Rent Study Guide

Rent by Jonathan Larson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

When the musical *Rent* first appeared off Broadway in 1996, it immediately became a hit. Tragically, Jonathan Larson could not appreciate the overwhelming success of his play, since he had died on the evening of the final dress rehearsal. His death made the play that much more poignant in its focus on the diseased and drug-addicted young people of New York City's East Village. Still, in its examination of the lifestyles of the young men and women who inhabit the slums of the Village, the play becomes a celebration of life and the heroic struggle to survive. It was published by William Morrow in 1997.

Rent is loosely based on the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème*, an opera that focuses on the experiences of bohemian artists living in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. Larson places his play in New York City a century later than Puccini's work. It opens on Christmas Eve and chronicles the characters' lives over the course of one year. The fast-paced production moves through a collection of vignettes that are united by a rent strike against the landlord of the run-down tenement where some of the characters live. During the course of the play, the characters protest the landlord's plans to evict them and face other obstacles that are more difficult to fight, including drug addiction, AIDS, and troubled relationships. The characters do not overcome all their problems, but those that they do overcome provide them with a sustaining sense of community and the will to endure.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1960

Deathdate: 1996

Jonathan Larson was born in Mount Vernon, New York, on February 4, 1960, to Allan and Nanette Larson. His family loved the arts, and Larson received much support and encouragement from them. The house was often filled with music, including his piano playing, which he was able to pick up by ear. In high school, Larson was called the □piano man□ by his fellow students. While attending White Plains High School, Larson was very active in the music and drama departments. He became friends with a fellow student named Matt O'Grady, who would later be the inspiration for many of his characters as well as for the writing of *Rent*, Larson's most notable and only published work. In 1978, Larson attended the acting conservatory at Adelphi University on Long Island, New York, on a four-year, full-tuition merit scholarship. At Adelphi, he wrote his first musical, Sacrimoralimmortality, an unpublished work that attacked the hypocrisy of the Christian Right. He also began a relationship with Victoria Leacock, a woman who later worked on the production of two of his (unpublished) plays, tick . . . tick . . . BOOM! (an adaptation of his one-man show, 30/90) and Superbia.

After receiving a BFA with honors from Adelphi, Larson moved to New York City under the advisement of his mentor, the composer Stephen Sondheim, who told Larson that there are more starving actors than starving composers in the world. Larson lived a bohemian lifestyle in New York, where he took jobs waiting tables and gathered material for his works. He had a series of roommates, more than thirty different people, to help him pay the rent. He later incorporated these roommates into his works as characters. Paula Span, in her biographical notes on Larson for the *Washington Post*, notes that Larson □harbored a serious, soaring ambition.□ James Nicola, artistic director of the New York Theatre Workshop, where Larson developed and staged *Rent*, called this the need □to somehow reunite popular music and theater, which divorced somewhere back in the '40s.□ As Nicola put it, □This might be the guy who could do it.□

In 1989, Larson was approached by the playwright Billy Aronson, who asked him to collaborate on a new version of Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème*, an opera depicting the lives of struggling artists trying to cope with poverty and disease. The collaboration did not last long, however, and the two men parted ways. In 1991, after Larson had seen many of his friends diagnosed as HIV-positive, he decided to take up the project again, this time on his own. He named the new version of the play *Rent*.

Larson died of an undiagnosed aortic aneurysm on January 25, 1996, the night before *Rent* was to premiere. *Rent* became a huge success, posthumously winning Larson the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and four Tony Awards. His other works have earned him six Drama Desk Awards and three Obies.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Rent opens on Christmas Eve at Mark and Roger's apartment. They are freezing, since there is no heat in the building. The landlord has turned it off. Mark is filming with a movie camera, and he explains that he is shooting without a script, to see if anything comes of it. He notes that Roger has not played his guitar for a year and that he has just gone through drug withdrawal. Roger's dream is to write one great song.

Mark's mother leaves a message on the telephone answering machine, expressing sorrow over the fact that Mark's girlfriend, Maureen, has left him. Mark and Roger's friend Collins rings the doorbell, but before he is let in, two thugs mug him. Benny, their landlord, then calls, asking when Mark and Roger will be paying him rent, which they have not paid for a year. After Benny inquires about Maureen, Mark tells him that she has left him for a woman named Joanne. Benny warns that if Mark and Roger do not pay the rent, he will evict them.

Mark wonders how anyone can □document real life / When real life's getting more / Like fiction each day.□ Roger asks how a person can write a song when he has lost his creativity, and Mark adds that they are hungry and cold. They both wonder how they will pay the rent. Mark, along with half the actors, asks how a person can □leave the past behind / When it keeps finding ways to get to your heart.□ With the other half of the company, Roger asks how someone can □connect in an age / Where strangers, landlords, lovers / Your own blood cells betray.□ Both Mark and Roger note that one way to connect is through artistic expression, Mark using his camera and Roger his guitar. The entire company then declares that they are □not gonna pay rent.□

Angel appears on the street and offers to help Collins after he is mugged. When the two discover that they both have AIDS, they decide to go together to a support group meeting. Upstairs, Roger declares that he has wasted opportunities in the past and is determined to write one good song □that rings true.□ Mimi, a neighbor, enters, shivering, with a candle. As they talk, she insists that she dropped a bag of heroin somewhere in the apartment. Mimi tells Roger that she is a stripper, and Roger admits that he used to be a junkie. He finds the bag and puts it in his pocket, but Mimi grabs it on her way out.

After returning from the support meeting, Collins introduces Angel to Mark and Roger on the street. Angel is dressed up in Santa drag and clutching twenty-dollar bills in each hand. Benny appears and tells a homeless man to get out of his way, the very sort of callous attitude that Maureen will soon be protesting in her performance demonstration outside his building, where she, Mark, Roger, and Mimi live. Benny tries to bribe Roger and Mark, insisting that he will help their careers if they can get Maureen to stop her protest. Later, after Joanne reveals that Maureen has not been faithful to her, Mark and

Joanne sympathize with each other for loving someone who is too egocentric to return their affections.

When Mimi returns to Roger's apartment, he tells her that if she's □looking for romance,□ she should □come back another day.□ He explains, □Long ago□you might've lit up my heart / But the fire's dead□ain't never gonna start.□ Angel tells Collins that he will be Collins's □shelter,□ and they pledge their love to each other.

Maureen enacts a protest performance, criticizing Benny, who, she claims, has abandoned his principles □to live as a lapdog to a wealthy daughter of the revolution.□ After Benny insists that the bohemian lifestyle that they have all been living is dead, the cast sings □La Vie Bohème,□ an anthem to that lifestyle. Roger invites Mimi to a party after the performance but then ignores her. When Mimi asks whether she has done something wrong, Roger apologizes, explaining that he has □baggage□ and that he is a □disaster.□ Maureen's performance triggers a riot, which Mark captures on film as Mimi and Roger embrace. In response to the protest, Benny locks them out of the apartment building.

Act 2

On New Year's Eve, Mimi announces that she is going to get off drugs and go back to school. Later that night, Maureen tries to persuade Joanne, who has broken off their relationship, to come back. Maureen insists that she will □learn to behave□ and asks for □one more chance.□ That same night, after seeing some of the footage of the riot, a representative from a television newsmagazine leaves a message on Mark's answering machine, offering him a job. He says that the show is □*so sleazy*□ but considers the offer anyway.

Benny apologizes for locking them out of the building, hinting that Mimi influenced his decision to let them back in by seducing him, which Mimi angrily denies. The main characters conclude that friendship depends on love and trust and on □not denying emotion,□ and Mimi and Roger embrace. When Roger goes back into his apartment, Mimi's dealer appears on the street and hands her a bag of heroin.

By Valentine's Day, Roger and Mimi have been living together for two months, and Maureen and Joanne are back together. When Joanne accuses Maureen of flirting with another woman, Maureen insists that Joanne take her as she is. The two argue and decide they will split up once again. That spring, Roger determines to break off his relationship with Mimi and go to Santa Fe to write his one great song before he dies of AIDS. In the fall, Angel dies, and the cast mourns his death.

On Halloween, Mark meets the producer for the TV newsmagazine, after he has signed a contract to work for them. He is conflicted about his new job, admitting that he has sold out to corporate America. After Angel's memorial service that day, Roger tells Mimi that he is leaving for Santa Fe. Later, Mimi and Joanne discuss their troubled

relationships, and each wishes that she had someone who would truly love her for who she is. In the next scene Mark quits his job and plans to finish his film.

On Christmas Eve, Roger returns, declaring that he has written his song at last. Maureen and Joanne appear in the apartment, carrying Mimi, who is dying of AIDS. As Roger begins to play his song, □Your Eyes,□ which Mimi inspired, her fever breaks, and the two declare their love for each other.

Characters

Benjamin Coffin III

Their former roommate and present rent-gouging landlord, Benjamin Coffin III, wants to raze the building in which Roger, Mark, Mimi, and Maureen live. His aim is to gentrify the neighborhood by pushing out the bohemian element. He tries to appear generous when he tells Roger and Mark that he let their rent slide for one year, but his mercenary side soon emerges.

After Benny married into a wealthy, upper-class family, his father-in-law sold him the building and the neighboring lot, which he hopes to turn into a cyberstudio. Roger points out his callous materialism by declaring, "You can't quietly wipe out an entire tent city / Then watch 'It's a Wonderful Life' on TV." But Benny responds that if they want to write songs and produce films, as they claim, they will understand, and if they do not, he will kick them out. When Benny tries to bribe Mark and Roger into persuading Maureen to stop her protest, he reveals that he will do anything to succeed. By the end of the play, he has softened, as evidenced when he decides to pay for Angel's funeral.

Mark Cohen

Mark, an aspiring filmmaker, narrates the play as he films the lives of his friends. He insists that he can survive the bleakness of his environment through his art. It soon becomes apparent, though, that he is more comfortable viewing the world through his lens than in actively engaging in it. At the beginning of the play, the audience discovers that Maureen has left him for Joanne, which has made him bitter.

Mark, along with Roger, becomes defiant and declares that he will not pay the rent when Benny presses them, insisting instead that he will fight the system. However, when his film of the riot caused by Maureen's protest performance garners him a lucrative job offer with a sleazy network television newsmagazine, he briefly joins the system he criticizes to ensure himself financial stability. By the end of the play, however, he regains his values and gives up the job.

Tom Collins

Tom Collins, a black computer genius, teacher, and anarchist who has been expelled from MIT, is the intellectual voice of the company. In the opening scene, he is mugged, reflecting the harsh reality of the world in which the characters live. He is brave enough to allow himself to fall in love with Angel, knowing that since both of them are infected with HIV, their relationship will not have much of a future.

Roger Davis

Roger has been off heroin for six months, but he is infected with HIV. His main goal in life is to write one great song before he dies, but he has not been able to play his guitar in a year, fearing that he has lost his creative energy. He falls in love with Mimi but is too afraid to commit to her, knowing that she also is infected with HIV.

Roger has already lost the woman he loved to the disease, after she committed suicide. He tells Mimi, □Long ago□you might've lit up my heart / But the fire's dead□ain't never gonna start.□ In an effort to protect himself and to find the spark he needs to write his song, he leaves. He eventually returns, however, with a song of which he is proud, saying that Mimi has inspired his creativity. As he sings the song to Mimi, her fever breaks, and the two are reunited.

Joanne Jefferson

Joanne, a lawyer from an upper-class New York family, is in love with Maureen, who is unable to commit to her. Her character, which does not develop during the play, serves as a complication for Mark after Maureen leaves him for her.

Maureen Johnson

Maureen, a bisexual performance artist and rock singer, protests Benny's renovation of the building with a performance piece that highlights his insensitivity toward the homeless. Her performance rallies the tenants, but her selfishness is displayed in her relationships with others. Maureen is a self-involved hedonist who resists anyone's attempts to persuade her to commit to a relationship. She has cheated on both Mark and Joanne. Although she and Joanne reconcile at the end of the play, there is no evidence to suggest that her character has changed enough to ensure that the two will be able to work out their problems in the long term.

Mimi Marquez

Mimi Marquez works in a strip club and struggles with her addiction to heroin, which has resulted in her contraction of HIV. She falls in love with Roger, who is unable to commit to a relationship with her. Still, she is sympathetic to his reluctance, as she expresses when she sings to him: □So let's find a bar / So dark we forget who we are / And all the scars from the / Nevers and maybes die.□ When she declares to Roger after he rebuffs her, □I live this moment / As my last / There's only us / There's only this,□ she voices the ultimate spirit of the play.

Angel Dumont Schunard

The most generous and selfless character, Angel hands out money to the neighborhood while dressed in Santa drag. He first offers comfort to Collins by inviting him to an AIDS support group and later gives his love to Collins, along with all that he has, while declaring, □today for you□tomorrow for me.□ His death, brought about by complications from AIDS, is mourned by all of the characters and inspires them to live each day to the fullest.

Themes

Betrayal

The characters must deal with an overwhelming sense of betrayal□by their bodies, by the materialistic society in which they live, and by people they have trusted. Their bodies betray them after they contract HIV, slowly shutting down as their immune systems weaken and allow them to fall prey to various illnesses. Their society has let them down in its promotion of its vision of the American dream, which depends solely on upward social mobility and financial gains. The artists of the East Village are ignored in this system, unless they sell out to soulless corporations, such as the sleazy television newsmagazine that hires Mark to exploit the plight of the homeless for profit. One of the homeless people whom Mark films makes him realize that he has compromised his art when he angrily declares, □I don't need no [g□□ d□□] help / From some bleeding heart cameraman / My life's not for you to / Make a name for yourself on!□ He notes that Mark is just trying to use him □to kill his guilt.□ He has bought in to the same system as has Benny, who heartlessly pushes the homeless out of his way in his plans to change the neighborhood so that he can profit.

The most damaging betrayals come from individuals once trusted, like Benny, who exploits his friendship with Mark and Roger to gain success. After he marries into a rich, upper-class family, he becomes caught up in the materialistic system that measures success only through monetary gain. He tries to get Mark and Roger to persuade Maureen to stop her protest performance, enlisting their help in his capitalistic vision, and he threatens to evict them if they do not comply. Other betrayals are more personal. Roger feels betrayed by his girlfriend, who, unable to face life with AIDS, kills herself. He, in turn, betrays Mimi's trust when he leaves her, unable to allow himself to open up to another possibility of loss. Maureen betrays Mark and Joanne as the pressures of living in the East Village turn her into a self-serving hedonist.

La Vie Bohème

The characters lead a bohemian lifestyle as an escape from the harsh realities of their lives and as a form of artistic expression and individual style. Angel expresses himself by dressing as a woman, Maureen through performance art, Mark through documentary film, and Roger through rock music. They define their bohemian attitude by rejecting convention and pretension. They scorn the materialistic society in which they live and replace it with a strong sense of individuality.

Mark expresses this sensibility when he sings, □Playing hooky, making something / Out of nothing, the need / To express□/ To communicate, / To going against the grain.□ They align themselves with the avant guard, □To Absolut [Vodka]□to choice□/ To the *Village Voice* [a counterculture newspaper]□/ To any passing fad / To being an us□for once□/ Instead of a them□.□

Style

Musical Narrative

The narrative is driven by some thirty-five songs sung by fifteen cast members. The songs present the characters' poignant, emotional responses to their experiences. The most notable are Mark and Joanne's lament on having an egoist as a lover in □Tango Maureen□; Roger's struggle for artistic expression in □One Song Glory□; and his and Mimi's duets in □Light My Candle□ and □I Should Tell You,□ which express their tentative love for each other. The songs communicate the characters' reactions to thwarted artistic expression, unrequited love, illness, and death. The lyrics and arrangements of the songs also reflect the ethnic diversity of the characters.

Fast Pacing

The play is fast paced, as it juxtaposes vignettes of the various characters' struggles to survive. This pacing reflects the energy and exuberance of the characters and reinforces their motivations: their desperate efforts to exist one more day with the threat of poverty and disease hanging over their heads and to live each day to the fullest. The fast cuts from scene to scene and from character to character underscore the sense that time is running out for them. Angel's death, placed in the middle of act 2, adds to the tension and helps force the characters to make important decisions about their futures.

Historical Context

Giacomo Puccini

Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy, on December 22, 1858, and lived until 1924. He began his musical career at age fourteen, when he became an organist at local churches in Lucca, the same time that he began to work on his own compositions. *Manon Lescaut*, his first successful opera, for which he gained worldwide recognition, was produced at Turin in 1893. His next opera, *La bohème*, is considered to be his masterpiece. However, its unique conversational style, which includes a mixture of gaiety and tragedy, was not well received when it was first produced at Turin in 1896. A later opera, *Tosca*, gained much more favorable reviews when it was staged in 1900. Puccini continued his success with the production of *Madame Butterfly* in 1904. His operas, known for their beautiful melodies and intermingling of passion and tenderness, tragedy and despair, have cemented his reputation as one of Italy's finest composers.

AIDS

The promotion of traditional values in the 1980s received unexpected support as a result of the emergence of AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). The American public became aware of AIDS in the early 1980s, but the disease did not take center stage as a serious issue until the film star Rock Hudson died from an AIDS-related illness in 1985. By the beginning of the 1990s, the disease had spread rapidly, generating tremendous public fear, since no effective treatment had been discovered. Most of the early cases emerged in the homosexual population and among intravenous drug users, but by the 1990s, it had spread throughout the American populace. Racial and ethnic minorities have been hardest hit, representing approximately three-quarters of all new AIDS cases.

Because sexual contact is a primary method of infection, the sexual revolution that had begun in the 1960s was threatened. Still, abstention was not a guarantee of safety. The disease can lay dormant in the body for several years before symptoms become apparent. People can become infected long before they know that they have the disease. The rights that homosexuals had started to gain also were put in jeopardy as a result of the spread of AIDS. The conservative right wing blamed gays for the spread of the epidemic, some insisting that AIDS was God's punishment for their immoral lifestyles.

Since the 1980s, the incidence of AIDS has grown rapidly, and the spread of the disease shows no signs of slowing down. By 1994, an estimated half a million Americans had been infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, and the same number had died from AIDS. About forty thousand people are infected each year, and some twenty thousand people die from complications associated with the disease. The epidemic is worse in developing countries such as Africa, where people have little

access to medications that can help combat the disease. The major factor in the reduction of the transmission of AIDS is education. The public needs to be aware of the risks and learn about methods to prevent disease transmission. Sexual abstention, condom use, and needle-exchange programs have all proved to be effective preventive methods.

Critical Overview

Laurie Winer, in her review for the *Los Angeles Times*, notes that □Larson garnered the kind of rave reviews that young, struggling composer-lyricists pray and dream for.□ She calls the play □muscular, chilling and energizing□ and argues that □what would have been merely moving in *Rent* is made almost unbearable bittersweet□ by Larson's untimely death following a lifelong struggle to realize his artistic vision. She concludes, □*Rent* is a memorial service as a work of art, clearly and authentically created in love.□

In his review for the *Wall Street Journal*, Donald Lyons adds to the chorus of praises for the play, claiming, □It's the best new musical since the 1950s.□ He declares that it presents itself with □clarity,□ □force,□ and □crisp definition.□ Commenting on the play's construction, he writes that it appears that □we're about to see a rehearsal, and what we do experience has the raw, ragged, slightly unfinished, excited, urgent feel of a late but coalescing run-through: This seeming artlessness is a sophisticated achievement.□

Patrick Pacheco, in the *Los Angeles Times*, concludes that the play is □a raw and exuberant celebration of bohemian East Village artists . . . living on the edge.□ He claims that the topical subject matter, focusing on □the prevalence of violence and HIV . . . suffuses the musical with the fragility of life, the theme of Puccini's opera.□

In his review of the play for the *Washington Post*, Chip Crews declares, □Bristling with energy and assurance, *Rent* roars across the stage like an urban brush fire.□ This show, he states, □leads with its heart□an angry heart, taking up the cause of street people, AIDS patients, the young disaffected of a society that [in Larson's view] has no place for them.□ Crews, however, finds fault with the development of the plot, saying that □the emotions here are very raw, so raw that they're never fully articulated.□ He insists that the fragmented narrative in the second act □begins to seem arbitrary and capricious. The breakups are too easy, the battles too melodramatic.□ He adds, □It's a fast, muzzy conclusion that does no justice to the pain they have suffered.□

James Gardner, in his article for the *National Review*, also finds fault with the plot, writing that the play is □pretty much the same old showbiz fare, though with almost formulaic inversions. Instead of boy meets girl, you now have girl meets girl and boy meets drag queen.□ The play, he says, □wants desperately to be taken as the anthem of some nonexistent youth movement. But the bohemian life glorified in *Rent* looks no more vital than it did before,□ in the 1960s production of the rock musical *Hair*.

In his mixed review of the play for *New Republic*, Robert Brustein writes that the play is □good-natured, fully energized, theatrically knowing and occasionally witty.□ At the same time, he concludes that □it is also badly manufactured, vaguely manipulative, drenched in self-pity and sentimental.□ Its characters, he argues, are □poorly constructed,□ and it fails □to penetrate very deeply beneath a colorful and exotic surface.□ While □*Rent* has a lot to say about the need for human communication,□

Brustein determines that this □warm-hearted□ book □is basically superficial and unconvincing.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, she examines the theme of survival in the play.

The nineteenth-century American writer Stephen Crane's celebrated short story □The Open Boat,□ which focuses on four men in a small dinghy struggling against the current to make it to shore, is often quoted as an apt expression of the tenets of naturalism, a literary movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in France, the United States, and England. Writers included in this group, such as Crane, the Frenchman Émile Zola, and the American Theodore Dreiser, expressed in their works an environmental determinism that prevented their characters from exercising their free will and thus controlled their destinies. These authors wrote of a world beset by poverty and war at the beginning of the industrial age.

Environmental forces also threaten to rob individuals of their free will in Larson's celebrated play *Rent*, as they struggle to overcome grinding poverty and a new kind of war at the turn of the twentieth century: the war on AIDS. Yet Larson does not adopt the same naturalistic bleakness as do his predecessors at the previous *fin de siecle* (end of the century). While the play's vignettes present a grim portrait of inner-city life in the age of AIDS, its vision is tempered by the heroic endurance of its characters, who ultimately choose not only to survive but also to embrace each day.

Chip Crews, in his review for the *Washington Post*, declares that the play □bristl[es] with energy and assurance□ as it □roars across the stage like an urban brush fire.□ This show, he claims, □leads with its heart□an angry heart, taking up the cause of street people, AIDS patients, the young disaffected of a society that [in Larson's view] has no place for them.□ The characters' most immediate fear is being thrown out of their tenement by their former friend and current landlord, Benny, who has traded his friendships for success. Even Mark is tempted by the lure of money when he is offered a job by a television newsmagazine and must decide whether to abandon his artistic principles for a secure economic future. AIDS, however, is the most devastating threat hanging over their lives. Four of the eight main characters have the disease, and all have mourned the loss of loved ones to it. Roger lost his girlfriend, and in the course of the play, Angel, who has just established a loving relationship with Collins, succumbs to the disease.

Drug addiction is another force that threatens to control the characters' futures. They are surrounded by dealers, who feed on their need to find solace from the harsh realities of their lives; some characters, like Mimi, are not strong enough to resist. Mimi, who is forced to work as a stripper in order to survive, turns to heroin to escape and is unable to break her addiction to it, especially since Roger is unable to allow her to get close to him. Commenting on Roger's inability to establish a relationship with Mimi, the company sings, □How do you leave the past behind / When it keeps finding ways to get to your heart?□ His only goal now is to write one good song □that rings true,□ but his

creative energies have been blocked by the pain he has suffered. He rejects Mimi's love for the same reason, declaring, □Looking for romance? / Come back another day.□

The company warns him, □Give in to love / Or live in fear,□ but he cannot open himself to the possibility of more loss. The company expresses the difficulty that all of the characters have in allowing themselves to establish real connections with one another, knowing that these relationships will most likely not last, when they sing, □How can you connect in an age / Where strangers, landlords, lovers / Your own blood cells betray.□ Ultimately, however, the characters do connect with each other, as they realize that their relationships with others and the expression of their creativity are the only things that provide meaning. In her review for the *Los Angeles Times*, Laurie Winer praises Larson's focus on □people clinging fiercely together while living a difficult, exhilarating existence on the brink of poverty.□ His characters unite in their distain for convention and pretension and in their celebration of their bohemian lifestyle, which enables them to freely express themselves. Winer concludes, □the Bohemians of *Rent* wear their youth, poverty and creativity like a cloak around them, shielding them from judgment by the enemy□anyone who has 'sold out' and has money.□

The characters also come to understand that friendship □depends on true devotion□ and □on not denying emotion.□ Collins and Angel had been brave enough to accomplish this, refusing to let the future determine how they will live their lives in the present. The selfless Angel, whose anthem is □today for you□tomorrow for me,□ initiates his union with Collins when he declares that he will be Collins's shelter, wrapping him in love. Collins reciprocates, knowing that their relationship will provide them with □a new lease□ on life.

Love also ultimately proves to be an inspiration for Roger, who returns and declares that he has found his song, inspired by Mimi. His declaration of love enables her to find the strength to survive at the end of the play, which ends with a call to *carpe diem* (live for today). In the closing scene, the company sings □No other road no other way / No day but today.□ In the final moments of the play, Larson reveals to the audience the way in which seemingly overwhelming environmental forces can be checked through the saving power of faith: faith in self, faith in the creative spirit, faith in love, and faith in the present. As Winer concludes, □'Rent' is a rousing anthem to living each day as it comes.□

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *Rent*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

In 1996, Dreamworks produced an audio compact disk of the play, featuring the original Broadway cast.

A film version of *Rent*, featuring almost all of the original cast, was released by Columbia Pictures in 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Read the libretto for Puccini's *La bohème*, on which *Rent* is based, and compare and contrast its characters and themes. In a short presentation to the class, discuss these comparisons and contrasts and say why you think Larson made the changes that he did in his play.

The film *A Chorus Line* is a screen version of a Broadway musical that focuses on the experiences of a group of actors. The narrative is similar to that of *Rent*, in that it weaves the stories together as they relate to one main event. Watch the film versions of both plays and analyze how the various stories are depicted on the screen. Stage a scene from each film that reflects a similar theme and one from each that illustrates two different themes.

Rent has often been called □the *Hair* of the 1990s.□ *Hair* was a Broadway hit that illustrated the □hippie□ generation that came of age during the 1960s. Explore how *Rent* depicts the Generation Xers who came of age during the 1990s. Write an essay that determines whether or not the play is an accurate reflection of American youth during this decade.

Read biographical accounts of Larson's life. What elements of *Rent* are autobiographical? Develop a PowerPoint presentation of your findings and present it to the class.

Compare and Contrast

1984: Because the Census Bureau is not yet capturing data on cohabitation, estimates are required to reflect the trend of people living together without being married. This estimate was given the acronym POSSLQ, Persons of the Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters. In 1984, the estimated number of POSSLQs was 2.4 million.

Today: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of the year 2000, more than 11 million unmarried people live with a partner. This represents an increase of 72 percent since 1990 and is ten times the number of people who were cohabitating in 1960. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announces in 2002 that 41 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four have lived with someone at some point in their lives.

1984: The median age for a woman's first marriage is twenty-two, more than a year older than a decade earlier. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1980, 39 percent of American adults are unmarried. This number slowly rises to 41 percent by the end of the decade, indicating an increasing willingness to wait or forgo marriage and an increased acceptance of that decision.

Today: In 2000, the median age for a woman's first marriage is twenty-five, and 44 percent of American adults are unmarried. As the median age for marrying continues to rise, along with the percentage of adults who remain unmarried, society is increasingly accepting and affirming decisions not to rush into traditional family patterns.

1984: Women's voices in literature are embraced and encouraged. Women's poetry is released by major publishers and reviewed by important journals. In 1983, the *Women's Review of Books* is launched, providing a journal specifically for reviewing writing by and for women. In the preceding ten years, two women won Pulitzer Prizes in Poetry and three women won National Book Awards for poetry.

Today: Women continue to be major literary figures across genres. Between 1995 and 2005, two women won Pulitzer Prizes in Poetry, and three women won National Book Awards for poetry.

What Do I Read Next?

Hair (1968), with book and lyrics by Gerome Ragni and James Rado, is considered to be the youth anthem of the 1960s, just as *Rent* is considered to be an expression of the 1990s. The play is a rock musical that communicates the attitudes and behavior of young Americans who became caught up in the counterculture atmosphere of the age.

Bright Lights, Big City (1984), by Jay McInerney, chronicles the lives of young New Yorkers who have become caught up in the corporate world and subsequently discover the meaninglessness of their existence.

James Joyce's classic coming-of-age novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1925) follows a young Dublin man's quest for artistic expression.

AIDS in the Twenty-First Century: Disease and Globalization, by Tony Barnett and Alan Whiteside (2002), provides a detailed study of how the disease has spread not only in America but all over the world.

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The comprehensive guide to American theater includes articles on relevant topics, such as □AIDS and the American Theatre.□

Galvin, Peter, □How the Show Goes On: An Interview with 'Roger, "Mimi,' and 'Mark,'□ in *Interview*, Vol. 20, March 1996, p 105.

This interview with three of the original cast members□Adam Pascal, Daphne Rubin-Vega, and Anthony Rapp□focuses on the cast's reaction to Larson's death.

London, Herbert, *Decade of Denial: A Snapshot of America in the 1990s*, Lexington Books, 2001.

London charts the decade, which he considers to be a media-driven age, consumed by greed.

Shilts, Randy, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, Stonewall Inn Editions, 2000.

The authors trace the impact of social and political forces on the development of the AIDS epidemic.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

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Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

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

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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