Private Lives Study Guide

Private Lives by Noel Coward

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Introduction

Private Lives is considered a prime example of the sophisticated comedies of Noel Coward, one of the most-prominent dramatists of his era. An overwhelming critical and commercial success when it was first produced in 1930, *Private Lives* remains a standard of repertory and non-professional theatre companies everywhere and has entertained audiences for well over half a century.

The action of the play concerns a divorced couple, Elyot and Amanda, who meet on then-respective honeymoons to second spouses. They realize that they are still in love with each other and should never have divorced; they abandon their new spouses and run off together, though they are soon caught up in the same violent arguments that originally plagued their stormy marriage. This simple, somewhat contrived situation provides all the structure Coward requires to display his eccentric wit and deft comedic stagecraft, which are considered the main strengths of the play. The protagonists lampoon the hypocrisies and pretensions of modern manners and social conventions and seek true love regardless of the cost to their reputations. Once they free themselves from the "outside world," however, their inner passions and jealousies (their "private lives") consume them, leaving them trapped in an inescapable cycle of love and hate.

Expressed m such terms, the plot resembles that of a tragedy, but Coward (who acted the role of Elyot himself in the early productions) fashions from it a last-paced comedy, moving from misfortune to full-blown absurdity before tragedy has time to take hold. Prone to cynicism and irreverence, his glamorous upper-class characters seem incapable of taking much of anything seriously for long—a condition which usually proves contagious for the audience as well. Often accused of wasting his evident talent on superficial entertainments. Coward firmly believed the theatre existed for people's amusement, not to leach or reform them. On these terms. *Private Lives* is considered one of the enduring successes of modern comedic theatre.

Author Biography

Noel Peirce Coward is celebrated as one of the most prominent and prolific talents of the modem British theater. His witty, sophisticated comedies were immensely popular in the early part of Ihe twentieth century and have been widely performed ever since. A theatrical jack-of-all-trades. Coward made his mark not only as a playwright but as an actor, director, producer, songwriter, and lyricist: he also wrote novels, short stories, screenplays, and several volumes of autobiography, as well as being a popular night-club entertainer. In a career that spanned over a half-century, he was associated with most of the leading personalities of the London stage. A show business legend and renowned *raconteur* (a person skilled in telling amusing stories or anecdotes), Coward was known to his contemporaries as much for his off-stage personality as for his many professional accomplishments.

Bom on December 16, 1899. in Teddington-on-Thames, Middlesex. England. Coward was drawn to the stage in early childhood. Encouraged by his parents, he made his professional acting debut at the age of twelve and had begun writing plays and songs by the time he was twenty. In 1925. his reputation as a playwright was established by the hit comedy *Hay Fever.* Over the next twenty years he produced a string of critical and commercial suc^ cesses, including *Bitter Sweet* (1929), *Private Lives* (1930). *Designjbr living* (1933), *Tonight at Ei^ht-Thirty* (1936), *Blithe Spirit* (1941). and *Present Laughter* (1942).

While the majority of Coward's work consists >>f satiric "'comedies of manners" (dramatic works that poke fun at the manners and fashions of a particular social class) and musical revues, his style also encompassed elements of melodrama, modern psychological theatrics, and social drama. During World War II, he wrote two plays celebrating British nationalism and ideals *(This Happy Breed* [1943] and *Peace in Our Time* [1947]) and the film //; *Which We Serve,* a tribute to the British Royal Navy, which he co-directed with noted film director David Lean *{Lawrence of Arabia. The Bridge on the River Kwui).*

After the War, Coward's popularity faded somewhat, due in part to changing tastes among audiences and critics; though he remained a prominent figure in the theatrical world, his slightly-darker stage comedies of this period (including *South Sea Bubble* [1951] and *Nude with Violin* [1956]) failed to elicit the same enthusiasm as his lighter pre-war triumphs. While Ms work for the stage diminished, he continued to write short fiction, and his 1960 novel, *Pomp and Circumstance,* was a bestseller. His published diaries and reminiscences also found a wide audience, particularly an early autobiography, *Present Indicative* (1937) and its sequel, *Future Indefinite* (1954).

Coward died of a heart attack on March 26, 1973, in Blue Harbor, Jamaica. Among his many honors, he was given the New York Drama Critics Circle Award (Best Foreign Play, 1942, for *Blithe Spirit*), a Special Academy Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (1942, for *In Which We Serve),* and a Special Tony Award

from the League of American Theatres and Producers in 1970. Coward was knighted in 1970 and memorialized in Westminster Abbey in 1984.

Plot Summary

Act I

The setting is the terrace of an elegant hotel on the French Riviera; two separate suites open onto it, from either side of the stage. This simple situation contains a number of remarkable coincidences, as the audience quickly learns in a series of brief, mirror-image episodes. Each suite is occupied by a honeymooning couple, fresh from the altar: Elyot and Sibyl Chase on one side, and Victor and Amanda Prynne on the other. Elyot and Amanda were each previously married, a matter of some anxiety to their new spouses; in fact, they happen to have been married to each other, a three-year union they both describe as an intolerable round of violent arguments and passionate jealousies. Five years after their divorce, each is starting off on a new life, with what seems to be a more stable and manageable partner. Adding to the coincidence, they happen to have married at the same time ... and to have chosen the same hotel for their honeymoon... and to have been assigned adjoining suites.

Each couple makes an appearance on the terrace, then goes back inside, in a series of alternating episodes and near-misses that establishes the complex situation. The honeymoons are not starting well, for Sibyl and Victor each persist in asking about their new spouses' first marriages. Annoyed, Elyot and Amanda both profess to be far happier with their new mates but also give indications of already becoming bored by them. Finally, Amanda and Elyot notice each other, without coming face-to-face, and react with panic. They rush to their spouses, each demanding to leave the hotel immediately, but neither Sibyl nor Victor will agree to such a sudden change in then: honeymoon plans. The result is each new couple's "first quarrel," with Victor stalking off to the bar and Sibyl to the hotel casino. Left alone, Elyot and Amanda finally confront each other again.

Sharing the cocktails their spouses have abandoned, they behave coolly, making civil small talk, inquiring about the new spouses, toasting each other's happiness, and light-heartedly reminiscing over their disastrous marriage. The hotel orchestra (playing in the garden below the terrace) strikes up an old love song, and Amanda sings along while Elyot watches her intently. Their reactions suggest that it had been "their song" when they were a couple; when the music ends, Amanda is fighting back tears. After an awkward moment, their reminiscences grow more regretful. They ascribe then: marital fireworks to having been "ridiculously over in love." "To hell with love, "Amanda vows; love had led them into "selfishnessness, cruelty, hatred, possessiveness, petty jealousy." And yet, she observes, here they are, "starting afresh with two quite different people. In love all over again, aren't we?" Elyot fails to answer at first, then gives the answer she doesn't want to hear: "No.... We're not in love all over again, and you know it." Saying goodnight, he turns abruptly back toward his suite.

Amanda is panic-stricken, and calls him back. The moment, the music, and the memories have clearly rekindled their former passion, but she refuses to face that fact,

asking him to divert her with small talk until she can pull herself together. The effort fails miserably, however, and they soon confirm that they are—and have always been—in love. After some negotiations, they agree to elope immediately, abandomng the people they have just married and escaping to an apartment Amanda keeps in Paris. Worried that they will soon rum their love all over again with their arguing, Amanda insists on a promise "never to quarrel again," to be enforced by a code-phrase, "Solomon Isaacs." When they feel a fight developing, one or the other will say "Solomon Isaacs," a signal for two minutes of silence ("with an option of renewal") in which to cool down. Agreeing to the pact, they escape. The act ends with the jilted Victor and Sibyl returning to the terrace, discovering their common plight, and trying to absorb it all as they drink the cocktails Elyot and Amanda have left behind.

Act II

A few days later, the scene picks up the fugitive couple in Amanda's well-appointed Pans flat, savoring their sudden happiness. They have sent the maid home and are relaxing in cozy domestic bliss. Throughout this Act, their rambling conversations reveal the mixed emotions of then- situation. The ever-shifting flow of talk runs into three alternating streams: the exchange of romantic endearments, coupled with witty banter that parodies aristocratic manners; the revival of "old scores" from their marriage, leading to arguments that are only headed off by the invocation of Solomon Isaacs (who is soon abbreviated to "Sollocks" for economy's sake); and anxious speculation about the future— what to do when Victor and Sibyl catch up to them—and whether they will make their love work out this time around. Soon Elyot grows passionately romantic, but Amanda is not in the mood His resentment at her refusal escalates into a battle that is just barely contained with an urgent "triple Sollocks."

In the calm following this storm, Elyot sits down to the piano and begins playing idly Amanda joins him and they sing several old songs together, concluding with "their" song from the terrace scene. The sudden ring of the telephone breaks then* reverie Although it turns out to be a wrong number, their first, terrified thought is that it is Victor and Sibyl. "What shall we do if they suddenly walk in on us ?," Elyot asks; "Behave exquisitely," Amanda replies airily. But the phone call has shaken her composure; as she grows somber (speculating that happiness like theirs cannot last), Elyot earnestly tells her not to be serious. He urges her to "be flippant" and "laugh at everything"—including themselves, their love, and the inevitability of death. "Let's be superficial and pity the poor philosophers," he rhapsodizes; "Let's blow trumpets and squeakers, and enjoy the party as much as we can, like very small, quite idiotic school-children."

A tender moment follows but soon another "skeleton" from the past is being tossed around, an affair Elyot had suspected during their marriage. Tempers rise quickly, until Amanda calls him a "ridiculous ass," and turns on the record-player to shut him out. Elyot turns it off, and a battle for the machine ensues. Elyot hastily calls for the truce of "Sollocks," but this time the skirmish will not be contained. "Sollocks yourself," Amanda cries furiously, smashing the phonograph record over his head. "You spiteful little beast," he answers, slapping her in the face They settle down to a full-scale brawl, with

lamps and vases flying, furniture overturned, unrestrained verbal assaults, and slapstick choreography. As they roll on the floor in what Coward describes as "paroxysms of rage," Victor and Sibyl enter through the front door, and gape at the combatants in silent shock. The struggle continues until Amanda knocks Elyot down, rushes through a side door, and slams it behind her. He jumps up, runs into the room opposite hers, and slams the door. As Victor and Sibyl creep inside and sink wordlessly onto the sofa, the curtain falls.

Act III

At 8:30 the next morning, amid the debris from last night's battle, Victor sleeps on a sofa blocking the doorway to Amanda's room, while Sibyl is similarly encamped at Elyot's door. Louise, the maid, arrives for work, waking the jilted spouses. Amanda soon emerges from her room with a packed suitcase and heads for the door, cut off from escape, she is "gracefully determined to rise above the situation." Acting the role of the perfect hostess, she arranges for Louise to bring breakfast out. Elyot completes the group and is upbraided by Victor for his "flippant" attitude towards the situation; soon they are on the verge of coming to blows, and Amanda and Sibyl withdraw to another room. Elyot refuses to fight, however; he argues that it would prove nothing and would only satisfy the "primitive feminine instincts" of the women, who want to be fought over. Victor tries to discuss the legal details of their situation, but Elyot storms off to his room, calling him a "rampaging gas bag."

Sibyl soon joins Elyot in his room, leaving Victor and Amanda to negotiate a settlement At first, they agree that Victor will sue for divorce immediately while Amanda exiles herself in some foreign country. Victor soon softens his position, however, offering to live apart but delay a formal divorce to protect her reputation. Sibyl and Elyot emerge and announce that they have reached a similar decision: she will not divorce him for a year.

Louise brings breakfast, and the four settle down awkwardly to dine. Amanda makes light conversation in an effort to smooth over the discomfort, but Elyot will not play along: he mocks her "proper" manners, and soon disrupts her composure. As she "chokes violently," Victor again assails Elyot's flippancy, while Sibyl defends her husband. Soon Victor and Sibyl are arguing lustily; for three days they've been getting on each other's nerves and their anger now comes spilling out, as Elyot and Amanda watch in amazement. As the argument escalates, they laugh to themselves, and Elyot blows Amanda a kiss across the table. Their spouses don't even notice as they rise and walk silently to the front door, hand-in-hand. Sibyl slaps Victor, he shakes her violently, and Elyot and Amanda, with their suitcases, go smilingly out the door, as the curtain falls.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

This scene opens on a terrace of a hotel in France. There are two separate suites divided by a line of small trees in tubs. It is a summer's evening around eight o'clock and an orchestra is playing nearby. A pretty, young woman, Sibyl Chase, steps out onto the terrace and calls back into the suite to her husband, Elyot Chase. He joins her on the terrace and they begin to talk about the lovely view and how happy they are to be married. Shortly after, they begin to argue, but before the argument gets too heated, Sibyl apologizes for annoying Elyot and he kisses her. Sibyl asks Elyot if he is happier being married to her than he was to his ex-wife, Amanda.

Elyot starts to show anger at the memory of his ex-wife and asks Sibyl to stop talking about her. Sibyl ignores his request and makes Elyot say that he despised Amanda and could never love her again. They discuss how their love is a different kind of love, "wise, and kind, and undramatic." When they discuss the plans for the next day, Sibyl proclaims her aversion to being sunburned and Elyot calls her a very feminine creature. This hurts her feelings and she says that being feminine does not make her crafty and calculating. She brings up Amanda again; every time Elyot asks her to stop talking about Amanda, she agrees, but then keeps on talking about her, which obviously displeases Elyot. They make dinner plans and go back inside.

Victor, a man a few years older than Elyot, walks out onto the terrace from the adjoining room. Admiring the view, he calls back into the room for his wife, Mandy, to come outside. He proclaims how beautiful she is and how happy he is to be married to her. Victor then asks her if she loves him and she says yes; he also asks her if she loves him more than she loved Elyot. It becomes obvious that Mandy is Amanda, Elyot's ex-wife. She says she does not remember, whereupon Victor makes angry remarks against Elyot, indicating that he would like to hurt him for hurting Amanda. It is revealed that Elyot struck Amanda a few times and that she struck him too. Victor seems much angrier with this than Amanda is who treats the conversation as a joke.

Amanda changes the subject and says she wants to be sunburned the next day. Victor says he hates sunburned women. He then brings up her last honeymoon, even though it is clear that Amanda does not want to talk about it. Victor professes his love for Amanda and tells her how he is going to make her happy. Amanda says she is not what he thinks she is and says she loves Victor "more calmly" than she did Elyot. Victor repeatedly brings up Elyot until Amanda forbids him from bringing up his name again. Victor says he is surprised by Amanda's strained, wild ways, and says he wants to know her better. Amanda says it is good for the woman to have mystery about her; also, that Victor should know that she is unreliable and not completely normal. Victor becomes more concerned and scandalized as the conversation progresses. He gets over this though and kisses her and they make plans to get ready for dinner as they go back into the suite.

Elyot walks out onto his part of the terrace and sits down with his back to the other part of the terrace. Amanda then walks out and sits down with her back to him. The orchestra starts playing and they both seem startled. Elyot begins to hum along to the song and, upon hearing him; Amanda clutches her throat and jumps up to look over the trees at the adjoining terrace. Seeing Elyot, she sits back down and starts humming along to the tune. Elyot hears her, gasps and jumps up to see her. When the song ends, they are facing each other.

They have a strained conversation about how they are both enjoying their respective honeymoons and how happy they are. Amanda goes back inside and Elyot looks horrified. Sibyl comes out onto the terrace and notices that something is wrong. When she asks Elyot about it, Elyot says he feels ill and that they must leave at once. Not wanting to leave, Sibyl asks Elyot if he is mad or drunk. They argue for some time but Sibyl is firm and nothing Elyot says to her will convince her to leave. The argument gets ugly and Sibyl starts to cry and says that her mother was right about Elyot. She says she wishes she were dead and Elyot stomps back into the rooms; Sibyl follows him in tears.

Victor then comes stomping out of his room onto the terrace; Amanda follows him and he calls her a lunatic. Amanda tries to convince Victor that they have to leave by telling him that her sister had a tragedy here. Victor does not believe her so he calls her a liar and she admits it. Pressing her for the truth, she finally admits that she wants to leave because Elyot is in the same hotel as them. She lies again and says that Elyot did not see her. Victor still refuses to leave and says he will not start giving into her already. Their argument heats up; Amanda insults Victor and he tries to remain calm. Eventually he tells her that he is going down to the bar and Amanda tells him to go away.

Soon after, Elyot stomps onto the terrace followed by a crying Sibyl. They get into a mean argument; Sibyl says she wishes that she had never met Elyot and he tells her that he hopes she chokes on her dinner. Wailing, she goes back inside. Elyot lights a cigarette; Amanda, seeing him, walks over, and asks him for one. They bicker and then start drinking the cocktails that were left on Elyot's part of the terrace. Toasting to each other's new husband and wife, each one asks the other one if they are in love and what their respective spouses are like. Upon discovering that they were both trying to leave for Paris, they laugh at the coincidence. Soon they are insulting the other's spouse. In a moment of silence, the orchestra begins to play the same tune as before. Amanda softly hums the tune and she turns back to Elyot with tears in her eyes. They apologize to each other and, when the orchestra begins to play the same tune again, they laugh. Amanda and Elyot then reminisce about old times: how many good times they had, how in love they were and what fools they were to ruin it all. Elyot proclaims that neither of them really loves their new spouse and, as he turns to go back inside, Amanda calls to him and says she does not want him to leave. Elyot tells her he loves her; Amanda tries to protest but admits that she loves him too. He says that she holds no mystery for him and she says this makes her glad. They embrace, and as soon as they pull apart, they decide that they must escape to a flat in Paris of which Amanda has use. Soon, they are bickering once more only to apologize and start kissing again. They make a pact to never quarrel again and decide that whenever they start bickering one of them will say

"Solomon Isaacs" and then they will have to stop. They rush off together through Elyot's suite.

Victor comes outside, looking anxious. He goes back inside calling Amanda's name; when he hears Sibyl calling Elyot's name he comes back out to the terrace. They see each other and talk about how they are looking for their spouses. When she notices the two empty cocktail glasses on her side, Sibyl comes over to Victor's side of the terrace and they both end up looking pensively out at the view.

Act 1 Analysis

This scene introduces us to our main characters and sets the tone for the rest of the play. Elyot and Sybil start arguing almost immediately. Sybil is very concerned about her husband's ex-wife and needs to be assured that he loves her and not Amanda. Their relationship is set up. Sybil is insecure and needy; Elyot seems detached and knows that to appease her he only has to kiss her and tell her he loves her. Early in the play, we begin to see that this relationship is doomed and that Sybil and Elyot are a mismatch.

The parallels that run throughout this play begin when we meet Amanda and Victor. Victor is the insecure one in this marriage; he needs Amanda to reassure him that she loves him, and he wants her to say bad things about Elyot. Victor shows how he feels threatened by Elyot when he threatens to hurt him physically. Amanda's annoyance also shows how there is discord between her and Victor.

The first real emotion felt and shown in the play by Elyot and Amanda is when they first see each other on the terrace. Their love seems genuine and inescapable while the love they claim for their spouses is false. This introduces the theme that love is only true if it is violent and passionate. Both parties love their current spouse "more calmly" than their former, but they also leave their current spouse for their former. The idea of fate also comes in when Amanda and Elyot realize that they were both trying to escape to the same city, Paris.

When Elyot and Amanda start talking for the second time, the tone is different. They seem like companions who speak to each other as equals, not in cloying or false terms. Their conversation is full of passion and regret. As a result, the audience is not surprised when they embrace. Instead, it is expected and even welcomed because they are so obviously in love with each other. This love makes the fact that they are married to other people even more ridiculous.

The end scene mirrors how the act opened up, only this time it is Sibyl and Victor looking out at the view instead of Amanda and Elyot. Now that Amanda and Elyot have left, Sibyl and Victor finally realize that the honeymoon is not going to go well. The parallels between the two relationships are comic in their absurdity: both couples bicker, both spouses (Sibyl and Victor) need to be reassured and both seem to hate their spouse's exes. This hatred is born of fear that their love is false, and that Elyot and

Amanda could love each other again. The climax, when Elyot and Amanda leave together, foreshadows trouble in their future: from each other, because of their history of arguing, and from the people they both just married and quickly abandoned.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

This scene takes place a few days later in Amanda's flat in Paris. It is ten o'clock at night and Amanda and Elyot are seated opposite one another at a table. Dinner is over and they are comfortable in pajamas, drinking coffee and liquors. Their housemaid, Louise has a cold and they are talking and laughing about how she sounds like a herd of bison. An absurd but funny conversation about Hungarians and crossing the Sahara on a camel is their next topic. The past few days have evidently been peaceful and they have sent a note to Victor and Sibyl. Amanda admits she would never have been happy with Victor, and they discuss their future and whether they want to be remarried. Both seem to be scared of marriage so they do not conclude. Instead, they kiss and talk about their past. An argument begins in earnest after a short while when the question of being faithful comes up. They argue about the affairs they had after they divorced, but they finally stop and admit that they should have said Sollocks (an abridged version of Solomon Isaacs) long ago.

They dance and have another absurd conversation. After dancing, they revert to talking about Sibyl and Victor. Elyot says that they would have been happy with Sibyl and Victor; their lives would have been smooth and amicable. When Amanda says a few complimentary things about Victor, another argument begins. Elyot quickly says Sollocks. They kiss and speak lovingly to each other about how much they missed one another and how heartbroken the divorce left them.

They start kissing and Elyot tries to make love to Amanda, but she resists upon insisting that it is too soon after dinner. This makes Elyot very angry while Amanda stays calm. They begin to bicker yet again. This time Amanda calls out Sollocks. Elyot begins to play the piano and it seems that their fight is over. They begin kissing again and end up on the couch. When the telephone rings, they both jump up, afraid that it is Sibyl or Victor. Elyot answers the phone; it is a wrong number. Amanda says that happiness is only temporary and that love is a very poor joke. Elyot makes light of the situation and tells her not to be serious, to treat everything as if it were a joke. They kiss and talk about past big fights they had. The memory of them makes them laugh at how ridiculous they were. Elyot pours himself a brandy and this starts another argument because Amanda thinks his prior two glasses should have been enough.

Soon they are trading sarcastic barbs with each other. Elyot is angry because of a suspected affair Amanda had with a man called Peter Burden. Amanda is angry because Elyot is drinking and being annoying. While arguing, they end up wrecking a record that was playing on the gramophone. Elyot becomes remorseful and says Sollocks but Amanda breaks the record over his head anyway. Elyot slaps her and immediately apologizes but Amanda still slaps him across the face. When Elyot walks away, Amanda throws a cushion at him, knocking over a lamp in the process. They argue more and Amanda tries to leave the flat but Elyot prevents her from going; they

end up fighting each other while rolling on the floor. It is at this moment that Sibyl and Victor enter. Amanda and Elyot continue fighting; they eventually break apart and run to separate rooms where they slam the doors. Sibyl and Victor are left alone in the room and they sink on to the sofa.

Act 2 Analysis

Act 2 is where we see more of the absurdist comedy that began in Act 1. The conversations between Amanda and Elyot are absurd and comical, and their arguments are violent, but it usually ends with them laughing and making up. A pattern in the relationship between Amanda and Elyot becomes cemented in this act. When they talk about abstract ideas or absurdities, they get along. When they talk about their own relationship or anything that is grounded in reality, they begin to bicker. This bickering leads to full-out arguments, showing how turbulent their relationship must have been for the years that they were together. It made sense that each of the second marriages involved someone who was calmer, less argumentative and more passive. At the same time, love is being portrayed as being something that causes people to behave violently.

The pattern of arguing and making up continues throughout Act 2. It appears that this cycle has started to spin out of control. Each argument is a little bit worse and each time they say Sollocks it occurs later and later in the fight. This foreshadows the blow-up fight they have at the end of Act 2.

Elyot's drinking had been foreshadowed in Act 1 and it comes into focus here. The final argument of Act 2 focuses on two serious problems: Elyot's drinking and Amanda's relationships with other men. This is a continuation of arguments they had years ago. The fight escalates out of control to the point where saying Sollocks does no good. Amanda and Elyot are locked in their own world and do not even notice when Sibyl and Victor walk in. They are too caught up in their own passion and anger to notice anyone else. Sibyl and Victor are left to be bystanders in this relationship war. This scene shows how passive Sibyl and Victor are, especially in contrast to the passion and emotion demonstrated by Amanda and Elyot.

Act 2 demonstrates the main theme of the play: True love is combative, passionate and does not die. Five years after their divorce, Elyot and Amanda are arguing like the past five years and their second marriages never happened. They cannot exist in the same room without either yelling or kissing. It is this comic exaggeration that makes the play a comedy instead of a drama. Even through the fighting, we never doubt that Amanda and Elyot will end up together.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

It is now eight-thirty the next morning. Victor is asleep on a couch outside Amanda's door and Sybil is asleep on a couch outside of Elyot's room. The housemaid, Louise, enters and is horrified by the mess that Amanda and Elyot have made. Louise speaks in French to the half asleep Victor and Sibyl. Upon waking, they talk and try to figure out what to do. Sibyl cries as Victor tells her that they must finish what they came there to do.

Amanda opens the door to her room; she is dressed and looks as though she is ready to travel. She tries to leave but she is drawn into conversation with Victor and Sibyl. She acts very calm and cool, as if the craziness of the night before had not happened. She goes into the kitchen to get coffee and leaves Victor and Sibyl feeling even more irritated. Sibyl seems especially angry. At this point, Elyot opens his door and, as soon as he sees Sibyl and Victor, he closes it again and tells them to go away. After Amanda returns from the kitchen and goes back into her own room, Elyot opens the door to his room. This time he is dressed and looks as though he is leaving. Sibyl and Victor argue with him and convince him to stay and talk. He goes to order coffee but Victor tells him that Amanda already ordered breakfast.

Victor and Sibyl talk to Elyot about how horrible the whole mess is and what they should do. Elyot has a flippant remark for everything they say, and this only goes to infuriate Victor further. Amanda comes back into the room, acting in a high-handed manner, as if they were not in an awkward situation. Elyot and Amanda proceed to have a ridiculous and comically absurd conversation about how lovely Paris is and how lovely their apartment is. This conversation degrades into bickering and almost turns into a full-out fight, especially when Victor steps in to defend Amanda after Elyot calls her a slattern and fishwife. Sibyl breaks up the fight and Amanda ends up dragging Sibyl off to her room, on the pretense of washing up.

After the women leave, Victor and Elyot are still arguing; Victor seems very intent on hitting Elyot. Elyot tells him that their fighting is just what the women would want and it is useless to do it. They then ask each other if the other one loves Amanda and neither will give a definite answer. Elyot is then struck by a certain melancholy and he says that everyone will forget him. Victor tells him that is nonsense and yet another argument starts and Elyot storms off to his room. Amanda and Sibyl re-emerge and Amanda accuses Victor of not being very manly because he did not fight Elyot. Sibyl comes to Elyot's defense and says he is just as strong as Victor is. Amanda and Sibyl start arguing and Amanda tells Sibyl that she can have Elyot. Sibyl then bangs on Elyot's door and he lets her in.

Amanda and Victor start to tidy up. Victor says he is confused and lost; he cannot see why Amanda would want to be with Elyot when he drinks and hits her. Amanda says she

should never have married Victor because she is a bad lot; he does not contradict her. Instead, he becomes businesslike and discusses their divorce plans whereupon Amanda becomes self-pitying. Both agree that Sibyl is stupid and insipid and this cheers up Amanda. Victor asks Amanda if she loves Elyot and she will not give him a straight answer. Eventually she gives in and says that she hates him but that they have a strong attraction to each other. Amanda also says that she thought she loved Victor after Victor tells her that she never really loved him.

A very awkward breakfast follows with the four of them sitting around, pretending that everything is okay. While they eat, they make polite conversation and it comes out that neither couple is going to be divorced right away. At one point, Elyot winks at Amanda. She seems startled and the conversation dwells on travel and beaches. Sibyl and Victor start arguing after Elyot makes a joke and Sibyl tells Victor that he has no sense of humor. While their spouses are arguing, Amanda looks at Elyot and he winks at her again. She smiles. As the argument between Sibyl and Victor escalates, Elyot and Amanda end up holding hands and quietly laughing. Elyot blows a kiss to Amanda. Sibyl and Victor end up screaming at each other while Elyot and Amanda get up to leave, still holding hands. Sibyl slaps Victor; he shakes her by the shoulders. Amanda and Elyot leave, smiling, and carrying their suitcases as the argument continues.

Act 3 Analysis

The symbolism and parallels that have run throughout the play come to a head in Act 3. Amanda and Elyot are in separate rooms, and in front of each of these rooms, their spouse is asleep on a couch; this couch prevents them from exiting their rooms. It is as if they are trapped and separated again by their mismatched spouses.

Events have flipped around now that it is morning. Victor and Sibyl are upset and rumpled, and Amanda and Elyot are calm and determined to behave as though nothing has happened. This contrast shows a number of things. For one, it shows how much Victor and Sibyl did love Amanda and Elyot. Their love is showing up now because they are the ones who are angry and argumentative. Even lovely, passive Sibyl finds her voice, and throughout Act 3, she is sarcastic and much more alive than she was in Act 1.

Victor and Sibyl are trying to behave rationally and are thinking about the long term. This is in contrast to Elyot and Amanda who simply want to leave, to run away. This further serves to show the impulsiveness of Elyot and Amanda versus the seeming calmness and rationality of Sibyl and especially of Victor. Victor has a brief crack in his calmness when he wants to hit Elyot. Elyot talks his way out of it though and Victor's regular, calm nature returns very quickly. It is interesting that Amanda seems to have wanted Victor to beat up Elyot; she seems offended that he did not. It is also interesting that Sibyl comes to Elyot's defense. For a moment, it would appear that original alliances (Victor and Amanda, and Elyot and Sibyl) have reemerged, but this is shortly squashed. Amanda realigns herself with Elyot when she talks to Victor, who comes to realize that Amanda really is not the woman he thought he was marrying.

The climax of this final act ends up with Sibyl and Victor yelling at each other and acting rather as Amanda and Elyot have in the prior two acts. The argument between them escalates, during which Amanda and Elyot get back together. Their love seems to be so innate that all they have to do is look at one another to know what the other is thinking. The comic absurdities that have run through this play really climax when the seemingly rational and calm Sibyl and Victor get into a pushing and shoving match. When Elyot and Amanda leave, they are once again bonded together as co-conspirators.

Characters

Elyot Chase

The witty and cynical Elyot is the male lead, whose love/hate relationship with Amanda forms the centerpiece of *Private Lives.* Though his occupation (if any) is unidentified, he is wealthy and fashionable, accustomed to luxury, and self-indulgent In conversation, his habit is to "be flippant" and mock traditional social conventions; if he has a philosophy, it lies in his refusal to ever be serious, in defiance of "all the futile moralists who try to make life unbearable." He holds to no Great Truths; everything is "nonsense" in the long run, nothing is eternal, and the intelligent response is to live for the moment and savor all pleasures, to "be superficial and pity the poor philosophers" who search for higher meanings and moral truths

For all his eloquent rebellion, however, Elyot has his insecurities, and is not unaffected by social expectations. At the play's beginning, he has willingly entered into a conventional marriage; though it appears doomed and promises to be unfulfilling for him, he is resigned (before meeting Amanda again) to acting out the shallow role of husband. Confronted by Victor in Act HI, he doesn't defend his actions, admitting that he is completely in the wrong, and that his flippancy is meant "to cover a very real embarrassment." Though he is wise to its hypocrisies, Elyot is not immune to society's demands—just as he is not immune to his attraction for Amanda, despite the bitter history of their marriage, and the violent jealousies they inspire in each other.

Sibyl Chase

Sibyl is Elyot's second wife, seven years younger than her husband; but although she is the newly wed "Mrs. Chase," she is quickly thrown together with Victor Prynne by their shared fate. From the end of the first Act, she and Victor become a kind of "couple," traveling together as they seek justice from their wandering spouses As a couple, they balance the central pairing of Elyot and Amanda, and while they are the "wronged parties," they are meant to receive little sympathy from the audience. As Coward has sketched them, they contrast unfavorably in every sense with the passionate, witty couple at the heart of the action.

In comparison to Amanda, Sibyl is shallow, inexperienced, andunreflective, dutifully acting out her social roles with a false, exaggerated femininity. As the blushing bride, she is bubbly and romantic, deferring to her husband and denying any intention to "manage" or run his life. Cast as the abandoned wife, she gives way to dramatic tears and self-pity, while demonstrating an ability to "manage" both Victor and Elyot in order to get her way. Coward leaves her character relatively undeveloped; like Victor, she is a superficial foil for the sophisticated protagonists, Elyot and Amanda.

Louise

Louise is the maid at Amanda's Paris flat, a minor character; she appears briefly in Act in, primarily to serve breakfast to the four protagonists.

Amanda Prynne

As Coward's heroine, Amanda is sharp-witted and glamorous, strong-willed and passionate. By abandoning Victor (and by being sexually active while unmarried), she defies the conventional, reserved, and subordinate role for her gender—especially as dictated by the society of the first half of the twentieth century. Her relationship with Elyot, though hopelessly plagued by their hateful bickering, also offers a more equal—and honest—alliance than that with the stodgy Victor: she and Elyot are intellectual equals and comfortable companions, at least in the moments between their violent conflicts.

Though she and Elyot mock the formalities of aristocratic manners, Amanda is well-versed in social conventions and their power to smooth over conflicts. If Elyot's philosophy is to "be flippant," hers is to "behave exquisitely"; like Elyot's, Amanda's strategy serves to cover the embarrassment of facing the consequences of their actions and to distance herself from the uncomfortable realities of their volatile relationship.

Victor Prynne

Steadfastly conventional and self-consciously masculine, Victor is the conservative counterpart to Elyot's rebellious flippancy. Habitually "serious," proper, and moderate in all things, he is paternally protective of Amanda; yet his formal, dignified posturing seems to cover a bland and passionless nature. When he'confronts Elyot in Act in, he strikes a belligerent pose, but Elyot sees through his blustering threats, calling him "all fuss and fume, one of these cotton-wool Englishmen"; unable to defend his own position, Elyot nonetheless expresses contempt for Victor: "[I]f you had a spark of manliness in you, you'd have shot me." In defense of his and Sibyl's "honor," Victor presents a caricature of manly chivalry, which evaporates completely when it is confronted and questioned by Elyof his violence is easily neutralized by Elyot's clever argumentation, but when his temper is roused, he is not above striking the woman he claims to defend. Like Sibyl, he is an underdeveloped character, a dull stereotype who serves as a background to highlight the brilliance of the unconventional protagonists

Themes

As a "comedy of manners," *Private Lives* deals with the conventions and social rituals by which a person presents their "public" self to the world—and with the "private" passions and motivations that lie beneath the veneer of etiquette and respectability. The title comes from a speech Amanda makes early in the first Act. "I think very few people are completely normal, deep down in their private lives," she muses. "It all depends on a combination of circumstances;" given the right conditions, "there's no knowing what one mightn't do." She soon illustrates the point by impulsively running off with Elyot, in contradiction to law, social taboo, and the marriage vows she has just taken—yet m accordance with her personal needs and private desires.

Style

While Coward is known for his witty dialogue, his work is relatively short on quotable "punch-lines" or one-lmers, the kind of which define the comedic style of writers like playwright Neil Simon *(The Odd Couple)* and filmmaker Woody Allen *(Annie Hall),* The humor of *Private Lives* depends greatly on its expert stagecraft and carefully-balanced construction. In his introduction to the anthology *Play Parade,* Coward modestly describes the play as "a reasonably well-constructed duologue for two experienced performers, with a couple of extra puppets thrown in to assist the plot and provide contrast." This self-deprecating assessment points to two of the playwright's strengths: his awareness of the abilities of the "experienced performers" with whom he worked, and his attention to contrast and symmetry.

Coward used actors he knew, he often tailored his fictional characters to match his thespians personalities and physical traits, and he paced his dialogue to fit these actors' timing and delivery. *(Private Lives* was specifically written for Gertrude Lawrence, who essayed Amanda, and Coward himself; the pair had worked together often before starring in the play's first production) As Enoch Brater noted in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Coward's language "is not by itself inherently funny; what makes it effective on stage is the way it has been designed as a cue for performance." The shifting moods and volatile chemistry of Elyot and Amanda's relationship are carefully orchestrated through their conversation. While their clever dialogue "works" reasonably well on the page, it is difficult to read the text without also envisioning the give-and-take of gestures, expressions, and voice inflections (not to mention the broad physicality of the slapstick fights) that mark its performance. These are large, "meaty," and demanding roles, characters meant to capture and hold the attention of the audience; for all the "literary" nature of their conversation, their every nuance has been fashioned with an eye toward the visual, toward a realization on the living stage.

Coward freely acknowledged that the play's secondary characters, Sibyl and Victor, were relatively insubstantial ("little better than ninepins," he wrote in *Play Parade,* "lightly wooden, and only there at all in order to be knocked down repeatedly and stood up again.") Although they are the hapless "butts" of Coward's humor and never threaten to outshine the protagonists, their deployment is crucial to the play's success. Their conventional notions of marriage provide a contrast to the risky, emotional alliance between Elyot and Amanda; in turn, the protagonists' passion, glamour and intelligence are heightened by the bland personalities of their counterparts.

In the tightly-scripted first Act, Coward achieves another kind of balance, through the individual scenes of the two newly wed couples, which lead up to Elyot and Amanda's reunion In alternating appearances, the couples are presented as mirror-images of one another, separately enacting the same scenarios with an exaggerated symmetry, down to the pacing and content of their dialogue. The audience is quickly cued to the similarities between Sibyl and Victor—and between Amanda and Elyot. Long before they switch partners, each pair (Sibyl/ Victor, Amanda/Elyot) is revealed as a kind of "couple," having more m common with each other than they do with their new spouses

The jilting of Sibyl and Victor is a "scandal," but Coward has already enlisted the audience's sympathy for it; dramatically speaking, the rearranged "couples" make far more sense, and their re-shufflmg allows each character to escape from what would clearly have been a disastrous mismatch.

A comparable symmetry marks the play's ending: as Elyot and Amanda sneak off together (echoing their sudden disappearance in Act I), their conventional, "respectable" spouses are locked in an escalating argument, which mirrors Elyot and Amanda's fireworks in Act II Thrown together by circumstances, Sibyl and Victor have truly become a "couple," however temporary, and their fight serves to make that fact official. Given a few years, they might become well-matched, veteran combatants, like their wayward spouses. Their argument, and Elyot and Amanda's sly escape, may each be humorous in themselves, but the juxtaposition heightens the effect considerably, making a comic moment resonate with the themes Coward has developed throughout the play.

Historical Context

Throughout the 1920s, and particularly during the Great Depression of the 1930s, many of the most popular plays and films were light comedies set among the wealthy, privileged members of "high society." When such works are associated with the Depression, their appeal is usually ascribed to the audience's need for escape from their grim circumstances, if only briefly, and only in imagination: they offered glamorous fantasies of unimaginable luxury, to audiences who were straggling to secure the bare necessities. Given its upper-class setting and its appearance in the year after the 1929 New York stock market crash, *Private Lives* might appear to be such a work of Depression-era "escapism." Yet when the play was written, the full and lasting effects of the economic crisis were not yet widely recognized, either in Europe or America. While it may be classed as light entertainment, intended more for diversion than enlightenment, *Private Lives* belongs to an earlier tradition, associated with the social transformations of the "Roaring Twenties." In this tradition, the escapades of the "idle rich" were not only glamorous and amusing but provided a way to address ongoing controversies over manners and morals.

The 1920s are usually characterized, both in Europe and in America, as a turbulent decade in which established truths of all kinds came under question and the traditional bounds of social conduct were widely challenged. After the unprecedented destruction of World War I, with its enormous toll in human life, many felt disillusioned with "the old order." Many felt that the common practices of the nineteenth century yielded years of senseless slaughter and economic hardship. At the same time, science was increasingly seen as a challenge to traditional religious beliefs (a fact borne out by the Scopes Monkey Trial, which pitted the theories of divine human creation and evolution against each other). Rapid technological advances (a continuance of the industrial revolution that was begun in the latter half of the 1800s) were changing daily life in many ways, suggesting thai a new, "modern" world was coming into being—one that would require new values and new standards of behavior.

While the United States had outlawed the sale and consumption of alcohol in 1920 (the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution, often referred to as simply Prohibition), the law was widely defied. Criminal elements rose to supply rhe illegal commodity so many citizens demanded. Many historians credit the birth of powerful organized crime in the U.S. to the illicit alcohol trade: crime bosses came to significant prominence and wealth during this period, the most notable being Al Capone. Too late to curb the tide of organized crime or the American public's increasing pleasure in moderate disobedience, prohibition was repealed in 1933.

Social standards of the Victorian era were also challenged on several fronts, particularly in regard to the changing status of women, who were demanding and taking on public roles traditionally denied them, including voting, land ownership, and careers. The alleged immorality of "the younger generation" became a matter of intense scrutiny, centered on behaviors ranging from smoking, drinking, and dancing to sexual promiscuity; the image of amoral "flaming youth," celebrated in F. Scott Fitzgerald's

bestselling novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), was the subject of public controversy throughout the early Twenties. The stereotypes of the young female "flapper" (young women who dressed suggestively and indulged in excessive socializing) and the illicit underworld "speakeasy" (establishments that served contraband liquor) suggested a revolution in public attitudes and a momentous change in moral standards. Depending on one's viewpoint, such sensations in popular culture represented either a long-overdue liberation from obsolete, restrictive standards, or the catastrophic decline of civilization itself.

One of Fitzgerald's most famous aphorisms is that "the very rich are different from you and I"; that difference apparently creates a dual fascination in the larger culture, a mix of envious admiration and moralistic disapproval. "You and I" seem to enjoy fantasizing about the conspicuous luxury of the upper classes, while still cherishing the belief that a moderate lifestyle is more safe and secure; wealth cannot truly buy happiness—and may even be an obstacle to personal fulfillment. In their pursuit of fashionable sensation and self-indulgent consumption, the "idle rich" seem immune from traditional moral codes" they can afford to risk public disapproval by defying convention, though they are often made to pay for their excesses in the long run. Thus, the world of the wealthy can serve as a "safe" stage for the consideration of moral questions, for it presents a "special case," distanced from the conditions of the everyday; the wealthy are licensed to behave in ways that might be unacceptable for characters with whom the audience identified more closely

While Amanda and Ely of s casual attitude toward divorce and marital fidelity may seem unremarkable to modern audiences, it represented a controversial "new morality" in its time. Audience members could either admire their liberated, "progressive" outlook, or else enjoy the crisis and conflict that result from their "immoral" actions. Though Coward presents them as glamorous and sophisticated, their faults are also apparent, and they pointedly do not "live happily ever after"; regardless of one's moral standards, it is difficult to either idolize or demonize them without reservations.

While its sexual references are few and quite indirect, *Private Lives* was considered somewhat suggestive, though well within the accepted standards of the day. In terms of the prevailing morality, it was both mildly titillating and ultimately reassuring. Had Elyot and Amanda been working- or middle-class characters, their attitudes would have been more controversial, and their story would seem less a proper subject for light-hearted entertainment. In the alluring, unreal world of "high society," however, audiences could approach themes that might otherwise have hit uncomfortably close to home.

Critical Overview

Private Lives was a runaway hit when it debuted in 1930, and the play has remained popular in revivals ever since. In the initial production, Coward himself starred as Elyot opposite Gertrude Lawrence's Amanda. The play was produced at London's Phoenix Theatre, opening in September, 1930, after preview runs in Edinburgh, Birmingham, Manchester, and Southsea. The *Daily Mail* reported that tickets to the three-month engagement were in great demand, "though the piece is meant neither to instruct, to improve, nor to uplift." In the *New York Times,* drama critic Charles Morgan called the play "a remarkable tour de force," despite a story that was "almost impudently insubstantial___The speed, the impudence, the frothiness of [Coward's] dialogue are his salvation, and his performance is brilliant." After its New York debut, at the Times Square Theater m January of 1931, J. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* found the essence of the play to be its "well-bred petulance" and "cosmopolitan fatigue." "Mr. Coward's talent for small things remains unimpaired," Atkinson reported; "[he] has an impish wit, a genius for phrasemaMng, and an engaging manner on the stage." Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) quickly acquired the film rights to Coward's international sensation and had a feature adaptation (starring Robert Montgomery and Norma Shearer m the leads) in theaters by the end of 1931.

Subsequent critical assessments (both of *Private Lives* and of Coward's work m general) tend to follow the tone of these early reviews. While noting a lack of substance, of "big ideas" or grand themes, cntics nonetheless acknowledge an abundance of style, wit, and comedic pacing; the result is taken not as "Immortal Drama," but as highly-entertain-ing dramatic spectacle. Producing such work was Coward's conscious intention; he once said he had "no great or beautiful thoughts" to express, and no particular desire to include such thoughts in his plays if he did have them."The primary and dominant function of the theatre is to amuse people," he believed,"not to reform or edify them." His "smart" humor is prized for its eccentricity; as Atkinson observed of *Private Lives,*"Mr. Coward's wit is not ostentatious. He tucks it neatly away in pat phrase's and subtle word combinations and smartly bizarre allusions." While satiric humor is a staple of his work, he is not usually considered to present any unified critique of society, or to advance a consistent, identifiable philosophy. For this reason, his characters and situations are often considered to be superficial, even trivial. His wit, however, is nearly always classed as "sophisticated," and Ms dialogue is praised for its intelligence and cleverness. Disdaining "high-brow" conceptions of art, Coward claimed not to be writing for posterity; yet his "talent for small things" has shown a remarkable staying-power, and his work has delighted audiences for several generations.

Private Lives remains a popular standard for repertory companies everywhere. After more than a half-century, it evidently retains its appeal for a wide audience. Major London revivals were staged in 1944, 1963, 1969 (a 70th birthday tribute for Coward at the Phoenix Theater), and 1980, marking its 50th anniversary. Tammy Grimes won a Tony Award for her performance as Amanda in a 1970 Broadway revival, and a 1983 production featured Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Faulkner is a professional writer with a B.A. in English from Wayne State University. In this essay, he examines Coward's treatment of gender-roles and marriage.

As Noel Coward repeatedly insisted, *Private Lives* is a light comedy, intended to amuse and captivate its audience, rather than to teach moral lessons or advance a particular ideology. It is exactly the sort of popular work scholars may "murder to dissect:" to over-analyze its "deeper meanings" is to risk blinding ourselves to its glittering surfaces or sacrificing the light-hearted pleasures its author has carefully provided. Nonetheless, the lasting popularity of *Private Lives* indicates that it *does* have "something to say" beneath its eccentric, entertaining banter, something that has appealed to audiences for several generations now. Its many intriguing qualities include Coward's cynical perspective on the eternal "battle of the sexes" and an exploration of traditional gender-roles that can be seen to anticipate the social and sexual transformations of more recent years.

In this reading, Victor and Sibyl are cartoonish representatives of the traditional male and female roles: he is stolid and conservative, paternally wishing to "look after" his new wife; she is emotional and sentimental, fully expecting to be taken care of by her husband. Coward intentionally sketches these characters as dull and two-dimensional, thoroughly predictable in their blind embrace of society's expectations. In contrast, Elyot and Amanda ate alluring rebels, who mock convention and follow their individual desires, despite the social disapproval they invite.

In historical terms, Coward can be said to dramatize the opposition between Victorian moral codes and such "modernist" doctrines as "free love," "companionate marriage," guilt-free divorce and female equality. These were among the catch-phrases of a widespread moral controversy at the time *Private Lives* was written; in different words, similar concerns have appeared in more recent debates over feminism, sexuality, and "family values" (a debate that reached a high point with former vice president Dan Quayle criticizing the sitcom *Murphy Brown* for a plotline that involved the title character becoming a single mother). Amanda and Elyot clearly represent the "progressive" moral position, in opposition to restrictive traditions. Yet in another sense they are firmly traditional; while they defy conventional notions of social respectability, they remain faithful to the dictates of another convention, that of romantic love. When Elyot and Amanda escape the legal bonds of their new marriages it is not to pursue a promiscuous lifestyle or to make a philosophical statement but to follow the stronger love between themselves: they are romantics following their own hearts regardless of the consequences, not revolutionaries who seek to overthrow all conventions.

Victor and Sibyl embrace the sterile, unequal terms of traditional marriage. Coward implies that, unlike their worldly and sophisticated partners, they lack the imagination to feel restricted by the artificial confines of their stereotypical gender-roles or the self-awareness to notice any conflict between their private desires and the public images they strive to maintain. It may be that they simply cannot conceive of any alternatives to

the parts they have always expected to play. Amanda and Elyot, on the other hand, are too intelligent and self-aware to be satisfied for long in the confinement of a conventional marriage—even though they were both willing to enter into such an alliance before their youthful passion was rekindled. Their impulsive decision is a courageous (if selfish) search for a more fulfilling alternative, which allows them more equal roles. The traditional marriage represented by Victor and Sibyl is an unbalanced equation: either the man has full authority over his submissive wife or she "runs" him surreptitiously, bending him to her will while maintaining a dependent pose. Though it is marked by violent strife, Amanda and Elyot's precarious relationship is distinctly more honest and equal than the second marriages they had anticipated and truer to their individual "private lives" or desires.

"Private lives," however, turn out to be messy and volatile, requiring boundaries of some sort to keep from breaking out in primitive, passionate conflict. While this psychological truth is evident in Elyot and Amanda's love/hate relationship, it applies equally to Victor and Sibyl, whose repressed passions come spilling out at the end of Act in, echoing the wild skirmishes between the play's central couple. Confused and distraught, lacking a "prescribed etiquette to fall back upon," they drop their "respectable" poses, and soon engage in the very behavior which they found so shocking and reprehensible in Elyot and Amanda. As Amanda observes m the play's signature speech, few of us are "completely normal" beneath our public roles, even those like Sibyl and Victor who seem most tediously normal; when "the right spark is struck, there's no knowing what one mightn't do."

By traditional standards, Elyot and Amanda's previous marriage and divorce, as well as their troubled reunion, are proof that they are "incompatible" as marriage partners. Yet they seem to be made for each other and to be far more compatible as a couple than they are with their new spouses. The problem with their first marriage, they agree, was that they loved each other too much; their romantic passion brought out other passions, and they became "two violent acids bubbling about in a nasty little matrimonial bottle " In their second marriages, they have overcompensated for their bitter experience, seeking to avoid the problem by marrying people with whom they are clearly *not* in love. Apparently, they have convinced themselves that these unions can last, precisely because they feel no passionate attachment to their partners there is utterly no danger of loving too much.

When Amanda and Elyot's passion for each other is awakened, however, such a safe, lukewarm relationship is no longer an acceptable compromise—though a satisfying, long-term marriage seems no more possible than it was their first time around. Early in Act II, Amanda offers a different diagnosis of their troubles, targeting not love but marriage itself "I believe it was just the fact of our being married, and clamped together publicly, that wrecked us before " Marriage is claustrophobic, a "nasty little bottle" that contains passion under pressure, building until it explodes. To Coward's sensibility, it is love and marriage that are incompatible. His protagonists may have one or the other but not both.

Amanda and Elyot begin then- second tryst with a number of advantages on their side. They are not only lovers but old friends and, intellectually, kindred spirits. They hold no surprises for each other, yet remain strongly attracted. Their disastrous experience has made them aware of the pitfalls of marriage, and they are consciously determined to avoid repeating their mistakes. A marriage counselor would likely consider such a couple well-prepared for partnership and rate their chances of success high. But then- good intentions and hard-earned wisdom are little, if any, help, and they are soon caught up in the same jealousies and resentments that had made their life together intolerable.

Overall, this amounts to a severely pessimistic view of the prospects for men and women. While the conventional marriages are unacceptably hollow and passionless, Elyot and Amanda's efforts to live their love prove no more workable; their commitment to their passion only dooms them to endless cycles of love and hate. When they sneak off together at the final curtain, it is clear that their escape is temporary and provisional and their happiness momentary and precarious They have triumphed and regained their equilibrium but nothing is guaranteed. Though the audience may wish them well, their future together is questionable. They easily outsmart and outmaneuver Victor and Sibyl and presumably can do so indefinitely, for the weaker characters are clearly no match for them. Unfortunately, they are *too* good a match for each other, too alike and too evenly-matched for one to successfully "manage" the other. Worse yet, they both seem incapable of managing themselves. Marriage is quite possible, Coward seems to be saying—but not among two people who share so many personality traits—and not in the presence of passionate love.

Drama often dictates that the people and events it portrays are larger than life. In this sense Amanda and Elyot's relationship can be seen as an exaggerated case of marital ups and downs. Marriage is very often hard work for the two people who try to maintain it, for every happiness there is often matched sorrow or disappointment Through his protagonists, who represent an extreme of the precarious-ness of relationships, Coward is making the humorous statement that sharing your life with another is not always easy and true romance does not always end "happily ever after."

Source: Tom Faulkner, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

In this review of a 1968 revival performance of Private Lives, *Gill offers the opinion that this work is Coward's finest and a prime example of skilled farce. The critic also states that the enduring appeal of the play is a fitting birthday present for Coward, whose seventieth anniversary was marked by the new production.*

Four of the most fruitful days of 1929 were surely those that Noel Coward, on a lazy holiday tap around the world, spent writing *Private Lives.* The first act of the play, which I don't hesitate to call as nearly flawless a first act for a comedy as any in the language, is said to have been jotted down overnight—formidable proof of the fact, repugnant to puritans, that time and effort have no necessary connection with achievement in the arts. Neither, for that matter, does age—Coward was twenty-nine when he wrote *Private Lives,* and he was never to surpass it (Indeed, he had already composed, at twenty-five, its only possible rival for comic excellence, *Hay Fever.)* The play had its world premiere in Edinburgh, in 1930, starting Gertrude Lawrence (who had inspired it) as Amanda and Coward as Elyot, with Laurence Olivier and Adnanne Allen in supporting roles. The sun has long since set on the British Empire that Coward made such fun of and later glorified, but I doubt if it has ever set, or ever *will* set, on *Private Lives.* Now the play has bobbed up here, at the Billy Rose Theatre, in an APA production sponsored by David Merrick. The production is an admirable one and will serve nicely to help celebrate the occasion of Coward's seventieth birthday, on Tuesday next. As a small sprig to add to the laurels being heaped up in honor of that day, I will repeat an opinion that I have often expressed, with a gravity not quite wholly based on a desire to irritate certain friends of mine in Academe—-that Coward is the greatest of English theatrical figures in the multifariousness of his gifts. Who but he has written his own plays and musical comedies, directed them, acted in them, danced in them, and sung in them songs of his own composition? Poor Shakespeare, after all (and I have been waiting a long time to set down the words "poor Shakespeare")* merely wrote, acted, and composed the lyrics of a few songs in his plays. As far as I know, there isn't much likelihood that when he played the Ghost in "Hamlet" he broke out into song and dance, though the idea is an appealing one and somebody is bound to make use of it sooner or later.

Simple as it may seem in the reading, *Private Lives* is extremely hard to act well; the lines of the play turn out to matter less than the silences between the lines, and the duration of these silences must be calculated to the millisecond. The director of the present production, Stephen Porter, has performed these calculations with exemplary skill. He is aware that much of our pleasure in the play comes from our being allowed to know, from moment to moment, more than the characters themselves are allowed to know. Our laughter springs as much from the sudden glory of anticipation fulfilled as from the witty expression of any ordinary human feeling or—perish the thought!—thought. The first act has a symmetry of word and deed so exact as to be almost uncanny; the two newlywed couples in the swagger hotel in Deauville are made to move through a series of discomfitures as neatly introduced, exhibited, and dismissed as so many magic hoops, cards, coins, and colored handkerchiefs. In the second act, the prestidigitator risks losing control by losing momentum. We perceive that he has time to

kill on his way to a third act (in the twenties, a playwright who plotted a comedy in two acts would no doubt have been accused of shortchanging his audience), and we come dangerously close to seeing Amanda and Elyot for what they are—in real life, two of the least delightful people imaginable, with nothing to do but eat, drink, bicker, make love, and congratulate themselves on their isolation from a world unworthy of them. In the third act, the prestidigitator is again in full control; after a flurry of slapstick physical encounters, he rings down the curtain on a breakfast scene that is at once consummately trivial and just the right size.

Amanda and Elyot are played by Tammy Grimes and Brian Bedford. I wouldn't have guessed that Miss Grimes, whose voice to my ears is like chalk on slate, could bring off the role of a pretty, willful English girl of those distant flapper days, but she does, she does, and Brian Bedford is appropriately clipped of accent and selfish of purpose as Elyot. David Glover plays the staunch and obtuse ninny who has just become Amanda's second husband, and Suzanne Grossmann, looking a trifle jaded for the part, plays Elyot's bewildered twenty-three-year-old bride. The amusing Art-Deco settings and the lighting are by James Tilton and the costumes are by Joe Eula.

Source: Brendan Gill, "Happy Birthday, Dear Noel," m the *New Yorker,* Volume XLV, no 43, December 13,1969, pp. 115-16

Critical Essay #3

In this review of the original Broadway production—which starred playwright Coward in the lead role ofElyot—Atkinson gives a favorable appraisal of the play's comedic offerings.

Noel Coward's talent for httle things remains unimpaired. In *Private Lives,* in which he appeared at the Times Square last evening, he has nothing to say, and manages to say it with competent agility for three acts. Sometimes the nothingness of this comedy begins to show through the dialogue. Particularly in the long second act, which is as thin as a patent partition, Mr Coward's talent for little things threatens to run dry. But when the tone comes to drop the second act curtain his old facility for theatrical climax comes bubbling out of the tap again. There is a sudden brawl. Mr. Coward, in person, and Gertrude Lawrence, likewise in person, start tumbling over the furniture and rolling on the floor, and the audience roars with delight. For Mr. Coward, who dotes on pranks, has an impish wit, a genius for phrase-making, a subtlety of inflection and an engaging manner on the stage. Paired with Miss Lawrence in a mild five-part escapade, he carries *Private Lives* through by the skin of his teeth.

Take two married couples on their respective honeymoons, divide them instantly, and there—if the two leading players are glamorous comedians— you have the situation. As a matter of fact, it has a little more finesse than that. For Elyot Chase, who feels rather grumpy about his second honeymoon, and Amanda Prynne, who feels rather grumpy about hers, were divorced from each other five years ago. When they see each other at the same honeymoon hotel in France, they suddenly realize that they should never have been divorced Their new marriages are horrible blunders. Their impulse is to fly away together at once. They fly. How rapturously they love and quarrel in a Paris flat, and how frightfully embarrassed they are when their deserted bride and bridegroom finally catch up with them, is what keeps Mr. Coward just this side of his wits' end for the remaining two acts.

For the most part it is a duologue between Mr. Coward and Miss Lawrence. Jill Esmond, as the deserted bride, and Laurence Olivier, as the deserted bridegroom, are permitted to chatter foolishly once or twice in the first act, and to help keep the ball rolling at the end. After the furniture has been upset. Therese Guadri, as a French maid, is invited to come m, raise the curtains and jabber her Gallic distress over unseemly confusion. But these are ultitarian parts in the major tour de force of Mr. Coward and Miss Lawrence cooing and spatting at home.

Be it known that their passion is a troubled one. They coo with languid pleasure. But they are also touchy, and fly on the instant into felme rages. Mr. Coward's wit is not ostentatious. He tucks it away neatly in pat phrases and subtle word combinations and smartly bizarre allusions. Occasionally he comes out boldly with a flat statement of facts. "Certain women should be struck regularly like gongs," he declares. Acting just as he writes, he is crisp, swift and accurate. And Miss Lawrence, whose subtlety has not always been conspicuous, plays this time with rapidity and humor. Her ruddy beauty,

her supple grace and the russet drawl in her voice keep you interested in the slightly wind-blown affairs of a scanty comedy. If Mr. Coward's talent were the least bit clumsy, there would be no comedy at all

Source: Brooks Atkinson, "Mr. Coward Still Going Along" (1931) in *On Stage; Selected Theater Reviews from the New York Times, 1920-1970,* edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp 122-23.

Adaptations

A film adaptation of *Private Lives* was released in December, 1931, by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. It starred Norma Shearer and Robert Montgomery as Amanda and Elyot, with Reginald Denny and Una Merkel as Victor and Sibyl. While it retained most of Coward's story and dialogue, director Sidney Franklin also made significant alterations: extending the "set-up" in Act I while compressing the action of Acts H and HI; and having the lovers escape not to a Paris flat but to a Swiss chalet. The film is available on videocassette through MGM/UA Home Video Victor and Sibyl represent the traditional, "normal" modes of behavior for their gender-roles. He is conservative and reliable, moderate in all things, and paternally protective of his bride; she is bubbly and romantic, given to dramatic emotional displays, expecting (and needing) to be "taken care of" by her man Coward sketches them as shallow, comic exaggerations of their types: Victor is a stodgy, blustering charade of "rugged grandeur," while Sibyl is a coquettish "flapper," flighty, empty-headed, and demanding. Neither appears capable of an original thought, and the sympathies of the audience are clearly meant for Elyot and Amanda, in their rebellion against the restrictive bonds of convention. Glamorous and witty, Elyot and Amanda lampoon "respectable" manners mercilessly and dare to follow their hearts, regardless of the social consequences.

These appealing "social outlaws" do not live happily ever after, however. Once free to "be themselves," they are soon fighting like animals, despite their best intentions and the great love they have for each other. On one side, Coward presents social conventions as silly and restrictive, causing people to repress their "private lives" or urges and behave hypocritically. But he also suggests that they have an important, and necessary,"civilizing" effect; without them, the worst of human nature arises and people become slaves to violent passions and petty jealousies. Manners and rules give life a structure, helping to manage and mediate the inevitable conflicts that arise when people interact.

For all their rebellion and mockery, Elyot and Amanda are fluent in social ritual and deploy it strategically throughout the play: in their pact that the magic words "Solomon Isaacs" will halt their quarreling, for example, and in Amanda's resolve to "behave exquisitely" when Victor and Sibyl catch up with them. In Act HI, she does exactly that, acting the perfect hostess amid the debris of her brawl with Elyot, who admires her cool ability to "carry off the most embarrassing situation with such tact, and delicacy." Confronted at last by Sybil and Victor, Elyot observes that the four of them have "no prescribed etiquette to fall back upon"; in such a case, his habitual response is cynical "flippancy," while Amanda relies on the very social conventions they have both been ridiculing. In the end, the wronged-but-ridiculous spouses are beaten at their own game; the outlaws escape the (public) consequences of their transgressions, at least temporarily, while their conventional counterparts descend to the same savage passions that have plagued Elyot and Amanda's stormy love.

Love and Passion

Like the protagonists in a sentimental romance, Elyot and Amanda seem meant for each other, drawn together by a deep, inescapable love that overrides all other concerns (and common sense). Coward uses them, however, to refute the conventions of romantic love: instead of bringing contentment and fulfillment, "True Love" has the couple locked in a passionate death-grip, tossing them helplessly between the extremes of love and hate, pleasure and pain.

Having married for love and found it a disaster, Amanda and Elyot try to make "safer" choices in their second marriages; each envisions a steadier, if less-passionate alliance, with a more-manageable, less-sophisticated partner. Elyot tells Sibyl that love should be "kind, and undramatic. Something steady and sweet, to smooth out your nerves when you're tired. Something tremendously cozy; and unfhirried by scenes and jealousies." Similarly, Amanda assures Victor that their love will last, because she loves him more "calmly" than she loved Elyot. But the spark of the old couple's reunion instantly reveals these platitudes as pure self-deception: very often, love is not "calm" or easily-managed but an uncontrollable force that disarms self-control, dispels reason, and sweeps people away with the force of its passion. As embodied by Amanda and Elyot, love can be both a blessing and a curse; it intoxicates and elates but can just as quickly lead to "selfishness, cruelty, hatred, possessiveness, [and] petty jealousy." "To hell with love," Amanda vows—just before she risks everything for it, once again. She and Elyot are veterans in the battle of the sexes, wise to love's traps and minefields, but their wisdom fails to bring them the least bit of immunity from the pitfalls of love.

Topics for Further Study

Choose an episode of a television "situation comedy," and compare its dialogue to that of *Private Lives.* In what ways do they differ? How is the humor in Coward's play achieved in contrast to the humor of the sitcom?

Coward is often compared to an earlier British dramatist known for his satiric wit, Oscar Wilde. Read Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) and compare and contrast it with *Private Lives.*

Assume that Victor and Sybil divorce their spouses after the play ends and marry each other. Write a brief description of their lives together Try to employ dialogue similar to that between Elyot and Amanda in Act n.

What do you think of Coward's view of marriage? What are your personal opinions on the subject? Support your arguments with examples of married couples you have known.

Compare and Contrast

1930: Astronomers at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, discover a ninth planet in the solar system and name it Pluto. It is the first "new" planet since Neptune was sighted in 1846. The discovery is made with mankind's most-advanced tool for space exploration: a telescope.

Today: Humans have walked on the moon, first landing m 1969. Unmanned spacecraft have explored the outer reaches of the solar system, mapping the surfaces of planets known only as points of light in 1930. The satellite-mounted Hubbell telescope was launched into space in the mid-1990s, providing astronomers with the most in-depth space pictures to date. No probes have yet made close observations of Pluto, though in 1978, the planet was discovered to have a moon, named Charon.

1930: The world's population reaches two billion, with the great majority of people living in rural areas

Today: Global population passed the five billion mark during the 1980s, and continues to grow; more than fifty percent of the populace now live in towns and cities.

1930: In India, Mahatma Ghandi begins a civil disobedience campaign in protest of British colonial rule, by leading his followers on a 165-mile march.

Today: Ghandi's efforts drew worldwide attention to the cause of Indian independence, which was finally achieved in 1947 His doctrines of passive resistance and civil disobedience helped inspire the strategies employed by the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and influenced the philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Such peaceful practices continue to be employed by contemporary protesters.

What Do I Read Next?

If you enjoy one play by Coward, the next logical step is to investigate his other works *Design for Living* (1933), about a "progressive" romantic triangle, and *Blithe Spirit* (1941), about a man who is haunted by the meddling ghost of his first wife, share much of the style and sensibility of *Private Lives.*

Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (1931) and *Since Yesterday: The 1930s in America* (1940) are lively, readable histories of the twenties and

thirties, respectively, written by a contemporary historian. They provide a useful survey of the major events of the years during which Coward achieved his widest fame.

The Amazing Mr. Noel Coward (1933), by Peter Braybrooke, written soon after *Private Lives* appeared, is an enthusiastic celebration of Coward' s talents. While far from objective, it vividly reflects the towering stature Coward attained in the popular theatre of the 1930s.

Further Study

Castle, Charles. *Noel,* Doubleday, 1972.

One of several fond tributes to Coward, Castle's book is drawn from the reminiscences of friends and theatrical colleagues, as well as Coward's own observations Coward, Noel *Present Indicative,* Doubleday, 1937; and *Future Indefinite,* Doubleday, 1954.

Coward's two major volumes of autobiography provide glimpses of his legendary personality and storytelling ability. *Present Indicative* includes more detail from the period in which *Private Lives* was wntten and first produced.

Hoare, Philip. *Noel Coward A Biography,* Simon & Schuster, 1995.

A extensively-researched biography, wntten with the cooperation of Coward's estate, Hoare's volume draws on previously-unavailable source matenal to produce a thorough account of the playwright's life and times.

Levm, Miller. *Noel Coward,* Twayne, 1968

A concise survey of Coward's long career, it includes a biographical essay and a critical assessment of each of his major works

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Coward, Noel Introduction to *Play Parade,* Doubleday, 1933, p. xm.

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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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