Reunion Study Guide

Reunion by David Mamet

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Introduction

David Mamet is one of the most celebrated American playwrights of the twentieth century. Mamet, who has won numerous prestigious awards for his plays, is best known for his use of dialogue that captures the rhythms and idiom of colloquial American speech and powerfully expresses the struggles of his characters to express themselves to one another.

Reunion is a one-act play that dramatizes bits and pieces of one long conversation between Carol, a twenty-four-year old woman, and her father, Bernie, whom she hasn't seen since her parents divorced twenty years earlier. Bernie is a recovering alcoholic and has spent much of his life intoxicated, traveling around, and moving from job to job. Carol tells Bernie that she has contacted him because, although she is married, she is lonely. Father and daughter try to reestablish a relationship with one another by asking each other questions and attempting to explain their lives.

In *Reunion*, Mamet explores the delicate dynamics of communication between a parent and child who have been separated by divorce. The struggle to establish a genuine sense of connection between two family members is poignantly rendered through Mamet's characteristic skill at creating dialogue that expresses the difficult, sometimes painful, often unsuccessful, efforts of human beings to communicate with one another.

Author Biography

David Alan Mamet was born November 30, 1947. His parents were of Polish-Russian descent, and Mamet grew up in a Jewish neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. His mother was a teacher and his father a labor lawyer. After his parents divorced, Mamet moved with his mother and sister to the suburbs of Chicago but later lived with his father. He began his association with live theater in high school when he worked as a busboy at Second City, a comedy club, and as a stagehand at Hull House Theater. From 1965 to 1969, Mamet attended Goddard College in Vermont, where he majored in literature. His play *Camel* was performed at Goddard College while he was still an undergraduate. After graduating from college, Mamet taught drama for a year at Marlboro College in Vermont, where his play *Lakeboat* was performed by the Marlboro Theater Workshop. From 1971 to 1973, he served as artist-in-residence and acting instructor at Goddard College, and helped found the Nicholas Theater Company and served as its artistic director. In 1974, Mamet was back in Chicago, having brought the St. Nicholas Theater Company with him. Over the next two years, his plays opened primarily in Chicago. He first gained significant critical attention as a playwright when his Sexual Perversity in Chicago was performed in 1974 and won the Jefferson Award for Best New Chicago Play. From 1975 to 1976 he taught as a visiting lecturer at the University of Chicago. *Reunion*, a one-act play, premiered in 1976, and was later performed as a triptych with *Dark Pony* (1977) and *The Sanctity of Marriage* (1979).

In 1976, Mamet moved to New York, where small theater companies were beginning to produce some of his plays. That year he received an Oboe Award for Best New American Play for *Sexual perversity in chicago* (which was adapted to the screen in the 1986 film *About Last Night*). Mamet first rose to national prominence as a major playwright of his generation in 1977, when *American buffalo* (1975) opened on Broadway at the Barrymore Theater, garnering Mamet the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best American play. (Mamet also won an Obie for Best American Play for *American buffalo* in 1983.) Many of Mamet's plays were produced in various theaters in New York, Chicago, New Haven, and London. Mamet's international reputation as an outstanding playwright reached its pinnacle in 1983, when his most celebrated play, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, premiered in London. *Glengarry Glen Ross* concerns the internal competition and shady dealings among several men working in a real estate agency. In 1984, Mamet was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best American Play, for *Glengarry Glen Ross*. *Glengarry Glen Ross* was adapted by Mamet to the screen in a critically acclaimed 1992 film.

Mamet's career as a Hollywood screenwriter began in 1981 with the remake of the classic *The Postman Always rings twice*. Other screenplays by Mamet include *The Verdict* (1982), *House of Games* (1987; also Mamet's debut as a film director), *The Untouchables* (1987), *We're no angels* (1990), *Homicide* (1992), *Hoffa* (1992), *Oleana* (1994), *American buffalo* (1996), *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997), *The Edge* (1997), *Wag the dog* (1997), *Ronin* (1998), *The Winslow boy* (1999), and *State and Maine* (2000), among many others.

Plot Summary

Scene 1

As the play opens, Carol has just arrived at Bernie's apartment on a Sunday afternoon in early March. Bernie comments, "This is a very important moment." He's relieved that she calls him Bernie, rather than "Dad." He explains that he has quit drinking and has been doing better lately than he had been in the past.

Scene 2

Carol tells Bernie his apartment looks nice, and he explains that he's been living there two years. Carol tells him the apartment she lives in with her husband, Gerry, is very nice and comfortable, although it gets a little cramped when Gerry's two sons (from a previous marriage) are staying there.

Scene 3

Carol sees a picture of Bernie with a group of Army Air Corps bombers and asks him about his military duty in World War II. He explains that he was a tail gunner in a B-17. Carol tells Bernie she wants to know more about him. He describes himself as: "Fifty-three years old. Ex-alcoholic. Exthis. Ex-that. Democrat." Bernie asks Carol a little about her husband Gerry, and her marriage. Bernie explains to Carol that he had wanted to see her again after he and her mother were separated, but that her mother had initiated a court order in 1951, forbidding him from seeing his daughter. Carol tells Bernie she has been married to Gerry for two years, and that his sons are eight and twelve years old. Bernie tells Carol he almost burst into tears when Gerry showed up at the restaurant where he works to say Carol wanted to see him.

Scene 4

Bernie tells Carol she has a half-brother, Marty, who is three years younger than she, from his second marriage to a woman named Ruth. Bernie hasn't heard from Marty in several years, but says that, last he heard, Marty wasn't doing anything with his life. Carol also has a half-sister, Barbara, from her mother's second marriage. Bernie reminisces about the last year he saw Carol, when she was four years old, and he used to take her to the zoo and to the science museum. He tells Carol, "You were a beautiful kid." Bernie says he has some pictures of Carol from that time, which he looks at every day, but then he is unable to find them to show her. He mentions that he's thinking of marrying a woman named Leslie, whom he works with at the restaurant.

Scene 5

Bernie says that he is happy now, that he has stopped drinking, likes his job at the restaurant, and is even starting to save some money. He explains to Carol his current attitude about life, that "You got to take your chance for happiness."

Scene 6

Bernie states that the main things on his mind at the moment are getting to know Carol and possibly getting married again. Carol tells him she used to think he was Toto (the Native American friend of the television cowboy hero The Lone Ranger), and that she was upset when he told her he wasn't Tonto. He says that "the only two worthwhile things I ever did in my life" were working for the phone company and firing a machine gun during World War II.

Scene 7

Bernie admits to Carol that he was scared about meeting her again. Carol tells him she works at her husband's office, and Bernie can see that she's not really happy with the job. She then admits to Bernie that she and her husband aren't sleeping together any more, and that her husband is not a good lover. Bernie points out that Gerry seems like a nice guy and seems to be fond of her.

Scene 8

Carol points out that she is from a broken home because of her parents' divorce and that so many people are divorced these days, it is no longer considered a big deal. However, she thinks it must have affected her in some way. Bernie explains that he did feel guilty about the divorce but that he was also angry with her mother and even angry with her. He goes on to say that he was angry with the government for how he was treated in the war and as a war veteran. Carol tells him that her husband, Gerry, fought in the Korean War, but that he never talks about it.

Scene 9

Bernie tells Carol a story about something that happened to him when he was working for the phone company. He had driven to a friend's place on New Year's Eve and gotten drunk. He had paid a young man to drive him home afterward, but the young man disappeared, so he drove himself home while still drunk. As a result, he got into an accident and crashed his car into a telephone pole. A police officer found him and drove him home without arresting him or giving him a ticket for the accident. However, as soon as he got home, the phone company called him to come out and repair a telephone pole

that had been knocked down in a car accident. So, he ended up getting paid to repair the telephone pole he himself had crashed into.

Scene 10

Bernie explains that he was .red from the phone company, where he had worked for ten years, after he accidentally hit a police car and his driver's license was revoked. He says his driver's license will probably be reinstated in about a year. Carol mentions that she worked as a sixth-grade teacher for a year-and-a-half. They realize that, since they've both been living in Boston for years, they probably passed each other on the street, or in a restaurant or store, many times without knowing it.

Scene 11

Bernie recalls that he had considered calling her on her twenty-first birthday, in 1968. She states that she wants to get to know him, and he assures her that he wants to get to know her. He adds, "let's get up, go out, do this" because "what's between us isn't going nowhere, and the rest of it doesn't exist."

Scene 12

Bernie asks Carol why, after all these years, she decided to seek him out and see him at this point in her life. She responds that she wanted to see him because she felt lonely. She adds, "You're my father."

Scene 13

Carol says she feels lonely, and that she feels cheated because she never had a father. She tells Bernie she doesn't want to be his pal or his buddy, but wants him to be a father to her. She insists that she is entitled to have a father. Bernie agrees but states that the important thing is for them to be together. Carol asks if he'd like to go out to dinner with her and her husband, Gerry, that night. Bernie responds that he would like that. Carol then suggests that just the two of them could go out to dinner, without Gerry. Bernie tells her whatever she'd like to do is fine.

Scene 14

Bernie gives Carol a gold bracelet with the inscription "To Carol from her Father. March eighth, 1973." He explains that it should say March third, but that his threes look like eights. They get ready to call Gerry and go out to dinner. Carol tells Bernie the bracelet is lovely, and he thanks her.

Scene 1

Scene 1 Summary

Bernie welcomes Carol into his apartment. He tells her that he would have recognized her anywhere. He feels like a racehorse, and that, if he were still a drinker, that he'd offer her a drink as well. He adds that if he still drank, she probably wouldn't be there and expresses the hope that she's not going to call him "Dad." They compliment each other on how good they look, with Bernie commenting that nobody else is going to take care of him if he doesn't do it himself, except maybe the VA (Veteran's Administration) or AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). He talks about how often he goes to the VA and AA meetings and then recalls that someone else took care of him, a friend who got him a good job in a restaurant. Carol comments that he's got a lot of friends. Bernie says he always did and then comments again on how good Carol looks. Carol says that AA helped her track him down, saying that Gerry did the legwork. They talk about how neither of them goes to church anymore, and Carol suggests that they should start going again to "renew their faith." She mentions that Gerry still goes, and Bernie comments that Gerry might be one of those people who actually mean it when he goes.

Scene 1 Analysis

The first important thing about this play is less specific to the play itself than it is to the work of the author in general. David Mamet writes in a particularly sparse style, with his characters using a minimum of words when they speak. This gives the impression that every line is carefully shaped to provide the clearest information in the shortest period of time with as little explanation as possible, meaning that understanding what's passing between characters comes from paying careful attention to both what is said and what is implied. Another word for this implied content is "subtext."

In this first scene, a large amount of information is packed into very few words and very little is actually explained. Most of what is understood about these characters and their situation is stated outright, not as explanation but as facts, mentioned almost casually. This includes Bernie's alcoholism and his not having seen Carol for several years. Other references do require interpretation, such as Bernie's comment that he feels like a racehorse. This is a reference to how nervous both he and racehorses are before a big event. With the horse, the event is the race, while with Bernie the event is his reunion with Carol. The second reference requiring interpretation is Carol's comment about renewing faith, which represents her and Bernie's mutual need to renew their faith in each other. Her brief statement both foreshadows and sums up the action of the play as they allow themselves to become vulnerable with each other, thereby creating new faith in their relationship and, as a result, new faith in themselves, evidence of which emerges as the action of the play continues.

Scene 2

Scene 2 Summary

Bernie comments on how good it is to see Carol, and Carol says his apartment's very nice. Bernie talks about how it was mostly decorated by his friend, Leslie, and that he's lived there a couple of years. Carol talks about her home with Gerry, saying that it gets cramped when Gerry's kids come to visit. She says she and Gerry are talking about buying a house together. She says again that Bernie's place is nice. Bernie seems to not know what to say next.

Scene 2 Analysis

The second important thing to note about this play is the brevity of many of its scenes, which represents awkward stops and starts in what must be a difficult conversation. There is no indication in the text of how the scenes are to be broken up, whether there is a blackout between scenes, a dimming of lights, or an extended pause. Whatever the technical means of defining the scenes, the point is that between the end of one and the beginning of the next, Carol and Bernie both seem to be looking for the next thing to say.

Scene 3

Scene 3 Summary

Carol looks at a picture of Bernie taken during the war. Bernie says he was nicknamed "Butch" back then but can't remember why. Carol discovers a medal that Bernie received, and he tells her he was a tail gunner, that tail gunners didn't usually last long but he did, and that he once chewed out a young lieutenant who wasn't giving him the respect he thought he deserved. He reveals that he was stationed in England, which leads Carol to reveal that she and Gerry have done a lot of traveling, including England. Bernie asks her to tell him more about Gerry, but Carol tries to get him to talk about himself. Bernie insists upon knowing more about Gerry, adding that he'll kill him if he's treating her badly. Carol talks about how they love each other in the "usual" way, adding that she thinks he's a little frightened of her. Bernie comments that men are often frightened of beautiful women, and asks whether Gerry takes care of her. When Carol says he does, Bernie asks what she wants by coming to see him.

Carol says she just wants to get to know him. Bernie says there's not much to tell, saying that what she sees is what he is. He talks at length about his experiences as an alcoholic and how he lost his driver's license, went into the VA hospital for a while with a bad back, and then worked for the phone company for several years. He says he wanted to visit her (Carol), but says he couldn't because of a court order. Carol says she never really knew the details about the court order. Bernie changes the subject, telling a long story about how he missed his brother's funeral because he was working as a mover, was on a run out west when his brother died and got back a couple of days after the funeral. He says he went to visit his brother, but his brother's angry wife who told him she never wanted to see him again met him at the door.

Bernie asks about Carol's mother, and she tells him she married a great guy. Bernie then asks how long she and Gerry have been married and whether Carol gets along with Gerry's kids. She says they do all right, adding that Gerry and the kids' mother are divorced. Bernie says he likes Gerry, and then tells another long story about how Gerry surprised him at the restaurant when he came in and told him Carol was looking for him. He says when he heard his daughter was looking for him, he just about burst into tears.

Scene 3 Analysis

This scene is the exception that proves the rules established in the first two scenes. It's the longest scene so far and almost the longest scene of the play. If one accepts the proposition that the shortness of the first two scenes indicates that Carol and Bernie are having difficulty finding things to say, the length of this scene combines with Bernie's long speeches to indicate that he, at least, is growing more comfortable. Meanwhile, his speeches suggest that he's got things inside him that he's wanted and needed to say for a long time. The idea that he's full of suppressed stories and feelings is reinforced by

the lines at the end of the scene in which he refers to almost bursting into tears when he hears about Carol's wanting to see him.

At this point, it's becoming clear that the play isn't just about a reunion between father and daughter but Bernie's reunion with himself. At the same time, the contrasting sense that Carol is reluctant to talk about herself and Gerry suggests that she needs the same kind of self-reunion that Bernie is already going through with the play's final moments indicating the possibility that as a result of re-connecting with Gerry, such a reunion might be possible.

A key moment in this scene is the point at which Bernie comes right out and asks Carol what she wants, which suggests that even as he's becoming more comfortable, he's not quite able to rid himself of the suspicion that she's after something other than just getting to know him. The action of the play reveals that Carol is there for exactly the reason she says she is, another reason that Bernie continues to open up and reveal more about himself than he was perhaps prepared to admit he needed to do.

Scene 4

Scene 4 Summary

Bernie tells Carol she's got a half-brother by his second wife, Ruth, and comments that he knows Carol's mother had another daughter, Barbara. Carol says she and Barbara are very close, and Bernie tells her she'd like Marty, although he admits he hasn't seen him much for a long time. He talks about how similar Ruth and Carol's mother were, how he and each of his wives got along well at the beginning, but it didn't last too long. He talks about the experience of having kids, which he says is "indescribable" and goes into a long reminiscence of things he and Carol used to do together, talking about how beautiful she was and how he looks at pictures of when she was little all the time. He looks for his photo albums, but he can't find them. Carol tells him she doesn't have to see them, but Bernie keeps looking. Meanwhile, he tells Carol she smokes too much. Carol says she knows she does, and adds that Gerry smokes as well. Bernie says they should both quit, saying that he quit himself several years ago. This leads him to mention that he's thinking about getting married again to his friend, Leslie, who decorated the apartment and who works at the same restaurant he does. Carol asks about her, and Bernie says that Leslie's a good worker, knows all about his past, and might even love him. He asks Carol how she'd feel if he got married again. Carol says she thinks it would be good for him, Bernie says it wouldn't get in the way of their getting to know each other, and Carol asks why he wants to get married again. Bernie tells her he wants the companionship.

Scene 4 Analysis

The key element of this scene is the way it illustrates the decreasing importance of Bernie's past and the increasing importance of his future. This is symbolized by the fact that he can't find the photo album, by his mention of having quit smoking, and by his reference to getting married again. All of this indicates that in spite of his long reminiscences about Carol's childhood in this scene and other reminiscences throughout the play, Bernie's reunion with himself is enabling him to finally move on with his life.

Carol, by contrast, seems to be stuck in her life. This is indicated by her comments about being unable to quit smoking combined with her earlier reluctance to talk about Gerry. The fact that this scene shows Bernie and Carol at such different places in their lives supports the idea that Carol is on her way through, indicating that Bernie is becoming a kind of inspiration. In other words, by seeing and sensing Bernie moving on, Carol realizes that it's possible for her to move on, a possibility again represented by the play's final moments and the gift of jewelry Bernie gives her, which itself is a symbol of the spiritual gift he's already passed on--the capacity to leave the past behind.

Scene 5

Scene 5 Summary

Bernie talks about how he's a happy man with a good job, good friends, and the ability to go for long walks without needing to bum money for drinks or look for someone to help him "get laid." After apologizing for speaking crudely, he explains that he views people who talk about living in the country and getting back to nature as doing the same kind of things he did when he was younger, things like drinking and getting into debt and being a lousy human being. He describes them all as ways of "getting around," talks about how Carol's lucky with all the possibilities in her life, and says that she should focus on those and not on all the other more negative stuff the way he did for so long. He becomes insistent as he tells her she's got to take what happiness she can and find out about the rules of the world for herself because nobody's going to do either of those things for her. He says that everything's got a price, including happiness, and people have to learn what the price is and pay it.

Scene 5 Analysis

Essentially, Bernie is saying that what he's done up to now is to avoid living, that he's learned that living means focusing on all the good and positive and hopeful things, and that he wants Carol to learn the same lesson. He's at his most passionate in this scene, and interestingly, Carol is at her most silent. This suggests that Bernie's message is what Carol, perhaps subconsciously, needed to hear. To look at it another way, the philosophy Bernie speaks of in this scene is what enabled him to have his reunion with himself, put his past behind him (for the most part), and focus on the future. This is the philosophy Carol needs to develop to generate her own self-reunion.

Scene 6

Scene 6 Summary

Bernie shrugs off the passion of the previous scene and tells Carol again how good-looking she's become. She says that she got it all from him, saying that she used to think he was the handsomest man she ever met and fantasized when she was a child that he was Tonto, the native companion of the Lone Ranger. It becomes clear that Bernie knew about the fantasy and that he told her to keep it private between the two of them.

Carol tells Bernie he's wasted in the restaurant. He reacts angrily, saying that he likes it there, that he's not her fantasy father but her father the ex-drunk, that he can't do the only other things he was ever good at any more, and that it's important to find happiness wherever you can. He curses and says she hasn't even been to the restaurant, that his life doesn't have to be her life, and that if someone likes where he works--Carol interrupts him and tells him to not be silly. He says he's just explaining, but Carol curses and tells him she doesn't want to talk about it any more.

Scene 6 Analysis

The primary function of this scene is to suggest that the feeling Bernie has about Carol's discontentment is probably right. Her suggestion that Bernie is wasted in the restaurant can easily be seen as a projection of her own unhappiness onto him, something that Bernie calls her on in his angry reaction to her suggestion. Her fantasy about his being Tonto reinforces this idea, suggesting that in the past, Carol saw her father for what he could be rather than for what he truly was and still looks at him the same way. Bernie's response is his attempt to make her see the truth about himself and therefore about her, moving them both further along their journey toward reconciliation and bringing Carol closer to realizing that she needs to reunite with herself and her true dreams. Meanwhile, Carol's losing her temper suggests that on some level she's aware that this is something she needs to do, is afraid of it, and resents having it pointed out to her.

It's interesting to note that Carol saw Bernie as Tonto and not as the Lone Ranger, as the sidekick and not the hero. This suggests that Bernie was a supporting character in his own life in the way Tonto was a supporting character to the Lone Ranger. This idea ties in with Bernie's suggestion that by living the life he did when he was younger, he wasn't really living his true life and only became truly himself, the leading character in his own life, once he moved away from his old life and accepted the values of hope and possibility.

Scene 7

Scene 7 Summary

Carol and Bernie both admit they were nervous about seeing each other with Bernie saying he imagined some kind of intense drama. He asks Carol where she works, and she explains that she works in Gerry's office doing a lot of different things. Bernie says it's fine as long as she likes what she's doing, and when Carol hesitates about agreeing, Bernie suggests she quit. Carol admits that her unhappiness comes from another source, saying that Gerry isn't a good lover. Bernie tells her to not let it get her down, Carol angrily asks what he knows about it, and Bernie says that as a man of the world being a bad lover doesn't really mean anything, particularly if Carol knows Gerry truly cares for her. He asks if she agrees, and she doesn't respond.

Scene 7 Analysis

It seems that on some level Bernie is getting to Carol since she's clearly getting more resentful of his observations. In similar situations outside the world of the play, such reactions often suggest that the person making the observations is closer to the truth than might perhaps be comfortable. This situation seems to be no exception because in spite of her resentment, Carol begins to sense that Bernie's right; her marriage is troubled. This suggests that she's beginning to confront the negatives in her life in the same way that Bernie confronted his, raising the possibility that Carol's self-reunion is actually beginning to happen. This possibility is reinforced by the way that Bernie puts his newfound philosophy into action, suggesting that rather than focusing on the negative, Carol should focus on the positive. The fact that she remains silent in response to his suggestion is very telling and leads us into the action of the next scene.

Scene 8

Scene 8 Summary

Carol relates how she isn't quite sure how, but she believes the fact that she comes from a broken home, which she describes as "the most important institution in America," has affected her marriage. Bernie says that life goes on, and Carol says that's the kind of philosophy Gerry has. Bernie admits that he missed her like crazy when he left, and that he was angry at Carol's mother for a long time in the same way that he was angry at the government and the VA for not helping him more when he was in trouble. He then says he's not asking Carol to understand, saying they've both been through enough. Carol mentions that Gerry fought in the Korean War, and when Bernie asks whether he talks about it, Carol says he says nothing.

Scene 8 Analysis

Bernie suggests in this scene that there's no point in continuing to be angry and bitter about the past and that Carol needs to abandon her resentment of coming from a "broken home" in the same way that he had to abandon his anger about how he was treated by her mother and by the government. The implication is that by doing so, she'll discover the capacity to look at the positive side of life the same way he has. This moves Carol another step closer to her self-reunion and clearly underlines the play's thematic statement that holding onto the past sabotages the future.

The brief mention of Gerry's participation in the Korean War and that he's silent about it suggests that Gerry is himself haunted by his past and implies that he's as much in need of a self-reunion as Carol is.

Scene 9

Scene 9 Summary

This scene consists of Bernie's telling a long story of a job he did one New Year's Eve while he was still working for the phone company. He tells how he went to a party, smashed his beloved car on a telephone pole but drove away from the accident, got called in to repair the telephone pole, and sat in the phone company's truck drinking while the coworker who accompanied him on the call did all the work.

Scene 9 Analysis

Although Bernie's rambling story is evocative of some of the good times he had in his earlier life, it's a clear contrast to all the negative stories he's told so far. Because it's juxtaposed with the following scene, it serves as an illustration of how Bernie must let even the good things in the past go so that he can face the future fully and positively.

Scene 10

Scene 10 Summary

In what seems like a continuation of the previous story, Bernie explains that he got fired from the phone company after colliding with a police car. He says that his boss, the fellow who called him out to help him on the New Year's Eve job, pleaded his case with head office, but the decision was final. He talks about how he was the best telephone lineman on the job, how everybody occasionally drank on the job, and that he can't figure out why he got fired. This leads Carol to reveal that she was a teacher for a while, and when she tells Bernie where she taught, they realize they worked right across the street from each other and must have unknowingly passed each other hundreds of times.

Scene 10 Analysis

Because he talks at such length about being happy with who he is and sounds quite self-aware, there's irony in the way that Bernie can't understand why drinking on the job got him fired. It may be true that everybody drank while they were working, but chances are they didn't get caught, and that's the point that seems to be escaping him. This raises the question of whether Bernie truly believes he's happy or whether he's just talking himself into thinking he is. Chances are, the truth lies somewhere in between and that on some level he may be happy, but he's still got a long way to go when it comes to being honest with and about himself.

Juxtaposed with Bernie's story is Carol's admission that she was once a teacher. This suggests that Carol lost her job in a similar way to how Bernie lost his, not necessarily by drinking on the job but perhaps because she got caught doing something inappropriate. This idea, that they share parallel experiences, is reinforced by their mutual discovery that they worked near each other and must have seen each other frequently. It's an idea that supports the thematic and dramatic premise that Bernie and Carol are both experiencing a self-reunion as a result of their reunion with each other.

Scene 11

Scene 11 Summary

Bernie tells Carol he wanted to call her on the day she turned 21. He says she probably doesn't believe him, but ultimately it doesn't matter since actions are more important than ideas, adding that spending time in jail reminded him that the present is what's important. Carol says she wants to get to know him better, and Bernie says he wants to get to know her, too, suggesting they go for a walk or do something they did together when Carol was a child.

Scene 11 Analysis

Bernie's restless insistence on going for a walk suggests two things. The first is that on some level he realizes that his reunion with himself won't be complete until he manages to put the past with Carol aside and moves into the future, becoming the kind of father he can be now as opposed to the kind they both wish he had been. The second is that on another level, he recognizes that Carol needs his help to reconcile with herself and is taking steps to give her that help even though she hasn't asked for it. Meanwhile, it's interesting that no explanation is given of why he was in jail. This helps to define the play's thematic point of leaving the past behind and living in the present.

Scene 12

Scene 12 Summary

Bernie comes right out and asks Carol why she came looking for him. After a very brief discussion that refers back to Gerry's having tracked Bernie down through AA, Carol admits that she was lonely, and that Bernie's her father.

Scene 12 Analysis

The truth at the core of Carol's character and her visit appears in this scene. The juxtaposition of her comments that she's lonely and that Bernie's her father indicates that she wasn't just lonely; she was lonely for him, a possibility confirmed by her comments in the following scene. Even though her earlier comment that Bernie is wasting his self at the restaurant suggests that she was lonely for the idea of a father more than actually for Bernie, and it's clear that she's beginning to accept him for who he is and take comfort from that, instead of becoming disappointed that her fantasy father isn't real.

Scene 13

Scene 13 Summary

Carol says that she feels lonely and cheated because she didn't have a father, adding that she doesn't want to be friends but wants a father, war stories and everything. She forcefully asks whether Bernie thinks she's entitled to that, and he agrees that she is but says it's important they accept each other as they are now and not hold onto the past in any way. Carol asks whether he's working that night, and Bernie says he never works Sundays, adding that when he was asked to cover for someone who was sick, he said he couldn't come in. Carol tells him that Gerry said it would be a good idea if the three of them went out to dinner, but when Bernie says that's fine, Carol says she'd like to go out with him on her own. Bernie tells her he'll do whatever she wants.

Scene 13 Analysis

It's possible to interpret Carol's comments about feeling cheated as referring to how Bernie feels as well. Whether he does or he doesn't, this climactic scene marks the highest point of emotion for both of them as they admit and act upon their need for connection with each other, which then brings them into a closer connection with themselves.

Scene 14

Scene 14 Summary

Bernie tells Carol he got her something, and he gets out a bracelet, making a joke about his having found it on the bus. Carol reads what he had engraved into it. He apologizes that the date is wrong, saying that the engravers couldn't read his writing. He tells her that Ruth once told him never to give jewelry as a gift because it made the person receiving the gift think that she had to wear it any time the giver wasn't around, adding that that's the reason he never gave her any jewelry. Carol says it's beautiful. They discuss what the weather's like outside, saying they should get going. Bernie suggests that Carol should call Bernie, and after she's done they'll leave. Carol says again that she loves the bracelet. Bernie thanks her for the compliment.

Scene 14 Analysis

The gift of the bracelet symbolizes the success of the reunion, not only in terms of Bernie and Carol's beginning a new relationship with each other, but also in terms of Bernie and Carol's beginning new relationships with their selves. In other words they're at least beginning to move on from the past with their going out symbolizing their capacity to enjoy each other in the present and move into the future together. This idea is corroborated by the fact that Bernie does something that was essentially denied him in his past, giving a gift of jewelry--another new beginning. Meanwhile, the discussion about calling Gerry indicates that at least on some level, he's going to be included in their relationship and that he's going to continue to be an important part of the present, at least for a while.

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Characters

Bernie Cary

Bernie Cary is a fifty-three-year-old recovering alcoholic. He is the father of Carol, whom he hasn't seen since he divorced Carol's mother twenty years earlier. He tells Carol he had wanted to see her all those years, but that her mother initiated a court order forbidding him from seeing Carol. He mentions that he considered contacting Carol when she turned twenty-one, but did not do so. Bernie admits that he was scared by the prospect of meeting Carol at this point, but he seems pleased that she is there. Bernie spent most of his adult life as an alcoholic, and has only quit drinking in the last couple of years. Before that, he worked for the telephone company for ten years, until he was fired for driving drunk and smashing into a police car. He is divorced from his second wife, Ruth, with whom he has a son, Marty, whom he hasn't heard from in several years. Bernie says that he hasn't done very well for most of his life, but has been feeling much better in the last couple of years. He likes his job working at a restaurant, is saving some money, and is thinking of marrying a woman named Leslie, who works with him at the restaurant. It is clear that Bernie very much wants to reestablish a relationship with Carol.

In the final scene of the play, he gives Carol an engraved gold bracelet as they get ready to go out to dinner together.

Carol Mindler

Carol Mindler is a twenty-four-year-old woman, the daughter of Bernie. She has come to visit her father whom she hasn't seen since she was four years old, when her parents divorced. Carol repeatedly tells Bernie that she wants to get to know him, and that she wants him to be a father to her. She feels "cheated" because she did not have a father when she was growing up. She says she wanted to see him now because she is lonely. She is married to a man named Gerry, who has two sons from a previous marriage. Carol implies that she and Gerry's sons don't particularly like each other, although they get along. She works as an assistant in Gerry's office, a job that doesn't seem to challenge or interest her. She tells Bernie that she and her husband don't make love any more, and that he is a "lousy" lover anyway. Toward the end of the play, Carol tentatively asks Bernie if he will go out to dinner with her and her husband. Bernie gives her a gold bracelet with a note to her engraved on it and Carol seems very pleased to receive such a gift from her father.

Themes

Marriage, Divorce, and Family

A central theme of *Reunion* is marriage, divorce, and family. Carol's relationship with her father was broken off when she was four years old because of her parents' divorce. Carol's mother is now remarried, and she has a half-sister from this union. Bernie remarried after divorcing Carol's mother and was divorced a second time. As a result of Bernie's second marriage, Carol has a half brother. Now Bernie is considering a third marriage to a woman he works with at the restaurant who has already been divorced once. The marriage he is considering, however, does not sound entirely promising because his reason for wanting to remarry is for "companionship," and there is no suggestion that he feels a strong or deep connection to the woman he plans on marrying.

Carol's husband, Gerry, is divorced from his first wife, with whom he had two sons. Carol indicates that she is not entirely happy in her marriage to Gerry, that she is lonely, and that they don't make love any more, so it's possible she may end up divorced from him. Carol refers to herself as being from a "broken home." She points out that everyone is getting divorced and remarried these days, and that "every child has three sets of parents." Carol complains that because divorce has become so common, people no longer speak of children as being from a "broken home," and the effect of divorce on children is no longer considered to be a major concern. Carol seems to resent this because she herself feels that her life has been deeply scarred by her parents' divorce and the absence of her father from her life. She ironically refers to divorce as the "Great American Institution." This comment implies that divorce has become commonplace in the United States, and that, according to Mamet, it is damaging to the lives of children.

Communication and Personal Connection

In *Reunion*, as in many of his plays, Mamet explores the difficulties people have in communicating with one another about their feelings and what is important to them. Mamet focuses on communication as a means by which human beings ought to be able to develop a sense of personal connection with each other. However, his characters find that conversation often has the opposite effect and ends up getting in the way of real personal connection when it should be facilitating connection. A major irony in Bernie's life is that he worked for the telephone company for ten years, and yet never once called his daughter on the phone. The telephone is clearly a symbol for verbal communication, and yet Bernie, although an expert telephone repairman, was, for most of his life, a failure at communicating with the people who are important to him.

In *Reunion*, though, Mamet ultimately expresses a more hopeful attitude about the possibilities of forming personal connections through verbal communication. Both father and daughter try very hard to make up for twenty years of separation in the space of

one conversation, and they do not always succeed. However, over the course of their conversation, the two do manage to communicate mean-

Storytelling

In their efforts to communicate with one another, and to explain the past twenty years of their lives to each other, Bernie and Carol engage in a certain amount of storytelling. Bernie, in particular, at several points informs Carol that he is going to tell her a story about his past. Bernie resorts to storytelling to make a connection with his estranged daughter, in a way that suggests a parent telling stories to a small child as a means of teaching the child a lesson or helping her to make sense of the world.

The importance of storytelling in parent-child relationships is explored in Mamet's short play *Dark Pony*, which is usually performed as a companion piece to *Reunion*. In *Dark Pony*, a father tells a story of Native American legend to his four-year old daughter while they are driving home one night. In *Reunion*, however, Bernie's stories are not drawn from traditional legends or folktales, and do not contain any particular moral lesson or impart any wisdom. Instead, his stories merely recount the exploits and foibles of a severe alcoholic. The longest story Bernie tells Carol, for instance, is about driving drunk, running into a telephone pole, and then getting paid by the telephone company as part of his job to repair the pole he damaged. Bernie thus attempts to use storytelling as a means of reestablishing a father-daughter relationship with Carol; but his efforts in this direction only serve to highlight the fact that, throughout most of his life, Bernie has evaded his responsibilities as a father and lived a reckless, meaningless, existence devoid of any real personal connections or genuine relationships.

Style

Dialogue

Mamet is best known and most widely celebrated for his skillful use of dialogue, which conveys the natural rhythms of the American idiom. Mamet's characteristic use of dialogue is showcased in *Reunion*, as the entire play consists of bits and pieces from one long conversation. The characters speak in fits and starts, often not completing their sentences, repeating themselves, hesitating, and jumping from one thought to the next without a logical flow of ideas. This naturalistic dialogue perfectly expresses the awkwardness and discomfort experienced by Carol and her father. The dialogue indicates that these two people are essentially groping in the dark to find some form of meaningful communication.

Dramatic Structure

Reunion is a one-act play, divided into fourteen short scenes, which represent snippets of one long conversation between two people. This series of scenes has often been described as short bursts of dialogue. The effect of Mamet's choice of dramatic structure is, in part, to emphasize the fact that this conversation is not .owing smoothly and to highlight the awkwardness felt by the two characters, who don't know each other and often aren't sure what to say to one another. It is clear to both characters that this is a momentous occasion and many meaningful things are said, but the conversation does not, on the surface, seem to develop along clear lines or go in any particular direction. The characters jump incongruously from one topic to the next in their efforts to establish a rapport, and the short scenes accentuate this disjointed feeling throughout their conversation.

Setting and Stage Direction: Minimalism

The settings and stage directions in Mamet's plays are often described as minimalist. That is, they are stripped down to the bare essentials. For instance, the stage directions indicate that Reunion is set in Bernie *Reunion* 's apartment, on a Sunday afternoon in early March. Whereas most playwrights would probably include some detail regarding the décor, furnishings, and various objects in Bernie's apartment, Mamet leaves such specifications up to the discretion of whoever stages the play. From the perspective of someone reading the play, such details are left to the imagination, or may be considered irrelevant. Similarly, Mamet provides no stage directions to describe the actions or movements of the two characters during the conversation. Mamet's minimalism has been interpreted as, in part, a device that emphasizes the dialogue as the most important element of the play and allows for those who wish to produce the play maximum freedom of interpretation, as far as set design and staging.

Historical Context

American Theater

Mamet is ranked among the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century. Before World War II, the only American playwright of note was Eugene O'Neill, whose most celebrated works include the autobiographical *Long Lay's Journey into Night* (1941). In the post-World War II era, several notable American playwrights began to emerge. Arthur Miller is best known for *Death of a Salesman* (1949), about an aging salesman and his relationship with his sons. Miller is also known for *The Crucible* (1953), which uses the historical setting of the Salem witch trials as a vehicle for social and political commentary on America in the 1950s. Tennessee Williams was another great American playwright during this era, known for his stories of sensitive personalities in the context of a Southern aristocratic society in decay. His most celebrated works include *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947).

In the 1960s, Edward Albee emerged as a great American playwright, most notably for his *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), about the relationship of a married couple, both of whom are alcoholics. In the 1970s, alongside the rising reputation of David Mamet, Sam Shepard won critical acclaim for his *Buried Child* (1979). After the popular and critical success of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun* brought African-American playwrights and actors to the mainstream, several notable African- American playwrights emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, including Amiri Baraka (*The Slave and The Dutchman*, both 1964) and Ntozake Shange (*for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf*, 1976). During the 1980s, when Mamet's reputation was augmented by the success of *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), American playwrights Lanford Wilson (Talley's Folly; 1980) and August Wilson (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*; 1984) also gained national recognition.

Alcoholism and Alcoholics Anonymous

In Reunion, Bernie refers to himself as an *Reunion* "exdrunk," and frequently mentions the fact that quitting drinking has completely changed his life for the better, making him a happier, more responsible, more financially stable person. There are an estimated five million alcoholics in the United States, and another four million "problem drinkers" who may eventually become alcoholics. Thus, some four percent of the adult population of the United States are alcoholics□one of every twenty-five adults. The organization Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), devoted to helping alcoholics quit drinking and stay sober, originated in 1935 when two friends, William Griffith Wilson, a stockbroker, and Robert Holbrook Smith, a surgeon, got together to help each other quit drinking. They published the book Alcoholics Anonymous in 1939, which put forth the program they had devised. There are now approximately two million members of AA throughout the world. Alcoholics Anonymous programs are also known as twelve-step programs,

because of the twelve steps toward achieving sobriety on which the programs are based. Alcoholics Anonymous places great emphasis on the idea that alcoholism is a disease and that people who suffer from alcoholism can only recover by practicing complete abstinence from the consumption of alcohol. Alcoholics who have successfully quit drinking are referred to in AA as *Alcoholics Anonymous* "recovering alcoholics."

War

Throughout *Reunion*, Bernie makes reference to his tour of duty as a tail gunner for the American Air Corps, shooting a machine gun out of a B-17, during World War II. World War II was fought between the Allies (including the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union) and the Axis Powers (including Germany, Italy, and Japan) from 1939 to 1945. The United States, however, did not enter the war until late in 1941, after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Bernie takes a certain amount of pride in his position during the war, primarily, it seems, because of the high level of risk involved. He tells Carol most soldiers did not live through more than three missions. He also mentions that he was at one time mad at the government for, as he says, treating him like a kid when he was in the military.

Mamet originally wrote *Reunion* in 1973, during the tail end of the Vietnam War, and the play was first produced in 1976, just after the end of the Vietnam War. In the Vietnam War, the United States fought on the side of South Vietnam against the communist forces in North Vietnam, beginning in the mid-1960s. By 1968, the Vietnam War was becoming increasingly unpopular among many Americans, particularly young Americans, who thought the war was unjust to both the Vietnamese people and the American soldiers who were drafted to fight. Thus, Mamet's references to World War II would have been significant to the original audiences of the play as a commentary on the Vietnam War. Bernie denies that fighting in the war was an act of heroism, asserting rather that he essentially didn't have a choice. Further, Bernie expresses anger toward the United States government for how he was treated in the military. These sentiments resonate with the sentiments of many Americans about the Vietnam War during the 1970s.

Critical Overview

Mamet first gained national recognition as a major playwright with the 1977 Broadway production of American buffalo (1975). He rose to international prominence as one of the greatest playwrights of the twentieth century with the production of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize-winning Glengarry Glen Ross in 1984. Mamet is widely celebrated for his skillful rendering of American vernacular English and the rhythms of spoken language. C. W. E. Bigsby, in David Mamet (1985), echoed many reviewers and drama critics in his assertion that Mamet expresses *American buffalo Glengarry Glen Ross* "a sensitivity to the American vernacular unequalled by any other playwright."

Summing up the extent of Mamet's status as a major American dramatist, Leslie Kane, in *David Mamet: A Casebook* (1992), explained:

Mamet is widely considered to be one of the most prolific and powerful voices in contemporary American theater. His sensitivity to language, precision of social observation, concern for metaphor and its force, theatrical imagination and inventiveness, images of alienation, striking tone poems of betrayal and loss, brilliant use of comedy, and continuing productivity account in large part for his staying power and critical respect.

However, Mamet has also been criticized for extensive use of offensive language in his plays, and for the treatment of women in his male dialogue, which some consider degrading and sexist. *Reunion* was first performed in 1976, later performed with the short companion piece *Dark Pony* (1977), and ultimately performed as part of a triptych including *The Sanctity of Marriage* (1979), also a short piece. Critics have praised *Reunion* for its minimalist plot, setting, and stage directions, which leave the viewer to focus on the dialogue and the relationship between the characters. Mamet is also praised for his creation of nuanced characters and his delicate rendering of the relationship between father and daughter in *Reunion*. Patricia Lewis, in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, asserted, "*Reunion* suggests the real and deep characters Mamet is capable of creating." Lewis observed, "The relationship in this vignette is probably the strongest manifestation of character interaction and interdependency yet evidenced in [Mamet's] writing." Nesta Jones and Steven Dykes, in *File on Mamet* (1991) described *Reunion* as "a good minor play in a strong minor key." Harold Clurman, in a 1979 review of *Reunion* in *The Nation*, stated:

David Mamet has written more original and striking plays than *Reunion* . . . but none I have found more touching. . . . Mamet's writing here is marked by an honest sensibility and a humanity of perception which strike home. . . . It is in this play and this vein . . . that Mamet's most telling qualities are revealed.

Michael Billington, in a 1981 review of *Reunion* in the *Guardian,* commented, "It would be hard to over-praise the way Mr. Mamet suggests behind the probing, joshing family

chat an extraordinary sense of pain and loss." Stephen H. Gale, in *Essays on Contemporary American Drama* (1981), noted of *Reunion*, "Mamet's drama beautifully depicts the touching way in which [the two characters] communicate, hesitatingly, as a renewed bond is formed."

In a career spanning some three decades, Mamet's reputation as a playwright, screenwriter, and director continues to grow. In the 1990s, he also published several books of essays and memoirs, books on acting and .lm directing, and a novel.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses on the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses Bernie's personal philosophy in Mamet's play.

In *Reunion*, Bernie is a recovering alcoholic who has not seen his daughter Carol since he divorced her mother twenty years earlier. Throughout his long conversation with Carol, Bernie expresses key points in his personal philosophy on life, developed as a result of his struggles to recover from alcoholism. Bernie applies this philosophy to his relationship with Carol, as he tries to develop a renewed personal connection with his adult daughter. In addition, Bernie attempts to provide Carol with some form of parental guidance by offering her his personal wisdom about life and relationships, gained from his own experiences, both good and bad. In the course of his conversation with Carol, Bernie repeatedly refers to his alcoholism, an addiction he has only been able to resist over the past three years. A major characteristic of Bernie's alcoholism was his refusal to take responsibility for his life, particularly in terms of his relationships with members of his family. Although he did work for the telephone company in Boston for ten years, he also drifted around the country and moved from job to job for a number of years after he divorced Carol's mother. Because of his alcoholism, he eventually crashed his car into a police car, after which his driver's license was revoked. As a result, he was fired from the phone company. Bernie even missed the funeral of his own brother, partly because he was drifting around and out of touch with his family, but also as a result of his drinking. Because he missed his brother's funeral, his brother's wife refuses to speak to him ever again. Bernie also mentions that, while he was drinking, he was always in debt. He points out that there was no good reason for him to be in debt all those years, except that he was irresponsible about work and money. One of the most significant consequences of Bernie's alcoholism and avoidance of personal responsibility is that he never tried to contact his daughter, even after she turned twenty-one and there was no legal restriction on his relationship with her. Further, even the fact that Carol's mother was able to obtain a court order forbidding Bernie to see Carol was probably made possible on the evidence of his alcoholism□that is, Carol's mother probably informed the court that Bernie was an alcoholic, and therefore unfit to see his daughter. In the present, however, Bernie is much more concerned about the consequences of his actions, particularly in terms of how his decisions may affect his relationship with Carol. He mentions to her that he is thinking of remarrying, but makes a point of asking how that would affect her. He tentatively asks, "How would you, you know . . . feel if I got married again? Would that . . . do anything to you?" Even after she responds that she thinks it would be good for him, Bernie assures her, "Of course it wouldn't get in the way of our getting to know each other." Thus, although he can't change his past, and the effect of his past actions on his relationship with Carol, he is very aware of weighing the possible consequences of his present and future actions on their relationship. Bernie understands that, for him, drinking was a way of "looking for a way around" life's challenges and difficulties, of avoiding his responsibilities and the

consequences of his actions. His personal philosophy in the present, however, is grounded in the understanding that choices in life must be made based on the idea that one must be willing to face the consequences of one's actions. As Bernie says, "pay the price" for one's decisions in life, whether they be good or bad." He explains, You wanna drink? Go drink. You wanna do this? Pay the price. Always the price. Whatever it is. And you gotta know it and be prepared to pay it if you don't want it to pass you by.

By this statement, Bernie is not advocating that Carol, or anyone else, go ahead and drink; rather, he is pointing out that, if one chooses to drink excessively, one must be aware of, and willing to accept, the consequences of that decision, to "pay the price" for one's actions.

Bernie has only quit drinking over the past three years, and is trying to be a more stable, responsible person. He has clearly made progress in taking responsibility for his life, since he stopped drinking. He has had the same job for two years, has his own apartment, and has even begun to save money. Although Carol was the one to contact him, after so many years, Bernie clearly seems ready to take responsibility for trying his best to reestablish a relationship with his daughter.

Throughout his conversation with Carol, Bernie tries to admit candidly what kind of person he was in the past and what kind of person he is today. He understands that he can neither deny nor change his past. He also understands that it's important not to have illusions about himself. While Carol clings to her childhood image of him as an idealized hero, Bernie repeatedly insists that he is "no hero," that he is simply an "ex-drunk," and that the only way for him to be happy is to accept himself as he truly is. He tells Carol, "I'm a happy man now," but that he in no way takes happiness for granted, that "I don't use the term loosely." Although his life has become simple, Bernie expresses genuine contentment with himself. He tells Carol, "For the first time in a long time I get a kick out of what I'm doing."

Carol tells Bernie she used to think of him as a hero, in the person of Tonto, the Native American sidekick of the television cowboy hero The Lone Ranger. She tells him she was very upset after, when she was four years old, he told her that he was not hero. He even asserts that, although he was given a medal for his service in World War II, he was no hero in the war, but was simply doing what he did out of necessity. He explains, "They put you in a plane with a gun, it pays to shoot at the guys who are trying to kill you. Where's the courage in that." He tries to impress upon Carol that she needs to let go of her childhood ideals about her father and accept him for the flawed man that he is.

Bernie himself does not shy away from admitting his many faults and his mistakes in the past. At one point, he states, "I've spent the majority of my life drinking and, when you come right down to it, being a hateful sonofa[b□□]." Yet he is willing to accept himself for who he is, and who he has been in the past. He explains that "I am what I am and that's what happiness comes from . . . being just that." In other words, happiness comes from accepting that he is no more nor less than who he really is. Carol at one point tells Bernie he is wasting his life working in a restaurant. He responds that he is not the hero Tonto, but only himself, an "ex-drunk." Further, Bernie asserts that he likes who he is

today, and likes his life as he is living it in the present, that "I like it like I am," and "I like it at the restaurant. I love it at the restaurant," regardless of whether or not he lives up to other people's ideas about what he should be doing with his life.

As part of his philosophy of self-acceptance, Bernie tries to be honest with Carol about his feelings, expressing at various points anger, fear, and sadness. He tells her that he almost burst into tears when her husband, Gerry, informed him that Carol wanted to see him, and that he was scared by the prospect of seeing her after all of these years. Bernie is also honest with Carol about his feelings during the period after he and her mother were divorced. He admits that he felt guilty about not seeing Carol, but that he also felt angry with her mother, and even angry with her. On the positive side, Bernie expresses the feeling that he wants to get to know his daughter, and that their meeting after all these years is "a very important moment." Through such honest expression of his feelings, Bernie does his best not to shy away from his past, and to be honest with himself and others about who he is and how he feels in the present. Bernie thus makes a point of taking responsibility for his feelings in both the past and the present, without dwelling unrealistically on a past that he has no power to change.

Bernie ultimately tries to impress upon Carol that he is not a hero, and that she cannot continue to idealize him in the way that she did as a little girl. He tries to explain that he is no more nor less than what he is, a recovering alcoholic who has made many mistakes in life but is happy with who he is in the present. Bernie admits to Carol that he felt guilty about abandoning her, but he also makes it clear to her that he cannot undo the past. He tries to explain to Carol that their relationship as father and daughter at this point cannot be based on what's gone on in the past, that he'll never be able to make up for the fatherless childhood Carol suffered. He explains that wanting to get to know each other in the present is still "not going to magically wipe out twenty years . . . in which you were growing up, which you had to do anyway, and I was drunk." He adds, "What's past is in the past . . . it's gone," and that, "I can't make it up to you." Bernie understands that the best he can do is to accept the consequences of his past actions, to accept his own personal limitations in the present, and to make better, more responsible, choices in the future.

Bernie tells Carol he spent a couple of days in jail once, where he learned, "you've gotta be where you are. . . . While you're there." He also states, "The actions are important. The present is important," in relation to his and Carol's relationship to each other. He seems to be saying that they cannot have a relationship by dwelling on a past that cannot be altered, or trying to recapture the years they have lost, but must forge their relationship based on who both of them are at this point in their lives, by spending time together and doing things in the present. He suggests, "let's get up, go out, do this," because "what's between us isn't going nowhere, and the rest of it doesn't exist." While this last statement is a bit enigmatic, it seems that Bernie is trying to say the past cannot be altered, that it is "going nowhere," and that the future does not yet exist. Their only choice is to develop a relationship with one another in the present by choosing to be together and do things together in the here and now. Bernie takes positive steps toward this end by giving Carol an engraved bracelet "from your father," and letting her know

that he is willing to do "whatever you want" as far as how they spend their time together from that point on.

Although he does not make direct reference to it, Bernie's newfound attitude about life resonates with the "serenity prayer," recited regularly at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Bernie seems to have found personal serenity by quitting drinking and developing the wisdom to know the difference between what he can and cannot change. He is eager to change the things he can in the present, such as taking positive action to develop his relationship with Carol from one of two strangers into one of close interpersonal connection.

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on *Reunion*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

O'Sullivan is a writer of fiction, feature articles, and criticism. In this essay, O'Sullivan considers the economy of language and indirection in Mamet's play.

Reunion is the story of a father and daughter coming together after a separation of many years. It is a quiet play, using Mamet's trademark terse, cryptic dialogue; yet there is a degree of melancholy that distinguishes it from the playwright's other, more noisy work. The play demonstrates how language can mark the distance between two people as well as draw them together and manages to convey a sense of festering bitterness, betrayal, and recrimination without ever addressing them head on. Silences are as pregnant with meaning as the verbal exchanges. Like the plays of the British playwright Harold Pinter, to whom he is most often compared, Mamet's plays often proceed in the form of "dramatized conversation." This conversational tone, often constituting superficial or anecdotal exchanges, conceals stresses just beneath the surface, tensions that threaten to erupt violently. Like Pinter, Mamet is sparing in his use of directions. It can be argued that they are contained in the language itself, the way it is written on the page, for example, when Carol is looking at a photograph of Bernie's bomber group. Language itself is the vehicle of dramatic action. As with Pinter, Mamet employs silence, the space between words, as a kind of punctuation. This includes both the ways in which he organizes the individual speeches of his characters, often starting a new line with each sentence, as well as the indication of pauses written into the stage directions. This breaking up of the speeches places an emphasis on both what is said and left unsaid. In these gaps between words lie hidden meanings. It is no accident that both Mamet and Pinter began their careers as actors on the stage; their works are written to be performed. Mamet's famous use of profanity serves a similar purpose; it is used as a rhythmic device, linking syllables while also creating an aura of authenticity. The effect is a kind of street language that is actually highly stylized and poetic.

Reunion is one of Mamet's earliest produced plays but it already contains the elements of what is now recognized as "Mametspeak"; the clipped, authentic-sounding, yet highly stylized economy of language that in its use of compression and indirection most resembles poetry. C. W. E. Bigsby, in his study David Mamet, has remarked upon how Mamet's plays often proceed through the use of "parallel monologues." His characters address one another indirectly, appearing to be only half listening, or incapable of following a line of thought. Exchanges threaten, at times, to break into incoherence. A monologue may be broken, in mid-sentence, and go off on a tangent.

There is something poignant as well as comical in these digressions. What is shown is a struggle for coherence. Assertions are made, then quickly contradicted, undermining the authority of the statements. There is a built-in instability to each utterance and the truthfulness of the speaker is constantly called into question. Bigsby notes that "the inarticulate sounds made by his characters are themselves shaped into effective harmonies." This is certainly the case in *Reunion* where father and daughter, in an attempt to communicate with one another, speak half-truths, tell white lies, and construct self-serving or exculpatory narratives that allow them to finally approach a

point where they can engage one another, directly and without pretense. The play opens with uncertainty, when Bernie, a fifty-three-year-old "ex-drunk" remarks to the twenty-four-year-old daughter he has not seen in twenty years that "I would of recognized you anywhere. It is you. Isn't it? Carol. Is that you? You haven't changed a bit." This confusion, assertion of certainty, then doubt, followed by blatant dissimulation sets the tone for the piece. Assertions by either character are not to be taken at face value, even if the motives for dissembling are benevolent. This meeting between father and daughter, fraught with tension, proceeds through a series of indirect exchanges that define, obliquely, the characters and their needs. Carol is the more reticent of the two, with Bernie evidently having more to answer for. Bernie is suspicious of her motives for seeking him out after all these years and has constructed, out of habit or a bad conscience, a well rehearsed narrative of his life that is meant to be both an admission of his failings and exculpatory. Bernie describes himself as "ex-this, ex-that," in particular, ex-drunk. He speaks the language of recovery, with an ex-tail-gunner's reserve. This emphasis on what he once was, is a way of separating himself from his past, appealing to Carol as who he is now. The inadequacy of this approach should be apparent; Bernie cannot describe himself except as something other than he was. He exists, in the present, only vaguely. As Bigsby points out, "Unlike the present relationship, which is fraught with danger, accusations, potential embarrassments and emotional traps, the past, once reshaped by memory and imaginations, is an object that can be handled with relative safety."

Just as Bernie falls back on platitudes and anecdotes as a way of steeling himself against any true communication, Carol constructs her own fictional narrative of a happy marriage and loving husband. The truth leaks through, as fissures open up revealing the depth of her despair and the real reason for this rapprochement with Bernie. The two of them attempt to find common ground in shared memories. They try to connect, weave fictions, half lies, and attempt to connect memories that don't correspond. Both offer stories in the hopes that they will elicit recognition in the other. "Do you remember that?" is asked hopefully but is never answered. Carol tells how she thought her father was Tonto. She recounts how she asked him if it were true and he answered in the negative. "I didn't understand why you were lying to me." Later, Bernie responds angrily "This is not Tonto the Indian but Butch Cary, ex-drunk." This self-identification seems no less a fiction, constructed out of need and convenience.

Through an accretion of details, one may draw conclusions as to why Carol chose an older man for a husband, although she does not seem conscious of what they may be. The failure of this union seems directly tied to her desire to look up her actual father. That she is unable or unwilling to address him as 'father' is revealed in their earliest exchange. At a moment when Bernie who has ventured some paternal advice to his daughter without having earned the right, Carol responds "He's my husband, Bernie, not my father." Bernie has not earned the right to patronize her, to play the paternal role. It is uncertain that it would be possible.

As the play progresses, Carol seems to hover on the brink of recognition. She speaks of coming from a broken home: "The most important institution in America." "It's got to have affected my marriage," she says. Bernie once again falls back on a platitude: life

goes on. Bernie seems to intuit that Carol's admission of unhappiness in her marriage is an indirect reproach of him. He takes the offensive, admitting his own anger and hostility. He returns to the theme of ex-soldier, which he first said was "no big deal," and rails against the Veterans Administration. He plays the victim in order to release himself from responsibility. The way that Mamet handles this scene is subtle, but effective.

Bernie: I mean, understand: I'm not asking you to understand me, Carol, because we've both been through enough.

Am I right?

Pause.

Carol: Gerry was in Korea.

Bernie: Yes? And what does he say about it?

Carol: Nothing.

The failures to find a shared memory lead them to search for common ground; Bernie becomes excited when Carol tells him she taught at the Horace Mann School in Newton. Bernie used to frequent a garage across the street when he was a phone company employee. When Carol tells him she worked there in 1969, Bernie's hopes are deflated; he tells her he has not "worked for the phone company since '55." Once again, there is a disconnect, but they keep foraging, searching out a patch of shared experience:

Bernie: I'll bet I saw you around. Boylston Street . . .

Carol: We must've seen each other . . . in the Common . . . A hundred times.

A common past seems irretrievably lost to both of them, yet they persist in their attempts to create a linkage. Bernie tells his daughter that he was in jail once. "What it taught me," he says, "you've got to be where you are . . . While you're there. Or you're nowhere. Do you know what I mean? As it pertains to you and me?" Carol responds: "I want to get to know you." The play has now shifted, so to speak, from the past tense to the present. Nothing can "wipe out twenty years," the years of Bernie's absence from Carol's life. Finally, Bernie asks Carol directly why she came looking for him, now. "I felt lonely," she replies. "You're my father." The penultimate scene opens with Carol stating "I feel lonely," shifting from the past to the present tense. This gives her remarks immediacy, placing them in the moment.

Finally, they are able to communicate in a direct, unambiguous fashion, yet this seems to discomfit Bernie. Out of the silence, Bernie remarks: "Who doesn't?" As Bernie appears to back away, Carol presses forward. She tells him that she feels cheated that she never had a father. Carol: And I don't want to be pals and buddies; I want you to be my father.

Pause

And to hear your . . . war stories and the whole thing. And that's why now because that's how I feel.

Pause

I'm entitled to it.

Am I?

Am I?

At the play's end, Bernie makes an offering to Carol. He presents her with a bracelet that he found on a bus, but has taken the trouble to have it inscribed to her. Even here the narrative is fouled up: in an ironic twist, the date of the inscription is wrong. "It's my fault. It's not their fault. My threes looks like eights. It's only five days off." This symbolic exchange binds one to the other in a way that their memories cannot. As Bigsby remarks, "This is a *Reunion* only in the sense that they reencounter one another. The intimate relationship of father and daughter is no longer recoverable; they come together out of simple need."

Source: Kevin O'Sullivan, Critical Essay on *Reunion*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Ozersky is a critic, essayist, and cultural historian. In this essay, Ozersky describes some of the ways in which Mamet's play is truly "Mametesque," even though it doesn't appear so at first glance.

David Mamet is one of the most famous of American writers: he has won a Pulitzer Prize, has an international reputation, and is equally at home on the Broadway stage, in independent theater, and in Hollywood, where his screenplays have been nominated for Academy Awards on two occasions. But Mamet has also suffered from being so identified with a particular genre, which he more or less invented: that of all-male workplaces bursting with an inventive and poetic dialect of American profanity. In his best-known plays, such as *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *American buffalo*, this language takes the place of plot in advancing an understanding of the world the characters inhabit. But it is a mistake to think that this only happens in Mamet's "male workplace" plays.

In *Reunion*, one of Mamet's early works, the language is neither profane nor stylized. There are only two characters, Bernie and Carol. They speak in a natural, realistic way. Neither person ever gets angry or agitated. It seems uncharacteristic of Mamet; but, a closer look reveals that the author's method and preoccupations are present here as much as in his more famous plays, and in those works for which he is best known. *Reunion* is a short work in which a long-separated father and daughter meet in a series of scenes set on a single winter afternoon. Bernie "Butch" Cary has the vast majority of the dialog. Carol Mindler, a married woman in her early twenties, mostly listens. But in that dialog, we learn a lot more about the two people than may at first be apparent.

Take Carol, for example. Carol at first seems to be a passive figure, merely agreeable. Bernie does all the talking, and Carol seems to be content merely to provide cues for Bernie:

Carol: Bernie Cary. Army Air Corps.

Bernie: Butch. They called me Butch then.

Carol: Why?

Bernie: . . . I couldn't tell you that to save my life.

Those were strange times.

Carol: What's this? Bernie is a bore, the kind of middle-aged man who gasses on about his wartime experiences, his drinking days, his recovery from alcoholism and so forth, without ever seeming to notice that he is monopolizing the conversation.

In the context of *Reunion*, it seems doubly obtuse. He has not seen Carol, his own daughter, in twenty years. And yet he asks her only the most perfunctory questions: "You still go to church?" "Tell me about your new husband." "You got any kids?"

But in fact, it is Carol who is in control of the conversation. Both people are in an awkward position; Bernie's answer is to simply spill forth with everything that comes to mind. Carol is far more conscientious in what she tells Bernie; she doesn't begin to open up to him until mid-way through the play. By asking Bernie questions, she learns much more about him than he does about her. But if Carol's very short, probing questions reveal something about her character, Bernie's unguarded, loquacious speeches make his character fairly transparent. We feel that we know Bernie very well by the time *Reunion* is finished. And the way we know him is only to a limited extent the result of what he actually says. Bernie lets us know that he was a drunk, a bad husband and father, a veteran. But it's in his asides that we really get a sense of how his mind works.

Bernie: . . . I mean, I'm fifty-three years old. I've spent the majority of my life drinking and, when you come right down to it, being a hateful sonofa[b□□] . . . But you, married, living well. You live well. A nice guy. A fine guy for a husband. Going to have . . . maybe . . . kids. You shouldn't let it bother you, but you have a lot of possibilities.

This kind of language is very characteristic of Mamet's work. In many plays, the characters reveal themselves through finished speeches created and polished by the playwright; Mamet's characters often speak semi-incoherently, struggling to get thoughts out. Because of that struggle, the audience can get a sense of not just the way they talk, but the way they think. Bernie, as a failure, sees anyone who has any kind of stability in their life as a fitting neatly into a category. He says, "married, living well" as if it were a kind of blue ribbon to stamp on Carol's life□despite the fact that he knows almost nothing about her life. "A nice guy. A fine guy for a husband." In fact, Carol will later tell Bernie a fairly intimate detail about her marriage, but its doubtful if even that will change Bernie's way of looking at things. Carol's life still has "a lot of possibilities," whereas of course Bernie's life is almost out of possibilities. One of the most interesting, almost poignant aspects of *Reunion* is the way the two characters use their own unhappiness as a way to try to open dialog with a long-lost, and badly-needed, relative.

One of Mamet's quintessential themes is the search for a home; and both Bernie and Carol, despite the frequent triteness of their conversation, clearly both have a lot at stake. Although *Reunion* was originally written to be performed by itself, and often is, Mamet has written a very short companion piece, *Dark Pony*, which was performed as an epilogue to *Reunion* at the Yale Repertory Theater in 1977. In *Dark Pony*, the same actors who played Bernie and Carol play a father and daughter, twenty years earlier, riding home from a day in the country. The father, who is described as being "in his early 30s" (or Bernie's age twenty years earlier) tells a tall tale to the daughter, who is described as being "dressed as if 5-8 years old." Coming as it does after *Reunion*, *Dark Pony* is intensely affecting, and the last line sums up the essence of what *Reunion* is really about: "We are almost home."

Given how emotional *Dark Pony* is for an audience who has just seen *Reunion*, one might be tempted to ask why Mamet didn't write both scenarios as one play. One answer may lie in the fact that Mamet doesn't like to give away too much. His characters don't "express themselves" and if they do, it's usually in the things they don't say. *Reunion* is an extremely restrained work, and Mamet never once gives in to the temptation to let a little bit of explicit emotion break through. The last scene of *Reunion* consists of Bernie, in a characteristically awkward moment, giving a gold bracelet to Carol. He has had the date of their *Reunion* engraved on it, he explains, but because his threes look like eights, the date is wrong. There would be ample opportunity for a less disciplined playwright to become mawkish here, in which Carol would say something along the lines of "it's not perfect . . . nobody's perfect . . . we just have to love each other as we are." Instead, the close of the play is as follows:

Bernie: I'm not going to tell you that you don't have to wear it if you don't like it. I hope you do like it.

Carol: I do like it . . .

Bernie: So what's the weather like out there?

Carol: It's fine. Just a little chilly.

Bernie: We should be getting ready, no? Shouldn't you call

Gerry?

Carol: Yes.

Bernie: So you do that and I'll put away the things and we'll go.

Carol: The bracelet's lovely, Bernie.

Bernie: Thank you.

As with so many other Mamet works, this exchange tell so much about both characters without really seeming to tell anything. Mamet's men tend to talk too much, and his women hardy at all; but in between what they say, and why they say it, lies a world of feeling. It's just a matter of the audience being sensitive to it. The feeling is real, but not rich; *Reunion* is not the kind of play that many people find easy to warm up to. Without Dark Pony as a payoff afterward, the audience might feel frustrated at having spent so much time with Bernie and Carol, and seen so little understanding or even relaxation between the two. They remain in the end as awkward and ill-at-ease as two strangers.

And two strangers they will almost certainly remain. Mamet doesn't give much hope that Bernie and Carol will break down and open up to each other, after the fashion of TV movies. Bernie will remain a self-absorbed heel; Carol, like nearly all Mamet women, will continue to carry vast reservoirs of silent resentment around with her, and will have trouble connecting. But they both want badly to be father and daughter again. And that,

more than anything else, is the driving force behind all their dialog, however stilted, indirect, or laconic. As the audience watches them try so hard to connect with each other, they begin to feel connected themselves. And not just with Bernie and Carol, but with all the things they have tried, and failed, to say. In *Reunion*, Mamet shows us how much courage it can take just to say anything at all□and why that courage is worth having.

Source: Josh Ozersky, Critical Essay on *Reunion*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Mamet is ranked among the major American playwrights of the twentieth century, alongside Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Amiri Baraka, Ntozake Shange, Lanford Wilson, and August Wilson. Learn more about one of these playwrights and his or her major works. What makes this author's style unique? What major themes does this author address in her or his works? Perform one scene from a play by this author with other students and discuss the author's use of dialogue in the scene.

Mamet is best known for his use of colloquial spoken American English in dramatic dialogue. To get a better sense of how Mamet's dialogue works in spoken form, perform one scene from *Reunion*. Does the dialogue of the characters sound natural to you? What does this style of dialogue convey when spoken aloud that you may not have noticed when reading it silently to yourself? How does this style of dialogue help to convey information about each character, and their relationship to one another?

Reunion is primarily a dramatic dialogue between a young woman and her father. Write your own dramatic dialogue of a conversation between two family members, such as a son and mother, brother and sister, mother and daughter, grandchild and grandparent, etc. As much as possible, work on writing your dialogue so that it sounds natural to your ear. Perform your scene with another student.

Mamet's theatrical career developed over time through his involvement with small, local, and regional theaters. Learn more about the local theaters in your area and describe them. For each theater, answer the questions: Is it a professional theater, a community theater, a repertory theater, or a theater affiliated with a larger institution (such as a college or university)? What plays have been performed by this theater over the past year? What plays are currently being produced by this theater? How is this theater funded? If possible, interview the artistic director about the approach this theater takes to acting, type of production, and type of plays they produce. Ask if you can sit in on a rehearsal to get a better sense of what goes into the production of a play.

Mamet has written many screen adaptations of his plays, as well as original screenplays. Watch one film for which Mamet has written, or co written, the screenplay, such as: *The Postman Always rings twice*, *The Verdict*, *House of Games*, *The Untouchables*, *We're no angels*, *Homicide*, *Hoffa*, *Oleana*, *American buffalo*, *The Spanish Prisoner*, *The Edge*, *Wag the dog*, *Ronin*, The Winslow Boy, or *State and Maine*. Pay particular attention to the dialogue in the .lm you choose. In what ways is the dialogue characteristic of Mamet's style? How does his use of dialogue work differently in the cinematic medium from the medium of live performance? If you are familiar with any of the actors in this .lm, how do your associations or knowledge of that actor affect your experience of the dialogue, or the film as a whole? What major themes are addressed in this .lm? meaningful information and feelings to one another, despite the difficulties they face in trying to do so.

Compare and Contrast

1970s: Beginning in the 1960s, regional theaters and theaters associated with colleges and universities become an important testing ground for innovative playwrights such as Mamet. The increasing popularity of off-Broadway and off-off- Broadway theater venues offers a forum for avant-garde playwrights. Some of these serious and innovative plays are eventually performed on Broadway, once they have been proven on the smaller stage.

Today: Because of the perceived need for greater and greater profits, Broadway productions focus almost exclusively on flashy, highly entertaining, big-budget musicals, such as stage adaptations of the animated Disney .lm *The Lion King*. Some serious dramatic works still see Broadway production, but these are exceptions. Thus, regional theater, off-Broadway, and off-off-Broadway are important as the primary venues for serious and innovative dramatic productions.

1970s: The Women's Liberation Movement, also known as Second Wave Feminism, begun in the late 1960s, advocates greater freedoms and opportunities for women, both in the professional world and in the private realm of marriage, family, and home life. The liberalization of many divorce laws becomes an important means by which women can extract themselves from abusive or oppressive marital circumstances. Greater economic opportunities for women make it easier for women to secure the financial means to support themselves without economic dependence on men.

Today: Most younger women do not identify themselves as "feminist," although most do agree with feminist principles and goals. Many young women, however, consider themselves as part of Third Wave Feminism, a new generation of women with different concerns from those of their mothers' generation. Divorce and remarriage, single-parent families, step-parents, and joint custody of children has become a norm in American society.

What Do I Read Next?

Death of a Salesman (1949), by Arthur Miller, is one of the most celebrated American plays of the twentieth century. Mamet is often compared to Miller, as both write about male ambitions and frustrations in chasing the American dream. *Death of a Salesman* concerns an aging salesman whose life has been wasted in the pursuit of unrealistic ambitions, with which he has also burdened his sons.

Waiting for Godot (1953), by Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, is a classic play of the Theater of the Absurd, and a major influence on Mamet. It focuses on the dialogue between three characters who are waiting for an enigmatic man named Godot.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?(1962), by the celebrated American playwright Edward Albee, is about the relationships between two couples, focusing on the professional ambitions and twisted emotional dynamics that characterize each marriage.

American buffalo (1975) is one of Mamet's most celebrated plays. It takes place in a pawn shop and concerns two men and a boy who plan to steal a valuable collector's coin from one of their customers.

Glengarry Glen Ross (1982) is Mamet's most highly acclaimed play. It takes place in a real estate agency and concerns the shady deals and fierce competition in which the real estate agents engage.

Further Study

Bryer, Jackson R., ed., *The Playwright's Art: Conversations with Contemporary American Dramatists*, Rutgers University Press, 1995.

Bryer provides a selection of interviews with major contemporary American playwrights.

Jones, Nesta, and Steven Dykes, eds., *File on Mamet*, Metheun, 1991.

Nesta and Dykes provide a general overview of Mamet's career, including a brief chronology, general synopsis of his major works, and quotes from reviews by a variety of critics on each major work.

Kane, Leslie, ed., *David Mamet: A Casebook*, Garland Publishing, 1992.

Kane offers a selection of articles by a variety of writers on Mamet's major works. Kane includes a brief chronology of Mamet's life and career, and interviews with actors and others who have worked with Mamet.

McDonough, Carla J., *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama*, McFarland & Co., 1997.

McDonough gives a critical analysis of the representations of masculinity in four major American playwrights: Sam Shepard, David Mamet, David Rabe, and August Wilson.

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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.

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