Rocket to the Moon Study Guide

Rocket to the Moon by Clifford Odets

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Introduction

Clifford Odets's *Rocket to the Moon* was first produced for the stage by the Group Theatre in New York in 1938. The play was the second Odets play produced by the Group Theatre after Odets's return from a brief hiatus in Hollywood where he worked as a scriptwriter. Like its predecessor, *Golden Boy*, the play signaled a move on the part of Odets away from the more overtly political drama of his earlier plays towards a drama more focused on interpersonal relationships and the pressures of life on the individual.

Set entirely in the waiting room of a dentist's office in New York City, the play focuses on the relationships between its central characters. In the play, dialogue is more important than action. The play takes place between June and August, and the oppressive heat of a stifling New York summer serves as the backdrop to the play's events. The play focuses on the mid-life crisis of a dentist, Ben Stark, who attempts to escape the confines of his life by having an affair with his secretary, Cleo. In the play, Odets develops many of the themes familiar to his audience from his earlier (and more overtly political) plays: economic pressures, the ability of the individual to rise above his circumstances, and the effects of personal responsibility on ambition. The play can also be seen as a meditation on the effects of marriage and personal relationships on the development of artistic talent.

Author Biography

Playwright Clifford Odets was born on July 18, 1906, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Louis and Pearl Odets, who were Jewish immigrants of Russian and Austrian descent. While Odets was a young boy, his family moved repeatedly between Philadelphia and New York before settling in the Bronx when he was six years old. By the time Odets entered high school, his father had become a successful printer who owned his own print company in New York. Odets senior wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. However, as a youth, Odets performed poorly in school but was a voracious reader and an ardent moviegoer. Despite his poor academic record, as a student at the Morris High School, Odets was an active member of the drama club. In 1923, at the age of seventeen, Odets dropped out of high school to pursue a career in acting. Odetss desire to pursue a career on the stage conflicted with his fathers ideas of success and would be a source of conflict from which Odets would draw heavily during his later career as a playwright.

"Although he managed to secure a number of minor parts, Odets was unable to find much success as an actor. In 1931, however, Odetss luck changed when he was cast in a minor role in the first production of Harold Clurman and Lee Strasbergs newly formed Group Theatre, *The House of Connelly*' by Paul Green. Odetss relationship with the Group Theatre would eventually result in the 1935 production of his own *Waiting for Lefty*, the play that established Odets as a playwright of note. Odets was to be associated with the Group Theatre until its demise in 1941.

However, despite the critical and commercial success of *Waiting for Lefty*, Odets would never really achieve the success his early plays suggested he would. Although Odets wrote over twenty plays between 1935 and 1954, his career apparently failed to achieve the promise hinted at in his early plays.

'In 1936, Odets accepted a job writing scripts for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and moved to Hollywood. There, he met and married the actress Luise Rainer on January 8, 1937. Odetss stay in Hollywood lasted only two years. He eventually returned to New York where he wrote *Rocket to the Moon* in 1938. The marriage suffered from the distance, and the couple divorced in May 1940.

Rocket to the Moon' (1938) marked a shift in Odetss focus from the overtly political drama of his early career to a more introspective and personal focus on interpersonal relationships, and his own roots as a second-generation Jewish immigrant. Despite its moderate success, *Rocket to the Moon* signaled the beginning of the end of the Group Theatre. In 1941, Odets returned to Hollywood and, while he wrote a large number of screenplays, his output for the stage declined markedly. He produced only three more plays before his death of cancer in 1963, at the age of 57. The last of these plays, *The Flowering Peach*', which was produced in 1954, was slated to receive the Pulitzer Prize. That award, however, was given to Tennessee Williams *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The first act of *Rocket to the Moon* opens with an argument between Ben Stark and his wife, Belle. Stark wishes to develop his dental practice by moving his offices to a more affluent part of town and specializing in orthodontics. His father-in-law, a retired businessman, has offered to provide Stark with money for the move. However Belle□who hates her father□wants Stark to refuse his offer. While Belle sees her desire for Stark to stay where he is as a practical one, Stark believes that his wife is trying to limit his aspirations. Despite these misgivings, Stark gives in to Belle and agrees not to move.

Stark's colleague, Dr. Cooper, enters during this conversation to get a drink of water from the cooler. His presence reminds Belle that Cooper, who rents his office from Stark, owes four month's rent. Belle views Stark's refusal to press Cooper for the money as weakness, and criticizes him for it. Belle tells Stark that she has been feeling depressed all morning and reminds him that it is the anniversary of the death of their son, who died during childbirth. At this point the play's central female character, Stark's secretary Cleo, enters and is immediately criticized by Stark (who is trying to mollify his wife) for taking a two-hour lunch break. When Dr. Cooper re-enters the waiting room, Belle demands that he pay Stark the money he is owed and accuses Cooper of drunkenness. Cooper tells Belle that he cannot even afford to pay the medical bills for his son, who recently broke his arm. Belle looks on Cooper more sympathetically and tells him to take another month before paying off his debts.

As Belle leaves the office, her father, Prince, enters. Prince sees Cleo and asks her who she is. This question prompts a long conversation between the two during which Cleo tells Prince that she does not like Belle. Prince is clearly attracted to Cleo and makes a number of attempts to impress her. Prince comes across as an energetic, playful, and intelligent man. Stark returns to the room and watches the two silently for a moment before Prince notices that he has returned. Stark tells Prince that he is rejecting his offer of financial help. Prince blames Belle for this decision, and the two men talk at great length about the effects of marriage on a man. Prince describes his own feelings about marriage, telling Stark that if he had been single he might have become a great actor. After describing his own position, Prince criticizes Stark for letting Belle run his life and tells him that he should have an affair with Cleo. Stark laughs at Prince, but his mood abruptly changes to one of melancholy as the older man leaves.

As Stark is contemplating the conversation with his father-in-law, Frenchy enters and the two begin a conversation that starts out where Stark's conversation with Prince had left off. Stark tells Frenchy that he has slept through his marriage. Frenchy, who is a bachelor, cannot really comprehend Stark's concerns and is glad when Dr. Cooper enters the room and joins the conversation. Cooper tells Stark that Belle confronted him about his debts. Stark confirms that he is not going to throw Cooper out despite Belle's

wishes. As their conversation winds down, Cleo comes back from her errand and Cooper leaves. Stark and Cleo are left alone and Stark, prompted by his conversation with Prince, begins to see her in a different light.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2 takes place about a month after act 1. The first scene opens with Stark leafing through a volume of Shakespeare and reminiscing about his youth. Cleo is very solicitous of Stark, bringing him a glass of water and giving him matches to re-light his pipe. Frenchy, also in the room, notices this and makes some pointed remarks about the effect of the heat on people's sex lives. Cleo takes offence at Frenchy's remarks, and the two begin to argue while Stark looks on. Once Frenchy leaves, Cleo and Stark discuss Stark's marriage to Belle, and Cleo questions Belle's treatment of Stark. Cleo tells Stark that she does not really need her job because her parents are wealthy. The two discuss one of Stark's patients, Willy Wax, a choreographer whom Cleo wishes to meet. Stark and Cleo's conversation is interrupted by a phone call from Belle and the later entrance of Prince, who is late for a dental appointment with Stark. Prince asks Cleo and Stark how their affair is going. After Cleo denies they are having one, Prince asks her out on a date. Stark expresses his jealousy and accuses Cleo of lying about her friends and her parents. Cleo admits that she has been lying and tells Stark that she loves him. Immediately after Cleo's declaration of love, Cooper interrupts their conversation. Cooper is distraught about his life and tells Stark that he is going to sell his blood to make enough money to pay him back. The scene ends with Cleo confessing her love for Stark and the two embracing passionately.

Act 2, Scene 2

Scene 2 begins with an argument between Cleo and Stark about Cleo's decision to accept Willy Wax's invitation to lunch. As they argue, Prince calls on the phone and asks Cleo out on a date (which she refuses). Frenchy enters and warns Cleo not to toy with Stark's affections. Cleo leaves for lunch with Wax, after an argument with Stark about the nature of their affair. Cleo is upset that Stark wants to keep their affair a secret and never takes her out in public. While Cleo is at lunch with Wax, Belle enters the office and argues with Stark. She demands that Stark fire Cleo and hire her, Belle, instead. When Stark refuses to fire Cleo, Belle accuses him of conducting an affair with Cleo and locks herself in his dental office. While Stark is trying to persuade her to come out, Cooper enters and gives Stark a check for thirty dollars, which he has earned by selling his blood. Belle leaves in disgust, telling Stark that he is an actor. Cooper leaves shortly thereafter, and Cleo returns from her lunch, followed by Willy Wax. Wax tells Stark that Cleo must be in love with him. The scene ends with Cleo and Stark in a passionate embrace.

Act 3

Act 3 begins with Belle and Stark arguing about their marriage. Belle accuses Stark of having an affair with Cleo. After Stark admits his infidelity, Belle tries to get him to admit that he does not love Cleo and that this was an affair of convenience. Belle tells Stark that if he commits himself to their marriage, she will change her ways. Stark cannot choose between Cleo and Belle. Belle tells him that she is going to leave him. Once Belle leaves, Frenchy enters. After a long conversation about love and marriage, she tries to help Stark sort out his problems. The entrance of Prince interrupts Frenchy's efforts. Prince tells Stark that he intends to ask Cleo to marry him. The two men argue, furious with each other. Cleo returns, and she and Stark discuss their affair and profess their love for each other. Stark wants Cleo to understand the situation he is in and asks her to have patience with him. At this moment, Prince asks Cleo to marry him, telling her that he can provide her with security. Stark realizes that he cannot give Cleo what she needs and ends their affair. Cleo refuses Prince's marriage offer and tells both men that she has gained a degree of maturity while working for Stark and can now go out into the world. Once Cleo leaves, Stark and Prince reconcile their differences. Stark tells Prince that he has also gained a new perspective on life. Prince leaves after asking Stark to return to his wife. The act ends with the exit of Stark.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Rocket to the Moon is a three-act play about the emotional mid-life crisis of dentist, Dr. Ben Stark, whose business life intermingles with his private one as he struggles with the angst of personal relationships, economic challenges and artistic aspirations.

The play takes place in the waiting room of the dental office of Dr. Stark in New York City in 1939. On an exceptionally hot day in early June, Ben and his wife Belle are arguing about Ben expanding and relocating his dental practice. Belle's father, Mr. Prince, has offered to pay for new equipment so that Ben can move to a better New York location.

Belle, who has been estranged from her father for many years, is discouraging Ben from accepting Mr. Prince's offer because the rent for the new location will be prohibitive and it will take awhile to realize any income after establishing a new practice. Ben has higher aspirations and goals than Belle, who would prefer to remain in the security of the status quo. He relents and agrees not to continue any discussion about expanding the practice.

Phil Cooper, a dentist who rents space in Ben's building, enters the waiting room to get a drink from the water cooler, and Belle, who is the credit manager for Ben's practice, takes the opportunity to remind Dr. Cooper that he is a few months behind on his rent. Belle reminds Ben that his softhearted approach in financial matters impacts their home life, and they cannot take a vacation like the rest of their friends.

Belle's petulant attitude continues, and finally Ben realizes that it is the third anniversary of the death of their newborn son. Belle would like to adopt a baby, but Ben does not want someone else's child. Ben falls short of the comfort that Belle needs and offers to buy her ice cream when she tells him that he knows as much about women as the man in the moon.

Ben's new secretary, Cleo, enters the office, and Ben affects an attitude of impatience with the girl so that Belle will think that he is managing the office better. Belle does not approve of Cleo's makeup, clothes or hairstyle and chastises the girl for her inefficiency. Dr. Cooper reappears, and Belle takes another opportunity to demand the back rent. She accuses him of being lazy and drunk when he cannot pay. Cooper confides in Belle that he is financially embarrassed because he cannot get any clients due to the economy and cannot even pay recent medical bills from his son's broken arm incident. Belle finally relents and gives Cooper an extension of another month to make a payment.

Belle sends Cleo out to place an ad in the newspaper for the Starks' summer rental apartment. As Cleo exits the room, Mr. Prince, who is a dapper man of about sixty years

of age, comes in and strikes up a conversation with Cleo. Mr. Prince reveals that he is Belle's father, but that does not hinder Cleo's revelations of distaste for Belle, whose surly attitude permeates the office and stifles Ben's aspirations for growth.

Despite the forty years' difference in their ages, Mr. Prince flirts with Cleo and moves in close to remove something from Cleo's eye just as Ben enters the room. Watching wordlessly for a few moments, Ben finally interrupts, wondering what Prince's intentions are with Cleo. Prince changes the subject, and Ben tells his father-in-law that he will not be able to accept the financial offer for new dental equipment because Belle does not approve of the arrangement.

Prince accuses Ben of losing his life by being married to the sour Belle, who does not allow Ben to take any chances or try anything new. Prince reveals that Belle blames him for ruining the marriage to her mother by being inattentive. Prince claims that he had no support from his wife but persevered and succeeded anyway. Prince does not want Ben to fall victim to the same fate and suggests that Ben have an affair with Cleo to add some excitement to his life, to take "a rocket to the moon!"

Prince leaves and Frenchy, a chiropodist in the building, initiates a conversation with Ben. The two men discuss the doldrums of married life. Ben feels as if he has slept through his marriage and feels that it is easier to stay asleep than to make any changes. Being a bachelor, Frenchy cannot completely understand Ben's perspective but tells Ben that he does not seem happy.

Cooper joins the conversation and tells Ben that Belle has chastised Cooper for the late rent again. Ben is embarrassed by Belle's aggressive behavior and assures Cooper that he will not be thrown out of the building. Cleo comes back to the office after completing her task at the newspaper office, and Frenchy and Cooper return to their respective offices. Ben is abrupt with Cleo at first due to Belle's lectures about the girl, but soon Ben becomes comfortable with Cleo and views her differently in light of Prince's observations.

Act 1 Analysis

The play's title is explained in this section with the theme of living life fully. Prince encourages Ben to take "a rocket to the moon" by introducing some excitement into his life. Whether the excitement is an affair with Cleo, a trip or some other diversion, Prince has the perspective of a man who has lived his life with thwarted dreams and does not want Ben to fall victim to the same fate. Belle is just like her mother, and Prince can see Ben's life mirroring his own unhappy existence. He wants Ben to takes some chances for happiness while he can.

Ironically, Belle tells Ben that he has no more insight into women than the man in the moon, while Prince tells Ben to take a rocket to the moon. Belle feels as if Ben is completely out of touch and has no sense of what is important, while Prince suggests that getting out of touch with what is conventional will be Ben's salvation.

The time period for the play makes this risk-taking theme quite bold because of the country's recovery from the Great Depression. Many people had still not recovered, such as Dr. Cooper who cannot re-build his practice, and Prince's prompting Ben to expand and reach for happiness may be seen as irresponsible.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

A month later, Ben is in the office waiting room reading from a book of Shakespeare given to him by an old teacher. Cleo is very attentive, bringing Ben a glass of cold water and matches to light his pipe. Frenchy watches the attentions provided by Cleo and makes pointed remarks to Cleo about her sexually inappropriate clothing and gestures.

Cleo is understandably hurt by Frenchy's comments and argues with him when Frenchy intimates that he wishes Cleo had not been hired. Cleo continues her mild flirtations with Ben, and Frenchy realizes that he is not going to thwart Cleo's forward behavior. He eventually leaves.

Ben and Cleo discuss marriage, and Cleo tells Ben that she has been trained in all the domestic arts and will make a wonderful wife someday. Cleo then asks Ben if he loves his wife, and he answers affirmatively. Cleo reveals that she does not like the angry way Belle speaks to Ben sometimes, and Ben merely smiles, an action which confuses and angers Cleo.

A smile is Ben's defense mechanism, developed over years of marriage to Belle. He admits to Cleo that it makes him feel foolish sometimes, but the habit is too ingrained now to stop. Cleo feels as if the smile is masking Ben's unhappiness and urges him to show his true emotions.

Ben turns the tables and asks Cleo if she is happy. She replies that she is. There are so many social events to attend that Cleo gets weary from changing outfits all the time. Cleo also enjoys going on cruises but feels that a woman traveling alone is too conspicuous. Cleo states that she has much free time this summer, since most of her friends have gone out of town for the summer. This vacant schedule will allow her to work extra hours should Ben need her to stay later in the evenings.

Ben changes the subject and tells Cleo that Willy Wax, the famous dance director, is back in town from a trip to the West Coast. Cleo wants to be a dancer and muses on the ballets that Willy has staged as well as the romantic life he must lead traveling all over the country with the dance performances.

Ben comments that Cleo must be glad to have her friend Willy back, but Cleo admits that she does not know Willy. Ben is confused because Cleo had stated that she knew the man when Ben first met her. Cleo immediately tells Ben that it is inappropriate for a girl to date a man, even a man like Willy, at a first meeting because the man will lose respect for her. Cleo feels that Ben is a man that a woman could trust based on the parameters set out by Cleo's mother. Ben inquires about her mother, and Cleo replies that she was an opera singer in Europe. Ben is a little incredulous but does not embarrass Cleo by questioning her further.

Cleo would like to know why Ben stares at her so intently all the time, and Ben admits that it stems from admiration and nothing else. Cleo has become comfortable at the practice and enjoys the fact that Ben relies on her. She commits to staying until she is old enough to leave with a pension. Ben assures Cleo that he will be the one to leave first because he is so much older than she is.

Cleo is not fazed by the twenty years' difference in their ages and asks Ben if he likes her. The phone rings before he can answer. Belle is on the phone and tells Ben that Prince will be coming into the office for some dental work and that Ben is to charge the man for the services. Cleo brazenly adjusts her undergarments and complains that the heat has made it impractical to wear much. Ben cautions Cleo about the nature of such comments and warns her about her naivety.

The conversation is stunted by the entrance of Prince, who has arrived late for his appointment. Prince gladly reschedules his appointment and inquires about the progress of the affair between Ben and Cleo. Cleo tries to change the subject by telling Prince that the weather is too hot for such activity.

Ben excuses himself to go to the lavatory, and Prince seizes the opportunity to talk to Cleo alone. He confides that Ben has lost his sense of enterprise, even refusing Prince's offer of money to expand the dental practice. Prince is well aware that Belle has killed any initiative in Ben and urges Cleo to adopt the philosophy of always moving forward.

Cleo is unimpressed with Prince's strutting behavior, but the older gentleman is undaunted and begins listing his positive points including his good skin tone, original teeth and a healthy bank account. Prince continues to flirt with Cleo and finally asks her out. His intensity makes her relent and agree to a date the following night.

Prince leaves with the promise to return for the appointment tomorrow, and Ben wants to know what has transpired in his absence. Ben is slightly jealous, and his demeanor turns immediately to a professional one. He insinuates that he may have to terminate Cleo for her inefficiency. Cleo responds that she does not need the job because her family is wealthy with more money than they can spend.

Cleo's dignity is offended when Ben challenges her veracity on the issue, and she attempts to leave but falls and ends up crying. Ben is instantly touched and rushes to her aid, and Cleo finally admits the depressing details of her life as one of eight people living in the family apartment. Cleo's dreams of dancing have been her only escape from the hopeless lifestyle.

Cleo is touched by Ben's kindness but reminds him that he is no longer resourceful and wonders where his courage is. Ben is confused by the line of questions, and Cleo clarifies that Ben should go out more, experience more things and begin to really live his life. Any decent wife would help her husband do that, and Belle is not doing Ben any favors by limiting his dreams and ambitions.

Finally Cleo admits that she loves Ben, and he pretends that he does not hear the words. When Cleo prompts Ben for a response, Cooper suddenly enters the room and interrupts the conversation. Cooper's client base is still not improved, and his depression turns into outraged comments about the despair of talented men like himself who cannot practice their craft and support themselves appropriately due to the economy.

Cooper admits that he has signed up to give blood in order to pay the rent on the office space. The indignity of the situation makes Cooper insult Cleo, who tries to make him feel better. Cooper leaves to return to his office. Cleo fears for Cooper's state of mind and what he may do to himself, but Ben tells her not to worry. He says that Cooper is more talented than Ben and will recover one day.

Cleo takes the opportunity to bring up the topic of her love for Ben once more, and he cautions her that he is a married man. Cleo reminds Ben that Belle does not support his dreams and that his loneliness can be assuaged in her arms. Cleo entreats Ben to love her, and they finally embrace with fervor.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The play contains a pervading theme of dissatisfaction, and all the characters are living with disappointment of some form. Ben would like to expand his practice, but Belle won't condone it. Belle is estranged from her father, has lost a baby and sees no financial gain in the dental practice. Cleo comes from an underprivileged family and invents stories about her life to position herself more favorably. Prince is nearing the end of his life and has not had the joy he had hoped for. Cooper is financially challenged and cannot recover from the economic conditions.

In spite of the negative situations faced by each of the characters, the author supplies them with hope in the form of creative aspirations and new relationships. This positive perspective is important in this period in America on the heels of the Great Depression when people need hopeful situations and something to believe in again.

The author also uses literary techniques such as similes and metaphors in the dialogue of the characters, such as when Cleo describes the casual attitudes of people during the summer months. She says, "All the people have such an unbuttoned mood, don't they?" This is a much more descriptive way of saying that people are more relaxed during this season than just making the statement directly.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

On a late afternoon in August, the dental practice's phone rings, and Cleo enters the waiting room to answer it. Ben wants to take the call if it is Belle, which makes Cleo angry, and she lets the phone ring. Ben finally answers the ringing phone, and it is Prince calling for Cleo. Cleo postpones a date with Prince and primps in the mirror, not knowing that Frenchy is watching her.

Ben emerges from the inner office and asks Cleo not to go out with his patient, Willy Wax. Cleo is noncommittal but eventually accepts a lunch invitation from Willy, to Ben's dismay. Frenchy asks Cleo not to make any trouble for Ben because the other doctors like him and don't want to see him hurt. Frenchy continues that as a married man, Ben has had his ambitions thwarted, and he has become like millions of other men who live depressed and inadequate. Frenchy does not want Cleo to be the thing that makes Ben spring loose at some point.

The office is empty now except for Cleo and Ben, who discuss the nature of their affair. Cleo is disappointed that Ben will not take her out in public and that he will not make their relationship more permanent by leaving Belle. Cleo says that she will keep the lunch date with Willy because he is interesting and can hopefully advance her dancing career.

As Cleo leaves the office, Belle enters, surprising Ben who expects his wife to be at the beach to start the weekend. Belle is disdainful of the flamboyant Cleo and demands that Ben fire the young woman. Belle would prefer that she herself work in Ben's office because they would save money and the office would be run more efficiently.

Ben refuses to agree to terminate Cleo, and Belle accuses her husband of having an affair with Cleo. She demands that he make a choice between her and Cleo. Ben tells her that the choice is not easy because Cleo meets some of his needs in ways that Belle cannot. Belle is outraged and will not be disposed of easily after ten years of marriage.

Belle breaks down into tears and locks herself in the inner office just as Cooper enters the waiting room. Ben indicates that Belle has shut herself in the room, and Cooper calls out to Belle in a jovial voice that he has a surprise for her. Cooper hands Ben a check for thirty dollars, which he earned for selling his blood. Belle will not accept the check and leaves the office.

Willy and Cleo return to the office because Cleo has spurned Willy's advances. Willy and Cooper leave, and Ben is jealous of Willy's familiarity with Cleo. He makes plans for the two of them to visit the planetarium after a lecture tonight. Cleo is upset because

Ben will still not take her out in public, but Ben claims that he loves Cleo. The pair embraces passionately.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Frenchy is the voice of reason among all the characters in the play and succinctly states that Ben is like millions of other married men who are trapped by convention and obligations. Ben's story of thwarted dreams and unfulfilled expectations is not a new one, and Frenchy acts as the foil against Cleo's character, who wants Ben to throw away his commitment to Belle in favor of a life with her. Ben is conflicted because Belle represents his own failure through their strained marriage and the death of their newborn son. Cleo symbolizes the chance for happiness and success for Ben. He struggles with the cost of such a decision.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

At the end of August, Belle and Ben are sitting together on the couch in the waiting room. Ben has finished reading the newspaper, and Belle is sorting checks looking for a banking error. Belle accuses Ben of waiting for Cleo this evening, but Ben denies it. The couple begins to argue one more time, when mercifully the phone rings to interrupt them. Belle answers the phone and, realizing that it is her father, hands the phone to Ben. Prince is looking for Cleo, and Ben replies that he does not know where she is or when she will return. Prince wants to come tonight to speak to Ben.

Belle is suspicious of her father's motivations and wants Ben to come home with her, but he refuses. Ben does not want another argument with Belle and admits that he has failed Belle as a husband. He does not know how to alter his behavior or provide her with the things she needs. Ben tells Belle that he is not the right man to help her be the best person she can be. Ben concedes that the failure of the marriage is his.

Finally, Ben admits to infidelity with Cleo, and Belle immediately reacts and demands that Ben declare that he does not love the young woman. Belle continues that she can understand how something like this can happen when a man and a woman work together every day. Belle is prepared to forgive and forget and wants to continue her marriage with Ben. Ben will not admit that he does not love Cleo, and Belle is outraged that Ben is still not sure of his decision in the situation. Belle takes the car keys and tells Ben that she will be staying with a friend. Ben may contact her when he comes to a decision.

Frenchy enters the office, wondering why Ben is still here so late. Ben admits that he is waiting for Cleo, who is out on a date with Willy. Ben continues to muse that his fortieth birthday is approaching and, in his melancholy mood, questions Frenchy on his attitude toward life. Frenchy has a simple life of working on his car and going out on his boat and not taking things too seriously. Frenchy has never married, although he is always looking for the right girl who can balance his personality.

Frenchy thinks that for most people, love is a physical sensation, but real love involves the grace to use it properly and extend it. A person needs to bring a complete balanced life to love in order to make it work. The business of love gets harder every day according to Frenchy, who does not want to bring a woman into his life until he feels settled himself.

Frenchy mentions that he heard Belle and Ben arguing earlier and encourages Ben to examine the situation by asking himself what he can provide for Cleo. Ben admits that he loves Cleo, and Frenchy urges him to be practical. Frenchy encourages Ben to forget the shame and the morals for a minute and focus on the actual problems at hand. The first problem he must resolve is whether Ben wants Belle or Cleo.

The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Prince, who is looking for Cleo. Frenchy leaves the two men, and Prince reveals to Ben that he is in love with Cleo and wants to marry her despite the huge gap in their ages. Prince also knows that Ben is having an affair with Cleo, but Prince can offer her more in terms of life experiences and the money to back them.

Prince shares with Ben that he has not had happiness in his life, and he is ready to grab it now in the form of Cleo. Although Prince knows that this information will upset Ben, he is more concerned with his own happiness at the moment and is determined to have Cleo for his wife.

The two men are interrupted by the arrival of Willy Wax, who tells them that Cleo has gone home because she did not appreciate Willy's advances this evening. Ben warns Willy to stay away from Cleo because his intentions are inappropriate, and the two men almost break into a physical altercation when Willy realizes he should leave.

Cleo comes into the office as Willy is leaving, and Cleo echoes Ben's warning that Willy needs to leave. Willy hurls a few derogatory comments before finally exiting the office. Ben is frightened by the level of animosity which Willy has struck in him and enters the inside office to wash his hands. Cleo tries to alter the mood in the room and comments on her beautiful new raincoat. Ben is still distracted and tells Cleo that they must come to an understanding. He wants to know the depth of Cleo's affections for him. Ben cannot articulate the scope of his problem and embraces Cleo as Prince walks into the waiting room.

Prince wants to know if Ben has told Cleo that Prince loves her and wants to marry her. Prince proposes the question to Cleo, who thinks the older man is joking with her. In all seriousness, Prince perseveres in his intentions toward Cleo. Prince tells Cleo that he can offer her the world, while Ben is limited in his abilities. Eventually Ben admits to Cleo that he cannot continue his relationship with her. Cleo does not love Prince and cannot marry him. Cleo is determined to find true love and the joy that has been missing in her life for so long, and she decides to leave the office for good. After Cleo leaves, Ben and Prince reconcile their differences, and Ben commits to trying to work on his marriage to Belle.

Act 3 Analysis

Cleo has become the love interest for most of the male characters in the play, who are enamored of her fresh naivety. Ben wants her to add magic to his life. Prince wants to mold the young woman, and Willy merely wants another conquest. Fortunately, Cleo finds a level of maturity and can see the reality of the situation with each man. She acts appropriately in the end by leaving all of them.

Initially, the play focuses on Ben's mid-life crisis but emotional crises can occur for people at any age, as exhibited in the turmoil experienced by Prince. Fortunately, the author provides some elements of hope and redemption, at least for Ben and Cleo who

can go back to their lives to find happiness without adding any further destruction to other people's lives.

Frenchy again functions as the voice of reason and tries to get Ben to understand the problem from a practical perspective. Ben, however, suffers the age-old internal struggle of honor versus self-indulgence and emerges as a man of honor who will return to his wife. He is also a man of dashed dreams, again facing the same problems that plague him at the beginning of the play. This position is an appropriate ending for a play written on the heels of the Great Depression when stability and security are primary tenets for life in America.

Characters

Dr. Phil Cooper

Dr. Cooper is a dentist who rents an office in Ben Stark's building. Dr. Cooper is the most pathetic character in the play and seems to be the man most affected by the socio-economic climate of the mid-1930s. He is a veteran of World War I, but he has been severely affected by the depression. Dr. Cooper feels that he has been abandoned and forgotten by his country, even though he served in the military during the war. He is financially unsuccessful and cannot afford to pay his rent or support his family. His young son recently broke his arm, and Cooper cannot afford to pay the doctor's bills. His financial straits are so bad he is forced to sell his blood in order to pay the rent on his office. Dr. Cooper serves, in many ways, as a cautionary character for Ben Stark.

Frenchy Jensen

Frenchy is a chiropodist who rents office space from Ben Stark. Unlike the play's other principle characters, he is happy with his lot as a single man and sees no need to embark on a romantic relationship. Frenchy believes that relationships impede a man's progress. He is also sympathetic to the effects of modern life on women, arguing that a wife is shortchanged in marriage. Of all the characters in the play, Frenchy seems to be the most secure. He is often humorous and has an ironic outlook. However, Frenchy is the character that holds Cleo in the lowest regard. He is frequently rude to her and picks on her incessantly. Frenchy is also capable of being serious and forthright. When Ben Stark is at his lowest point, it is Frenchy who attempts to help him work through his problems.

Mr. Prince

Mr. Prince is Belle Stark's father, a retired but successful businessman. Mr. Prince continually encourages Ben Stark to go further in his life. He offers to provide Ben with the money he will need to expand his dental practice and encourages him to have an affair. Mr. Prince seems to have more energy and vitality than any of the other male characters in the play. He is learned, well read, and has a sense of humor. Like Ben Stark, Mr. Prince makes repeated references to Shakespeare. For example, he calls himself an American King Lear. Despite his outward appearance of happiness and wit, Prince is in many ways a bitter man. He believes that his wife held him back in life and that he could have been a great actor if he had not been married and had the responsibilities of a family. A widower, Mr. Prince is in love with Cleo and wants her to marry him. Despite Prince's relative wealth and vitality, however, Cleo sees that he is only interested in her as a trophy and refuses his offer. Prince is able to quickly shrug off

Cleo's rejection of him and immediately returns to his old ways, forgiving Ben and establishing that, for him, nothing will have changed.

Cleo Singer

Cleo Singer is Ben's young secretary and is the most important and complex female character in the play. Cleo is youthful and vital and stands in contrast to the middle-aged characters. Cleo is in love with Ben and wants him to commit to their relationship by leaving Belle and marrying her. As the object of affection for almost all the men in the play, Cleo must contend with Belle's jealousy, as well as numerous advances from Wax and Mr. Prince, both of whom Cleo rejects as unworthy of her affections. The men in the play repeatedly objectify Cleo. She is seen as something that can be used up and discarded and almost all of the men seem both beguiled by, and frightened of, her youth and beauty. Cleo begins the play as an insecure and flighty woman who lies about her life and seems unable to carry out the basics of her job successfully. As the play progresses, however, Cleo appears to be the only character who really develops and grows. This is why, at the end of the play, she is the only one who can actually leave. All in all, however, Cleo is a relatively ambiguous character. Like Ben Stark, she lacks enough substance to be a compelling central focus of the play. Her ability to leave the confines of her affair with Stark, and the confines of her job at his dental practice, seemingly comes from nowhere. Despite this ambiguity, Cleo is an important and interesting character.

Belle Stark

Belle is Ben Stark's wife. She bears the brunt of his disillusionment with his life. Belle hates her father and persuades Ben to refuse his offer of financial help. Belle believes that her father effectively killed her mother by treating her badly. Indeed, many of Belle's actions seem to stem from her desire not to endure the same fate as her own mother. Despite Ben's desire to expand his practice, Belle wants him to curb his ambitions and be content with what he has. She is, however, frustrated with her marriage to Ben, alternately blaming herself and Ben for the failure of their relationship. Her jealousy of Cleo leads her to demand (unsuccessfully) that Ben fire his secretary and employ her instead. Because Belle is unable to bear children after the death of their son during childbirth, Belle represents for Ben everything he has failed to achieve and Ben's inability to find happiness. While Belle is a largely unsympathetic character, there are indications that she should not be seen solely in this way. If one views Belle's actions from the perspective of Frenchy, for example, she appears to be as trapped by circumstances as her husband.

Dr. Ben Stark

Ben Stark is a moderately successful dentist who owns the building in which all of the action of the play takes place. Unhappy with his life, Ben wishes to develop his dental

practice by specializing as an orthodontist, but his wife dissuades him from doing so. Ben is bored and frustrated with both his home and professional life. Ben is in love with his secretary, Cleo, and embarks on a tentative affair with her as a way of escaping the ennui of his day-to-day life. However, Ben is ultimately unwilling to commit to a relationship with Cleo because he cannot choose between the possibilities she offers him and the security of his marriage. Unable to leave his wife or take the steps necessary to develop his dental practice, Ben Stark seems trapped between his ambitions and the comforts and securities of his current life. Caught between these competing imperatives, Ben represents the perils of middle-class life in which desire and expectations often overwhelm happiness and contentment. At the end of the play, Ben claims to have gained a degree of insight as a result of his affair with Cleo and the decisions he has been forced to make. What Ben decides to settle for, however, is the security of his current position. Because of this, Ben Stark is an ambivalent hero. While he is the central character, he is largely an ineffectual one. He seems unable to make decisions for himself and cannot even keep a pot of flowers alive. Ben is unable to expand the horizons of his life beyond a nostalgic longing for his youth□when everything was still ahead of him and no decisions about his life had yet been made. He reads and quotes from Shakespeare on a number of occasions and seems to want to retreat into the prior life the English playwright signifies for him.

Willy Wax

Willy Wax is a choreographer and one of Ben Stark's patients. Wax is enamored of Cleo and repeatedly tries to get her to join him for lunch. Wax is the least sympathetic character in the entire play. Indeed, he appears to be the type of man who often lures young, impressionable women into his office. He is portrayed as a shallow, egotistical man who is only interested in himself and who attempts to parlay his modicum of fame into an affair with Cleo. When Cleo refuses his sexual advances, he accuses her of being old-fashioned and refuses to have anything more to do with her.

Themes

Marriage and Career Aspirations

The major conflict of the play stems from Ben Stark's desire to leave his general dental practice and to specialize as an orthodontist. Stark's wife, Belle, persuades him to forego his dream and to be content with his mediocre but dependable general practice. While Stark agrees to Belle's demands at the very beginning of the play, the ramifications of this decision are felt throughout it. Although Stark capitulates to Belle's wishes, he feels confined and stifled by his present position. As a way to escape this feeling, Stark carries out a brief affair with his secretary, Cleo. Stark's attempt to deal with his professional disappointments through an extramarital affair highlights one of the central themes of the play□the effects of marriage on a man's career aspirations. In a conversation about the effects of marriage, Stark's father-in-law, Prince, tells him that Belle's mother had "a housewife's conception of life" and that her limited view eroded his own ambitions, "drip, drip, the matrimonial waters go, and a man wears away." Prince believes that Belle is having a similar effect on Stark. "You graduated first in your class," he tells him, "you played tennis, you were full of life and plans. Look, you don't even resent me now." Odets insists repeatedly that this winnowing away of ambition is the fault of the woman in a marriage. Stark tells Frenchy, for example, "a man would be an idealist to want a honeymoon all his life." Frenchy replies, "No, he'd be a woman. A man can't be both lover and banker, enchanter and provider. But the girls want those combined talents." Therefore, the pressures on a man□both in marriage and in business□seem to leave him trapped between competing expectations. Frenchy avoids these twinned pressure altogether by eschewing romantic relationships and living alone. While Frenchy rejects romantic relationships, he is also the only male character who shows any consideration for the woman's position. "In this day of stresses I don't see much normal life, myself included," he tells Stark. Frenchy alone seems to understand that the economic pressure to provide for a family often makes a man shortchange his wife. "The woman's not a wife," he says, "She's the dependent of a salesman who can't make sales and is ashamed to tell her so, of a federal project worker or a Cooper, a dentist . . . the free exercise of love, I figure, gets harder every day." These comments introduce one of the play's other central themes, the economic pressures of the Great Depression.

Economics and the Great Depression

While *Rocket to the Moon* may be less explicitly political than Odets's earlier plays, the effects of the economic pressures brought about by the Great Depression and the increasingly consumer-oriented nature of the American economy are central to the play. The influence of the Great Depression on the characters in the play can be seen most clearly in Cooper. A veteran of World War I, Cooper struggles to make ends meet because his dental practice is failing, and the economic demands of supporting a family exceed his income. By making Cooper a veteran, Odets is commenting on the contrast

between the optimism of the post-war years and the realities facing many Americans after the crash of 1929. The depression is referred to explicitly on a number of occasions. For example, Frenchy reminds Stark that he is providing discounts to W.P.A. workers. Moreover, as Frenchy's earlier remark that a woman is less a wife than the dependent of a salesman or a federal project worker makes clear, the Great Depression had a profoundly negative effect on the securities traditionally assumed to go along with marriage.

Artistic Aspirations and Constraints

While he was working on the play, Odets was experiencing his own relationship troubles; his marriage was shortly to come to an end. Because of this, a number of critics have suggested that the play is as much about the constraints placed on artistic aspirations by marriage and other pressures as it is about the themes discussed above. This claim is perhaps best exemplified in Prince's statement to Stark that if he had not been married he could have been "one of the greatest actors in the world." Instead, he is "an old man who missed his boat," a man who has "disappeared in the corner, with the dust, under the rug." Indeed, many of the play's characters have artistic aspirations: Cleo wants to be a dancer, Willy Wax is a choreographer, and Stark retreats into Shakespeare on a number of occasions. Given the weight of examples such as these, there can be little doubt that, however much it was motivated by his own personal life, Odets clearly uses the theme of artistic exploration as a metaphor for the debilitating effects of marriage on a man's ambitions.

Style

Setting

All of the action of *Rocket to the Moon* takes place in the waiting room in Ben Stark's dental office. Because of this single location, the focus of the play becomes the dialogue between the characters and their entries and exits from the stage. In the final moments of the play, Stark refers to this room as a prison-office. Mirroring the themes of many of the conversations between the characters, the confines of the single room help invoke the feeling that the characters, and Stark in particular, are trapped in their circumstances.

Imagery

Because the action of the play consists of the interactions between characters and their entrance and exit from Stark's waiting room, almost all of the imagery of the play is embodied in the character's dialogue and is developed through the repetition of thematic elements. The one significant exception to this is the repeated focus on the Hotel Algiers seen through the window of the waiting room. In the first act, Prince tells Stark that he once knew a bookie that used the hotel as an office. The hotel signifies a different type of life and the temptations that Stark overcomes at the close of the play. Another central image in the play is of Cleo as a consumable object. Frenchy refers to her as "Juicy Fruit," for instance, and Cleo tells Wax that "No man can take a bite out of me, like an apple and throw it away."

Genre

Rocket to the Moon is a work of dramatic realism. Its central subject concerns the everyday lives of its protagonists, and the setting and dialogue of the play focus on realistic subjects. The play attempts to reproduce the everyday speech of New Yorkers. The moments when Stark or Prince quote from Shakespeare, for example, contrast sharply with the rest of the dialogue.

Historical Context

It is almost impossible to discuss the work of Clifford Odets without spending some time focusing on his relationship to the Group Theatre, of which he was an original member, and on the broader genre of American political theatre that arose during the Great Depression. The Group Theatre was, as Gerald Weales suggests in his essay "The Group Theatre and its Plays," "a community of artists" and "the most successful failure in the history of American theatre." The Group Theatre lasted as an organization for ten years spanning the decade of the 1930s. During that time they produced seven of Odets's plays. Founded by George Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg, the group also started or significantly directed the careers of actors, such as John Garfield, and directors, such as Elia Kazan, who would later go on to direct some of the most important films in the history of Hollywood cinema. The group leaned decidedly to the left, and a number of its members were also members of the Communist Party during the 1930s. Indeed, Odets and Kazan would discuss this fact at length when they both appeared before Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Commission in the 1950s.

Odets made a name for himself as a playwright with two plays produced by the Group Theatre in 1935, *Awake and Sing*! and *Waiting for Lefty*. Both of these plays can be considered works of agitprop (agitation-propaganda), a type of progressive, politically serious drama produced in America after the stock market crash of 1929. *Waiting for Lefty*, written while Odets was a member of the Communist Party, was the most successful of these plays. It eventually played in over one hundred cities in 1935 and was performed throughout the 1930s. On its opening night in New York, the audience responded to the play by rushing the stage to congratulate the actors after the final curtain. Given that the play is about a conflict between striking New York cab drivers and a corrupt union boss, its reception was hardly surprising. As Christopher J. Herr points out in *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, "in 1934 alone, almost 2,000 strikes had broken out across the country, including violent conflicts in Toledo, Minneapolis, Harlan County, Kentucky, and San Francisco." Michael Denning notes, in the Introduction to *The Cultural Front*, that the national textile strike of 1934, involving over 400,000 workers, "became the largest strike in a single industry in American history." Odets had found a set of themes that spoke to the millions of unemployed, under-employed, and disenfranchised citizens of America feeling the lasting and debilitating effects of the crash of 1929 and the depression that followed.

That Odets had struck a cord with the American public is perhaps proved most effectively by the fact that *Waiting for Lefty* was, according to Wendy Smith (quoted in Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front*), the "most widely banned" play in America. Given the social and economic conditions under which Odets and the majority of Americans were living, it is no surprise that he found his greatest early success with dramas about the socioeconomic conditions of the 1930s. Precipitated by the stock market crash of October 1929, the Great Depression affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans. Unemployment rates skyrocketed and farms and homes were repossessed by banks and lending companies.

Critical Overview

The initial critical reception to *Rocket to the Moon* was mixed. While many critics believed that Odets was attempting to develop his understanding of social and interpersonal relationships, many found his efforts to be lacking. For example, in his *New York Herald-Tribune* review, Richard Watts Jr. begins by claiming, "Mr. Odets continues to be the most exciting and the most exasperating of the younger American dramatists." Watts ends his review by calling the play a "baffling combination of brilliance and confusion." Like many critics, Watts believes that the play's first act is brilliant but that, in the second half, the play loses its focus and "begins to languish."

Rocket to the Moon (along with *Golden Boy*) is commonly understood to mark a shift in Odets's dramatic work from a politically aware playwright of the American left to one more focused on interpersonal relations. This claim is a persistent theme in contemporary reviews of the play. This opinion of the trajectory of Odets's work is one that continued long after his death. In his 1989 book *Clifford Odets*, Gabriel Miller sees *Rocket to the Moon* as purely a romantic drama. Miller suggests, "Odets was torn between the desire to write about the sociopolitical situation and the increasing pressure of his personal troubles."

As Odets's reputation gained in stature in the late 1990s, a number of critics argued that fewer political plays, such as *Rocket to the Moon*, are connected to Odets's earlier work than contemporary reviewers might have thought. Christopher J. Herr, for example, argues in *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, that, while the play "continue[s] his retreat from overtly political drama into a more generalized examination of American life," the connections between it and plays such as *Waiting for Lefty* are many. The characters, Herr argues, are still driven by economic imperatives (much as the characters in *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing*!). Herr points out that the play is explicitly set against the backdrop of the Great Depression.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Piano is a Marion Brittain Fellow in the School of Literature, Communication, and Culture at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. In this essay, Piano considers how the character Cleo Singer embodies the competing impulses of personal and economic pressure in the play.

Rocket to the Moon is generally understood to mark Clifford Odets's move from explicitly political subject matter, dealing with the social and economic conditions affecting Americans during the Great Depression, towards a drama more interested in interpersonal relationships and, more specifically, the subject of love. While there is undeniable evidence to support this claim, it is arguably overstated. Indeed, while plays such as *Rocket to the Moon* and Odets's previous play, *Golden Boy*, certainly focus on the personal rather than the political, a focus on the economic and social conditions that affect the lives of Odets's protagonists is never far beneath the surface. As such, Odets's later plays should be understood to be drawing from the same well and embodying many of the same concerns as his earlier works. Christopher J. Herr, for example, states in his book *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre* that, despite the less overtly political nature of these later plays, "the economic imperatives that drive the characters remain strong." A number of critics have suggested that, in the later plays such as *Rocket to the Moon*, Odets was trying to deal with broader social and economic issues and events in his personal life, such as his divorce from the actress Luise Rainer. Gabriel Miller, for example, suggests that during the late 1930s, as the world was on the verge of World War II, "Odets was torn between the desire to write about the sociopolitical situation and the increasing pressure of his personal troubles."

In *Rocket to the Moon*, these economic imperatives are paramount, and Odets successfully interweaves the personal motives of his central characters with a nuanced understanding of the effects of the Great Depression and the economic conditions of the 1930s on their desires, needs, and aspirations. These considerations can be seen both in the relationships between Ben Stark, the central protagonist of the play, and his male co-workers, and in the relationship between Stark and Cleo Singer, his secretary. If *Rocket to the Moon* should indeed be seen as a highly personal play in which the socio-economic conditions of the Great Depression serve as a backdrop to the interpersonal relations that compel its plot, then attention must be paid to the interrelationship between these two drives. Nowhere are these potentially contradictory impulses more apparent than in the character of Cleo Singer.

From the very beginning of the play, issues of economics are highly evident. The play begins with an argument between Stark and his wife, Belle, about Stark's desire to expand his dental practice by moving his offices to a more affluent area of town and to specialize as an orthodontist. For a mixture of personal and financial reasons, Belle does not want Stark to give up the security of his comfortable and moderately successful practice. Much of the remaining action of the play□particularly Stark's affair with Cleo□can be understood to stem from Belle's successful attempt to persuade Stark to remain where he is. Frustrated with his lot in life, Stark embarks on an affair with Cleo

because she signifies the possibility of change that Stark has been denied in his professional life. As Gabriel Miller suggests, Cleo "inhabit[s] a world beyond the Depression-decimated experience of the other characters" who live in a "world of loneliness, pain, separation, and exile." While characters such as Frenchy and Cooper symbolize potentially moribund futures for Stark, Cleo offers the possibility of escape. She is, as Prince suggests, the "rocket to the moon" that will free Stark from his quotidian troubles and reinvigorate him. However, Cleo is an ambiguous outlet for Stark's frustrations, both because of the ways in which Stark understands her and because she has her own desires and ambitions.

In as much as Cleo embodies a symbol of escape for Stark, she is repeatedly imagined as an item available for consumption; the interpretation of Cleo as edible, expendable, or consumable is one of the most consistent patterns in the play. Indeed, each of the central male characters likens her to a commodity on at least one occasion. The idea that Cleo is a commodity available for consumption by the play's male characters is expressed almost immediately when, in her first conversation with Prince, Cleo says that she wants to be a dancer and that she has appeared on stage in a number of shows. As Cleo desires to use her own body as a commodity by becoming a dancer, each of the male characters refers to her at some point during the play in relation to food, something to be consumed and discarded. Moments later, Cleo seems to reject the position that her aspiration to be a dancer seems to establish, telling Prince that she does not "have to stand in Macy's window." In this reference to the famous New York department store, Cleo's status in the play as an item of consumption is concretely established for the first time. Despite her assertions to Prince in which she rejects the position as a consumable object, however, Cleo is repeatedly understood to be such by the play's male characters. From the very beginning of the play, Cleo Singer symbolizes the collation of the personal and the economic, and her personal value is equated□often ambiguously□to an economics of consumption in which the interpersonal and the socioeconomic worlds of the play are brought together.

Cleo's youth and vitality stand in marked contrast to the vituperated natures of each of the play's male characters and to the barren nature of Stark's wife, Belle. Stark is undergoing a mid-life crisis, Prince is an old man, Frenchy is incapable of sustaining a romantic relationship, and Cooper has been turned into a shell of a man consumed by failure. Belle cannot bear children, is seen as a drain on Stark's vitality, and has sapped him of his professional aspirations. Cleo, on the other hand, has a "jingling body" and, as Wax tells her, is "fresh and alive." Quoting Shakespeare, Stark tells her that she is "green and fresh in this old world," explicitly contrasting her youth to the aridity of the lives of the men she is surrounded by. Prince calls Cleo a "girl like candy," comparing her youth to a food most commonly associated with children, something sweet but lacking in nutritional value. References such as these that equate Cleo to food and perishable consumables are not the only ways in which Cleo is symbolized as a source of life in the play. Cleo also brings Stark glasses of water from the water cooler and waters the geraniums he is unable to keep alive by himself.

While Cleo stands in contrast to the male characters□young and full of vitality□her youthful charms are also understood to be temporary. As Herr suggests, the association

of Cleo with "the natural abundance of fruit" is "ambivalent at best." By associating her youthfulness with fruit, a commodity with a finite shelf life, Odets is revealing the limitation in these virtues as much as he is holding them up as possible routes of escape for men such as Stark and Prince. This, indeed, is the opinion of Cleo's virtues held by Frenchy, who tells her, when he is warning her not to ruin Stark's life, that he "knows the difference between love and pound cake." Cleo's appeal, Frenchy believes, is one that will fade as she ages and the luster of her youthful vitality wears away. Of all the characters in the play, Frenchy is the most hostile to Cleo's presence and speaks of her most often in negative terms. For example, he tells her that he gave her the job as receptionist in "a moment of aberration" because she pushed her "jingling body in [his] face." Later in the play he calls her "Juicy Fruit" and likens her to a spider weaving a web. For Frenchy, then, Cleo's charms should not be trusted. Frenchy sees Cleo as a distraction from the real business of men's lives.

The inherent ambivalence of the imagery associated with Cleo is further complicated by the fact that she stands at the close of the play as the only character who is able to escape the dentist's office. Of the play's central characters, Cleo alone is able to see a life for herself beyond the horizons of Stark's waiting room. "I'm a girl," she tells Stark and Prince at the close of the play, "and I want to be a woman." She has learned that the options presented to her by both Stark and Prince□to wait in vain for Stark to leave his wife or to enter a loveless marriage of convenience with Prince□will take more out of her than she will gain in return. As the focus of the play shifts from Stark to Cleo (as it does in the third act), she rejects the way she has been used by the men and insists that she is more than a commodity to be eaten up and spat out. "No man can take a bite out of me, like an apple and throw it away," she tells Wax after their failed date, and this sentiment applies equally to Stark and Prince. Moreover, this statement echoes the claim she makes to Prince at the beginning of the play that she does not have to "stand in Macy's window."

Source: Doreen Piano, Critical Essay on *Rocket to the Moon*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

All three acts of the play take place in the same location□the waiting room of Stark's dental practice. Because of this, the forward progress of the play relies heavily on the entrance and exit of characters and on the ways in which they interact in that confined space. How would you direct the end of act 3 when Stark, Prince, and Cleo have their final conversation? How would you pace the character's dialogue and what decisions would you make about their movement both entering and exiting the stage?

The historical period in which *Rocket to the Moon* takes place is the Great Depression of the 1930s. This was a period of great social, political, and economic upheaval in the United States. Research the Great Depression after the stock market crash of 1929. What were some of the causes of the crash and the Great Depression that followed? How did the country get out of the Great Depression? What have been some of the lasting effects of governmental policies from the period?

Clifford Odets was briefly a member of the Communist Party in the early 1930s. Because of his involvement with communism, Odets□like many other prominent American celebrities□had to testify in front of Senator Joseph McCarthy's House Un-American Activities Commission in the 1950s. Conduct research into the HUAC hearings and McCarthyism. What other noted celebrities were called to appear in front of the commission? What accounted for the rising fear of communism in America in the 1950s?

Rocket to the Moon is an example of social realism. Unlike in tragedy, farce, comedy, or romance, the play's dialogue, characters, and events are intended to be as realistic as possible. Explore how Odets manages to produce realistic characters and to deal with common themes through an examination of the dialogue in the play. What aspects of the character's interactions help provide a sense of realism? Do the themes Odets addresses in this play□the function of marriage, economic pressures, artistic aspirations, and others□resonate for readers in the early 2000s? How could you update the play to make it more relevant for an audience now?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Most women are expected to be housewives and, if they do choose to work, are limited to jobs as secretaries, assistants, nurses, or teachers.

Today: Many women hold powerful and important positions in major companies. However, women still earn proportionally less than their male counterparts.

1930s: Space travel only exists in the realm of fantasy and there is no federal space agency.

Today: Since 1961, over four hundred people have visited outer space and NASA is making plans to send astronauts on a mission to Mars.

1930s: Three million American workers are members of unions.

Today: The AFL-CIO alone has over thirteen million members from sixty-one different unions.

What Do I Read Next?

Awake and Sing!, first produced in 1935, was Odets's first play. It is a more explicitly political play than *Rocket to the Moon* and is often considered to be Odets's best.

Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* is the playwright's most widely known play. Like *Awake and Sing!*, the play helped cement Odets's reputation as a political dramatist.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, produced in 1949, examines a number of similar themes to *Rocket to the Moon*.

The Fervent Years: The Story of the Group Theatre and the Thirties is Group Theatre founder Harold Clurman's memoir about his experiences in theatre during the 1930s.

Robert S. McElvaine's *The Great Depression: America, 1929—1941* provides a historical overview of the social and economic conditions faced by many Americans during Odets's most productive years.

John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* is one of the most famous fictional accounts of the Great Depression.

Further Study

Cooperman, Robert, *Clifford Odets: An Annotated Bibliography, 1935—1989*, Meckler, 1990.

This book provides an exhaustive bibliography of work by and about Clifford Odets. The book is intended for both dramatists and scholars. The section on critical work includes criticism on Odets and general issues in American society during the years in which his plays were produced.

Demastes, William W., *Clifford Odets: A Research and Production Source Book*, Greenwood Press, 2001.

This book contains plot summaries and critical overviews for each of Odets's plays. The book also includes primary and secondary bibliographies of works by and about Odets.

Herr, Christopher J., *Clifford Odets and American Political Theatre*, Praeger, 2003.

This book explores the links between Odets's plays and the political theatre of the 1930s through the early 1950s. The book's chapters move chronologically through Odets's career. Herr also focuses on Odets's career as a Hollywood screenwriter.

Miller, Gabriel, *Clifford Odets*, Continuum, 1989.

In this book Miller divides Odets's plays thematically and traces the evolution of the playwright's thematic vision through his career.

□□□, *Critical Essays on Clifford Odets*, G. K. Hall, 1991.

This collection contains contemporary reviews of Odets's major plays and a number of critical essays on individual plays by a range of scholars. The book also contains three interviews conducted with Odets in the 1950s and 1960s.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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