# The Prisoner of Second Avenue Study Guide

## The Prisoner of Second Avenue by Neil Simon

BOOKRAGS

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# Introduction

Neil Simon, one of the most popular of twentieth-century American dramatists, is known for his comedies that often examine the tensions that can arise among family members or between men and women living in New York. In his play, *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, which ran on Broadway for 788 performances beginning in 1973, Simon's comedy turns darker as he explores the devastating effect that city life can have on a middle-aged couple. In early 1970s, when the play takes place, New York City was beset by financial problems, high crime, and strikes that made daily life often inconvenient and sometimes dangerous. The play chronicles Mel and Edna's struggle to survive city life, coupled with noisy neighbors, faulty plumbing, and the loss of employment, and to maintain a measure of dignity in the process.

# Author Biography

**Nationality 1:** American

**Birthdate:** 1927

Neil Simon was born on July 4, 1927, in the Bronx, New York, to Irving, a garment salesman, and Mamie Simon. He grew up in Washington Heights, Manhattan, during the Great Depression. After he graduated from high school, Simon joined the army and wrote for military publications while he took classes at New York University and the University of Denver.

After his discharge in 1946, □Doc□ Simon, a nickname he earned as a child from impersonating the family doctor, began a career as a comedy writer for several television shows, including *The Phil Silvers Show* and Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*. In 1961, when his first play, *Come Blow Your Horn*, appeared on Broadway, Simon turned his talents to playwriting.

Several of Simon's plays have autobiographical elements taken from his childhood as well as his relationships with his four wives, including dancer Joan Baim, who died while they married, an event that inspired Simon's *Chapter Two*, and actress Marsha Mason, who starred in several stage and film versions of his plays. Plays influenced by events in his childhood often involve coming-of-age stories, while those that reflect his marriages explore the tensions that can develop between men and women in relationships.

Simon has received Emmy Awards for his television work, the Tony Award for Best Play for *The Odd Couple* in 1965, for *Barefoot in the Park* in 1966, for *Sweet Charity* in 1968, for *Plaza Suite* in 1969, for *Promises, Promises* in 1970, for *Last of the Red Hot Lovers* in 1972, for *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* in 1973, and for *The Sunshine Boys* in 1978. In 1975, he was awarded a special Tony Award for his overall contributions to the theater. He has earned several other writing and drama awards as well as Oscar nominations. He was elected to the Theater Hall of Fame in 1983 and received a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1991 for *Lost in Yonkers*. Simon was honored at the Kennedy Center in 1995, and in 2006, he received the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor. *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* is available in *The Collected Plays of Neil Simon*, volume two, which was published by Plume in 1979.

# Plot Summary

## Act 1, Scene 1

*The Prisoner of Second Avenue* takes place in a Manhattan apartment from midsummer to December, most likely in 1971. Mel and Edna Edison have been living on the fourteenth floor in this small apartment for six years. When the play opens, Mel is sitting alone anxiously in the dark at 2:30 a.m., moaning □Ohhh, Christ Almighty,□ which wakes up Edna. When she asks him what is wrong, he replies, □Nothing,□ and tells her to go back to bed, but then he keeps moaning. She soon gets him to admit that he cannot sleep because it is freezing in the apartment due to the broken air conditioner and asks what she can do to make him feel more comfortable. She notes that he has been tense for a week.

Mel then complains about the ugly pillows on the couch and declares that he is tired of the apartment, the building, and the entire city as they listen to the jarring street noises. He claims that he is more sensitive to noise, including the ones emanating from the apartment next door, where two German stewardesses entertain nightly guests. As he bangs on the wall, yelling at them to be quiet, he cracks it. Mel then orders Edna to call the superintendent in the morning and demand that the crack be fixed, along with the air conditioning and running toilet, insisting that he will not pay for any of it.

When Mel admits that tranquilizers no longer help calm him down, Edna begins to worry about him, which sets him off on a rant about everything that is wrong with the city and the world, including the lack of safe, good tasting food and the smell of garbage that permeates the air. Edna argues that he has to accept city life or leave Manhattan, but Mel insists that he will stay and exercise his right to protest. After he yells at a barking dog from his terrace, voices from above tell him to be quiet, but he just hollers back at them.

When Edna tries to get him to calm down, he screams at her. After he finally starts to relax a bit, he admits that he has not been sleeping well and that he feels he is losing control. Edna tries to reassure him that everyone is feeling that way in the city and suggests that he go back to his analyst. Mel tells her though that the doctor is dead and that therapists cost too much anyway.

When Mel declares that he is worried about losing his job, Edna says that they could move somewhere that does not cost as much, but Mel refuses to take her advice seriously. Then the stewardesses from next door call and complain about the noise, which sets Mel off on a tirade again, insisting that Edna □bang back□ on the wall. The scene ends with the voice of news commentator Roger Keating, reporting on the long list of the city's problems.

## Act 1, Scene 2

A few days later, Edna has come into the apartment and discovered that they have been robbed. When Mel comes home, she explains that she went to the store for a short while, and since she lost the door key, she left the apartment unlocked. The robbers took everything, including the liquor and Mel's suits. Edna is frightened, while Mel fumes to the point where he loses control, screaming and throwing ashtrays on the floor. He then admits that he was fired four days earlier but did not tell her because he hoped that he could find a new job. As he promises that he will find something, Edna insists that she has confidence in him.

Mel gets increasingly agitated about their lack of money as Edna tries to calm him down, telling him that they will get by. As he rants about the money that they have spent on useless things and about how he was mistreated by his company, a voice from an above apartment calls down to him to quiet down. When he refuses and yells back at the voice as he is standing on his terrace, he gets hit with a bucket of water from above, which drenches him. The scene closes with Edna wiping him off, trying to assure him that everything will work out.

## Act 2, Scene 1

Approximately six weeks later in mid-September, Mel is wandering around the apartment in his bathrobe, grimmer and angrier than in the first act. When Edna comes home from her job as a secretary to make him lunch, she rushes, since she only has half an hour. She has a difficult time getting Mel to talk to her. He admits that he is frustrated by his failed attempts to find a job and humiliated by the fact that Edna is working.

He then begins to explain to Edna that □the social-economical-and-political-plot-to-undermine-the-working-classes-in-this-country□ is preventing him from finding a job. He has heard this on the radio talk shows and believes that □the human race□ has hatched this □very sophisticated, almost invisible□ plot □to destroy the status quo□ and insists that he is a victim of it.

Edna gets increasingly agitated during this rant to the point where she determines that he needs to see a therapist. While Mel ignores her and begins to plan his revenge, which involves burying those trying to destroy him with snow, Edna calls the doctor, insisting that her husband must see him as soon as possible. The scene closes again with the voice of Roger Keating, reporting that the governor has been mugged and that city workers are on strike.

## Act 2, Scene 2

Two weeks later, Mel's brother Harry and three sisters, Pauline, Pearl, and Jessie, meet at Mel's to discuss his situation and how they can help. The sisters talk about Mel's

childhood while Harry tries to get them focused on Mel's financial troubles. He proposes that they all chip in to pay for Mel's doctor bills, but the sisters are reluctant to finance them if they last more than a few months. Harry, however, insists that Mel is their responsibility and deserves their help for as long as he needs it.

When Edna arrives, Harry proposes his plan, and she is deeply touched but asks if they could buy a summer camp for him instead. Edna is certain that if Mel gets out of the city and into the country, he will regain his mental health. After Harry rejects the plan, arguing that Mel does not have any business sense, a heavily sedated Mel appears after just having taken a walk. The scene ends with the voice of Stan Jennings, who has taken over reporting duties from Roger Keating after the latter was mugged.

## Act 2, Scene 3

Six weeks later, in mid-December, Edna is on the phone, trying to get someone to restore the water and electricity to the apartment. When Mel arrives, he declares that he is not going back to his incompetent doctor and will instead work out his problems himself. Edna, who is getting increasingly upset about the lack of water and electricity, tearfully tells Mel that her company has gone bankrupt, and she is out of a job. Like Mel had done at the beginning of the play, Edna begins to rant about all of the city's problems, claiming that all she wants is to be able to take a bath. She implores Mel to bang on the pipes as she banged on the wall for him to try to get someone to pay attention to her. In order to calm her, Mel agrees to move with her out of the city.

Harry arrives, offering Mel money for the summer camp. When Mel refuses, Harry leaves, and he and Edna argue about Harry's offer. Their shouts prompt a voice from above to tell them to shut up. As Mel tries to apologize to his neighbor, he is hit again with a bucket of water. As he stands on the terrace in a state of shock, it starts to snow. Edna and Mel look at each other, and he goes to the closet and takes out his shovel. The play closes with Roger Keating's voice, warning residents of the upcoming snow storm and asking them to work together to shovel everyone out.

# Characters

## Edna Edison

Edna Edison is a loving, supportive wife whose main concern is her husband's welfare. She has adopted a traditional role in marriage, taking care of the household while her husband works outside of the home. When he becomes agitated about their living conditions, she tries to offer alternatives that she thinks will benefit both of them and continually tries to revitalize his confidence in himself. She is not a dishrag, however. When Mel gets verbally abusive, she stands her ground, insisting that he treat her with respect.

When Edna is forced to switch roles with Mel, she tries to devote herself to her job while maintaining her steadfast support of her husband. She rushes home to prepare his lunch and check up on his emotional state, running herself ragged in the process. As a result, she experiences the same level of frustration as Mel has endured and so ends up collaborating with his plans for vengeance by the end of the play.

## Harry Edison

Harry Edison, Mel's older brother, generously offers to pay for Mel's therapy, even amid the protests of his sisters who are worried about how long it will take to cure him. Harry is confident of his own judgment that Mel has no business sense and so initially refuses to give him money for a summer camp. Yet his loyalty to his brother eventually supersedes his concerns, and he decides to give the money unconditionally. Simon suggests that Harry could be motivated by his desire to be the favorite in the family, a position, he claims, he never achieved.

## Jessie Edison

Jessie Edison criticizes her brother Mel but insists that, since he is the baby of the family, his behavior must be excused. She does not want to think about the implications of his present behavior and tries to comfort Mel when he arrives at the apartment. Her tears betray her concerns about him, yet she would rather go shopping than face the reality of his situation.

## Mel Edison

Since Mel Edison has adopted the traditional role of head of the household, his ego takes a major blow when he loses his job and can no longer support himself and his wife. At that point, the tensions that he has lived with for six years become overwhelming and cause him to harbor paranoid notions that he is the victim of a conspiracy to undermine the working class in the United States. He tries to maintain his

sanity by venting his emotions and lashing out to those closest to him, including his wife and his neighbors.

His inability to cope with the pressures he faces causes a mental breakdown. Simon glosses over the details behind his recovery but suggests that his departure from corporate America helps to restore his self esteem and his sanity. He reveals the magnanimous side of his nature when he is ready to forgive his neighbor for her slanderous assault on Edna, but when he is humiliated a second time by her, his need for revenge overtakes his humanity, and he plots her destruction.

## Pauline Edison

Pauline Edison defends her brother Mel against her sisters' attacks. She has always found excuses for his behavior. She also seems more grounded in reality than her two sisters, consistently correcting their memories about him.

## Pearl Edison

Pearl Edison is the most practical sister and tries to control all of her siblings, insisting to Edna, □We just want to do the right thing.□

# Themes

## Male and Female Roles

Simon characterizes Mel as a traditional man who is devastated when he loses his job because that is what defines him. He has tolerated all of the irritations of daily city life for six years until he is fired, which causes him to feel worthless. His wife becomes an outlet for his anger and frustration as well as those nearby who threaten his peace. Edna also plays a traditional role at the beginning of the play as she suffers with Mel through the troubles that arise, remaining supportive by continually trying to assure Mel that everything will work out for them. However, there is a limit to the abuse that she will take. Proving herself to be more rational than her husband, Edna tries to get him to recognize that she is living in the same situation with the same set of problems and that □you either live with it or you get out.□

Their roles reverse, however, along with their temperaments, when Edna gets a job. Mel then becomes the more passive member of the family, caused in part by his medication, taking long walks around the city and beginning to work through his problems. This time, when the neighbor yells down to them to be quiet, Mel apologizes rather than feeling that he has to stand up to her. Ironically, Edna adopts this role, baiting the woman regarding the water she threw down previously at Mel. The tensions of working in the city, coupled with the other indignities of life there, have made her as tense and irritable as Mel has been, especially when she is fired as well. By reversing traditional roles for men and women and creating similar consequences for each, Simon illustrates the damaging effects that living in an urban jungle can have on an individual, male or female.

## Imprisonment

Mel feels imprisoned by his world, surrounded by nameless, faceless tormentors who compound his misery. After he loses his job, the walls of the small apartment close in on him as he paces back and forth into every corner. The apartment becomes a microcosm of the city. Whether he is inside freezing or outside roasting, □Either way,□ Mel claims, □they're going to get me.□ Mel sees no exit from this prison, eventually acknowledging that he is too old to play baseball or begin a new career running a summer camp. By the end of the play, the city has defeated Mel, who is reduced to fantasizing about revenge plots. In all, the play seems darkly about how an individual is powerless to create change in a certain kind of urban landscape fraught with its own difficulties.

# Style

C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon define □black humor□ as □the use of the morbid and the absurd for darkly comic purposes in modern fiction and drama.□ Simon uses both verbal and situational black humor to express Mel's bitter response to his situation as well as its absurdity. Mel uses verbal humor in the form of sarcasm and self-deprecation as a defense mechanism. He tries to alleviate his own sense of failure by belittling his wife, when, for example, Edna suggests that they move to another country where the cost of living is cheaper, Mel responds: □All right, call a travel agency. Get two economy seats to Bolivia. We'll go to Abercrombie's tomorrow, get a couple of pith helmets and a spear gun.□ He tries to poke fun at his own situation and thereby lighten it when, after Edna demands, □Don't talk to me like I'm insane,□ he responds, □I'm halfway there, you might as well catch up.□

Situational black humor occurs throughout the play, most notably at the end of each act when Mel is drenched with the water. Both instances provide comic relief in the form of slapstick comedy, but they also are moments of intense humiliation for Mel that heighten his angst, revealing the uselessness of his attempts to fight back against the injustices of his world.

# Historical Context

Sheridan Morley, in his review of the play for *Spectator*, writes that *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* □deals with a moment in history when not only the central character but Manhattan itself was on the brink of a total nervous collapse.□ The events that occurred in 1971, the probable year in which the action of the play takes place, illustrate this pervasive deterioration. City police went on strike along with eight thousand state, county, and municipal employees and local members of the Communications Workers of America. Crime rates soared while two city policemen were murdered and participants in a Puerto Rican Day Parade were attacked. In September, riots broke out in New York State's Attica Prison, which lasted for several days. When order was restored, thirty-two prisoners and eleven guards and police were dead.

Social institutions were strained to the breaking point in the 1970s. Rising rates of inner city poverty, drug use, and youth crime overwhelmed police and social services. Many residents, especially the white middle class, fled the city, eroding the tax base. By the end of the decade, almost a million people had left the city, a population loss that would not be regained for twenty years. All of these factors contributed to the fiscal crisis that emerged in the 1970s, which pushed New York to the edge of financial collapse. Mayor John Lindsey feared that he would have to declare the city bankrupt. Initially, President Gerald Ford refused to provide federal money for the city, but after severe criticism from the New York City press, he eventually approved a loan.

# Critical Overview

While some of Neil Simon's plays are not well received by critics, audiences love just about all of them. *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, however, earned some strong reviews like the one from Cliff Glaviano in the *Library Journal*, who writes, □Simon takes a good look at apartment life, career and role reversals, a nervous breakdown, and the love, torture, care, or inertia that somehow keeps a couple in a relationship for many years.□ He praises both the style of this □classic American comedy□ that □at points□ is □laugh-out-loud funny□ and filled with □fast-moving dialog with nonstop Simon quips and jokes□ as well as its themes, claiming that □it offers sensitive insight into the human condition.□

In his review for the *Los Angeles Times*, Philip Brandes criticizes □dramatic ironies so broad you could drive a truck through.□ He also finds fault with □those relentless one-liners, capping dialogue that predictably opts for cleverness at the expense of truth,□ as when □a Simonized breakdown polishes the rough edges of schizophrenia to more comfortable contours.□ Yet he concludes, □while the production has its problems, it works in unexpected ways,□ especially in the darkness of its comedy.

Sheridan Morley, in his review for *Spectator*, finds □a couple of rather uneasy comic turns in a curiously and uncharacteristically clumsy construction,□ noting that four of the play's characters appear only at the end of act 2.

Reviewers disagree over whether the play is dated. Brandes claims that it is, along with Morley who calls it □a time-warped slice of urban history.□ Yet Glaviano insists that if the audience can □add a cellular phone or two, . . . it's life in 2000.□

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

# Critical Essay #1

*Perkins is a professor of twentieth-century American and British literature and film. In the following essay, she examines the play's theme of urban survival.*

Neil Simon's *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* is set in Manhattan during the early 1970s, a time of great turmoil for New York City as it struggled to deal with a fiscal crisis, high crime rates, and population loss. In his article, "The Ominous Apple," Peter Tietzman notes that the play was a response to Simon's negative view of the city during that period. As quoted by Tietzman, Simon claims: "people were so alienated and so fearful that they were separating themselves from contact. And not without cause." The play is his "statement about those urban ills" as well as his exploration of how the system's failures can cause an erosion of humanity as each individual's primary motive becomes survival.

When the play opens, middle-aged Mel Edison is beset by problems in his small, overpriced, Manhattan apartment. When he and Edna moved in six years ago, Simon explains in the stage directions, "*they thought they were getting . . . all the modern luxuries and comforts of the smart, chic East Side. What they got is paper-thin walls and a view of five taller buildings from their terrace*." They also acquired a broken air conditioner that refuses to go above twelve degrees and music coming through the walls from the apartment next door where German airline stewardesses nightly entertain a steady stream of men. Any attempts to relieve the annoyances inevitably fail: when Edna tried to get the superintendent to fix the air conditioner, he could not find anything wrong with it, and when Mel tries to quiet down the stewardesses, he bangs on the wall, cracking it but getting no other response.

Mel's troubles are not confined to his apartment. The city itself seems to be conspiring against him. The temperature outside is a sweltering eighty-nine degrees at 2:30 in the morning, and traffic noise and the stink from uncollected garbage seep in even with the windows closed. Inside or out, Mel claims, "Either way they're going to get me."

The noise and the stink and the freezing temperature, however, are not the primary reasons Mel cannot sleep. He paces his apartment in the middle of the night because he has lost his job. After revenues declined three million dollars that year, his company fired forty-three people in one afternoon. Mel understands how difficult it will be to find another job at age forty-seven in a city that is facing fiscal crisis. Although he declares to Edna, "I still have value, I still have worth," Mel later admits that his situation has begun to scare him. He tells her, "I'm unraveling . . . I'm losing touch . . . I don't know where I am half the time . . . or who I am any more. I'm disappearing."

Mel's frustrations and fears cause him to lash out at everyone in his immediate vicinity, including Edna, repeatedly blaming others for his misery. He faults her for the broken air conditioner and toilet that will not stop running, insisting, "I asked you a million times to call that office" and then attacks her decorating skills, berating her for keeping "ugly little pillows" on the couch. As Edna tries to find remedies to their situation, suggesting

that they could move out of the city, Mel becomes sarcastic and ridicules her ideas to the point where Edna declares, "Don't talk to me like I'm insane." His attacks on her increase in intensity until he ends up screaming at her.

Edna tries to deflect her husband's verbal assaults, arguing, "Mel, I'm a human being the same as you. I get hot, I get cold, I smell garbage, I hear noise," and declaring, "I'm not going to stand here and let you take it out on me." Yet Mel insists, "If you're a human being you reserve the right to complain, to protest. When you give up that right, you don't exist any more." His protests, in the form of rants against the city and outbursts directed toward his wife and his neighbors, work as a defense mechanism and so help him cope to a degree with his situation. Mel, however, has become a part of the problem, intensifying the angst of those around him, which inevitably redoubles his own.

The newscasts at the end of most scenes link Mel's troubles to those of other beleaguered New Yorkers who, like him, face municipal strikes, muggings, robberies, and unsanitary conditions. In his efforts to retain a measure of sanity, Mel lashes out at his neighbors, trying to exact revenge for the nuisances and humiliations he has suffered. They, however, are tormented by their own city-bred annoyances and so give it right back to him, which only increases his misery. At the end of the first act, after his rantings have prompted angry voices from the apartment above to insist that he lower his voice to prevent the children from waking up, Mel merely screams louder to the point where he is drenched with a bucket of water, the ultimate humiliation. He struggles to cope by fantasizing about burying the neighbors in a foot of snow in retaliation for the injustice.

The city's failure to improve living conditions for its citizens soon begins to drive Edna to the breaking point as well. She must endure her husband's tirades, his insistence that she keep banging on the walls to quiet the neighbors, and a significant loss when everything is stolen from their apartment. She faces the same pressures Mel had at work, when she accepts a secretarial position. She also worries each day about how to help Mel regain his mental health. When she eventually is fired, she wonders whether "the whole world [is] going out of business," and when the apartment loses electricity and water, Edna adopts Mel's tactics, insisting that he bang on the pipes until the super restores the water so that she can take a bath.

By the end of the play, Mel has survived his nervous breakdown, but Edna's loss of employment causes tensions to rise again as the two begin arguing about accepting money from his brother. Their voices once more prompt other tenants to call down to them, but this time with a much more vitriolic tone, which generates a war of words between Edna and her neighbors. It appears though that Mel has learned to cope with the indignities of life in an urban jungle when he offers his apologies to the voice from above. Unfortunately, he only gets another bucket of water dumped on him for his troubles.

The play's final irony comes in the newscaster's call at the end of the play for New Yorkers to "live together and work together in a common cause" as a snowstorm

threatens the city. While they watch the snow increasing in intensity, Mel, with Edna's silent approval, grabs the snow shovel from the closet, preparing for his revenge. Ultimately, through this final act of humiliation and subsequent plan for vengeance, Simon promotes a grudging respect for Mel and Edna in their refusal to be defeated by the city as they return to their survivors' mentality, determined to fight back in the urban warfare that has made them prisoners of Second Avenue.

**Source:** Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

# Adaptations

Melvin Frank directed a film version of the play in 1975, starring Jack Lemmon and Anne Bancroft, with a screenplay by Simon. Bancroft subsequently received a BAFTA Film Award nomination, and Simon was nominated for a WGA Screen Award. The film was available as of 2006.

L. A. Theatre Works's unabridged cassette version, produced in 2001 and read by Richard Dreyfuss and Marsha Mason, was available as of 2006.

# Topics for Further Study

Neil Simon wrote the screenplay for *The Out of Towners*, a film about a young Ohio couple vacationing in New York who are forced to face many of the same problems that drive Mel and Edna to the brink of insanity. View the film and compare and contrast the couples and their response to the chaos of the city. How do you account for the differences? Prepare a PowerPoint demonstration comparing *The Prisoner of Second Avenue* and this film.

After researching the subject of coping mechanisms, prepare to lead a discussion of how Mel and Edna could have found healthier ways to remedy their situation.

Determine if all of the events announced by the reporter at the end of most scenes in the play really happened. Prepare a report that presents an in-depth look at the problems New York City faced in the late 1960s and 1970s. Include a discussion of whether those problems were resolved.

Write a story or autobiographical essay that focuses on the frustrations of urban living.

# Compare and Contrast

**1971:** Between 1965 and 1971, reported crime rates in New York City rise by 91 percent.

**Today:** Violent crime rates go down in the United States and in New York during the first years of the twenty-first century, but in 2005, they start to rise again.

**1971:** On January 14, twenty-five thousand members of Patrolmen's Benevolent Association in New York City go on strike.

**Today:** Labor unions are weakened by plant closings, especially those in the auto industry and in job outsourcing to overseas companies where labor is cheaper.

**1971:** On June 13, racists attack a Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City, which results in hundreds being injured.

**Today:** Minorities have gained prominent positions in business and government, including former secretary of state Colin Powell and Hispanic senator Jon Corzine.

# What Do I Read Next?

In Simon's romantic comedy *Barefoot in the Park* (1963), a young man and woman, whom the author claims are the younger version of Mel and Edna, struggle to cope with life in New York as they learn to adapt to each other's personality and temperament.

Simon's autobiographical *Chapter Two* (1977) explores the pain a middle-aged New Yorker experiences after the death of his wife and the guilt he feels when he remarries soon after. That guilt causes major problems in his new relationship.

*New York: An Illustrated History*, by Ric Burns, James Sanders, and Lisa Ades, was published in 2003 as a companion to Burns's popular PBS series. The authors supplement a comprehensive social and political history of the city with photographs, paintings, and newspaper headlines.

Jane Mushabac and Angela Wigan's *A Short and Remarkable History of New York City* (1999) offers a brief but comprehensive overview of the city and a timeline of its development. The book is an excellent resource for those beginning a study of the city.

# Further Study

Hischak, Thomas S., *American Theatre: A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama, 1969-2000*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Hischak examines the new trends in American theater that emerged during the last few decades of the twentieth century. He includes an analysis of *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, as well as of Simon's later plays.

Koprince, Susan, *Understanding Neil Simon*, University of South Carolina Press, 2002.

In this assessment of Simon's career as a playwright, Koprince provides detailed explications of the style and themes of several of his plays, concluding that Simon has often been wrongfully overlooked by scholars.

Simon, Neil, *Neil Simon Monologues: Speeches from the Works of America's Foremost Playwright*, Dramaline Publications, 1996.

Simon collects his best monologues in this book, which range from the serious to the comic. The collection offers a valuable tool for actors preparing for the plays as well as for students since a summary and analysis of each monologue is included.

□□□, *Rewrites: A Memoir*, Simon and Schuster, 1998.

Simon reflects on his career and his personal life, from his childhood through his early years as a television comedy writer, to his huge success as a playwright into the 1970s. He includes a discussion of his art and the influences on it as well as honest accounts of his problems with writer's block and personal relationships.

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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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