Harriet that there must be no scandal from the situation. Harriet begins to gather her things to leave the studio and tells John to bring the portrait to her home where William will pay him.

Margaret will not allow John to go to Harriet's house because Harriet will have another opportunity to seduce John. Margaret also tells Harriet that she and John tricked Harriet and William into commissioning the portrait simply because they needed the money. Harriet is furious about the deception, declares that she will withhold the payment, and stomps out of the apartment. Hetty remains because she cannot bear to leave John forever.

John turns on Margaret and accuses her of ruining the whole situation with her jealousy, thinking only of herself all the time. Margaret tries to touch John but he pushes her away in disgust, damning all women for their mercenary, deceitful ways. Both Hetty and Maggie wilt in sadness and Margaret collapses convinced of her failure in the marriage.

Act 2 Analysis

The author uses sarcasm in this act with the interactions between John and Margaret. For example, when John complains about the weak coffee and says, "Margaret, I wish this coffee was better acquainted with the water. Couldn't you let them hold hands a little longer?" John's sarcastic remark is a stab at Margaret's inability to make good coffee; but Margaret does not tell him that she is stretching the coffee because they have no money to buy more. This is also an example of anthropomorphism, whereby the author offers the idea that the inanimate objects of coffee and water could have hands.

Margaret is quick to implement sarcasm of her own when she responds to John's coffee comments. She quickly calls upon an imaginary butler whom she chastises for the weak coffee.

The full significance of the play's title becomes evident in this act when Harriet, upon hearing John and Margaret's upstairs neighbor playing some wistful music, comments

that she can hear the overtones of the music. Harriet explains to Margaret that overtones are the harmonies that one hears just above a tone before it evaporates. The author uses symbolism to denote the true feelings of the characters, displayed by their individual alter egos, are the overtones of their personalities and relationships.

The overtones signify an important theme of duplicity in the play. Each character is playing a role, counter to his or her true nature. William attempts to live a life in high society to please Harriet, although he is a simple man who neither wants nor understands the high life. Harriet has married a man she does not love just because he is wealthy. John's marriage to Margaret is a sham because he married her only after Harriet rejected his marriage proposal. Now he wishes to hurt Harriet in the same way she hurt him. Margaret squelches her own dreams and ambitions to try to build a life with John, although he rejects her attempts to better their financial situation. The author literally symbolizes this duplicity with the dual characters for all but William, who is as close to behaving true to himself as possible.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

This scene takes place in Maximillian Brush's art gallery where the portrait of Harriet now hangs. Maximillian is an old art dealer, but still has much enthusiasm for the craft. He sits looking at his paintings as if they are treasured friends. John is now employed at the gallery and enters the room to tell Mr. Brush that he has finished one of his retouching projects. Mr. Brush notices John's dejected posture, and John admits that he hates the work but has taken the job merely out of necessity.

John feels that his enthusiasm for real painting is lost but Mr. Brush reminds him of the brilliance of Harriet's portrait. Mr. Brush inquires why Harriet declined the portrait. John can only tell him that her decision was made on a whim and John did not have the resources to pursue litigation for the payment. Mr. Brush can tell that John had loved Harriet and wishes he could help John find some peace in adapting to the disappointments in his life.

John shares with Mr. Brush that he prefers to be free of his marriage so that he may paint freely with no other responsibilities or commitments. Suddenly Margaret (with Maggie) enters the room and John turns from her. Margaret buries her hurt feelings and greets Mr. Brush. Margaret has just come from her job as a seamstress, a position that humiliates John because he does not want his wife to work. John's anguish about the situation is exacerbated when Margaret announces that she has been offered the position of head designer. Margaret does not understand why John is allowed to enjoy his craft but she is not allowed to pursue something she enjoys.

In typical fashion, Margaret attempts to buoy John's feelings. She tells him that someone is bound to buy Harriet's portrait soon and John will be established as a fine artist. John cannot bear any more discussion about the portrait or his career and leaves Margaret (and Maggie) alone with Mr. Brush, who asks Margaret's opinion of the portrait. Maggie cautions Margaret in her answer because Mr. Brush must suspect Margaret's jealousy of Harriet. Mr. Brush urges Margaret to tell him the real reason that Harriet declined the portrait and Margaret tells the elderly man that she found John and Harriet in an embrace and that John still loves Harriet.

Margaret tells Mr. Brush that she knew John was a struggling artist and sacrificed because she loves him, but that John does not return her love in kind. Mr. Brush suggests that Margaret has lost herself by catering to John's demands, but that Margaret has no right to John's soul just because she has given up her own. Mr. Brush counsels Margaret that she will only be truly happy when she has learned to stand alone. Mr. Brush, Margaret (and Maggie) leave to greet guests in another room of the gallery.

William and Harriet (with Hetty) enter the room where Harriet's portrait hangs. William immediately goes to the portrait and stands before it in admiration. Harriet feigns composure while Hetty is thrilled with the brilliance of it. William announces that he likes it and wants to buy it, but Harriet attempts to change his mind, offering to pose for an even greater artist. Harriet calls upon her feminine wiles to change William's mind about the purchase. Still, William states that he must pay John, even if Harriet does not want to take the portrait home. Harriet claims that the portrait is bad, but William honors his debts and wants to set the situation right. All the while Harriet is touching William's arm and cooing at him, Hetty protests the thought of being this close to William because he is personally repugnant.

Mr. Brush enters the room and assures William and Harriet that John has now arrived as an important artist with this portrait. William begins to write the check for five thousand dollars and Harriet is unable to stop him this time. Hetty urges Harriet to intervene quickly but William is fixed in his intention to complete the sale. Hetty makes one more plea for Harriet to stop the sale and Harriet grabs the check and tears it into little pieces.

John (as well as Jack) hears the commotion and enters the room to hear Harriet tell William her true reason for not wanting the portrait. According to Harriet, John and Margaret had deceived Harriet and William into buying the portrait and then John insulted Harriet. John admits to William that Harriet has refused John's marriage proposal and that Harriet married William only for his money. Despite Harriet's protests, William knows that this is true because he can see the love between Harriet in John displayed in the portrait.

Hetty encourages Harriet to lie her way out of the situation and Harriet claims to not care for John at all anymore. John now refuses to sell the portrait and Hetty screams to be able to share her feelings of love. Finally, Harriet tells William how she despises being his wife and how John made her feel alive again during the time in the studio. William is deflated but not surprised to hear Harriet's words, as he knows that it is too much to expect a woman like Harriet to love someone dull like himself. William offers Harriet her freedom and Harriet joyfully tells John that there is hope for a life together now.

Margaret (with Maggie) enters the room and William admits to offering Harriet her freedom and wants to know Margaret's position on the situation. Margaret releases John from any further commitment to her and Jack and Hetty are ecstatic at the turn of events. The decision now rests with John; but he surprisingly does not choose Harriet, who is instantly furious and orders William to pay for the portrait so she can be reminded of her foolishness. William takes Harriet back and the couple leaves the gallery.

Maggie and Jack are thrilled that Harriet is gone forever but Margaret surprises John by declining to go home with him. Maggie and Jack are in shock at Margaret's desertion, but Margaret prefers to accept the promotion at work and live her own life for a while. John thinks that Margaret is doing this to hurt him, but Margaret truly wants to have her

own career and put her own needs first. Jack is frantic at the thought of losing Margaret now and John asks if she will return but Margaret cannot give a definite reply.

Act 3 Analysis

Throughout the play William acts as the foil, which means that he is the only person who is true to his own code and beliefs. Typically, a foil acts as a positive contrast to the negative traits of a protagonist. In this case William stands in contrast to Harriet, Margaret, and John whose duplicitous natures make William's authenticity truly stand out.

The author has a little bit of fun by naming the art gallery owner Mr. Brush which symbolizes the paint brushes used as tools to create the works of art hanging on his walls. In another sense of the word brush, Mr. Brush is able to sweep away Margaret's reservations about living her own life so that she can see her own potential for completion and happiness.

The author ends the play on an important note by having Margaret's character leaving to pursue her own career. This would have been very popular for the period of the women's movement and probably endeared the author to women exercising their new independence.

Characters

Margaret Caldwell

Margaret is one-half of one character who appears in this play. She is the refined, cultured part of herself, just as Harriet is. She is the ego. In addition, Margaret shares many other similarities with Harriet. She is in a desperate situation from which she longs to escape. Margaret is married to the painter John Caldwell. The two of them have just returned from eight years in Paris, where John tried to make his mark as an artist. He was unsuccessful, however, and they are now forced to live in poverty while John makes his living drawing advertisements. Margaret loves John, but the benefits of this have been overshadowed by the severe poverty in which they are forced to live. Margaret is desperately hungry and longs for the food and fine things that wealth can bring. She is willing to give up love for money.

John's name also gives a clue as to Margaret's relationship with him. John is *called well.* In other words, while it may seem prestigious and glamorous to be married to an artist, the reality is not as good as it sounds. To say you are an artist's wife is exciting. To live it is horrible. Just as Harriet must work to control her baser instincts, so must Margaret. Margaret's lavender gown connects her with Maggie, who wears a dark purple gown. The two together represent one complete person.

Harriet Goodrich

On the surface Harriet is a cultured society lady who is married to the very wealthy Charles Goodrich. She has a beautiful house, a car, a chauffeur, wonderful food, and all of the fine trappings that wealth can provide. She presents an air of being extremely happy and content. This is all a façade, however. Deep down, Harriet does not love Charles and she is in despair over being trapped in her current situation. She hates her marriage to Charles because it only provides a life of comfort and wealth. There is no passion. Harriet married her husband for the money and that is all she got. His name even indicates what he represents to her: Charles is only *good* because he is *rich.* Harriet secretly longs to escape her current situation and to rekindle the passion of her earlier relationship with John Cald well, a man whom she believes to be the true love of her life. Harriet grew up in the same town as John. The two dated in her youth, and she has been in love with him ever since.

At the time they dated, John was an aspiring painter. He actually proposed to Harriet, but she turned him down because she was afraid his desire to be an artist would lead to a life of poverty and hardship. She has never lost her desire for John, however, and is now deeply jealous of Margaret's marriage to him. Harriet (with Hetty) is actually one-half of one of the characters presented in this play. She represents only the ego portion of this character. She is the person that is presented to the outside world, the cultured, polite woman that everyone expects this character to be. She is the part that has been

molded by society and taught how to behave. Harriet wears a green gown, which represents the jealousy that runs deep within her.

Hetty

Hetty is Harriet's counterpart. She is not a complete person, but is the other half of Harriet's personality. Hetty embodies the wild, untamed desires and wants that live deep within Harriet. She represents her *true* feelings. Hetty is able to see beyond the courteous everyday conversation that takes place when people talk to one another. She understands that deep down people are vicious and self-serving and that they just cover this up for the sake of appearing humane. Hetty has little patience for these polite games that human beings play with each other. Because she has not been cultured and refined by society, she operates on a very basic level. She is the id portion of Harriet's character.

Hetty has the ability to be violent and cruel and is willing to do almost anything to get what she wants. She desperately wants Harriet to succeed in regaining John and will use any means necessary to convince Harriet to act upon her desires. Harriet's sense of propriety and decorum is all that keeps Hetty's unsociable behavior in check. Hetty is always present, and Harriet must consciously work to keep control of her. If Hetty was ever able to completely overcome Harriet, she would be deemed unfit for society and would probably be locked away. Hetty wears a gown of deep green, which reflects her connection to Harriet. The deeper color signifies the harsher, baser emotions she represents.

Maggie

Maggie is Margaret's darker half. She is the instinctual, desire-driven force who constantly prods Margaret to go after what she truly wants. It is Maggie who has brought Margaret to the meeting with Harriet in order to carry out her plan of getting Harriet to order a portrait. Maggie is Margaret's id, and she operates on a primitive level, just as Hetty does. Maggie is not afraid of confrontation. She will do whatever is necessary to get what she wants. During the play, Maggie's actions are governed primarily by hunger and her need for food. Just as Harriet must be careful to keep Hetty in check, Margaret must work to do the same with Maggie. If Margaret lets her guard down for a moment and forgets the rules of social etiquette, Maggie will overcome her and drive her to behave in a way that might be considered insane.

Themes

Ego versus Id

The theories of Sigmund Freud were very popular when *Overtones* was first produced. Freud looked at the way various psychological forces shape a person. He eventually concluded there were three major parts that made up an individual's psyche: the ego, the id, and the superego. The ego represents the part of the psyche that experiences the outer world through the senses. It is the "rational" part that primarily governs the actions of the person. The id is the part that contains the instincts for survival and the drive for pleasure. It is often considered the wild, primitive part. The superego is the part that contains the values and moral standards. Although Freud did not publish *The Ego and the Id* (the book which clearly identified these terms) until 1923, he had already extensively discussed the concept of conflicting societal and primitive forces upon the psyche, and these theories were well-known among educated circles in the United States. They influenced many playwrights of the period, who began using dream interpretations, hypnosis, and subconscious states as themes in their work. *Overtones* is considered the first example of physically dramatizing the conflict that takes place between the ego and the id. By using a dual-character format, Gerstenberg was able to personify the struggle taking place within each of the characters. At the opening of the play she clearly establishes for the audience that the characters of Harriet and Hetty are actually the same woman with Hetty's opening line, "Harriet. Harriet, my other self. My trained self." Gerstenberg goes on to reinforce this dual-character format by having Margaret and Maggie represent the ego versus id conflict of the other character in the play.

Feminism

The theme of feminism is addressed in an inadvertent way in *Overtones*. While the two characters do not directly discuss the suppression of women or their lack of opportunity, these concepts are made apparent by viewing the situations in which they are trapped. Both Margaret and Harriet owe their discontent and sad situation to their total dependence on what their husbands can provide. They both have relied on their respective men to provide a wonderful life for them, and now, since their lives (and husbands) have not turned out as they had hoped, the two women are trapped. Neither woman has the resource to stand on her own or to improve her situation. Instead each sees only one possibility: link up with a better man who might provide a better life. Harriet wants John because Charles cannot give her adequate love. Margaret wants Harriet's money and influence because John cannot adequately provide for her. The possibility of being proactive in improving their current relationship never occurs to either. This is, of course, in keeping with the times in which *Overtones* was written. During this period, women were expected to remain at home and to obey their husbands. Most women had little social power or influence within society. Like Harriet and Margaret, their choices were extremely limited.

Jealousy

The theme of jealousy is pervasive in *Overtones*. Each character wants what the other has and is willing to go to great lengths to get it. Because we can hear the characters' inner thoughts through the dialogue of Maggie and Hetty, Gerstenberg can make the deep-seated jealousy very clear. At the end of the play when Hetty threatens, "I'm going to take him away from you," and Maggie counters with, "I want your money—and your influence," there is no question as to just how envious and desperate these two women are of each other. Margaret's jealousy is even visually symbolized in her costume. As Gerstenberg states in the opening stage directions, "Harriet's gown is a light, 'jealous' green."

Victorianism

Strictly speaking, the Victorian era corresponds to the reign of Queen Victoria of England from 1819 to 1901, and Victorianism is a term used to describe the social mores and customs that became prevalent during Victoria's reign. Although her reign ended more than a decade before *Overtones* appeared, many of the trappings of Victorianism were still present in the United States at the time of Gerstenberg's writing. The Victorian household was ruled by the husband. The husband was the "breadwinner," and the wife was expected to stay home and raise the children. Instruction in proper behavior and in the manners of society was considered extremely important. People were expected to follow the rules of decorum at all times and any display of unbridled emotion was scorned. The custom of having afternoon tea became popular during the Victorian era. Victorianism is also sometimes associated with haughtiness and arrogance. *Overtones* exhibits a strong sense of Victorianism in the way Margaret and Harriet interact while at tea. Although their emotions are raging inside, they make sure to eat daintily and properly, and try desperately not to let their true emotions show.

Style

Dual Characters

Overtones is the first known instance of a playwright using two actresses to portray a single character. By splitting each character into two parts, Gerstenberg allows the audience to hear the inner thoughts and desires of the character without having to stop the action. Prior to this, when a playwright wanted the audience to hear a character's private thoughts, he or she would use an *aside* or a *soliloquy.* An aside is when a character speaks directly to the audience, without the other characters onstage hearing him or her. A soliloquy is when a character is alone onstage speaking his or her thoughts out loud. Both of these techniques often bring a momentary halt to the action of the play. Gerstenberg's dual-character technique allowed the audience to experience the "outside" and the "inside" of the characters simultaneously, thus creating the possibility of continuous action and of an additional set of internal character conflicts that could be visually experienced.

Symbolism

Gerstenberg uses various types of symbolism throughout *Overtones*. She uses both visual and textual means to convey symbolic concepts. Also, Hetty and Maggie each wear darker versions of her respective counterpart's costume colors. This symbolizes the attachment between each character and her primitive self, and also suggests the deeper, darker emotions that Hetty and Maggie harbor. In addition to the color, the style of the costumes also serves a symbolic function. In the stage directions, Gerstenberg describes the cultured characters' gowns as made of chiffon, in order to suggest the "possibility of primitive and cultured selves merging into one woman." The title of the play also functions as a symbol. Overtone is defined as an ulterior, usually implicit meaning, or a hint. In the play, Gerstenberg lays out this symbolism for the audience when she has Harriet remark to Hetty, "I am your subtle overtone."

Shadowing

Overtones uses the visual technique of shadowing to help the audience make the connection between the disparate parts of each character. Each primitive self stands behind her respective cultured self and shadows her by using similar gestures. The primitive self also moves around the stage in conjunction with her counterpart. The shadowing primitive self is always behind the cultured character, sometimes looming over them, thus creating a visual image which reinforces the duality present in Margaret and Harriet, and the threat that Maggie and Hetty provide.

Unity of Time and Place

Unity of time and place occurs in a play when it takes place in one setting and in real time. In other words, there are no jumps to another place and there is no passing of time in which the story is picked up later. *Overtones* has a strong unity of time and place because it takes place in one room and the audience experiences the entire meeting between Harriet and Margaret. These type of plays were popular with small upstart theatres because they usually had small casts, one set, and thus were easy and inexpensive to produce. Gerstenberg often wrote specifically with these factors in mind. As Stuart J. Hecht notes in the *Journal of Popular Culture,* "Gerstenberg intended such performances as inexpensive productions which could help raise money to begin or sustain a local little theatre."

Historical Context

The New Woman

In the early 1900s an increasing number of women were leaving their homes and entering the workforce. The swell of industry taking place in the United States created more jobs than could be filled by the male population. More employees were needed to work in the new factories and industries, and women were there to answer the call. They were now not merely wives and mothers, but active participants in the economy, and this newfound independence led many to question their place within society. They began to push the bounds of acceptable behavior and to call for equal rights and the right to have a say in matters of government. The "new woman" had more power, was more opinionated, and was more self-determined than females of the previous generations had been. With this surge in women's self-confidence also came a backlash of resistance, and a strong debate arose over the proper role of women in society. Out of this debate rose the feminist movement, a drive for women's rights and equality that still persists today.

Women's Suffrage

In 1915 the fight for women to win the vote was in full swing. From 1905 to 1910 the National American Woman Suffrage Association grew from seventeen thousand members to seventy-five thousand. In 1912 the Progressive Party, led by Theodore Roosevelt, finally endorsed the suffragist position. On January 12, 1915, the women's suffrage amendment failed in the House of Representatives. The suffragettes were not deterred, however. They continued their struggle and finally succeeded in winning women the right to vote in 1919.

Little Theatre Movement

In the early 1900s the theatre was dominated by large commercial institutions that were run by powerful and wealthy entrepreneurs. The commercial aspects of these establishments caused them to offer popular, "safe" productions that would bring in as much money as possible. Little thought was given to artistic innovation or risk-taking. Around 1912 that began to change with the advent of the "little theatre" movement. The little theatres were founded by local artists and based upon similar independent theatres that had been established in Europe. The actors and technicians were not paid, and the theatres relied on subscriptions and donations for financial support. They usually presented small, inexpensive productions and experimented with form and style previously unseen by most audiences. One of the most influential of these was the Chicago Little Theatre, formed by Maurice Brown in 1912. Alice Gerstenberg was a member of this theatre during its first season.

Freud and Psychoanalysis

In 1909 the famous pioneers of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, traveled to the United States to give the first American lectures on psychoanalysis at Clark University in Massachusetts. The lectures were published in 1910, and suddenly much of the American population became interested in the topic of psychology and of the subconscious mind. Articles on Freud's theories began appearing in many of the popular literary magazines of the day and they became a common topic of parlor conversation. Freud intrigued and shocked American society with his frank discussions of sexuality and deviance, and his theories eventually led to a change in attitude toward members of society who were considered to be insane or psychologically impaired.

Critical Overview

Overtones is recognized as the first example of visually depicting the Freudian split between the id and the ego onstage. As W. David Sievers notes in *Freud on Broadway,* "it marks the first departure from realism for the purpose of dramatizing the unconscious." When the play premiered in 1915, it was a popular success and was "heralded as representing a new formula in theater," according to Beverly M. Matherne, writing in *American Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide from Colonial Times to the Present.* The New York press did not give the play rave reviews, however. As Keith Newlin reports in his introduction to *American Plays of the New Woman,* the *New York Times* concentrated most of its critique on the other works presented on the same bill and only briefly noted of *Overtones* that its "idea was more clever than its execution." Newlin also notes, however, that the *New Republic* was a bit more generous when it touted the play as an "interesting event" and stated that "Miss Gerstenberg's success will incite other dramatists to try their hands" at plays of a similar form.

In this supposition, the *New Republic* was correct. Gerstenberg's dual-character form was used by several other playwrights, including Eugene O'Neill. Echoes of her work can also be found in the plays of "Sophie Treadwell, Adrienne Kennedy, Marsha Norman, and Peter Nichols," according to Mary Maddock in *Modern Drama.* Recent critics still consider the play to be an important milestone in American theatre history. Hecht calls the play "telling and innovative." Maddock states that *Overtones* initiated a "significant trend in twentieth-century American drama."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Kattelman holds a Ph.D. in theatre from Ohio State University. In this essay, Kattelman discusses the various techniques used by Alice Gerstenberg to heighten visual, auditory, and symbolic interest in her play and how these techniques serve to highlight similarities and differences between the characters.

In *Overtones*, Alice Gerstenberg uses duality, contrast, and juxtaposition to create a piece that is both visually and symbolically intriguing. The play is noted for being the first instance of the use of the dual character, a technique in which two actresses portray different parts of one single woman. In *Overtones*, the split is a Freudian one, with one actress portraying the id or primitive portion of the character, while the other portrays the socialized and mannered ego. This dual-character technique allows the audience to experience the inner struggle of the subconscious firsthand, and because the character's inner thoughts do not have to be conveyed to the audience through an aside or soliloquy, the audience can learn what the character is thinking while the action continues uninterrupted.

The dual-character technique also allows some interesting parallels to be drawn between the two women of the play, and Gerstenberg makes the most of this opportunity. Through the course of the play the audience learns just how similar Harriet and Margaret really are. They are both desperately unhappy and are willing to scheme and lie in order to better their situation. They are also both caught in circumstances that have been dictated by the forces and expectations of society. As Mary Maddock notes in *Modern Drama,* "Margaret and Harriet are the unhappy products of the process of socialization that replaces women's personal desires with patriarchally correct wants and needs." Thus, the characters are both trapped in a world "not of their own design."

The dialogue of Hetty and Maggie make the similarity between the characters very clear. Gerstenberg often uses a parallel construction of dialogue for these two characters in which one line is a direct counterpoint to the line spoken by the other character. For example, when Maggie urges Margaret to "Flatter her," Hetty counters with, "Tell her we're rich." And when Hetty cautions Harriet, "Don't let her see you're anxious to be painted," Maggie also warns, "Don't seem anxious to get the order." This repetition of sentence structure textually emphasizes the analogous circumstances in which Harriet and Margaret are trapped.

The similarity of the characters in *Overtones* introduces a strong sense of irony. Although they do not realize it, Margaret and Harriet are practically mirror images of one another. They have both been schooled in the fine art of etiquette and decorum, and they are both trapped within a patriarchal system that affords them no power except for that obtained by marrying the "right" man. They both believe that if they could only possess what the other has they would be truly happy. Yet, one suspects that if the two were to succeed in gaining what they want, they would still be as miserable as they are now. They may trade places, but they would still be confined within a situation that would make them extremely discontent. Eventually Margaret would become desperately

bored and unsatisfied with her marriage to Charles, and Harriet would be hungry and miserable with John.

One can imagine the scene presented in *Overtones* being repeated in the future with the characters reversed. Harriet is forced to grovel for customers while Margaret now laments the loss of her one true love. As Maddock notes, "the desires of Harriet and Margaret are so perfectly symmetrical that should both women succeed in their goals they will both fail." Although the play is a meeting between two women, one can almost see it as struggle that is taking place within a single individual who is in turmoil over whether to listen to the practical side that desires Charles' money, or the idealistic side that desires John's love. Although this interpretation is not what Gerstenberg intended, the close parallels and similarities between the two characters allow for this type of reading as well. The final moments of the play solidify just how alike Harriet and Margaret are when Hetty and Maggie simultaneously exclaim, "I'm going to rob you—rob you."

Comparison and contrast are two key elements of *Overtones*. They generate interest, and help to raise the play above the level of a typical afternoon tea. One of the ways Gerstenberg introduces contrast into *Overtones* is through her choice of the husbands' respective professions. Although the play does not make clear what Charles does for a living, one can assume he is a successful businessman. John, on the other hand, has chosen to forsake the money that the business world could bring in order to pursue his art. John pursues a world of ideas, Charles a world of possessions. In the play, Gerstenberg alludes to this dichotomy by emphasizing the place love plays in each relationship. One gets the feeling that Harriet is just another one of Charles's possessions. He can keep her safe and comfortable, but does not love her. John, on the other hand, loves Margaret, but is not able to provide safety and comfort for her. Margaret has love. Harriet has material possessions. Neither woman has both.

Another way Gerstenberg uses the "compare and contrast" motif in *Overtones* is through her use of color. She establishes in the opening stage directions that each primitive self wears a gown of the same color as their counterpart, but in a darker shade. This helps the audience to visually make the connection between each pair of actresses. But Gerstenberg also helps the audience make the distinction between Harriet and Margaret through a clever use of color. She has chosen their costume colors from opposites sides of the color wheel. Purple and green are not directly opposite each other on the wheel because they both share the color blue, and yet the two colors are far enough apart that they provide a strong visual contrast to one another. In other words, purple and green are alike and yet different, just as Margaret and Harriet are. The juxtaposition of these two colors visually emphasizes the themes and relationships contained within the play. Gerstenberg also plays upon a light/dark theme by keeping Maggie and Hetty upstage and partially veiled. One almost gets the sense that they are lurking in the shadows just waiting for the right opportunity to reveal themselves. In the stage directions, Gerstenberg even uses the term "shadow" to describe how Maggie and Hetty move in conjunction with their respective counterparts.

Allowing Maggie and Hetty to interact directly with one another was a wise choice for Gerstenberg, although it is not strictly in keeping with Freudian theory. Normally, one would not assume that the id of one person can directly interact with the id of another because the id's influence is usually thought to affect only the person within which it is contained. In Freudian theory, the id can only have contact with the outside world through the ego. The ego is the part of the psyche that mediates the influence of external realities. As Freud notes in *The Ego and the Id,* "the ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavours to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id." By allowing Hetty and Maggie to directly confront one another, however, Gerstenberg multiplies the possibilities for conflict, making for a much more dynamic and forceful piece of theatre. The audience witnesses four simultaneous "tennis matches" on stage: Hetty vs. Harriet; Harriet vs. Margaret; Margaret vs. Maggie; and Maggie vs. Hetty.

Ironically, while this possibility for direct conflict between the competing "ids" heightens the intensity, it also heightens the humor contained in *Overtones*. It is comical to watch Hetty and Maggie physically struggling with each other directly behind the reserved pair of their respective socialites. Harriet and Margaret serve as a static facade in the foreground and their prim and proper mannerism provide a humorous counterpoint to the insanity that is occurring right behind them. This humorous vein is in keeping with Gerstenberg's usual style. As Stuart J. Hecht notes in the *Journal of Popular Culture,* "The vast majority of Gerstenberg's plays are comedic. The few times that her dramaturgy takes a more serious turn comes in those plays where the inner self is confronted."

The above techniques of dual-characters, parallel dialogue, color imagery, and direct interaction between the subconscious-character elements all combine to make *Overtones* an interesting theatre piece visually, audibly, and symbolically. With this play, Gerstenberg pushed the boundaries of theatrical form and used all means available to create an intriguing exploration into two women's psyches. She provided numerous clues as to what the piece is "about" so that audiences would be able to easily understand this innovative and complex presentation. Apparently her ideas worked because the influence of *Overtones* on theatrical form is still recognized. That the play survives and is still produced across the country attests to the fact that audiences during the early part of the twentieth century were ready for this type of theatrical/psychological experience and that they still appreciate it today.

Source: Beth Kattelman, Critical Essay on *Overtones,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Topics for Further Study

Read Marsha Norman's play *Getting Out.* Compare and contrast the way Norman uses the dual-character technique in her play with the way Gerstenberg employs it in *Overtones*. What are their similarities and differences? Does *Getting Out* relate to Freud's theories of the ego and the id in any way?

Research the history and etiquette surrounding the ritual of taking afternoon tea. Who originally popularized this custom? Do we still use any of this same etiquette today when eating or drinking with friends? Explain.

Research the history surrounding women's entry into the workplace around the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. How did this change the lives of American men and women and their relationship to each other? What problems arose when more women left the home?

Read an overview of Freud's theories about the ego and the id. Do you agree with his conclusions? Why or why not?

How would you direct this play so that the audience could easily understand the associations between the characters? Would you follow Gerstenberg's stage directions or use an alternate technique? Why or why not?

Compare and Contrast

1910s: The first phonograph is introduced by the Victor Talking Machine Company. By 1919 Americans spend more on phonographs and recordings than on most other forms of home entertainment.

Today: Phonograph records are no longer manufactured. The compact disc has replaced the phonograph record and many people own a compact disc player.

1910s: The average price of a new car is $600. A Model T costs $360. Most Americans do not own an automobile.

Today: Almost everyone has at least one car. The price of a bottom-of-the-line new car generally exceeds $10,000.

1910s: Euclid Avenue and East 105th Street in Cleveland, Ohio, becomes the first intersection in the United States to be equipped with an electric traffic light on August 5, 1914.

Today: Traffic lights are found in every major city in America. The colors red, yellow, and green are recognized as symbols for stop, caution and go, across the country.

1910s: Electric clocks are first introduced. Most people, however, still use windup clocks to keep track of time.

Today: Digital clocks and wristwatches are the most prominent time-telling devices. Clocks on computers and handheld devices can be set to the precise second.

1910s: The divorce rate is one in one thousand. Most people remain married no matter how difficult their situation may be.

Today: One in two marriages ends in divorce. There is no longer a horrible social stigma attached to being a divorced woman.

1910s: The life expectancy for a man in the United States is 48.4 years and for a woman is 51.8 years.

Today: The life expectancy for a man in the United States is 74.2 years and for a woman is 79.9 years. While better health care and medicine have lengthened general life expectancy, the entry of women into the workforce and the increased common stress of daily life has closed the gap between the sexes.

What Do I Read Next?

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) is an excellent short story about the psychological breakdown that can result from a woman's feelings of being trapped and powerless. It is considered a standard text of early feminist literature.

Getting Out (1979) is Marsha Norman's play about a young woman struggling to break free from her younger, primitive self. The play uses two actresses to portray a single character and was highly successful when it premiered at the Humana Festival of the Actors Theatre of Louisville.

Sophie Treadwell's play *Machinal,* originally presented in 1928 and published the following year, is an excellent example of an innovative use of style and form. The play is written in nine episodes and uses offstage sounds to suggest the mechanized world that keeps its heroine, the Young Lady, trapped.

Daily Life in a Victorian House (1993), by Laura Wilson, gives a good account of the manners and etiquette of England's upper classes. Although the book deals with an extremely wealthy family in England during the height of the Victorian era, it offers a glimpse of the manners and mores that were eventually picked up by upper-middle class families in the United States.

Afternoon Teas: Recipes-History-Menus (1995), by Pam McKee, Lin Webber, and Ann Krum, contains a brief synopsis of the history and the customs of afternoon tea. The book also contains simple recipes. It provides a concise introduction for those not familiar with the etiquette and history of afternoon tea.

Further Study

Appignanesi, Richard, and Oscar Zarate, *Freud for Beginners,* Pantheon, 1990.

An exploration of Freud's life and theories presented in cartoon form, this book covers Freud's writings and terminology in an entertaining and accessible way.

Chinoy, Helen Krich, and Linda Walsh Jenkins, eds., *Women in American Theatre,* Theatre Communications Group, 1987.

This anthology contains a good overview of all facets of women's theatre history in the United States. It includes discussions of numerous lesser-known figures and groups and also provides an extensive bibliography.

Diner, Steven J., *A Very Different Age: Americans of the Progressive Era,* Hill & Wang, 1998.

This book provides a cohesive social history of 1900 to 1920, a time which is considered the "progressive era" in the United States. It explores how the technological revolution during the early twentieth century transformed the lives of all Americans.

Kramer, Dale, *Chicago Renaissance,* Appleton-Century, 1966.

Kramer presents a social history of the literary movement in Chicago from 1900 to 1930. The book extensively discusses the theatrical community of the time.

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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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