Rites Study Guide

Rites by Maureen Duffy

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Introduction

Rites, by British playwright Maureen Duffy, was first performed in 1969, at the National Theatre Repertory Company in London. The play takes place in a woman's public restroom, and has an all-female cast. The characters are representative working class women of London, including the restroom manager and attendant, three office workers, and two widows in their sixties. The action and dialogue of the play reveal the anger and resentment the women feel toward men in their romantic and sexual relationships, and at work. The play finally erupts in a few moments of frenzied violence in which the women kill someone they believe to be a male spy, only to find that their victim is a woman.

Rites is very loosely based on *The Bacchae,* a play by the ancient Greek dramatist, Euripides, which describes the conflict between the largely female worshipers of the god Dionysus and the male representatives of law and order in the city of Thebes. Like *Rites*,*The Bacchae* culminates in a frenzied killing by a group of women.

Rites was written at a time when the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s was gathering strength. Like the women's movement, the play exposes the stifling effects on women of gender stereotypes at many levels of society.

Author Biography

Maureen Duffy was born on October 21, 1933, in Worthing, Sussex, England, the daughter of Cahia Patrick Duffy and Grace Rose Wright. She grew up in an impoverished environment, and at age six, when World War II broke out, she was evacuated with her mother to Trowbridge in Wiltshire. When she was fourteen, she returned to the family home in Stratford, London. After leaving grammar school, Duffy taught for two years at the City Literary Institute, Drury Lane, London, before going to King's College, London. After graduating with a bachelor of arts degree in English, Duffy taught creative writing for five years in state schools.

Since the 1960s, Duffy has distinguished herself as a poet, playwright, novelist, and biographer. Her first play, *The Lay-Off*, was produced at the City of London Festival, 1961, and her first novel, the autobiographical *That's How It Was*, followed in 1962. Her first poetry collection was *Lyrics for the Dog Hour* (1968). This was the first of five volumes of poetry; her *Collected Poems* was published in 1985. Duffy's second play, *The Silk Room*, was produced in England at Watford Civic Theatre in 1966, and *Rites* was produced by the National Theatre Repertory Company in London in 1969. Later plays include *A Nightingale in Bloomsbury Square*, produced at Hampstead Theatre in 1974.

Duffy's novels have won critical praise in the United States as well as Great Britain. Among her major novels are *Wounds* (1969), about two lovers and the emotional pain they experience; *Love Child* (1971), set in Italy with a child narrator; *Housespy*, an espionage thriller (1978); and *Gor Saga* (1981), a fable set in the near future, which critics compared favorably to works by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. Other novels include *The Microcosm* (1966), about lesbianism; *All Heaven in a Rage* (1973), about animal rights; and *The Paradox Players* (1967), about a writer who seeks isolation on a houseboat on the Thames during a winter in the 1960s.

More recent work includes the novels *Illuminations* (1991), which follows a retired female history lecturer to newly reunified Germany, where she acquires a lesbian lover; and *Occam's Razor* (1993), in which Duffy juxtaposes the history of the terrorist group, the Irish Republican Army, with the activities of the Italian Mafia. Her most recent novel is *Restitution* (1998). Duffy has also written a work of literary criticism, *The Erotic World of Faery* (1989), and a biography, *The Passionate Shepherdess: The Life of Aphra Behn, 1640-1689* (2000).

Her awards include the City of London Festival Playwright's Award, 1962, for *The Lay-Off*; and a Society of Authors travelling scholarship in 1976. She was a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1985.

Duffy has been active in the causes in which she believes. In 1972, she cofounded the Writers Action Group, which successfully lobbied for the passage of the Public Lending Right, under which authors received royalties from a public fund whenever their work was borrowed from public libraries. Duffy has also been active in animal rights causes.

Plot Summary

Rites begins with a procession of workmen dressed in white overalls, who construct the walls and cubicles of a public lavatory (the British term for restroom). They then bring in a large mirror, toilet bowls, and cisterns. They bang and hammer away, and this is followed by a sound of simultaneous flushing. The workmen then bring two large chairs, a notice about venereal disease clinics, a sanitary towel machine, and a perfume spray.

Two women enter. Meg begins cleaning, while Ada, the manager of the facility, sits at the mirror and begins putting on her make-up, admiring the results.

As she cleans, Meg complains about her job. She hopes that Ada will get her expected promotion and take her with her, but Ada refuses to promise anything. Ada discusses the man she was with the previous night; it becomes clear that by night she is a prostitute. She spends so much time at the mirror because she wants to make the best of what she has, so that she can charge a higher price.

Meg and Ada turn away an old woman who normally eats her breakfast in one of the cubicles because the woman is too early and they are not yet open. Meg admires Ada for being clever and Ada says she learns what she knows from the financial pages of the newspaper. Meg, however, is more interested in the daily horoscopes and persuades Ada to read some of them to her.

After the old woman returns and goes to the first cubicle to eat, three office girls enter, chattering about the date one of them had the previous night. After using the toilets, the second office girl and Norma complain to Ada about obscene graffiti on the walls. The three girls claim to be shocked and say that only men could have done it.

Meg takes up her knitting; the finished product will be a Christmas gift for a man, and Ada chides her for taking so long to complete it. The conversations continue in a disjointed kind of way. Norma announces that she wants to take the day off work; Ada reads some financial news out loud; Norma recites something from a romance novel she memorized, and Ada responds by talking to Norma about relations between the sexes in terms of assets and takeover bids. The office girls discuss a newspaper advice column and one girl cracks a joke that makes them all scream with laughter.

Nellie and Dot, two respectably dressed women in their sixties, enter. Nellie remarks how she used to clean her husband's shoes every day of their life together. The office girls say they would never do that, but acknowledge how different things were for women of that generation. Norma remarks how terrible it must be to be old. Nellie continues to describe the dull routine she shared with her late husband. As the women talk about baldness, hair and wigs, the office girls get Elizabeth I (who wore a wig) mixed up with another historical figure, Mary Queen of Scots, who was beheaded.

Norma complains about being at the beck and call of her boss, and Ada says she wouldn't stand for it. But the girls say their office jobs are better than being on a factory

production line or in the typing pool. Ada proudly says that she works for no man, and Nellie comments that her husband would not allow her to work. Now she and Dot are widowed, but they manage to keep themselves occupied with shopping and other trips. They have their pensions so do not have financial worries, which prompts Norma to remark that it sounds as if they are better off without their husbands. Taking up the topic of men, the first office girl complains that you cannot talk to them, unless they are married.

After more conversation, a girl comes in, buys a towel from the machine and goes to the second cubicle. The women discuss the matter of privacy, and Dot explains that there is more privacy than in the "gents" lavatory and describes how she once went to one.

Two women enter, leading in a toddler boy (who is represented by a realistic doll). The first woman picks him up and makes a fuss of him, while the other women make some observations: Nellie says they grow up too fast, while Ada thinks that some of them never do, and tells the woman that the toddler is too old to be brought into the women's restroom. Meg wonders how Ada knows the toddler is a boy, since according to Nellie he looks more like a girl. They decide to find out. Ada takes down the boy's trousers and his loose, long-legged pants. The women make remarks about his penis, and Ada even alludes to castration, but then they say they mean no harm and are only looking. The two women dress the boy, and Ada bitterly criticizes the others' attitudes toward love and relationships.

There is a crash from the second cubicle. The women ask the girl inside if she is all right, but there is no answer. The third office girl crouches down and looks under the door. The girl inside has her head in the pan, and blood is visible. After some discussion of what they should do, the third office girl climbs up and gets into the cubicle and opens it from the inside. The women haul the girl out and discover that she has cut her wrists, but the damage appears to be superficial. The girl calls out the name of a man and then cries. She has obviously been jilted. Ada shouts "B———men!" and the others follow with their bitter complaints about men.

Except for Ada and the stricken girl, the women then begin to dance the latest version of a dance called the shake. They chant that they do not need men. As they dance, the derelict old woman who has been eating her breakfast in the first cubicle, emerges. The women encircle her and aggressively sing a song called "Knees up Mother Brown." This is repeated until it reaches a frenzy, and the old woman cowers in fear.

Then another figure, dressed like a man, emerges from one of the cubicles and tries to run to the exit. Ada calls him a spy, and all the women, including the old woman who has just been tormented, fall upon the figure. During a violent scuffle, there is a scream and then another cry. The crowd of women breaks apart, revealing a tattered figure wrapped in bloody clothing. Horrified, Norma announces that it was a woman, not a man. The other women are shocked. They decide to stuff the body down the incinerator.

The lavatory gradually empties. The office girls help the injured girl to her feet and leave. Nellie and Dot go back to discussing their hats, and then they leave also. Ada

tells the two women with the toddler to leave. Ada then shoos the old woman away and goes back to the mirror and retouches her make-up. Meg resumes her cleaning, and she and Ada continue the kind of conversation they were having when the play began.

Summary

Rites is Maureen Duffy's one-act play about female gender roles and expectations in the male-dominated world of 1969 London, England.

As the play begins, staggered groups of workmen wearing white work clothes enter the stage and construct the interior of a public restroom. The men bow to the foreman, as they leave the room to reappear with more items to finish the room, such as a sanitary towel machine, perfume, two white chairs, a large mirror, and a venereal disease prevention poster.

Their work completed, the men bow once more and leave the room, while a woman carrying a small bag rushes in and enters stall number One. The two restroom attendants, Meg and Ada, enter. Ada begins her daily ritual of applying makeup and touching up her hairstyle. Meg inspects the stalls and flushes the commodes to make sure they are working properly.

Meg reports to Ada, who is the facility manager, that stall number Three is flooded again and bemoans the problems keeping the commodes running properly and keeping people from stopping up the plumbing with bathroom tissue. Ada is not ready to hear about problems just yet this morning, and Meg asks her about her man from last night. Ada had a respectable time for a weeknight. However, it would not have been a good weekend date, because the man was simply too boring.

Meg comments that she does not know how Ada manages to look so lovely after she is up most of the night and then has to come to work. Ada is hoping for a promotion, and Meg voices her wish to be transferred when Ada moves to another location. Meg knows that no one else could keep the restroom as nicely as Ada does, especially being in charge of the incinerator.

A bundled-up old woman enters, but Meg prevents her from entering a stall, because the restroom does not open for ten more minutes. Meg tells Ada that the woman comes every day to eat her lunch. Nonetheless, Ada does not want the woman inside, until the restroom is officially opened. The woman leaves and Ada is happy to have the downtrodden character gone, at least temporarily.

Meg flatters Ada for her intelligence and managerial skills, and Ada tells Meg that she must start reading to build up her own intelligence. For now, Meg will be satisfied at Ada's reading of their daily horoscopes. The old woman returns and enters stall number One. Meg cautions her to eat carefully and not to make a mess.

Ada directs Meg to check stall number Five for obscene graffiti, just as three office girls enter, talking about a man who exposed himself at the movies. Two of the girls enter and exit their respective stalls quickly and yell for their friend, Norma, to hurry up. Norma exits from stall number Five, complaining about the obscenities on the walls. Norma tells Ada that she may report her for allowing men in the ladies room, because

no woman could have possibly written such filth. Ada challenges the girls, because sex is something even their mothers and fathers engage in, but the girls do not like to be accosted with the obscenities

Ada settles down with her newspaper, and Meg begins to knit, as the girls discuss boyfriends and the wish for a day off from work to go to the coast. Ada reads some of the financial news aloud. The others are oblivious to what she is saying, because they are engaged in their own conversations.

Suddenly, two identically dressed old women, named Nellie and Dot, enter the restroom with Nellie talking about the way she used to obsessively take care of her husband. She polished his shoes and even picked the bones out of his fish dinner. The young girls chime in that they would never stoop to such behavior for a man but realize that the old women were raised in a different time, and the expectations were different.

Norma still wants to take today off because of her demanding boss, but the other girls claim the job is better than some they have had in a factory or a typing pool. Ada asserts that she will not work for any man, and Nellie tells the others that her husband would never allow her to work. Nellie and Dot are now living on their husbands' pensions. They have no financial worries, and no one to report to about how they spend the money.

Norma thinks that Nellie and Dot are probably better off without their husbands, which prompts a discussion about the impossibility of getting men to talk about anything of any substance. Norma asks Ada if she is married, and Ada replies that she does not want to be tied down and likes being the boss in the restroom.

Suddenly, one of the girls opens the incinerator door and jumps back quickly not realizing that the fire had been blazing so close to all the women in the room. Ada makes a joke about the incinerator leading to hell, just as a new woman enters. The woman buys a sanitary towel, and enters stall number Two.

The women are caught up in a conversation about the workings of a mens restroom. Soon, two new women enter with a toddler boy between them. Ada challenges the women that the boy seems too old to be entering the ladies room. The women laugh, and the first woman picks up the child, cooing to him.

Nellie believes that children today are forced to grow up too soon. Meg chimes in that it seems a shame that they have to grow up at all. Ada remarks that some never do grow up, and the second woman believes that all men are babies.

Ada once more challenges the women about the age of the child, and Meg offers up an opinion that the child's curls make it look more like a girl than a boy. Ada demands that the child be lifted up so that she can undress his lower half and check his gender. Satisfied that the child is indeed male, Ada and the others make derogatory remarks about male genitalia, even to the point of suggesting castration. The child is redressed, and the mother cuddles him once more.

Suddenly, there is a huge crashing sound from stall number two, and Ada directs Meg to knock on the door to see if the woman inside is all right. When no answer comes from inside the stall, one of the girls crouches to the floor and determines that the woman inside the stall has passed out in the commode, and there is blood on the floor.

The stall door is locked from the inside. The women tell Ada to get a policeman to break into the stall, but Ada adamantly refuses, because she will not allow men in the room. The other girls are able to lift one of the office girls up and over the stall so that she can unlock the door, and the others can attend to the unconscious woman.

Immediately, the women realize that the prostrate woman has slit her wrists, although the cuts do not look very deep. The women are outraged when the bleeding woman calls out a man's name, because she has apparently tried to kill herself over a failed relationship. Ada binds the woman's cuts with sanitary towels and orders Meg to clean up the bloody mess. The woman comes to her senses but begins to cry inconsolably, when Dot asks what the man has done to her.

All the women agree that men are unnecessary, and all except Ada and the injured woman dance together in an almost ritualistic chant of "don't need them," which changes to "Knees up Mother Brown," as the old woman who has been eating in stall number One finally emerges. The dancing women encircle the frightened old woman, until she cowers down to the floor.

Suddenly, a masculine-dressed figure emerges from stall number Seven but is prevented from leaving the room by the women who converge on him, certain that he must be a spy. Ada accuses the man of spying and trying to get away with murder. All the women, including the old woman from stall number One, beat the man to death.

When the frenzy ends, Norma recoils in horror, realizing that the dead body is that of a woman that had been dressed like a man. The women agree that the woman should never have tried to impersonate a man. Ada is suddenly afraid that news of this will block her promotion.

Ada opens the incinerator door and, with the help of the other women, shoves the body of the dead woman into the flames. The women wash their hands, and Ada instructs Norma to look after the woman who had slit her wrists. Nellie and Dot straighten their hats and leave the room. The others soon follow, leaving Ada and Meg alone again to continue their conversation about Ada's promotion. Ada reapplies her makeup, and Meg asks her about the man of her Friday appointment.

Analysis

The setting for the play is a public ladies restroom in England in 1969. The location is never specified but is probably London, because of the use of attendants in the restroom, as well as the office girls who frequent the facility.

The parade of men who assemble the restroom interior is important, because they symbolize the societal paradigm of men building institutions in which women must conform. The fixtures and accessories are appointed by men who assume to know what the women frequenting the facility will need, just as the author's point about men making decisions for women in most aspects of their lives at the time. It is also symbolic that the men are dressed in pristine white clothes and bow to each other in their unsullied sense of self importance.

Using the public restroom as a background, the author shows a representative sample of women in various stages of life, which dictates their attitudes, gender roles and professions. Ironically, Ada, who seems to abhor men, works at night as a prostitute and hopes for a promotion at her day job which will eliminate the need for her to work at night. The restroom is a source of pride for Ada, because she controls the cleanliness and likes the fact that it is one place where men are prohibited from entering.

Meg is getting older and hopes to ride on Ada's success to be taken to a better facility, even though she has no personal ambitions of her own. The young office girls are caught in limbo. They hate their jobs, even though they are better than some they have held and know that their only path out of their misery is probably through marriage to a man who will ignore them.

Nellie and Dot have outlived their husbands and are enjoying the mens' pensions, which the women have ultimately earned through obsessive service and devotion to their husbands. The unfortunate woman who slits her wrists is in the seriously unfortunate position of rejection, most probably from a relationship where she needed more than she received and had the audacity to ask.

The old woman who eats in the stall every day represents those females who have no job or man to attend to and live on the streets, bundling up against the pity thrown toward them. The women with the toddler boy are perverse in that they allow the child to be undressed in order to satisfy the curiosity of the other women. Finally, the woman dressed in a masculine way is the most tragic, because the other women destroy her for wanting to achieve or emulate masculine traits.

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Characters

Ada

Ada is the manager of the public lavatory. She is much concerned with her own appearance, spending a lot of time in front of the mirror putting on make-up. By night she works as a prostitute, and she reasons that the more attractively she can present herself, the higher the price she will be able to charge. She prides herself on her independence, and could not stand to be at the beck and call of a man. She deals with men on her own terms and is contemptuous of them. Ada is worldly wise and well informed. She always studies the financial page of the newspaper and applies to her own profession the marketing advice it provides. She reads a lot and possesses enough general knowledge to correct the office girls when they get Queen Elizabeth I mixed up with Mary Queen of Scots. Ada is also the strongest character in the play, by virtue both of her position as manager and her leadership qualities. It is Ada who initiates the attack on the woman who looks like a man, at which point she reveals the full force of her hatred of men. After the killing, Ada blames the victim for looking like a man. She takes charge of the situation, telling the other women how to dispose of the body and shooing the women out. She then sits down at the table and goes back to doing her make-up.

Dot

Dot is a respectably dressed woman in her sixties. She can hardly be distinguished from her friend Nellie, although Dot speaks much less frequently. Like Nellie, Dot is a widow, but she and Nellie find ways to pass the time and make the best of things. Being a widow has its advantages, since there is no husband around to ask her where all the money has gone. Dot's longest speech is when she describes in detail the occasion she used a men's lavatory. Like Nellie, her marriage followed a traditional pattern. The wife was expected to look after her husband, to minister to him. But it is clear that this was not very fulfilling for Dot, since she says that what makes marriage worthwhile is not the marriage itself but the children.

First Office Girl

First Office Girl is the one with the sense of humor. Several times she makes jokes that produce screams of laughter from the other office girls. Other than that, she is not much different from the others. She shares their disdain for men, believing that it must have been a man who wrote the graffiti on the wall of the cubicle because no woman would do so. She also says you cannot talk to men unless they are married. She likes to think she is independent, saying that, unlike Nellie, no one would catch her cleaning anyone else's boots like Nellie did for her husband. Like the others, she does not like her job but thinks it is better than the alternatives.

First Woman

First Woman is one of two women who enter the lavatory with the toddler boy. She is his mother and dotes on him. She thinks it is a pity he has to grow up. After the women have partially undressed the toddler and examined him, First Woman dresses him. After this, she leaves the boy (represented by a doll) on a chair and joins the group.

Girl

The Girl enters one of the cubicles and slashes her wrists. She is unconscious and bleeding as the other women haul her out. She comes to and calls out the name Desmond, and then cries incoherently. At the end, she is helped out of the lavatory by the three office girls.

Meg

Meg works as a cleaner in the public lavatory. She does not like her job, although she works hard at it and is proud of how clean the place is. She admires and looks up to Ada, who is younger than she, and also her supervisor. She hopes that when Ada gets a promotion, Ada will be able to offer her a new job. Like the other women, Meg does not have a high opinion of men. She says of the toddler, "It's a pity they have to grow up." Meg's marital status is unclear. She may be a widow or divorcee, since she says, cryptically, "I was better off without him." She also says that no one ever wanted her, "except one night behind the gas works and he was a bit simple." Meg is not as sophisticated as Ada; she likes to read the horoscopes in the newspaper and never bothers with the financial news.

Nellie

Nellie, like her friend Dot, is a respectably dressed widow in her sixties. She describes in some detail the predictable routine of her thirty-six-year marriage. She cleaned her husband's shoes every day, always bought him fish on a Friday and cooked it exactly the way he liked it. He would not let her work outside the home, saying he would sooner die than not be able to keep her. Every day she would wait all day at home for him to return from work. Nellie and Dot have adapted well to widowhood, although when Norma suggests they are better off than when they were married, Nellie and Dot both react with horror. Nellie does not care for some things in the modern world, such as the way young people dress, or the fact that young mothers go out to work and put their children in nursery schools. Nellie says that her generation of women were happy to have their children around for as long as possible.

Norma

See Second Office Girl

Old Woman

The Old Woman is a derelict who likes to go to the public lavatory to eat her breakfast. When she comes out of the cubicle, the other women call her Old Mother Brown, and dance around her. She is frightened and holds her bag to her head to protect herself. But when the women attack the figure that looks like a man, the Old Woman also joins in.

Second Office Girl

Norma appears not to share the hostile attitudes to men that most of the other characters have. She is the only one of the office girls to have a regular boyfriend, Eddy. Norma is a romantic, and can quote passages from romance novels, and recite romantic verses she learned at school. She is not wildly in love with Eddy, referring to him as merely "all right," but she appears to have a high level of tolerance for his idiosyncrasies. Norma has a sharp temper, and threatens to scratch Ada's eyes out if Ada speaks to her the way she spoke to one of the other girls. Norma is also squeamish, and the sight of the girl with the bloody wrists makes her feel ill. Like the other girls, she does secretarial work, but is fed up with always having to do what her boss wants.

Second Woman

Second Woman enters with First Woman and the toddler boy. She says little but her negative view of men is clear: she regards them all as babies.

Third Office Girl

Third Office Girl used to work on a factory production line. She prefers her current office job and seems to like it more than the other girls do. She likes the view from the window and the chances they get to laugh and chat when their male boss leaves the room. It is she who climbs into the cubicle where the bleeding girl is, spraining her ankle in the process. She also complains that she got her shoes and her stockings wet. Third Office Girl is the one who near the end of the play sets up the chant "We don't need them," about men.

Third Woman

Third Woman appears only at the end of the play. She emerges from one of the cubicles and rushes to the exit. She has short hair, wears a suit and a coat, and looks like a man. The other women fall on her and kill her.

Themes

At the heart of the play is the idea of gender stereotyping, in which the roles and attitudes of the sexes follow highly predictable patterns. Since it is men who set the rules and design them for their own advantage, this breeds frustration, resentment, and ultimately murderous rage in the women who congregate at the public lavatory. The negative picture presented of men is almost unrelenting, and includes the world of work, sex, relationships, and the home.

The office girls, for example, have dull, repetitive jobs in which they are at the beck and call of male bosses. But their minds are so impoverished, so crushed by the accepted notions of what women can do, that they have no ideas about what else they might aspire to. All they know is that the jobs they do have are better than the available alternatives, such as working on a factory production line. Being aware of one's dissatisfaction but lacking the capacity to imagine anything better is a recipe for frustration and a stunted life.

Norma's best solution, inspired by television advertising, is simply to take the day off and go to the beach. She and the other girls are lulled by the sentimental clichés fed to them by the male-dominated culture and also by the harmless diversions they are offered. Norma soaks up the soft pornography of romance novels that are aimed at women by the publishing industry, and the girls also lap up the conventional, moralistic advice about relationships with men that are offered to them by newspaper advice columns. The treachery of men is somehow enshrined and made harmless in little romantic rhymes that Norma learned at school. That is, until one of the office girls describes the reality of a man's attitude to her as a young, single woman: "You're all right till you're stuck with a kid then they don't want to know."

Men are presented through the eyes of the women as nothing more than big babies who are obsessed with sex. Pornography and sexual perversions are the realm of men. "Only men, only men, only men do that," chant the office girls in unison. And when the first office girl discovers the obscene graffiti on the cubicle walls, she assumes it must have been written by a man because no decent woman would write such things. The stereotypes conveyed are that men just want sex, whereas women want romance and family.

From the point of view of the females in this play, men are selfish when it comes to sex, and their performance also leaves much to be desired. "Eddy always falls dead asleep after," says Norma, and Dot thinks of the male orgasm as "only like a sneeze, when all's said and done."

Men in their turn have a low opinion of women's intelligence, at least according to Ada, who, as she studies the financial pages of the newspaper, says contemptuously, "They think we don't read that far." The "they" in question are the men who produce the newspapers. The underlying stereotype is that the realm of business and finance

belongs to men; women are content with the "women's pages" that discuss clothes, recipes, relationships, and the like.

The gender roles of the older generation, as represented by Nellie and Dot, are similarly fixed in stone. Men go to work; women wait all day for them to come home, occupying themselves, in the opinion of one of the office girls, sweeping and tidying and washing. The role of the wife is simply to make her husband comfortable, never to point out his faults or hurt his pride. Everything follows a predictable routine. Now widowed, Nellie and Dot seem in some respects to have more rewarding lives than they did when they were married. Although they do not have any directly unkind words to say about their dead husbands, they do let slip the fact that now there is no one to dock their housekeeping money after a bad week, or to ask where all the money has gone.

The younger generation of women feel the same pressure to conform to long-established roles. Women must defer to men. If a man steps on a woman's feet as they dance, says one office girl, she is the one who apologizes. The man's masculine pride must not be threatened.

Gender stereotypes emerge again when the girl with the slashed wrists is discovered. Nellie immediately says they must call a man because a man will be able to break the door down. Second Woman wants to get a policeman. The underlying stereotype is that in a crisis, you need a man. But Ada will not hear of this, and the women manage to solve the problem well enough on their own; brute strength is not always needed.

The gender stereotypes permeate society at all levels and are constantly reinforced. They can be found, for example, in the words of the nineteenth-century nursery rhyme that the women quote: little girls are made of "Sugar and spice and all things nice," whereas little boys are made of "Sni ps and snails and puppy dogs' tails." Everything points to a rigid segregation of society along gender lines, and the relationship between the sexes is one of antagonism. This is learned in childhood, as the first office girl makes clear: "Like in the playground, boys against girls. Them onto us."

The segregated public lavatories, in which the men's lavatory is an unknown, mysterious place to the women, thus becomes a metaphor for the basic divisions in society. "It's time he stuck to his own side of the fence," says Meg of the toddler boy who has been brought by his mother to the lavatory.

Given the resentment that women in the play feel toward men—which is most exemplified in Ada—the outrage and madness that takes hold of them when they see what they think is a man emerging from one of the cubicles is not so surprising. The women's lavatory is their domain; it is one of the few places where women can be in control. The invasion of their private space is likely to provoke a violent response.

But the play does not endorse the women's violence. Since their victim turns out to be a woman, this suggests that mindlessly attacking men, or what men represent, will only hurt women, too. Duffy says as much in her introduction to the play:

In the very moment when the women have got their own back on men for their type-casting in an orgasm of violence they find they have destroyed themselves and in death there is certainly no difference.

Style

Language

The language of the play reveals the characters to be working class women from London or the London suburbs. This is apparent from a number of ungrammatical expressions. The clearest example is Ada, who says, "I've stuck me pencil in me eye"; the "me" is a nonstandard version of "my." The characters use many slang expressions, some of which may be unfamiliar to American ears. "Copped," as in "copped the whole roll" means seized or stolen. "French letter" is British slang for a condom; a "conker," as in Nellie's comment that her husband's shoes "shone like conkers" is the fruit of the horse chestnut tree. In the fall, British schoolchildren play a game called conkers with these fruits. "Bloke" is working class slang for man, the equivalent of the American use of "guy." It is more common in southern than northern England.

Realism and Fantasy

Duffy commented in her introduction that the play was deliberately "pitched between fantasy and naturalism." The public lavatory in which the play is set is "as real as in a vivid dream." The realistic elements in the play are many and include the setting. This kind of public lavatory, with its malfunctioning toilets, graffiti-covered walls, and lingering derelict, can be found in most cities. The relationships between the characters, such as Ada and Meg (Meg's admiration of Ada; Ada's slightly amused tolerance of Meg), form another realistic element. The three office girls, with their superficial banter, will be familiar to anyone who has worked in a London office. There is realism too in the mundane things the characters discuss, the clichés they use, and the fully believable kinds of lives they describe. The incident in which the girl slashes her wrists is also grimly realistic.

To that naturalism, Duffy adds some fantastic elements: the incinerator for the sanitary towels, for example, which Meg imagines she can hear roaring like a "great furnace, a wild beast." Fantastic too is how the women dispose of the body of the woman they have killed by cramming it into the steel flap that opens into the incinerator.

Another fantastic element is the toddler boy represented by a doll, the masculine-looking woman who is attacked and killed, and the wild frenzy that takes hold of these otherwise very ordinary women as they commit their deadly act.

The result of the skillful combination of fantasy and naturalism is an unusual concoction that serves as an example of Aristotle's remark, quoted by Duffy in her introduction: "For poetic (i.e., artistic) effect a convincing impossibility is preferable to that which is unconvincing though possible."

Historical Context

When Duffy wrote *Rites* in 1969, the modern women's movement in Britain was just beginning to make an impact. This was a period of rapid social change; economic growth meant that women were entering the workforce in increasing numbers, and there was an expansion in higher education that led to increased job opportunities and higher expectations on the part of women. The emerging women's liberation movement, as it was known, campaigned for equal pay and equal opportunity in education and employment; abortion rights; day care; free contraception (through what was popularly known as "the pill"); and an end to sexism, gender stereotyping, domestic violence, and discrimination against lesbians.

Much of the women's movement was organized in local, women-only groups that linked with others through newsletters and national conferences. The First National Women's Liberation Conference was held in Oxford in 1970. In 1971, the biggest ever women's march took place in London.

The emphasis in the women's movement was on "consciousness-raising" (sharing ideas about women's experiences), direct action in support of causes, and women's self-help. In keeping with the popular feminist slogan, "the personal is the political," women examined their own private lives, including attitudes about reproduction and sexual expression, since many believed that the root of the subordination of women was in these areas of personal life.

In 1970, Germaine Greer, an Australian feminist living in England, published *The Female Eunuch,* which argued that patriarchal social structures, in alliance with capitalism, had forced women into stereotypical, subordinate roles. Greer advocated sexual liberation as a way for women to break out of this male-imposed straitjacket. The book became a highly influential best-seller.

The women's movement had some quick successes in Britain. In 1967, abortion was legalized under certain conditions. The Equal Pay Act of 1970 established the principle of equal pay for equal work. In 1975, the Sex Discrimination Act outlawed discrimination on the grounds of sex or marital status and established the Equal Opportunities Commission. Women also gained the right to maternity leave.

The women's movement also had an impact in the arts. One of the reasons Duffy wrote *Rites* was to provide more opportunities for women in the theatre. She was encouraged by the eminent actress, Dame Joan Plowright, who was aware of the lack of contemporary roles for actresses. Duffy's groundbreaking work was followed by that of Caryl Churchill. Churchill began writing radio plays with socialist and feminist themes in the 1960s. Her first professional stage production was *The Owners,* produced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972, and she went on to become Britain's leading contemporary woman playwright. Other developments that provided more opportunities for women in the writing and performing of contemporary drama were the formation of

the Joint Stock Theatre Group in 1974, and Monstrous Regiment, a theater collective, in 1975.

Critical Overview

Rites received less attention from reviewers than Duffy's novels from the same period, such as *Wounds* (1969) and *Love Child* (1971). In general, Duffy's work in the theatre has been overshadowed by her achievements in other forms, including nonfiction as well as fiction. However, *Rites* has attracted attention from a number of feminist scholars. In her collection of essays on lesbian writers, Jane Rule's judgment of *Rites* is somewhat negative. She argues that the play "reduces people to objects, stereotypes of all the ugliness of heterosexual women whose revenge is ultimately self-destruction.... It is hard to escape feeling an indictment against women, rather than simply against labels."

Elizabeth Hale Winkler, in "Three Recent Versions of the *Bacchae,*" discusses *Rites* in terms of the play that inspired it, Euripides's *The Bacchae.* She reaches the conclusion that Duffy's "overall conclusions are decidedly negative." Winkler points out that although Duffy critiques the stereotyping of gender roles, she does not point to any positive alternative. There are no female role models in the play. This is in contrast, Winkler argues, to another modern play that also revises *The Bacchae, A Mouthful of Birds* (1986) by Caryl Churchill and David Lan. That play, in addition to portraying the insanity and violence, also looks at the "more positive possibilities of solidarity, possessive madness, pleasure, and even ecstasy" that are suggested by *The Bacchae.*

Lynda Hart, in "Introduction: Performing Feminism" (in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*) draws attention to the beginning of the play, in which workmen silently construct the set that is to represent the women's lavatory. She calls this a "slow and deliberate pantomime," and likens it to the theatrical convention of the dumb-show. She argues that the dumb-show device reminds the audience that the space within which the all-female cast act out their drama is created by men: "The ladies room is far from being a liberated space; on the contrary, it is a privilege designed to distort women's action."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses Rites *as a creative reworking of* The Bacchae, *a play by the ancient Greek dramatist, Euripides.*

The title of *Rites* is taken from the play *The Bacchae,* written shortly before 406 B.C.E. by the ancient Greek dramatist Euripides. In addition to the title, there are parallels in plot and theme between *Rites* and *The Bacchae,* as well as some allusions and reversals. Duffy takes care to point out in her introduction to the play that *Rites* is not a version of *The Bacchae,* and that "no attempt was made to make it conform to that play." But she adds that the ancient text does add another layer of meaning to her own play, and makes it less likely that people will dismiss *Rites* as merely shocking or no more consequential than a dream.

The Bacchae revolves around a conflict between Dionysus, the god of wine, revelry and ecstasy, and Pentheus, the king of Thebes. When Dionysus begins to attract many followers in Thebes, Pentheus tries to stamp out the worship of this new god. He imprisons all the women whom he catches carrying the symbols of the god: wine, an ivy wreath, and a staff. Pentheus also captures Dionysus, who takes human form as a handsome young man. Miraculously, all the women who had been imprisoned suddenly find themselves free, and they continue their Bacchic worship in a glen just outside the city.

Pentheus then imprisons Dionysus, who warns the king that he will bring destruction on himself. Soon after his imprisonment, Dionysus conjures up an earthquake, and Pentheus's palace is reduced to ruins. Astonished, Pentheus interrogates the freed Dionysus, but a herdsman interrupts him. The herdsman tells Pentheus that Agave, Pentheus's mother, and a group of her fellow bacchantes are on a nearby mountain, celebrating the god. Dionysus, who seeks revenge on Pentheus, asks the king if he wishes to see the women at their secret rites. When Pentheus says that he does, Dionysus takes control of his mind and tricks him into disguising himself by dressing in women's clothes.

On the mountain, Pentheus sits in a tall tree to observe the women, but he is easily spotted by the bacchantes, who have been warned by Dionysus that an enemy is at hand. Led by Agave, the women attack Pentheus in a wild frenzy, tearing him limb from limb. Agave is so blinded by her frenzy that she thinks Pentheus is a mountain lion. After Pentheus's dismembered body is returned to Thebes, Agave recovers from her mad frenzy and is horrified at her murderous deed. Dionysus returns and exiles Agave and her sisters from the city.

The central conflict in *The Bacchae* is between two aspects of human nature. On the one side is the desire for order, rationality, law, decorum, restraint, and morality. All these qualities are represented by Pentheus, the king of Thebes. He feels that it is his duty to preserve the city from what he sees as the disruptive influence of the

bacchantes. The other side of human nature is the nonrational dimension. It includes sensuality, the abandonment of limits, a sense of oneness with nature, spontaneity, joy, celebration, and intoxication through wine and dance. This is represented by Dionysus.

The Bacchae shows what happens when this primordial, ecstatic Dionysian energy, which is an essential component of the human condition, is ignored or suppressed. The play also shows the harm that results when it is pursued to excess. In *The Bacchae,* there is no happy medium, no path of moderation.

In *Rites*, the equivalent of the Bacchic rites of the women of Thebes are the activities of the women in the public lavatory. The lavatory is a female space that men are not allowed to penetrate, just as the bacchantes act out their ritual worship of Dionysus in an exclusively female group on the mountain. In *Rites*, the equivalent of Pentheus, who claims to abhor what the women are doing but nonetheless jumps at the chance to see their secret rites for himself, is not any of the characters but rather the audience. There is, as Duffy points out in her introduction, a voyeur in everyone: "We should all like to be able to eavesdrop, to know how people behave alone or in groups when they can really be themselves.... Like Pentheus, we want to be shocked and pained."

There is, needless to say, a marked contrast between the rites of the bacchantes and the rites of this group of working class women in 1960s Britain. As Elizabeth Hale Winkler, in "Three Recent Versions of the *Bacchae,*" comments:

Instead of the ecstatic nighttime dances on the mountains . . .
we find only women engaging in empty,
trivial secular rituals such as putting on their make-up
in the morning, gossiping about unsatisfactory sex
with their boyfriends and singing snatches of banal
popular love songs.

If the bacchantes are full of life and a kind of divine madness (not all of which is destructive), the women in *Rites* are condemned to live stunted lives in settings that are defined for them by men. Their "rites" are exemplified at the beginning and end of the play, when Ada engages in her daily ritual of putting on her make-up with great vulgarity —she repeatedly spits into her pot of mascara and then puts her finger in it—and vainly admiring herself.

It is Ada who is the central figure in *Rites*; she is the equivalent of Agave in *The Bacchae* (although in that play Pentheus and Dionysus are the central characters; Agave does not appear directly until near the end). Just as Agave is the priestess of the bacchantes, so the strong-minded Ada is the "priestess" of the public lavatory. As the manager of the facility, she is the one in charge; she decides what is permitted there and what is not. Meg, the attendant and cleaner, treats her with deference.

In *The Bacchae,* it is Agave who initiates the murderous attack on Pentheus, and so in *Rites* it is Ada who incites the women in the lavatory to kill the masculine-looking person they assume is a male spy. Of course, there are differences between the two incidents.

In *The Bacchae,* Pentheus really does intend to spy on the women, but the figure who is killed in *Rites* has no such intention. In *The Bacchae,* a man is dressed as a woman; in the ironic reversal in *Rites*, the victim is a woman who dresses like a man. In both cases, however, the situation is one of mistaken identity, and the result is a crazed mob killing. Ada is blinded by her own hatred of men, just as Agave and the bacchantes are blinded by their mad, reason-obliterating frenzy.

There is another parallel between Agave and Ada that goes to the heart of Duffy's purpose. They are both, as Duffy points out in her introduction, deniers of life. Although Agave is a reveling bacchante, celebrating the god, she has been made so by Dionysus as a punishment for her earlier refusal to acknowledge him as a god. Agave refused to accept that Semele, her sister, had conceived Dionysus as a result of a visitation by the god Zeus. Seen in this light, Pentheus, who also denies that Dionysus is a god, is only repeating an attitude that at first was shared by his mother.

Ada, who is a more developed character than Agave, denies life by reducing sex, the life force itself, to a matter of money. Her contempt for men (whatever men may do to deserve it notwithstanding) has distorted her perceptions and given her a desire for revenge. During the course of the play, her statements about men become increasingly savage and cynical, and her anger is also directed at the women who accept the unacceptable: "I'll tell you about your kind of love: a few moments pleasure and then a lifetime kidding yourself. Caught, bound, even if you don't know it." After the girl who has cut her wrists breaks down in tears, Ada shouts with venom "B———men!" a cry she will repeat twice more before the end of the play, and launches into her bitterest tirade yet. At this point, Ada is boiling with a rage that makes her, like Agave, quite mad. She is like a volcano about to explode, and her words after the murder, as she gazes at the corpse, are chilling: "Look at it! I've seen prettier in the butcher's shop. Animals. B——— men."

Ada escapes the fate of Agave, who is exiled for her crime, but there is no doubt that she is culpable. Her hatred and rage lead her into the killing of an innocent. But this is not to deny that the play is also an indictment of a patriarchal society that oppresses women, pushing them into a limited range of roles, and so creating the kind of frustration which builds up until violence results.

This pervasive sense of female oppression by men finds a parallel in *The Bacchae.* The bacchantes are mostly women. Their actions in leaving the city and celebrating Dionysus in the forests and mountains are acts of freedom committed in rebellion against a male-dominated society. This society is exemplified by Pentheus. Not only is he intolerant, authoritarian, and dictatorial, he is also a misogynist. His reaction to anyone who opposes him is to imprison them. He has already imprisoned many women, literally tying their hands. He threatens that when he catches the other bacchantes who are threatening his idea of ideal social order (and his power), he will sell them into slavery or make them work the looms in his palace.

In *Rites*, this is translated into modern terms. Women such as Nellie and Dot tell how they were confined to domestic chores throughout their marriage, and the other women

are in a prison of limited opportunities that confines them to low-status jobs that amount to a kind of slavery. On the evidence of the play, the only freedom available for a woman of their social class is to transgress commonly accepted sexual mores and become a prostitute, like Ada. Ada claims that she is independent and free, largely because she ensures that it is she, not the man, who sets the terms of their sexual encounters. But by anyone's standards, that is a poor definition of freedom, not even coming close to the liberating joy of the bacchantes in the positive aspects of their Dionysian celebrations.

There is one more parallel between *Rites* and *The Bacchae* and one significant departure. Dionysus, who plays such a large role in *The Bacchae,* appears in *Rites* only as the toddler doll. Duffy explains in her introduction: "I would not have used a real child for Dionysus if I could have had one. A doll is at once more terrifying, more enigmatic and more appropriate, artistically, to the dream idiom." Dionysus in *The Bacchae* has long curly hair and an androgynous appearance, and this is also true of the doll in *Rites*. The women cannot tell whether he is a boy or a girl until they undress him and examine his genitals.

Finally, in ancient Greek drama violence is never shown on stage. The conclusion of *The Bacchae* is therefore reported by a character who witnessed it. The audience does not see it directly. However, dramatic conventions have changed since that time, and Duffy presents the violence in full view of the audience. It is meant to be disturbing, as the stage directions, referring to a "tattered and broken figure wrapped in bloody clothing," clearly suggest. *Rites*, then, may be more shocking than its ancient original, and not only for its violence. It presents an indictment of patriarchy but offers no way beyond it, pointing only to the resulting female rage that harms women and accomplishes nothing. Significantly, the play ends where it began, the mundane "rites" go on—but something terrible has happened in the meantime, and who is to say that it may not happen again?

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *Rites,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Times have changed since Duffy wrote *Rites* in 1969. But how much have they changed? Is there still discrimination against women in employment? If so, what industries or occupations are most affected and what can be done to remedy the situation? (You might want to discuss the concept of the "glass ceiling," which is a more subtle form of discrimination.)

Does liberation for women mean liberation for men too? In what sense? How have men been changed by the women's movement over the last few decades?

Ada's opinion about love and marriage is, "A few moments pleasure and then a lifetime kidding yourself. Caught, bound, even if you don't know it." Does this cynical view have a grain of truth in it, from the woman's point of view? Or does Ada's cynicism distort the reality? What would be a succinct, two-sentence formulation that would offer a completely different view of love and marriage? How would such a formulation avoid the sentimental, clichéd view of love that rests on the stereotyping of gender roles?

As a result of the women's movement, the roles of the sexes have become much more flexible. Has that made it more or less easy to have a successful relationship? In what ways has it made it easier, and in what ways more difficult?

Is *Rites* a depressing play because the lives depicted seem so sterile and hopeless? Or is it an inspiring play because Duffy has the courage to depict the lives of the women of a certain social class as they are, without sentimentality or false optimism?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: In the United States, median female earnings relative to median male earnings is about sixty percent. In Britain in 1970, the figure is about sixty-five percent. However, the passing of equal opportunity laws in the mid-1960s lays the basis for an improvement in women's earnings and the widening of their career opportunities. The effects of these developments, in both Britain and the United States, will not be felt until the mid-1970s.

Today: Economic inequalities relating to gender remain significant. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median earnings of women fifteen years and over who worked full-time in 1999 is $26,300, which is seventy-two percent of the median earnings of men ($36,500). In Britain, women's earnings are eighty-one percent of men's, but women working part-time (which amounts to over half of the women in paid employment) earn less than sixty percent of what men earn.

1960s: In the United States in the late 1960s, eighteen percent of female high school graduates are completing at least four years of college, compared to twenty-six percent of men. In Britain in 1963, only a quarter of the undergraduates are female.

Today: In Britain, more than half of the undergraduates are female. Similarly, in the United

States, women now make up the majority of students in colleges and universities. Women also receive more master's degrees than men and are entering business and law schools in record numbers.

1960s: In the early 1960s, on both sides of the Atlantic, the image of women presented in the media and accepted in the culture as a whole is that they are passive and noncompetitive. Women are considered best suited to domestic work and caring for a family, or being in one of the caring professions such as nursing or school teaching. There are also fewer opportunities for women to play sports, particularly sports that are traditionally practiced only by men. Strength and athletic skill in women are regarded by some as unfeminine.

Today: New definitions of femininity include physical strength and fitness. Women take up sports such as weightlifting in increasing numbers, for fitness and competition. They also compete in aggressive contact sports such as boxing, wrestling, and the martial arts. In the United States, for example, in 1999, 2,361 girls compete in high school wrestling, up from 132 in 1991. In 2001, the International Olympic Committee gives its approval for adding women's wrestling to the 2004 Olympics. In Britain in 1998, the British Boxing Board sanctions professional women's boxing for the first time.

What Do I Read Next?

Duffy's first novel, the autobiographical *That's How It Was* (1962), has been called one of the few authentic accounts in British fiction of a working class childhood. The novel focuses on the relationships between the protagonist and her mother, stepbrothers, school friends, and a schoolteacher.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) was one of the seminal works of 1960s feminism, awakening a whole generation of women to new insights into themselves and their roles in society.

Sylvia Plath's autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) describes the stereotyping of women's roles as discovered by a young woman who works as an intern at a magazine in New York City in the early 1950s. The focus of the story is the woman's mental breakdown that results in a suicide attempt.

The Awakening (1899), by Kate Chopin, is an early example of an emerging feminist consciousness. Set in New Orleans, it tells the story of a young woman as she awakens to psychological and sexual consciousness.

Like *Rites, A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), a play by Caryl Churchill and David Lan, is a revision of Euripides's *The Bacchae* in a modern setting. The playwrights set out to examine issues of possession, violence, and ecstasy.

Further Study

Brater, Enoch, ed., *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights,* Oxford University Press, 1989.

The sixteen essays in this collection examine the work of contemporary women playwrights from a variety of angles. Katherine Worth, in "Images of Women in Modern English Theater," comments on Duffy's *Rites.*

Hennegan, Alison, "Maureen Duffy," in *New Statesman,* April 17, 1987, pp. 20-21.

This is an interview with Duffy in which she discusses her novel, *Change* (1987). She also mentions that she started to write novels only because of the difficulty she encountered getting her plays produced.

Hersh, Allison, "'How Sweet the Kill': Orgiastic Female Violence in Contemporary ReVisions of Euripides's *The Bacchae,*" in *Modern Drama,* Vol. 35, No. 3, September 1992, pp. 409-23.

Hersh examines *Rites* and Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* in terms of how they represent Euripides's *The Bacchae* in a different historical context.

Itzen, Catherine, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968,* Methuen, 1980.

Itzen examines the history of alternative theatre in Britain since 1968. Alternative theatre refers to small groups that perform in community theatres rather than large commercial ones. Plays performed often have a leftwing political orientation.

Rieger, Branimir, ed., *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness,* Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994.

This is a collection of sixteen essays that examine madness in literature from a wide variety of critical approaches.

Wandor, Michelene, *Carry on Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics,* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.

This is a study of British women's theatre from a feminist perspective. Wandor discusses the difficulties faced by women directors, given the fact that authority and leadership have usually been seen as male characteristics.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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