The Secret Rapture Study Guide

The Secret Rapture by David Hare

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Contents

The Secret Rapture Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....4

Author Biography....5

Plot Summary....7

Act 1, Scene 1....15

Act 1, Scene 2....17

Act 1, Scene 3....20

Act 1, Scene 4....23

Act 2, Scene 1....26

Act 2, Scene 2....29

Act 2, Scene 3....32

Act 2, Scene 4....34

Characters....36

Themes....41

Style....43

Historical Context....46

Critical Overview....48

Criticism....50

Critical Essay #1....51

Critical Essay #2....56

Topics for Further Study....67

Compare and Contrast....68

What Do I Read Next?....70

Further Study....71

Bibliography...72

Copyright Information...74

Introduction

In an article he wrote for the *Listener* just before *The Secret Rapture* opened in London in October 1988, David Hare revealed the source of the play's curious title. "In Catholic theology," the playwright explained, "the 'secret rapture' is the moment when the nun will become the bride of Christ: so it means death, or love of death, or death under life." True to its origins, the play is filled with images of death, from the opening scene, in which a young woman keeps a vigil over the body of her dead father, to the climax, in which that same young woman is murdered by her obsessed lover. In between is a family drama rich with the symbolism and topical social criticism for which Hare has become well known in more than three decades as one of Britain's most popular playwrights.

Although the play's characters and themes are rather complicated, its plot is quite simple. Isobel Glass is a humane, fairly successful small business owner. Her sister, Marion, is a self-centered, fast-rising politician in Britain's Conservative Party government in the 1980s. When their father dies, Isobel is forced to assume the responsibility for their young, reckless, alcoholic stepmother, Katherine. Because of her love and loyalty for her father, Isobel allows Katherine and the others in the play to take advantage of her, and she quickly loses her boyfriend, her business, and ultimately her life.

Hare wrote *The Secret Rapture* near the end of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's ten years in office. During that time, Hare suggests, the rich got much richer, while the rest suffered more and more. Still, the play is much less about politics than some of Hare's earlier work. The relationships between the characters, and Isobel's singular morality, are the real driving forces. *The Secret Rapture* is available in *The Secret Rapture and Other Plays*, by David Hare, published by Grove Press in 1998.

Author Biography

David Hare was born on June 5, 1947, in St. Leonard's-on-Sea in Sussex, on the southeastern coast of England. When Hare was a boy, his father was a ship's purser on a passenger liner that sailed among England, India, and Australia. The time his father spent away from home left Hare alone with his mother and sister. Surrounded by women as a child, Hare developed an appreciation for the noble qualities he found them to have. A noticeable trend in his writing from the very beginning is the presence of strong female characters, such as those found in *The Secret Rapture*. The playwright's first success, *Slag* (1970), as well as *Plenty* (1978), *Wetherby* (1985), *The Bay at Nice* (1986), *Wrecked Eggs* (1986), *Strapless* (1989), and *Skylight* (1995), all have strong, typically virtuous women characters. "I've written about women a lot because my subject has often been goodness," Hare told interviewer Michael Bloom in *American Theatre* magazine. "The idea of men being good seems to me to be slightly silly."

Hare began his career in the alternative, or "Fringe Theatre," movement of London in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Fringe Theatre was different from the mainstream, usually government subsidized theatre of England. Fringe artists were interested in experimentation with dramatic styles; inexpensive production in nontraditional spaces, such as warehouses and apartment lofts; and the liberated, sometimes political, youth culture of the era. As a new artist on the Fringe scene, Hare earned a small salary as the literary manager for the Royal Court Theatre in 1969, where he also met some of Britain's most experimental, antiestablishment new writers and actors and launched his own career as a playwright. Some of his earliest plays were filled with political criticism and satire. *England's Ireland* (1972) is a collaborative documentary play about the political controversy and bloodshed caused by the English occupation of Northern Ireland. *The Great Exhibition* (1972) derives its name from its pathetic leading character, a world-weary, washed-out politician who has failed at his career and his marriage and, in a last attempt at gaining notoriety, decides to become a flasher in London. *Fanshen* (1975) is an adaptation of William Hinton's novel about the Chinese Revolution, and *Plenty* (1978) is an original work about the failure of Great Britain to live up to its post-World War II promise.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Hare became popular with a much wider audience, as his work started to premiere at the Royal National Theatre in London. He wrote a series of plays criticizing the Conservative government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the greed and self-interest he saw in British society. *The Secret Rapture* (1988) is an example of how Hare pitted virtuous figures against the destructive influence of this "decade of greed." One of his best-known accomplishments during this time was a trilogy of plays about British social institutions: in *Racing Demon* (1990), Hare tackled the Church of England and won an Olivier Award for Best Play in London's West End and a Tony Award for Best Play on New York's Broadway; *Murmuring Judges* (1991) indicted Britain's legal system; and *The Absence of War* (1993) completed the series by portraying modern English politics.

Prime Minister Thatcher left office in 1990, and the Conservative government was finally voted out in 1997. As his political targets started to fall away, Hare turned his attention away from social criticism and toward more intimate, personal plays. *Skylight* (1995) and *Amy's View* (1996) portray individual relationships between a woman and her lover and a girl and her mother, respectively. *The Judas Kiss* (1998) is a biographical story about playwright Oscar Wilde, and Hare's most recent play, *Via Dolorosa* (1998), is a one-man, staged autobiography in which Hare himself performed in London and New York.

Hare has remained quite popular both in England and America. When *The Blue Room* appeared in New York in the fall of 1998, it joined *The Judas Kiss*, *Amy's View*, and *Via Dolorosa* as one of four new Hare plays to appear on Broadway within a single year.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

The Secret Rapture begins in near darkness. Isobel Glass is seated quietly next to the deathbed of her father, Robert Glass, who died only a few hours before. Although the family has gathered together downstairs to mourn and to begin making funeral arrangements, Isobel decided she needed some peaceful time alone with her father and her thoughts.

Her calm is interrupted by her sister, Marion French, who has ventured up to Robert's bedroom to retrieve a ring she had given him just before his death. In their first exchange, the differences between the two sisters are stark and obvious. Even though Robert was married (to a woman considerably younger than he), Isobel was there nursing him in his final days and hours and even dressed him after he passed away. Marion, on the other hand, had only come to visit a few times. Instead of offering her father companionship, she sought to express her love for him by buying him an expensive ring. She wants it back now, she claims, because she is afraid that Robert's young wife, Katherine, will sell it, along with everything else in the house, to support her drinking habit.

Marion is clearly agitated—a state that defines her character. She is brusque, judgmental, and quick to anger. Isobel, on the other hand, seems all calmness and concern. She does not criticize Marion for taking the ring or for not being there when their father died. In fact, she goes out of her way to try to comfort her sister. Nevertheless, Marion thinks that Isobel must disapprove of her actions.

The two women are joined by Marion's husband, Tom French, who has come to bring them back downstairs. Initially, Tom seems to play the part of the peacekeeper. He is extremely religious. He believes that Jesus watches over him, even going so far as to help him when he has car trouble. He tries to reassure the sisters by telling them their father is now "in the hands of the Lord." As Marion's anger at both Isobel and Katherine rises, he refuses to take sides, calmly telling them, "I'm sure you both must be right." But Marion will not be calmed. Although Isobel has not raised her voice or said a single cross word against her sister, Marion insists that she makes her feel as if she is always in the wrong, and she storms out of the room.

Sensing that Tom is embarrassed by his wife's actions, Isobel points out that it is probably part of Marion's grieving process. Tom comments that Marion gets angry frequently, even though she seems to have everything she could want. She is a member of Britain's successful Conservative Party government and is probably destined for a high-level cabinet position. Since they seem to be making a meaningful personal connection, Isobel asks Tom for a favor. She explains that she cares about her sister very much and wants Tom to let her know if Marion should ever become seriously angry

with her. Tom agrees, and the two leave together to join the rest of the family outside in the garden.

Scene 2

A few days later, Isobel, Marion, Tom, and Katherine are gathered on the late Robert Glass's lawn, just after his funeral. Since Robert never attended church, Isobel had located a priest for the service who did not know him. Although she provided the man considerable information about her father, apparently he used very little of it and somehow got much of the rest wrong. None of the family members is happy with the service.

While they reflect on the afternoon, a number of Robert's neighbors from the village stop by to pay their respects, but the family agrees they would prefer to be left alone. Isobel greets the mourners at the door to let them know the family's wishes and suggests that they all go down to a nearby pub.

With the service ended and the guests ushered away, Marion launches a conversation about what the future holds for Katherine. They have all been wondering what she might do with herself and with the modest estate she has inherited from her husband. Katherine admits she has led a reckless and often irresponsible life. She has faced a drug problem, is suffering from alcoholism, and has never found a proper career or even held a job for long. However, she maintains that her time with Robert changed her and that she is ready to straighten up and face the future. She announces that she will go to work with Isobel.

Isobel is as surprised as any of the others to hear about Katherine's plans. They had not discussed such an arrangement, and Isobel's small graphic arts firm only employs three people with limited business. Katherine, though, has recognized a trait in Isobel that will not allow her to say no to someone in need. It is a trait that will eventually be her downfall.

Just as the conversation is getting serious, Marion's cell phone rings, and she takes the call. Her action reveals important facets of her character: she is a borderline workaholic, more committed to her career than her family and not very sensitive to the feelings of those around her. Even Katherine complains about her rudeness. She says that she must tell everyone she meets that Marion is only her "stepdaughter" and that she has nothing to do with Marion's awful connection to the politics and greed of the Conservative Party. The politics of the characters in *The Secret Rapture* are another way Hare compares and contrasts them with each other. Marion and Tom are successful "Tories," members of Britain's Conservative Party, which was in power throughout the 1980s under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. To the extent that they are political at all, the other characters in the play, including Isobel and Katherine, seem to detest the Conservatives and their greed and may be more sympathetic to Britain's Labour Party.

After Marion heads off into the house, the others discuss Katherine's bombshell announcement that she intends to go to work with Isobel. Katherine is prepared to pack up and go to stay with Isobel that very night, but Isobel is unprepared to commit to offering Katherine a job. Isobel's uncertainty brings out Katherine's vulgar side. Dying for a drink and frustrated that she is not getting her way, Katherine curses Isobel and tells her she is a fraud for pretending she is decent and caring when she is really just like all the rest. Then she storms into the house.

A moment later, Marion appears, finished with her call. She tells Tom and Isobel that Katherine is inside with a bottle of liquor she had stashed under a floorboard, complaining that Isobel won't give her a job. Tom goes inside to try to take the alcohol away, leaving the two sisters together.

Marion blames Isobel for Katherine's tantrum and her return to drinking, telling her all she really had to do to help was pretend to go along with Katherine's plans. Isobel objects that dishonesty is no way to help the situation and asks why Marion couldn't offer her a position somewhere. Of course, Marion has an easy out. "Don't be ridiculous," she tells her sister. "I'm in the Conservative Party. We can't just take on anyone at all."

As the women argue, Katherine returns, followed quickly by Tom. She is calmer and more contained now that she has had a few drinks, and she tells everyone the story of how she and Robert Glass met. She was in a bar in another town, drunk and trying to pick up men. She had been at it, she says, for weeks. Robert showed up and took her back to his house in Gloucestershire and let her stay in the spare room. They became fond of each other, and eventually she married the much older man. "People say I took advantage of his decency," Katherine admits. "But what are good people for? They're here to help the trashy people like me."

Again, Katherine's words are prophetic—Isobel will soon go to work where her father left off. She relents and tells Katherine that she can come to London and start to work with her the next day.

Scene 3

The third scene begins a few weeks later in Isobel's studio in London. Isobel and her partner, Irwin, are working on a new project: a book called the *Encyclopedia of Murder.* Irwin is trying to complete a graphic illustration of a gunshot wound. As they work and talk, a letter slides under the door. It is a letter of resignation from Gordon, the third employee in the firm. Irwin reveals that Gordon is resigning for a couple of reasons: he is secretly in love with Isobel and can no longer stand working so close to her, knowing he cannot have her; and he can't stand Katherine's abusive behavior in the workplace. In just a few short weeks, it seems, Katherine is already wreaking havoc in Isobel's life.

Irwin is also in love with Isobel, though it is different for him, he claims, because, unlike Gordon, "I have you." Later, Irwin's possessiveness of Isobel will take on significant and

serious meaning. For now, he just expresses a loyalty and a love that cause him to remain, in spite of Katherine, who may be ruining the company and their relationship.

Suddenly, Katherine appears with armfuls of flowers. Though she says she bought them from a man out front, predictably she has not paid him yet and dispatches Irwin to settle her bill. While he is gone, she announces to Isobel that she has sold Robert's house and plans to use the money to buy a flat in London, just around the corner from the studio. On top of this "good news," she says she has secured an exclusive eighteen-month contract to design the book covers for one of their publishers. All she had to do, she explains, was take the older man out to dinner and flirt with him all evening.

Isobel, of course, is shocked. She is shocked that her father's house has just been suddenly sold and shocked at the tactics Katherine is using to get the business of the respectable customers she has dealt with for years. She is frustrated by the greed and the cruelty of those around her and asks why they can't all just slow down and have a decent period of mourning and grief for her lost father.

Even Irwin, though, tells her it is time to move on and let it all go. He counsels her to forget about her sense of duty to her father, leave mourning behind, and to fire Katherine before she does any more damage with their customers. Despite all the harm Katherine has already caused, though, Isobel is not prepared to let her go. Her father loved this reckless, passionate woman, and that is enough for Isobel.

Just as Isobel and Irwin are again warming up to each other, Katherine drops another bombshell. Tom, it seems, would like to invest money in their company and allow them to grow the business. Already Katherine, who doesn't even really know the business, is talking about hiring extra artists and buying a bigger place in the center of the city. The same woman who only a few weeks before was complaining about the greed in the world now laughs, "We could be making money like hay. Everyone else is."

Isobel finally reaches her limit and tells Katherine her behavior has been inappropriate. Katherine offers to leave if Isobel will only ask her. Irwin even tries to see her out on Isobel's behalf, but in the end Isobel again determines that Katherine must stay.

Scene 4

The fourth scene is set a few days later in the living room of Robert's house. Everyone has gathered to pack up the house before it is sold and to sign the legal documents that will turn control of Isobel's company over to Tom and a board of directors in exchange for his investment in their growth.

At the beginning of the scene, Marion and her assistant, Rhonda Milne, have just finished a meeting with a delegation from the Green Party. They had invited them out to Robert's country house to give them the impression that Marion, who is a junior minister at the Department of the Environment, actually has a country background. The Green Party delegates are interested in containing the use of nuclear power, because of its potential effects on people and the environment. Predictably, the position of Marion and

the Conservative Party is that people need power and nuclear energy is a cheap and efficient way to provide it. "Come back and see me when you're glowing in the dark," she tells her adversaries.

One at a time the others arrive; first Isobel, then Irwin, who complains about the way people in the country are always shooting at things, and finally Tom, who immediately presents Isobel with his business proposal and asks her to sign it. She hesitates a moment and points out that this is a big and unexpected step for her small company. She is worried about growing too quickly and especially about losing control of her work. Marion points out that Tom is the president of Christians in Business and certainly a man who can be trusted.

Echoing Katherine from the previous scene, Marion and Tom both point out that everyone is making money and that it would practically be a sin in God's eyes for them not to use their talents to make money as well. Then there is the issue of Katherine. Again, Marion calls on Isobel's overdeveloped conscience to care for their father's widow. Ironically, she asks Isobel, "What sort of life is it if we only think about ourselves?" She pressures Isobel to agree to giving Katherine a permanent seat on the new board of directors.

Isobel tries to enlist Irwin's aid, but in one of the most pivotal moments in the play, Irwin wavers and admits that he does like the idea of the investment and that he has great faith in Tom's word. Seeking not to lose ground, Marion quickly tells everyone that Irwin confided in her that he and Isobel were going to get married; and in recognition of the marriage and Irwin's talents, she and Tom are proposing to double Irwin's salary. The recognition that Irwin was dealing with Tom and Marion on the side and knew about the salary arrangement before coming to sign the papers is too much for Isobel. She is crushed into silence.

Marion, Tom, and Rhonda pack up and leave, telling Isobel and Irwin to think about the offer. Left alone, Irwin tries to reason with Isobel, telling her that she was the one who changed everything by bringing Katherine on board. He assures her that he loves her and would never do anything to hurt her, while off in the distance the sounds of the hunters' guns are coming closer.

Act II, Scene 5

The second act begins several months later in Isobel's new offices in London's fashionable West End. The room is filled with artists' desks and is expensively decorated. It is evening, and Irwin and Rhonda are alone, sipping champagne. Rhonda, it turns out, is a bit like a younger Katherine. She is free spirited and adventurous, and she loves to stir up trouble. The trouble she is stirring this time is with Irwin. As she tells him stories about her sexual relationships with politicians, the two draw closer and closer together. They are quite likely just about to have sex there in the office when Isobel unexpectedly returns early from a business trip.

Irwin awkwardly starts to explain that Rhonda came by to see the new offices and to use their shower, since her water had been turned off. It is an obviously awkward situation, but Isobel seems uninterested in hearing about what Irwin and Rhonda had been up to. Instead, she goes about her business in the office. While Rhonda goes off to shower, Irwin again tries to get Isobel talking about Rhonda, about his artwork, about the way Isobel has been ignoring him for weeks now. She tries to resist the conversation but finally tells Irwin that she returned from her trip because she had a call that Katherine got drunk with some important clients. One of them told her that they would not be buying their latest project, and she'd tried to kill him with a steak knife.

Isobel is obviously tired and stretched to her limits and now must again deal with Katherine's mistakes, but Irwin pushes on. He demands a conversation with Isobel about their relationship problems and her unexplainable support for Katherine, who is so clearly ruining her life. In an important moment of recognition in the play, Isobel admits that she is "being turned into a person whose only function is to suffer." Still, she can't seem to turn herself around. The one decision she has made, though, is that she no longer loves Irwin and that she will stop pretending that she does.

Interestingly, Isobel complains that Irwin makes her feel guilty and saps her strength because he demands so much of her. Katherine, and even her sister, Marion, do much the same thing with even more devastating effects, but she has not turned her back on them. This contrast is not lost on Irwin. "Tell me why you will sacrifice your whole life for Katherine?" he demands to know. To Irwin, Katherine is not just chronically dependent on other people, like Isobel and her father; she is actually evil and intentionally sets out to destroy the lives of generous people who come to her aid.

Irwin's point seems to unsettle Isobel momentarily and to cause her to think about the right thing to do. During her pause for reflection, Rhonda returns from the shower, ready to go out to the movies. In an unexpected and strange move, Isobel announces that she and Irwin would like to go along, and the scene ends.

Scene 6

Three weeks later, Marion, Tom, Irwin, and Isobel are scheduled to meet in Tom's office. Obviously, Isobel's business is struggling, losing a lot of money, and Tom and his investors have decided to pull out. They have been offered a considerable amount of money for the office space, and they are ready to sell to make a profit.

Irwin has arrived, prepared to do whatever is necessary, but he explains that Isobel will not join them as long as he is in the room. Three weeks earlier, she walked out in the middle of the movie, drove to the airport, and caught the first plane leaving the country. She came back very quickly, bought her father's house back, and has been living in Katherine's apartment, looking after her ever since. She refuses even to speak to Irwin. Painfully, Irwin admits that he is still deeply in love with Isobel, the "one certain source of good" he has known in his life.

Isobel arrives at the office building and phones Tom. Irwin leaves so Isobel can join them. Tom tells her about his proposal to sell the business, but she is unfazed. She observes that Tom will be writing the whole venture off his taxes so that instead of losing any money, he will actually be making quite a profit, but she is not angry. Even though all of her workers will be laid off and she will be losing her business, it seems she has come to expect that kind of behavior from Tom and most of the world.

Tom offers her a small, rent-free office at the base of a parking garage where she could start over again, but Isobel recognizes that it would be foolish to try, particularly without Irwin. Irwin, she realized, is obsessed with her, so she has decided to completely cut him off and make it final. Now, she has determined, she must do what her father would have wanted and take care of Katherine.

In a frightening bit of foreshadowing, Marion screams at Isobel that she should "Hide behind your father for the rest of your life. Die there!" And Isobel responds that she probably will.

Scene 7

Some time later, perhaps a few weeks, Isobel and Katherine are in her apartment late one evening having dinner. Isobel has obviously been doing all of the cooking and cleaning and shopping for the two of them, while Katherine hurls abuse at her. She complains about the meals and about the boring lives they lead now that she no longer drinks and they never go out together.

The two prepare for bed. Katherine of course takes the bedroom, leaving Isobel on the sofa. Isobel warns Katherine that she must remember to lock the door and use the deadbolt, since Irwin has somehow managed to get a key to the apartment and might come looking for her. Katherine pretends not to know anything about that, but once the lights are out, she quietly unlocks the door.

This is obviously something Katherine and Irwin have arranged. Almost immediately, he slips in through the door and confronts Isobel. She calls for Katherine, but there is no response. Irwin wants to know if he can just sleep with Isobel, but she refuses, saying it will only make him unhappier. He is obviously quite disturbed, and he pulls out a handgun, telling Isobel he plans to kill himself with it.

Isobel tells Irwin that even if he forced her to have sex with him, he would never get from her what he really wants. They will never again have the relationship they once had. As they argue, Katherine finally emerges from the bedroom to check on them. Isobel tells her to call the police or go get help from someone in the street, but Katherine refuses. Finally, Isobel herself gets up and walks out the door, closing it behind her. As soon as it closes, Irwin fires five shots through the door, killing Isobel on the other side.

Scene 8

The final scene of the play provides a sort of *denouement,* a closure of some of the loose ends of the plot and its characters. Marion, Tom, Katherine, and Rhonda are back at Robert Glass's house, uncovering the furniture and restoring it on the day of Isobel's funeral. Her death seems to have taught them some lessons, though whether their lives will completely change remains uncertain.

When she learns that all the people of the town want to walk together to the funeral, Marion realizes that everyone seems to have valued Isobel, except them. She receives a call from the Ministry and, for the first time in the play, refuses to take it. Even Tom admits that he has "slightly lost touch with the Lord Jesus." Marion cannot bring herself to go to the funeral, but before Tom leaves, they embrace, kiss, and even caress each other. It is the only moment of physical passion either of them has shown in the play, and it only seems possible after Isobel's death.

Left alone in the room after everyone has gone to the funeral, Marion laments the loss of her sister, though what she wants now is not entirely clear. "We're just beginning," she says to herself. "Isobel, why don't you come home?"

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The scene is a darkened bedroom. When a door opens, there is just enough light to illuminate the figure of a man in the bed with a sheet over his face, and a woman in a chair at the foot of the bed. Marion comes in, looks at the man, starts to leave, but stops when Isobel (the woman in the chair) calls Marion's name. This startles Marion, who had not known she was there. Isobel asks Marion not to turn on the main light, saying she came to the room for some peace. Marion asks if Isobel was with "him" when he died. Isobel admits she was, and says there is a moment when you see the soul leave the body. "Like a bird". Marion feels guilty that she was not there, but Isobel reassures her: he was barely conscious, and did not even know who she was. (At this point, it is not clear who "he" is, and what his relationship is to Marion and Isobel).

Marion asks if "he's" still wearing a ring she gave him a couple of months ago. Isobel realizes that Marion wants it back and tells her it is in the chest of drawers. Once Marion has retrieved the ring, she says she thinks Isobel is "heroic" for coming and staying with "him" in his last days. Then, uncomfortable about asking for the ring right away and not waiting a little longer, Marion explains she wanted to find it before Katherine took it, sold it, and spent all the money on booze. Isobel, somewhat abruptly, suggests they go downstairs. Marion takes this to mean that Isobel disapproves about her taking the ring back, but before they can talk any further, Tom finds them and asks if they're coming downstairs, saying it's "awkward" with everybody "crowding" in the bedroom.

Marion goes on about Katherine, whom she says is drunk. Isobel says it does not matter, especially to "Dad" (the man in the bed). Tom says, "he's in the hands of the Lord," then asks if there is an ambulance coming. When Isobel tells him that all the arrangements for taking the body away have been made, Marion asks if Katherine was any help – not just after their dad died but when Isobel was nursing him. Isobel says Katherine helped, but Marion says that Isobel is just being kind. Isobel suggests that Marion has misjudged Katherine: "Dad loved her." Marion suggests that Katherine was just using him, but Isobel says that his love for her was the only thing that "distinguished his life." She asks Tom what he thinks. He says that they are probably both right, and that it must be wonderful to be a woman and have that "instinct" about people.

Isobel suggests she goes down and make some supper, but Tom has taken care of it. Marion suddenly bursts out with anger, accuses Isobel of trying to humiliate her about the ring and rushes out of the room. Tom apologizes on her behalf, but Isobel says it is all right; Marion is grieving in her own way. Tom does not quite believe her and explains that Marion is always angry. He also says he does not understand why: she has everything she wants, her political party (the Conservatives) is in power and she is certain to get a position in the cabinet. Isobel asks if he ever gets angry. Tom says no, not since he "made Jesus [his] friend. He goes on to talk about himself as an awful

sinner, but that since Jesus became his friend wonderful things have happened to him, that strange coincidences have turned negatives into positives.

When he is finished, Isobel asks him to tell her if Marion ever feels seriously angry with her. Tom agrees. Isobel asks if the undertaker has arrived. When Tom says yes, Isobel suggests it is time to go downstairs. Instantly Katherine's voice is heard. She comes on, leading us into the next scene.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The central conflict in this play – between Isobel and Marion – begins right away, as the playwright illustrates fundamental differences in their characters. Isobel is patient and compassionate; Marion is judgmental and touchy. The ring Marion comes in to retrieve is a symbol of their differences: while Marion gives their father a thing, an object to demonstrate her love, Isobel actually comes and takes care of him.

These differences in personality are important because Marion and Isobel are themselves symbols: Marion of the philosophy of conservativism, and Isobel of liberalism. Marion sees the world as a place to make money and gain influence; Isobel sees the world as a place to reach out to other people and make their lives a little easier. They represent opposing political and social points of view existing in England at the time the play was written: the mid-Eighties, when ultra-conservative Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister (and Ronald Reagan was President). The play, therefore, is a dramatization of a larger social conflict played out on an intimate, inter-personal level.

The character of Tom is also a symbol, representing the perspective of fundamentalist Christianity. Because he is married to Marion, the playwright is suggesting there are ties (economic, political and social) between Christianity and conservative economic and social policies. As the play develops, the relationships between all the characters symbolize the relationships between the political and social philosophies they represent. It is significant to note, though, that these characters come across as being real human beings and not just symbols, because the action of the play is determined not just by what they believe but also by whom they are, what they need and are trying to achieve.

In terms of playwriting technique, our interest in what is happening is effectively triggered and continuously increased by the playwright not revealing information immediately. We do not know who the man in the bed is until relatively late in the scene; we do not know Katherine's relationship to him until late in the scene; and we do not even see Katherine until the next scene. The fact that she is spoken about, and in such strong terms, makes us intensely curious to see her in person, which we do (very clearly) in the next scene.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

This scene is set in the back garden. Katherine appears, dressed in black after the funeral. She complains about the insensitivity of the minister who performed the service. Marion and Tom, both in black, appear. Tom asks if Katherine would like a drink, Katherine agrees, Marion firmly suggests non-alcoholic drinks and Tom disappears to get them just as Isobel (who is not wearing black) appears.

Isobel apologizes for what happened with the minister, saying that their dad had never seen a minister in his life, so she tried to give this minister a bit of a briefing. Marion says she thought the minister was "very sincere." Isobel mentions that one thing she specifically wanted the minister to mention was Dad's opposition to nuclear armaments, and that she was disappointed he did not. Marion says she asked him not to. Katherine mentions it was something he believed in, but Marion says funerals are not a place for politics. In spite of Isobel trying to change the subject, Katherine continues to attack Marion, saying that "he" did not really want a funeral, and it only happened because Marion insisted.

Before Marion can reply, Tom appears with the drinks and news that there are many people in the house. As Isobel goes off to deal with them, Katherine swears and complains about people trying to "claim friendship with people who aren't in a position to deny it." She then quietly says, "Robert wasn't anyone's" (this is the first time we hear the name of the dead man).

Isobel returns to say that the funeral guests are going to the pub (bar), and asks if anyone is going to join them. Marion says they will go later: they have to look after Katherine. Isobel senses Marion's anger and suggests that she (Isobel) stay with Katherine. Marion ignores her, and aggressively asks Katherine whether she has decided what she is going to do next. Katherine announces that she is going to work for Isobel, sell the house and buy a flat (apartment) in London.

Isobel is very quiet. Marion asks her whether she knew about this, and whether her small firm can afford more staff. It turns out that Katherine made the decision without talking to Isobel. Marion asks how Isobel feels about it, but Isobel says she needs time to think. Katherine angrily apologizes for making the assumption, but suggests that because Isobel is a generous person, she is not going to say no.

Marion's cell phone rings: it is her office. She takes the call inside. Katherine angrily complains about the Marion's politics and the government in general, its "loathsome materialism" and greed. She goes on to say that is why she's looking forward to joining Isobel's firm, now revealed to be involved in graphic design: there is something in their work that "gives nourishment to people." She then announces she is going up to

London with Isobel that night, saying she cannot sleep in the house now that Robert is gone.

Isobel suggests that Katherine needs more time before taking such a big step. Katherine takes that to mean that Isobel does not want her. Isobel says that she needs time to work out how to manage the transition in terms of actually fitting Katherine into the office, into the work the company does, and finding the money to pay her. Katherine says she is a good salesperson and can help them make the money. Isobel continues to hesitate. Katherine takes that to mean that Isobel is saying no. Isobel tells Katherine she can stay with her in London, but that there is no guarantee of a job. Katherine swears and says she is going to the pub, and accuses Isobel of merely pretending to be kind and compassionate.

She goes into the house. Tom offers to go after her, but Isobel says there is no need to worry: Katherine is barred from the pub. Then Isobel's frustration spills over: she says she saw this situation coming while Robert was dying, but did nothing about it. Marion returns and announces that Katherine has pulled up the floorboards in the kitchen and dug out her secret stash of liquor. Tom goes in to try to calm Katherine down.

Marion tells Isobel that she should have lied and told Katherine there was a job. Isobel says she could not do that. When Marion tells Isobel that there are more important things in life than honesty, Isobel asks why she did not offer Katherine a job. Marion tells her it is impossible, that it is a very different set of standards in politics. She goes on to say that Isobel is the same as their dad: talking compassion and understanding, but when it comes to actually doing something, it's "the end of your so-called principles." Isobel quietly protests she just wants to do the right thing.

Katherine returns, calmer after having some liquor, and apologizes to Isobel. Katherine then explains a little of why she is who she is and why she ended up with Robert: seeking comfort from men, hoping they would like her because she did not like herself. Isobel offers Katherine a job, but suggests that it be a replacement for the liquor. Katherine promises to try. Marion says she is pleased, and Tom says, "Praise the Lord."

Irwin's voice is heard offstage as this scene blends with the next one.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Like the other characters, Katherine is also a symbol. She represents what many on both sides of the political and social spectrum believe are the characteristics of the lower classes: self-righteous, frivolous, low in morals, and substance abusing.

In other words, the attitudes of all three of the women – Katherine, Isobel and Marion – represent the attitudes of their political and social philosophies. Katherine assumes, as many of the working or lower classes do, that she deserves something she doesn't necessarily have to work for; Marion, like many conservatives, challenges (the liberal) Isobel to actually do what she says she believes in; while Isobel's indecision represents the hesitation of many liberals when faced with challenges like Katherine's and

Marion's. Marion's attitude represents conservative contempt; Isobel's attitude represents liberals' well-intentioned but not very effective compassion; Katherine's attitude represents the lower class's sense of entitlement.

Even though he is only discussed and never actually seen, Robert is a symbol in this play. He represents liberal philosophy in action: he actually lived what he believed. The three women know this, which creates additional layers of dramatic tension. Because Robert was who he was, Katherine expects Isobel to behave the same way; Isobel feels she is letting her father down if she does not behave the same way; Marion feels guilty because she does not feel the same way.

In this scene, with the introduction of Katherine, the three central characters begin to play out the conflict that defines the play's central theme. When Isobel accepts Katherine into the firm, it is the first statement in the playwrights' argument that compassion can, and will, win out over manipulation and greed. It is an example of this playwrights' skill that all these characters actually come across as real people as opposed to just political positions.

Finally, Tom in this scene is less of a symbol than he is a function. In another example of playwriting technique, he provides the comic relief, saying things that make us laugh even the middle of the dramatic tension between the three women.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

This scene takes place in Isobel's office. Irwin, a graphic artist and Isobel's business partner, works at his drafting table as he talks with Isobel about his filing system, which contains just about everything he ever drew, read or wrote in files with names like "Smashed Dreams" or "the sad file". Isobel comments positively on the graphic on which he is currently working (a gun and the wound it has caused). They discuss the pictures that Irwin used as a reference (of the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan as opposed to the actual assassination of John Kennedy).

This leads to a discussion about how and why Isobel finds some politicians sexy, which leads to a discussion of one of the things that Irwin does that Isobel finds sexy about him, which leads Irwin to ask whether they will ever have a child and whether Isobel will marry him. Isobel says they probably will get married, but will not get more specific than that. She also mentions that her dad asked whether she was going to marry Irwin, and she said she probably would.

Their conversation is interrupted by the sound of a letter being dropped off outside the door. Isobel gets it and reads it: it is from Gordon, their third partner, who says he is leaving the firm. Irwin admits that he and Gordon had talked about leaving. Isobel asks if Gordon's decision had to do with Katherine. Irwin admits that Gordon did say he was uncomfortable about Katherine, but adds there is more to it. He says that Gordon left because he was in love with Isobel, but even though she did not love him back, he felt it was a tolerable, stable situation: after all, he saw Isobel every day. Then Katherine arrived and made the whole thing un-stable. Isobel asks if Irwin feels uncomfortable too. He says he does, suggesting that rather than just running a graphic design business Isobel now wants them to do "social work."

Irwin then asks how Isobel made the decision to hire Katherine, and how Marion felt. Isobel says that Marion was "desperate [to] give her a job." Irwin suggests everyone forced Isobel to do something she did not want to do. Isobel says she does not want to let Katherine go because of what it might do to her self-esteem to the point of making her drinking again.

Katherine bursts in with an armful of flowers, saying she impulsively bought all the flowers from a street vendor's stall. She says she offered to pay the vendor tomorrow, since she passes that way every day, but the vendor did not trust her. Irwin goes out to pay for the flowers.

When Isobel asks what Katherine is celebrating, Katherine tells her she has sold the house and is looking forward to buying a flat (apartment) in London. She says she just passed a place while walking with one of the firm's clients, Max, with whom she had been having dinner and talking to about the firm. She tells Irwin (who has just come

back in) and Isobel that the client is willing to consider hiring them for an exclusive contract for eighteen months. She then looks at Irwin's drawing and criticizes it quite bluntly. Irwin starts to become angry, Isobel tries to calm things down, Irwin gets angrier and then Katherine says she had been talking about Irwin's work with Max, who told her he was convinced that she could bring out something in Irwin's work that was not there before.

Isobel changes the subject to Katherine selling the house without asking her or Marion. Katherine says she did ask Marion, who said, "The whole deal was fine." She says she wanted to make sure she was asking for enough money, and knew that Marion was the right person to ask. She also explains that Robert did not believe in saving or investing, and that she knew that Isobel would not want her to starve. After a moment where she and Isobel glare at each other, Katherine goes into the kitchen to make coffee.

After she has gone, Isobel wonders to Irwin why nobody except her seems to be grieving. Irwin says that they are all moving on, and that it is time for her to do the same thing. That means, to him, that she has to fire Katherine. Isobel protests that she cannot just abandon her: she meant too much to her father, who found his life much more exciting with Katherine in it. He thought she was "free." Irwin describes her as "chronically dependent … on other people's good will … and … somebody else's expense." Isobel sees his point, but refuses to let Katherine go. Irwin gets her to admit that keeping Katherine around will not make her (Isobel) happy, but Isobel refuses to let Katherine go that night.

A moment of intimacy between Isobel and Irwin is interrupted when Katherine returns with a vase of flowers and announces that Tom (Marion's husband) wants to make an investment in the firm. When Isobel says he never wanted to before, Katherine says that Tom thinks that things look better now for the firm than they did before – especially with this new contract coming their way. Katherine talks about hiring more staff, getting a bigger office, having more money to spend on promotion – doing the same things other companies are doing. She also talks, with a lot of sexual innuendo, about keeping the new client happy which is the final straw for Isobel, who tells Katherine that the client's wife is a friend of hers.

Katherine suggests that her staying is not going to work. Isobel agrees and apologizes. Katherine says that Robert had warned her that Isobel was "narrow," and had "no vision." When Irwin protests that Robert did not say that, Katherine says she will not tell either of them any more of what Robert said, and asks if Isobel is really letting her go. When Isobel will not answer, Irwin jumps in and says yes.

Katherine says she will stay the night and leave for good in the morning. When she goes out, Irwin asks Isobel to go to bed with him. When she says no, Irwin crumples his drawing and throws it out, saying Katherine was right and his work is "tenth rate." He again asks Isobel to go to bed with him. Isobel just looks at him, says Katherine has got to stay, and goes out after her.

As Irwin turns back to his desk, Marion laughs and comes on, blending this scene with the next.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

Irwin is another symbolic character. When he first appears, he represents art, and what happens to the creative spirit when art becomes commercialized. This is supported by the fact that he is the only character who is inspired to action by deep and honest feeling (as the playwright suggests true art is), as opposed to the other characters whose actions and feelings are all affected by how they think. Marion, Isobel and Tom base their actions and choices on how they think they should behave and feel, while Katherine acts because of what she thinks she deserves. Irwin is also there as the voice of Isobel's conscience: to play out dramatically the doubts and questions in Isobel's mind about her feelings and choices.

The names of Irwin's files foreshadow the end of the play, when his and Isobel's dreams are smashed and there is another cause for the characters to be sad. The graphic also acts as foreshadowing: of the gun and violence that Irwin brings into the climax of the play.

Because Irwin represents deep and honest feeling, and because he is so emotionally tied to Isobel, he also represents the emotional context of liberal idealism. In other words, liberal ideals (like Isobel's and Robert's) exist to change society so that productive, creative impulses (like Irwin's but unlike Katherine's more indulgent, destructive impulses) have room to flourish and grow. Isobel's setting up of the firm gives Irwin a chance to be productive; her selling of the firm sets events in motion that ultimately constrict and deny him his truth because conservative ideals (like Marion's and Tom's) constrict creative impulses in the name of making money and profit.

Katherine coming in with armfuls of flowers foreshadows the last scene of the play, when she does the same thing on the day of Isobel's funeral.

Isobel's guilt about what might happen if she were to let go of Katherine represents liberal guilt over what might happen to the lower classes if liberals were not so generous. On the other side of things, Katherine's manipulation of Isobel's feelings (saying that she knows Isobel would not want her to starve) represents the lower class's manipulation of that liberal guilt. The same is true of Katherine's suggestion that Robert found Isobel "narrow," although there is some question – as voiced by Irwin – about whether Katherine is actually telling the truth.

Marion's laughter at the end of the scene represents conservative attitudes towards both liberal guilt and the manipulation of that guilt: that ultimately, in the conservative belief system, the lower classes and liberals will manipulate each other into non-existence and conservativism will triumph.

BOOKRAGS

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

This scene takes place in the living room of Robert's home, which is being cleared out for moving. Marian and Rhonda (her assistant or protégé) come in, having just participated in a political discussion with members of the Green party, whom Marion describes as "self righteous." As Marion and Rhonda continue, Katherine comes in and reads, paying little attention to their sarcastic comments about the Green Party's "moral position."

Isobel comes in with an armload of books and packs them while Rhonda encourages Marion, who brags about how well prepared she was, how clever she was, and how dominating she was compared to the Greens.

Irwin comes in just as the sound of gunfire is heard from outside, and comments that country people seem to "want to kill everything that moves." For the first time, Katherine pays attention to the others in the room, and asks if they are ready for the meeting. Marion sends Rhonda off to get Tom. Rhonda comes back quickly and says Tom is on his way in. As he enters with a briefcase, there is another explosion of gunfire.

Tom takes papers from his briefcase and hands them to Isobel: if she signs them, she transfers ownership of her firm to Tom and a board of directors. With everybody watching her and waiting, Isobel hesitates. Tom suggests she can ask any question she likes. Marion jumps in and explains that Isobel, who up to then had been very independent, is uncomfortable with the idea of a board. Isobel admits she is concerned about losing control. Tom suggests Isobel and Irwin will be as creatively free as they always were. Marion says, "Tom is president of Christians in Business. I think that makes it pretty clear he's a man you can trust."

Katherine says that everybody knows Isobel is the real reason the firm is a good investment, and that there is no way she will be replaced. Isobel suggests that in that case, she should just get the money directly without having a board involved. Tom protests that all the board is doing is protecting their investment. Marion accuses Isobel of not wanting to get bigger, of not wanting to be like everybody else and take the opportunity to make as much money as possible, to "join … in the fun." Katherine says that even though she thinks the Government (of which Marion is a part) is "appalling," she can still see it is "stupid" to not jump in and grab some of the money being made.

Marion implies that Isobel is "insulting" her and Tom if she does not take the money: she says Isobel is saying that Tom cannot be trusted. Marion also says that Isobel has to think about Irwin and Katherine, that she (Isobel) can't just think about herself, and that that's one of the reasons the money is being offered in the first place: to support Katherine in "this difficult time", especially since Katherine has coped "with bereavement so magnificently".

Isobel, feeling cornered, turns to Irwin for support. He argues in favor of accepting the offer, saying it will allow them more room to do the kind of work they really want to do. Marion adds that Irwin told her that he and Isobel were planning to get married, and implies that accepting the money would help them do that. Isobel is shocked, both that Irwin would let that slip and that Marion is using that as an argument. Marion makes one last point: that Irwin's salary will be doubled, which Isobel admits he deserves. Rhonda jumps in with a comment: "Why do people think it's smart to be poor?"

Tom announces he has to leave. Marion, Rhonda and Katherine leave with him. As she goes, Marion urges Isobel to "think about it." Isobel and Irwin are left alone. Irwin tells Isobel that she started the process of change by bringing Katherine into the firm, and she has a responsibility to follow through on what she started. When she does not answer, he then protests that he loves her, and would not ever do anything to hurt her. Isobel stays silent, until she hears the gunshots again. She comments that they are getting nearer, and asks if no one will leave them "in peace."

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

The setting of this scene (in a room in Robert's home that is being cleared out) represents the state of his (and Isobel's) liberal values at this point in the play: that they are disappearing and about to be taken over.

Marion's contempt for the Green Party represents the contempt that conservatives generally have for environmental concerns. Her bragging about her sense of power displays what the playwright seems to feel is conservative insensitivity.

When Irwin comes in at the same time as gunfire is heard in the distance, it continues the association between Irwin and guns that started in the previous scene, and which again foreshadows Irwin's bringing the gun (and violence) into the climax of the play. The gunfire itself is a symbol of the destructiveness of conservative philosophy: in England, as in America, hunting for sport and recreation is supported by conservatives and condemned by liberals. The gunfire appears at key points in this scene, symbolizing the way that that conservative philosophy of making money and gaining influence is potentially fatal to liberal philosophy.

There are several illustrations of the playwrights' central theme (about the tension between conservativism and liberalism) in this scene. Marion's comment about Tom being a man Isobel can trust is ironic, in that the playwright has clearly suggested a connection between fundamentalist Christian beliefs and conservative greed. Katherine shows how much of a hypocrite she is when she says the government is "appalling" but that Isobel should still be like the government and make money. Marion's suggestion that by refusing the money Isobel is thinking only of herself is ironic, in that the conservative philosophy is self driven, and profit driven, as illustrated later in the play when Tom and Marion want to get rid of the firm when it isn't making enough money. Marion's suggestion that the money is being offered to help Katherine is ironic, in that we have already seen how Marion really feels about Katherine. All of this illustrates how

easily the good intentions of liberal philosophy (as represented by Isobel) can be easily manipulated. This makes the play more objective, in that it portrays both the strengths and weaknesses of its opposing political views.

Rhonda's comment is effective on two levels. On one level, it is theatrically effective to have her say it because she has not said anything for a long time. The words of someone who speaks after a long silence are generally much more effective. Secondly, and more thematically, it sums up the contempt that both conservative philosophy and the lower classes has for the ineffectiveness and inaction of liberal idealism.

The final moments of the scene, and of the act, bring back the guns. This works on two levels. It again foreshadows Isobel's ultimate death at Irwin's hands in the climax of the play, and symbolizes the death of her ideals at his hands at this point of the play. Isobel's final line about peace echoes some of her very first lines, in which she says she came to Robert's room to find peace, which she seems to be doing throughout the play.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Late at night, In Isobel and Irwin's expanded offices (bigger space, more desks), Rhonda and Irwin drink champagne and chat. Rhonda is wearing only a short silk dressing gown, and is telling a story about how a married "senior Tory politician … a minister" tried to get her into bed. Irwin tries to guess which politician and smiles flirtatiously as Rhonda pours him more champagne. He asks for more details, but Rhonda suddenly complains about how tired she is of hearing men lie about themselves. When Irwin seems not to take her comment personally, Rhonda goes on and then stops again. To get her to finish the story, Irwin promises to tell her about his "most ridiculous sexual experience." Rhonda finishes the story, flirting all the while: she actually did go to bed with the politician, it was an awful experience (as it usually is for her) and that he is still trying to do it again. She says next time he calls she's going to get Marion to answer the phone, and tells Irwin that Marion not only knows everything, but enjoys hearing about it and enjoys gossip in general "perhaps because her own life's so dull". She says Marion employed her because she "causes chaos," which seems to excite Irwin.

Before they can go any further, Isobel comes in unexpectedly. Rhonda is embarrassed, Irwin is not but they are both confused, since Isobel left for the airport hours ago. As Isobel checks the messages on her desk and sets down to work, Irwin and Rhonda explain that Rhonda came by to look at the new offices, that Irwin mentioned there was a shower in the executive bathroom and since Rhonda's water was off, she came by to try it out. That is why she is dressed the way she is. Isobel asks how it is: Rhonda explains she has not had it yet and goes off.

Irwin shows Isobel the ad he's been working on, and is quietly glad when she says she likes it. He goes on to explain what was going on between him and Rhonda, and assumes that Isobel thought there was something going on. Isobel says she is tired of people telling her what she thinks, and snaps at Irwin angrily when he suggests that Rhonda's feelings might have been hurt by how Isobel reacted to her. Irwin tries to talk to Isobel about how she looks over-worked, and then how she seems angry. Isobel tells him that she is stopping herself from being angry because it would be counter-productive; the day has been "unspeakable" and that she is going home.

She goes to another desk where she collects Katherine's personal belongings. When Irwin asks her why, at first she refuses to tell him, then admits that she had to put Katherine into "a clinic." She tells him that Katherine was out for dinner with clients, had too much to drink, and when they said they decided to not hire the firm, Katherine stuck a steak knife into the managing director's heart. He survived, Isobel says, "Katherine was already too drunk to take aim." Irwin apologizes for insisting that Isobel keep Katherine in the firm, but Isobel says that hiring Katherine was her choice and that

Katherine's actions are her responsibility. She gets ready to leave and asks Irwin to lock up, but Irwin pleads with her to stay: he needs to talk to her.

Isobel keeps trying to leave, but Irwin keeps asking her what is going on, why she has been avoiding him. Finally Isobel's temper explodes, saying that as soon as she walked in the door everything was calculated to make her feel "awful": seeing Rhonda, being told she looked awful, and ultimately admits that the real reason she's angry is that Irwin agreed to the restructuring plan proposed by Marion and Tom. Finally, she admits that she is no longer in love with Irwin, but cannot break it off completely because she is still "fond" of him. When he says, "I love you," she tells him that from him those words are a kind of "blackmail," and for a while, she did not mind because she got comfort and affection in return. Now, she says, that is gone, and she is ready to move on.

Irwin refuses to believe it, saying that Isobel wants to break up because he failed some "sort of test" by talking to Marion about the deal, which meant that he challenged Isobel's "idea" of him as being "poor and under your spell". He says he still loves Isobel and wants her, but that it is time for her to face some "truths," challenging her to give up her "crazy idea of integrity." He suggests that because her father was kind and gentle but lost a lot of money, she thinks that anybody who lives differently is a kind of traitor, that she thinks of him (Irwin) that way, and that is why she wants to break up. When she says that idea's ridiculous, he challenges her to explain why she is sacrificing "her whole life" for Katherine. She says that is ridiculous as well, but then he points out that Katherine did what she did that night with the big client, the one the company needs, and suggests that Katherine did it to destroy Isobel. He goes on to talk about how Robert was beaten down by Katherine in the days before he died, that Katherine is actually "evil", and that if Isobel doesn't fight, she's going to lose.

In the silence that follows, Rhonda returns from her shower. She says she is going out to the movies, and Isobel suddenly suggests that she and Irwin will join her. Rhonda and Irwin are both surprised, and Rhonda tries to talk Isobel out of it, suggesting the film is too violent. Isobel says that will be perfect and leads the way out.

As they go, Marion comes in, blending this scene with the next.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The subtext of the first part of this scene (what is going on underneath the words) seems to be that Rhonda has come by the office to seduce Irwin. This illustrates what happened in the previous scene: Irwin had been seduced by the idea of money and influence, and now he is being physically seduced as well. Rhonda's story about the politician illustrates how hypocritical conservatives can be: saying one thing but living and meaning another. In the case of this politician, it is leading a public married life while having an affair: in Marion's case, it is saying that she believes in Isobel, Irwin and Katherine while really (as will be revealed later) that she is only interested in making money. When Irwin says that he is excited by the mention of "chaos," it reinforces the idea that he represents art, or the chaos of the creative spirit.

Katherine's attack on the client is completely in character for her. She has been established as being highly emotional, irresponsible and impulsive, and this incident illustrates again, how destructive such impulses can be. However, Irwin's suggestions that she's evil and that she's deliberately trying to destroy Isobel seems, under the circumstances, more of a tactic to get Isobel to stay in their relationship. His comments that Isobel sees him as a traitor and that Isobel will try to save Katherine is closer to the truth, as indicated by Isobel's actions in the next two scenes.

Isobel's comment that she is ready to "move on" is ironic, in that moving on is exactly what Irwin suggested she do earlier in the play (Act One, Scene Three). Of course, this kind of moving on is not what he meant.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

This scene is set in Tom's office, which is bright and airy compared to the other indoor settings of the play. Tom is at his desk as Marion joins him, explaining that she cannot see the problem. Tom says he cannot help it; he is still worried. Marion reassures him by saying "it's simply an administrative decision."

Irwin appears, in better clothes and seeming more confident. When Marion asks where Isobel is, Irwin says he does not know, and suggests that they might as well begin the meeting, as Isobel "isn't around much." He goes on to say that he has been running the business mostly by himself. Marion admits that there had been rumors that Irwin and Isobel had split up, and calls Isobel "stupid." Tom suggests that it should not affect the running of the firm, but before Irwin can respond, Marion asks what happened. Irwin tells her that when they were at the movies with Rhonda, Isobel got up to go to the washroom, never came back, apparently went out to the airport and flew out of the country, and later came back and bought Robert's house back, where she and Katherine are now living. He almost starts to cry, but calms himself down.

Marion says it is typical, that Isobel has always been irresponsible. She describes herself as the responsible one, being at work every day "forever." Tom interjects with the comment "at least until you die". Marion goes on about Isobel, suggesting she is unable to handle conflict. Marion then reveals that she knows Isobel asked Tom to tell her if she (Marion) was ever really angry with her, calls Isobel paranoid, and suggests that they should be looking into getting Isobel professional help. Irwin confesses he is still in love with her, and that she was the best thing in his life.

Tom re-directs the conversation back to the meeting, offering details of the deal they have been offered for the firm. Irwin explains that Isobel has been keeping her distance from work as well: it is his belief that as long as he works there, she will not come near it.

Tom takes a phone call from Isobel, and announces that she will not come up until Irwin leaves. When Irwin gets up to go, Marion tells him to stay, but Irwin asks Tom to put his proposal in writing and leaves. Marion is furious as Isobel comes in at the other door, embraces Marion and talks about how beautiful a day it is. Marion tries to confront Isobel about what is happening with Irwin, but Isobel is determined to go ahead with the meeting, and asks Tom whether it is true he wants to sell the business and fire all the staff.

Marion accuses her of being unfair, but Isobel says she is just trying to get the facts. Tom admits the expansion has not really worked, and that as a responsible businessman he has to be responsible for his own survival. Isobel asks whether it is true that because of a tax benefit, the firm did not actually cost them anything in the first

place. Tom admits it is true (saying it's "legitimate business practice), admits that it is a good time to sell and make profit, and promises that the employees will get three weeks pay. Marion tries to justify the arrangement but Isobel cuts her off: she says, "it's done," and when Tom asks her if she agrees, says she is only "one vote."

Marion asks what she is up to. Isobel says she has just been establishing the facts. Marion suggests that Isobel thinks that she (Marion) feels guilty. Isobel says that Marion knows what she feels and starts to leave. Marion asks her what that meant, but Isobel just takes her hand and warmly says she just wants to be friends. Marion says again that she is fine, but that she is concerned about Irwin.

Ignoring Tom's discomfort, Marion accuses Isobel of being "selfish" and not thinking about what will happen to Irwin. Tom suggests there is another smaller office in the same building that the firm could take over. Isobel says that since she and Irwin are no longer together, professionally or personally, there is no point in talking about it. Marion suggests that Isobel deliberately sabotaged the expansion in order to prove her point that it would not work. Isobel admits that she was out of her depth, but also says that she was "trashed," implying that the people who wanted the expansion in the first place "spat [her] out in lumps."

This sends Marion into a rage, accusing Isobel of "spoiling everything," saying she hates "this human stuff … people crying, people not talking," and telling Isobel that Irwin is "in agony". Isobel tells her that Irwin is obsessed with her, angry that she is no longer in with him, and cannot accept that, with the result that she is afraid of him. Marion calls her fear ridiculous, and describes Irwin as "ordinary." Isobel says that all her life she has tried to get along with everybody but this time her instincts are telling her to cut him off, "Do what needs to be done."

Marion asks whether it was necessary to fly off the way she did, and when Isobel says it was, Marion asks where she went. Isobel tells her she went to a tropical paradise and that it was beautiful but "useless": that as much as you want to, you cannot get away and leave everything behind. She tells of how she walked on the beach, and realized that there was only one thing for her to do: what her dad would have wanted.

Marion screams that her that she's "insufferable," and tells her to "hide behind your father for the rest of your life. Die there!" Isobel calmly says she probably will, and leaves.

Tom tells Marion she went too far, and leaves, saying he is afraid for Isobel. Katherine's voice is heard as this scene blends into the next.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

In this brief section between Marion and Tom, the subtext is that they have decided to sell their interest in the firm. This sets up a sense of suspense, in that we wonder how Isobel and Irwin are going to react. It is also representative of conservative philosophy:

do what you have to do to make as much money as you can, and then get out before you lose.

Irwin's physical appearance suggests that on a superficial level he is better off because of having more money and more business. His intense emotions around his breakup with Isobel, however, symbolize the playwrights' belief that such success (and therefore conservative philosophy) comes at the cost of human relationships. As a result, such success is empty. This is part of the play's theme.

Marion's reactions to Isobel are so extreme that it seems to us as though Marion actually is feeling guilty about what is going on – as though she is being angry to cover up her true feelings. This is a dramatic representation of the play's theme of the ultimate triumph of liberal compassion. One of the aspects of conservativism is that it fights to preserve the way things are, and have been. One of the aspects of being a human being is to fight against being proven wrong. Marion is therefore fighting two battles in this scene: to keep living her life the way she has always lived it (without any regard for "the human stuff"), and to keep believing she is right. The suddenness and extremity of her emotions indicate to us that she feels that she is losing, and is fighting even harder.

Her line that Isobel will die in her father's shadow foreshadows the climax of the play, in which Isobel actually does die because she lived according to what her father believed (i.e. in his shadow).

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

In Katherine's shabby apartment, Katherine refuses Isobel's suggestion that the two of them go for a walk, saying that she is fed up with being told what to do as though Isobel always knew best. Isobel brings in a Shepherd's Pie, which Katherine also rejects. Katherine then suggests that Isobel sell or mortgage Robert's house, that way she would have some money. Isobel says the house is already mortgaged, ignores the suggestion to sell, and continues to eat "mechanically." Katherine talks about her frustration with Isobel, who seems to be avoiding life, while Katherine wants to go out and drink, do something, anything, just to feel alive. Isobel says that if Katherine wants her to, she will go. Angrily, Katherine says Isobel should do exactly that – but when Isobel stands, Katherine begs her to stay. She does.

Katherine tells the story of what happened at dinner the night she stabbed the client: that she was suddenly overwhelmed by feeling frustration at his power and his careless use of it, and how it reminded her of the men in her past used their power. She started drinking, lost control and stabbed him. "At least I was alive," she says. "Not like now."

Isobel suggests they should both go to bed, goes to lock the door and tells Katherine that because Irwin has a key, she has to put the bolt on as well. Katherine says she did not give Irwin the key, but Isobel does not believe her. After Isobel goes out to change, Katherine undoes the bolt. Isobel returns, she and Katherine get out the foldout bed. Katherine kisses Isobel good night and goes into the bedroom. Isobel turns out the lights and gets into bed. She starts to read, but panics when she hears a noise by the door. She gets out of bed and turns out the lights.

Irwin opens the door and stands silhouetted in the light in the same way Marion did at the beginning of the play. Isobel turns on the lamp, asks who let him in and calls for Katherine. When she does not respond, she says Katherine goes to sleep with a walkman on. Irwin says that Katherine knows he calls for Isobel every day, and is just trying to help her. He then asks to sleep with Isobel. She explains that it will just make him unhappy, and when he says he cannot be unhappy, she still says no. He takes out a gun and puts it on a table, explaining he bought it to kill himself. She asks him to give it to her, but he does not move and asks why she is not frightened. When she says she "takes what comes," he asks her again to make love with him. In crude language, she challenges him to force her and that he can go ahead but she still will not give him the part of her he wants. "It isn't yours."

He accuses her of having destroyed him, and of dropping him because he made one mistake (agreeing to Marion's deal). He angrily asks her why she has not dropped Katherine, who has made many mistakes. Isobel says that someone has to take care of Katherine, that "she has no resources," which implies that she (Isobel) thinks that Irwin has. Irwin protests that he feels he has no worth: that he did when he and Isobel were

together, but no more. He asks Isobel to help him, but Isobel still says no. He continues to suggest that since she helped Katherine she can help him. She says there is one difference: that Katherine needs to be helped, but that he wants to be helped.

Then she says she is going to bed. Irwin screams at her not to move, says, "don't make me" … and stops himself. Isobel asks him whether that means if he kills her that will be her fault as well.

Katherine comes in, saying she heard something. Isobel asks Irwin to leave, and when he does not, asks Katherine to fetch the police. Katherine looks at Irwin for his approval to move. When Isobel describes him as an "intruder," Katherine smiles and says he's "hardly an intruder." Isobel firmly asks her to go and she starts to leave, but Irwin picks up the gun. Katherine freezes, and then Isobel goes for the door. As she closes it behind her, Irwin fires the gun. Katherine screams, opens the door and reveals Isobel's body. As Katherine puts her hand on Isobel's chest to feel for a heartbeat, Irwin collapses into a chair, saying, "It's over. Thank God".

A long silence follows … then bright light appears, and birdsong is heard.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Shepherd's Pie is a British dish often made from leftovers. In this scene, it represents what Katherine sees as Isobel's warmed over ideas. Katherine's desire to go out and live is both in character (in that she's impulsive and self-indulgent) and again represents what both liberalism and conservativism see as a flaw in the lower classes, while her reaction to Isobel's suggestions represents the reaction that the lower classes often have to well intentioned liberalism: that liberals come across as self-righteous and "superior". Her story of why she did what she did in the restaurant takes this further by illuminating the anger and resentment the lower classes feel towards both liberals (who want to help them) and conservatives (who want to use them).

Irwin's appearance begins the climax of the play. In this section, Isobel is fighting for her life, and this represents her fighting for her philosophy, or her belief system (and therefore her father's). That philosophy can be summed up like this: even though people who need help do not necessarily want help, the people who can give that help have an obligation to do it. There are two implications of this: that that kind of help is selfless, and is offered without hope of reward or profit; and that this is different from the conservative philosophy, which offers help only if there is a possibility for profit (as demonstrated by Tom and Marion's earlier offer to by the graphics firm). This means that this sequence is both a dramatic climax (the emotional high point of the action) and a thematic climax (the point at which the themes are most dramatically played out).

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

Back in Robert's living room (the same place as at the end of the first act), Marion and Tom, both dressed in black, are putting the room back in order: uncovering and moving furniture, unrolling the carpet. Rhonda comes in and tells Marion there is a call for her from the Ministry. Marion says she does not want to speak to them. She then remembers how Isobel used to play under the piano, saying Isobel "had a kind of magic world," and tells Tom she cannot go to the church.

Katherine comes in, wearing the same black outfit she wore to Robert's funeral and carrying flowers. Marion asks her what else was in the room when she (Katherine) lived there with Robert. Katherine tells her there were ornaments and lamps everywhere, and talks about how Robert loved "things," how picking up a book or photograph would change his mood immediately.

Rhonda comes back and says "they" all want to walk "through the village" together (the implication is to the funeral), and comments that Isobel seems to have been very popular and valued by everybody. Tom agrees, but Marion says everybody "except us."

She confesses to Katherine and Tom that she has never understood what people want, or understanding what people feel. She says she has always stood to one side, watching and being angry because people seemed so out of control, and says that she held on to one simple point of view "in order to survive." Tom starts to talk about the Lord Jesus but stops himself, saying he feels he has "slightly lost touch with the Lord Jesus." He then looks around at the room, which has been completely restored, calls it lovely and says it's "a perfect imitation of life." Marion embraces him, and the two of them quickly turn the embrace into something sexual, telling each other they feel "wonderful." Marion says, "I love you." Tom leaves.

Marion calls out to Isobel, says, "We're just beginning," and asks, "Why don't you come home?"

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

The last scene in the play represents the playwrights' final statement of his theme. The characters are back in the home of Robert, the character who lived the ideal of liberal compassion. As Marion and Tom put the room back in order, it suggests that Robert's ideals still have power, and that Marion and Tom are not quite so attached to their conservative ideals as they used to be. Several other things suggest this as well: Marion's refusal to speak to the ministry, her reference to Isobel's living in a "magic world," her suggestion that everybody except her and Tom valued Isobel highly, and Tom's statement he has "slightly lost touch with the Lord Jesus."

The sudden freedom to enjoy each other emotionally and sexually that she and Tom seem to have is another aspect of their change, and so is Marion's freedom to tell the story of how she came to be who and what she is. All of this represents the playwright's theme: that the ideal of liberal compassion will ultimately transform conservativism into something more open and human.

This scene also illuminates the title of the play, The Secret Rapture. "The Rapture" is a term used by fundamentalist Christians to describe the point, just before Christ's second coming, at which the people who have followed Christian teachings are taken into heaven. In other words, it is a transformation from a physical existence to a spiritual one. The title suggests that since Marion and Tom have discovered a freedom and a different kind of truth, through exposure to the living values of liberal compassion as represented by Isobel and Robert, they've gone through a similar kind of transformation, from being conservative materialists to liberal humanists … a "secret rapture" that might just be part of a kind of heaven here on earth.

Characters

Marion French

Marion is Isobel Glass's older sister and one of the play's important antagonists. Somewhere in her late thirties, Marion has climbed the ladder of British politics and secured herself a position as a junior minister for the Department of the Environment in Britain's Conservative Party. In the 1980s, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the Conservatives (or "Tories," as they are called in Britain) earned a reputation for greed and a lack of concern for social issues such as poverty, homelessness, and the environment. Like the political party she belongs to, Marion seems interested mainly in money and power and unconcerned with the welfare of others.

While Isobel spent a great deal of time caring for their father in the weeks before his death, Marion only visited occasionally. In place of concern and affection, she tried to show him that she loved him by buying him an expensive ring. Then, just hours after his death, she returned to take it back. She is a workaholic and takes business calls even in the middle of family crises. As her husband, Tom, observes, she seems to have everything she could want, including a prominent position in a successful government; nevertheless, she is constantly angry and lashing out at others. She loses her temper with Isobel many times in the play and even scolds her husband now and then. When she is visited by members of the Green Party, a political group interested in the environment and stopping the use of nuclear energy, she viciously tells them, "Come back and see me when you're glowing in the dark." As some critics pointed out, Marion's character is so one-sided that she is in danger of becoming just a walking stereotype of Thatcher's England.

As much as anyone else in the play, Marion drives Isobel toward her tragic end by taking advantage of her, playing on her conscience, and abusing her. She seems to hate Isobel for her goodness and for not being like everyone else in the world—concerned mainly with self-interest. Marion admits that she lacks the passion other people, like Isobel, seem to have for the world and does not understand what motivates them if not materialism or power. In the end, though, Marion seems changed by Isobel's death. In the final scene, she does not wear the conservative business suits she has appeared in throughout the play but a simple black mourning dress. She declines to take a business call from her department and, in her one moment of physical passion, embraces and kisses her husband before he leaves for Isobel's funeral. The final words of the play are hers: "We're just beginning," she laments. "Isobel, why don't you come home?"

Tom French

Tom is Marion's husband and acts mainly as a *foil* to the female characters in the play. In literature, a *foil* is a character that illustrates, mainly through contrast, the important

traits of other characters. For example, Tom seems soft-spoken and sometimes overeager to please. When Marion and Isobel are quarreling, rather than taking sides, he tells them, "I'm sure both of you are right." By contrast, Marion and Katherine are loud, brash, and highly opinionated. Tom has a head for business and makes a lot of money in investments and new ventures. Isobel, on the other hand, is afraid of risk and is more interested in doing quality work with her small graphics firm than in growing it just to make money.

Tom's most defining characteristic, however, is his religious faith. Some of his first words in the play are words of comfort spoken to Isobel just after her father's death. "He's fine," Tom tells her. "He's in the hands of the Lord." Tom claims his steady manner and his business success are the result of welcoming Jesus into his life. He even thinks that Jesus helped him repair his car when it was broken, and he builds a pool in his backyard just for baptisms, to convert others to his faith.

As the president of Christians in Business, Tom claims he tries to do business "the way Jesus would have done it." However, his practices seem to be something less than charitable. He and Marion convince Isobel to accept investment money for her small graphics design company so that it can grow larger. They reason that the expansion will allow them all to make some of the money that everyone else is making in Britain in the 1980s, while at the same time giving Katherine a solid position and a chance to start her life again. Then, when the company starts to fail, Tom lays off all the new workers, giving them just a few weeks' worth of wages and sells off their new office space for a large profit. On top of that, it turns out that he is writing the whole investment off as a tax break. Instead of losing money, he actually makes quite a bit, while Isobel loses her business and many people lose their jobs.

Like Marion and Katherine, Tom seems to be deeply affected by Isobel's death. As he helps the two women restore Robert Glass's house on the day of Isobel's funeral, he tries to comfort his wife the way he tried to comfort Isobel in the first scene. "The Lord Jesus . . ." he begins to say, but his voice trails off, and he admits that he has "slightly lost touch with the Lord Jesus."

Isobel Glass

Isobel is by far the most complicated character in *The Secret Rapture*. She is relatively young, somewhere in her early thirties, and modestly successful. She owns her own graphic design firm, with two other employees. Unlike her sister, Marion, Isobel is not interested in making a lot of money or in the politics of the popular Conservative Party government. Instead, she is interested in living a simple life, doing what is right, and helping people in need whenever she can.

Her determined sense of morality led some critics of the play to dub her "Saint Isobel," and even the other characters remark, not always kindly, on her almost otherworldly virtue. Her actions do seem to be those of a saint. She stays with her father to care for him in his final days. When he dies, she takes the abusive Katherine under her wing,

providing her with a job and unlimited chances to redeem herself. She accepts mistreatment from Marion and the loss of her business through Tom's treacherous business dealings, without passing judgment on either of them. The only person she hurts in the play is Irwin, though even that action seems based on a moral decision: he has betrayed her, and she does not think it would be fair to him to continue to pretend that she loves him.

Besides her complicated morality, Isobel's character is also difficult because of her role as the play's tragic protagonist. As some critics noted, her suffering and downfall should generate sympathy, but she is often such a strong character that it is hard to believe she is the victim. Writing for the *Times Literary Supplement,* John Turner observed, "Isobel, with her amazing and admirable verbal ferocity, is winning too much of the time to excite pity." Turner notes that Isobel easily dispatches Rhonda when she finds her dallying with Irwin in their office and that she boldly faces the homicidal Irwin, even hurling insults at him, just before he kills her.

Matt Wolf, another critic, suggested that Isobel suffers the fate, not just of a tragic heroine, but of a martyr. "It's no accident that Isobel's surname is 'Glass,'" Wolf pointed out in a review of the play in the *Wall Street Journal, European Edition.* "As the tragic outcome of the play makes clear, she holds the mirror up to the baseness of those around her, even at the cost of her own life."

In the end, it is only Isobel's sacrifice that changes the other characters in the play. Her death causes Tom to question his relationship with Jesus and causes her sister, Marion, to finally feel some passion and connection to another person. Much like a saint who performed good deeds in life only to be killed for his actions, Isobel's love and morality begins to have an effect only after she is gone.

Katherine Glass

Katherine is the young, unstable, alcoholic widow of Robert Glass. As she admits to the other characters in the play several times, she had no direction in her life before she met Robert. She was a drug and alcohol abuser. She had never held a real job, and her relationships with men revolved around brief sexual experiences, possibly even prostitution. Ever since she was a child, Katherine has felt inferior to those around her. As a result, she tends to act out in unusual, sometimes alarming or even dangerous ways.

Robert, she claims, turned her life around and gave her a sense of purpose and dignity for the first time. As a result of Robert's death, Katherine is alone again, and she must turn to the others for support. Katherine is not a sympathetic character; there is very little to like about her. Because of her neediness and her erratic behavior, though, she becomes the play's central motivating character. She sets in motion all of the play's action.

Katherine begins by taking advantage of Isobel's loyalty to her dead father. She convinces Isobel to give her a job in her small graphic arts firm. Then she drives out one of the firm's other employees and strains the relationship between Isobel and Irwin by criticizing his work and mistreating their customers. It is largely because of Katherine that Tom and Marion decide to invest in Isobel's company, even though Isobel does not want to expand it. Then, at a crucial moment in the company's growth, she gets drunk and tries to kill an important client, dooming the company to financial failure.

Throughout the play, Isobel tries to help Katherine and to give her every opportunity to redeem herself. However, Katherine continues to abuse Isobel and to take advantage of her. At one point, Irwin even warns Isobel that Katherine is actually evil and that she is "dreaming of ways to destroy you." In the end, Irwin is right. When Isobel has nothing left and is living with Katherine in her apartment, taking care of her and hiding from Irwin, it is Katherine who unlocks the door and lets Irwin in. As a result of this betrayal, Isobel, Katherine's savior, is murdered.

Rhonda Milne

Rhonda is the only minor character in *The Secret Rapture*. Somewhere in her early twenties, Rhonda is quite attractive, highly intelligent, bold, and outspoken. She is Marion's assistant in the Department of the Environment and seems to share Marion's conservative political views. She contributes two important things to the play.

First, Rhonda is a reflection of how Marion and her Conservative Party are affecting the lives of the next generation of Britain's leaders. Rhonda has recognized the power of the Conservatives and has attached herself to that power. She is ambitious, eager to profit, and doesn't seem to mind taking advantage of other people. She helps arrange Marion's countryside meeting with the Green Party representatives and relishes the way Marion insults them and sends them back to the city.

Second, Rhonda is a temptation for Irwin and a clear sign to Isobel that their relationship is over. While Isobel is supposedly away on a business trip, Rhonda arranges to meet Irwin alone in their new offices one evening. She is supposedly there to see the new space and to use their shower, since her water has been unexpectedly turned off. However, her visit turns into a seduction as she and Irwin share a bottle of champagne and she recalls some of her sexual exploits. Sounding a little like Katherine, Rhonda admits that Marion keeps her around because she "likes the idea that I cause chaos."

Unlike the major characters in the play, Rhonda does not seem changed by Isobel's death. On the day of Isobel's funeral, when everyone is gathered at Robert's house in appropriate mourning clothes, Rhonda appears wearing a short black skirt. She is still fielding phone calls from the Ministry for Marion, though Marion now refuses to accept them. She is puzzled by the town's reaction to Isobel's death. When she learns that they all want to walk through the village as a group, she comments, "It's like everyone valued her."

Irwin Posner

When he first appears in the play, Irwin seems to be Isobel's mild-mannered and devoted sometime boyfriend. He works as the principal illustrator at Isobel's small graphic arts firm. Initially, he recognizes the problems Katherine is causing for Isobel and their company, but he continues to support Isobel and her desire to help her father's widow. When Katherine begins to criticize his work and mistreat their clients, though, Irwin urges Isobel to cut her loose. He even tries to tell Katherine to leave, but Isobel allows her to stay.

The strain Katherine places on their relationship apparently begins to affect Irwin, and he begins to act in unpredictable ways. Behind Isobel's back, he meets with Tom and Marion about their proposal to invest in her business. He tells them that he and Isobel are planning to get married, and for his help in convincing her to agree to their proposal, he accepts their offer to double his salary. Isobel sees his actions as a betrayal and decides she no longer loves him.

Frustrated at Isobel's lack of attention and affection, Irwin meets Rhonda in their offices one evening when Isobel is supposed to be out of town. Though their encounter may have begun innocently enough, by the time Isobel surprises them by returning early, they have been drinking champagne together and are on the verge of a passionate embrace. Irwin makes one last plea to Isobel to show him some affection and to get rid of Katherine before she destroys everything, but Isobel is determined and tells him that it is over between them.

When the time finally comes for Tom and Marion to close down Isobel's company, Irwin admits that Isobel, not his career or anyone else, is his "whole life." He is still in love with her, though she will not even appear in the same room with him. Irwin's obsession finally turns to violence. He stalks Isobel to Katherine's apartment, where he confronts her with a gun and demands one last time that she take him back and restore things to the way they were before. When she refuses and tries to go for help, he murders her. Her life has ended and so, apparently, has Irwin's torture. "It's over," he mutters. "Thank God."

Themes

Sacrifice

In an interview with Anne Busby published in the program for the original production of *The Secret Rapture*, Hare revealed that the title of the play means "that moment at which a nun expects to be united with Christ. In other words, it's death." Nuns, much like saints, face their deaths after a lifetime of sacrifice. They do not live in luxury and collect the material possessions most people desire. Rather than enjoying some of the sensual pleasures of life favored by ordinary human beings, they spend their days tending to people in need and serving God.

There are many parallels between the life Isobel leads and the lives of nuns or saints. Like them, she has a strong, unwavering sense of morality, and she is more interested in ideas and relationships than in material wealth. Perhaps most important, she makes continual sacrifices for others, and those sacrifices eventually lead to her own death. She becomes, in essence, not a nun or a saint, but a modern martyr.

Most of the other characters in the play are materialistic. Marion and Katherine urge Isobel to go out and make money like everyone else. Tom proclaims that, "God gives us certain gifts. And he expects us to use them." Even Irwin compromises his ideals in order to double his salary and urge Isobel to expand her business. Isobel, though, is interested only in enough success to keep her happy and comfortable and in doing what is right for others. When she does finally agree to go into business with Tom, it is only because she feels outnumbered and because she feels an obligation to keep helping Katherine.

It is this urge to help others that is perhaps Isobel's single most defining feature. Isobel stayed at her father's house to care for him in his final days, while her sister Marion only appeared occasionally. She waits as long as she can before rejecting Irwin, because she would rather not hurt him. Then, when she does turn him away, she rejects him completely because she feels it is the only way for him to recover quickly. Most important, after her father's death she devotes herself entirely to caring for Katherine, even though Katherine shows herself again and again to be unworthy of Isobel's kindness and sacrifice.

By the end of the play, through her steadfast commitment to her beliefs, Isobel has lost her boyfriend, her business, and, finally, her life. The positive effect of her sacrifice is that the changes she could not achieve while she was alive seem to be accomplished by her death. Katherine, Marion, and Tom are all affected by her loss. They begin to realize that her virtue and her way of viewing the world were assets and that their own lives have been misdirected.

Dependency

Several characters in *The Secret Rapture* know or discover something about their own strengths and weaknesses as they grapple with some kind of dependency. The most obviously dependent character in the play is Katherine. As she herself admits, she has been chemically dependent, either on drugs or alcohol, for most of her life. She has always felt "mediocre." As a student in school, she struggled to keep up with her classmates academically. Then, as a young woman, she struggled with her weight and appearance and had several failed relationships. To cope with her frustrations, she turned to drugs and alcohol and eventually became dependent upon them. Though she tries to resist drinking once she starts working for Isobel, she can't help it when she is faced with a difficult situation, such as the client in the restaurant who rejects her business offer. Faced with yet another failure, she takes a drink, transforms into her wilder nature, and attempts to kill the man with a knife.

Katherine is also very dependent upon other people. She had been moving from relationship to relationship, trying to find a man who could somehow get her on her feet and give her direction. Then she met Robert Glass, Isobel and Marion's father. He took her in and became not only her husband but also her caretaker. Katherine had never held a real job, and even when she lived with Robert, she simply helped him out around his bookshop. He provided her with what she needed to survive—food, clothes, and a place to live. She, in turn, seemed to provide him with some adventure that was missing in his life. Still, as Katherine admits, "People say I took advantage of his decency. But what are good people for? They're here to help the trashy people like me."

Katherine unquestionably takes advantage of Isobel's decency. When Robert Glass dies, Isobel takes his place, and Katherine becomes dependent upon her. Katherine needs Isobel for some of the same reasons she needed Isobel's father—to give her the basic necessities of life and perhaps to serve as an object for the abuse she doles out. At the same time that Katherine moves in, Irwin Posner, Isobel's coworker and sometime boyfriend, reveals his dependency on Isobel. At one time, Isobel was interested in Irwin, but once she feels he has betrayed her, she rejects him completely. Irwin's dependency for Isobel's attention and affection becomes a dangerous obsession, which eventually leads him to murder her.

Marion and Tom display different, but not lesser, kinds of dependencies. Marion has never felt passion and has never understood other people's feelings. As a result, she has become dependent upon her personal pursuit of power, money, and prestige. Tom, on the other hand, seems naturally adept at business and making money, but at some point in his life that wasn't enough. He turned to religion and became a born-again Christian, and now he depends heavily upon his relationship with Jesus to guide him. Both Marion and Tom are affected by Isobel's death and begin to view their dependencies differently. Marion is less concerned about her career, while Tom admits that he has "slightly lost touch with the Lord Jesus."

Style

Symbolism

In literature, a symbol is something that represents something else. It contains both a literal meaning and an abstract meaning and is often used by the author to communicate complex ideas. In *The Secret Rapture*, the central symbol of the play is a character, Isobel Glass. She has a literal identity, or meaning, as a grieving daughter, a kindhearted business owner, and an abused caretaker for her widowed stepmother, Katherine. But she also has an abstract identity, or meaning. Through her actions and words, she resembles a saint-like figure who lives a pure life, sacrifices for others, and dies a martyr.

The first image of the play is of Isobel in a darkened room, mourning over her father in his deathbed. She was there when he passed away and tells her sister Marion, "There's actually a moment when you see the spirit depart from the body. . . Like a bird." Isobel is instantly established as a pious, devoted daughter who senses things most people cannot.

Isobel is essentially a good person, committed to doing what is right and to helping other people. In "Saint Isobel: David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* as Christian Allegory," Liorah Anne Golomb observed, "Even her name, a variant of Elizabeth, has as one of its meanings 'consecrated to God.'" The basic goodness in Isobel's character, though, is both a blessing and a curse. When Marion is guilt-ridden for rushing up to her father's bedroom to retrieve a ring she had given him not long before his death, Isobel acts as a sort of confessor to her sister. She does not pass judgment on her or scold her for seeming to care only about material possessions. Still, Marion is overwhelmed by Isobel's virtue, and she complains, "You make me feel as if I'm always in the wrong."

Throughout the play, again and again Isobel tries to do what she feels is right in various situations, but, each time, she encounters only criticism and abuse. She hires a priest for her father's funeral, though the man never attended church, and is criticized for not simply cremating him and throwing him into the English Channel. She assumes responsibility for Katherine, her father's widow, accepting the reckless woman into her life, much as a saint might go after a sinner in order to save his or her soul. She hires Katherine into her small graphic arts firm, tends to her mental and physical needs, and is rewarded by losing her business and ruining her life.

In her relationship to Irwin, Golomb believed Isobel even begins to resemble Jesus, with Irwin playing the part of the traitor Judas. When Isobel and Irwin meet with Tom and Marion to discuss their business proposition, Golomb noted, Irwin kisses Isobel's cheek before joining the conversation. Soon afterward, it is revealed that he has sided with Tom and Marion in exchange for having his salary doubled. His kiss is like the kiss Judas offered to Jesus just before betraying him, and his salary increase is like the thirty pieces of silver Judas accepted for betraying his teacher.

Once Isobel rejects Irwin and refuses to be seen with him, her decision is absolute. Like a nun or a saint, Irwin suggests, "My guess is she's made some sort of vow." Then, at the end of the play in the final moment before Irwin kills her, Isobel says on her way out the door, "I haven't got shoes. Still you can't have everything." Her last words echo the popular belief that Jesus walked to his crucifixion barefoot.

Of course, it is in her death that Isobel takes on the most important symbolic significance. Just as saints who give their lives to good deeds and are killed for their beliefs become more powerful as martyrs in the minds of their followers when they are gone, Isobel's virtue begins to affect those she left behind on the day of her funeral in the final scene. Marion, Tom, and Katherine all begin to realize how important Isobel was and how their own lives can become more meaningful if they now begin to live more as she lived.

Denouement

Denouement is a French word that means "the unknotting" or "unraveling." In literature, a denouement is a final scene that occurs after the high point, or climax, of the plot. It typically explains any unanswered questions and offers a glimpse at how the characters' world may have changed as a result of their actions.

The final scene of *The Secret Rapture* is a perfect example of a denouement. The climax of the play is past. Isobel is dead, and Irwin has even declared, "It's over. Thank God." All that is left is for Tom, Marion, Katherine, and Rhonda, the other surviving characters in the play, to gather together for Isobel's funeral.

Significantly, they all meet at Robert Glass's house, where the events of the play began some months before. The house had been sold by Katherine and repurchased by Isobel, and now they are restoring it to the way it was when Isobel and Robert were both still alive. The most important function of this denouement, however, is not to show the effects of Isobel's death on the physical environment but on the souls of the characters.

Rhonda has not changed. While the others are properly dressed in dark mourning clothes, she is dressed in a short skirt and jumper and is still fielding Marion's phone calls from the Ministry. Katherine, though, is uncharacteristically quiet and subdued as she goes about the room, putting things back on their shelves where they were once before. At her husband's funeral, she was drunk and obnoxious, but she seems to have more reverence and respect for Isobel's memory. Even Tom's faith has been a little shaken. He tries to offer Marion some comforting words from Jesus but then admits, "I don't know. I've slightly lost touch with the Lord Jesus."

Marion, who may have had the furthest to go, seems to have changed the most. She now refuses to take phone calls and conduct business on the day of her sister's funeral. She also seems to have had an emotional breakthrough. She had never been able to feel or express passion, but Isobel's death seems to have sparked feeling in her. She

embraces her husband warmly, even sexually. And the last words of the play are a plea from Marion. "Isobel," she asks, "why don't you come home?"

Historical Context

In a review of *The Secret Rapture* in *American Theatre* magazine, prominent London theatre critic Matt Wolf declared that the play was "directly inspired by the decade-old economic and moral climate of Margaret Thatcher's Britain." Though Hare's intimate family drama draws much of its power and appeal from its complex characters and ultimately tragic plot, Wolf's point is well made. The 1980s, both in David Hare's Britain and in the United States, are now viewed as a period of greed, conservative politics, and negligent middle-class social policies, and *The Secret Rapture* reflects this environment.

There are many similarities between the economic and social development of America and Britain during the 1980s. Both countries elected conservative leaders who believed in strong religious and national values and who opposed high taxes, high government spending, and too much control of private enterprise. In short, they believed that people would be better off if government interfered less in their lives. These are the same values expressed by Marion and Tom French and by most of the other characters in *The Secret Rapture*.

Ronald Reagan, a Republican, was elected president of the United States in 1980. Reagan believed in "supply-side" economics. This theory suggested that the economy would grow healthy if most people paid lower taxes and the government spent less money. The money people saved on taxes would be spent on products, services, or investments, which would boost the economy. Unfortunately for many, the largest tax cuts went to the wealthiest Americans, while those who earned less than the national average actually ended up paying the government more. At the same time that he was cutting taxes, Reagan was also spending less on social programs like job training, welfare assistance, child day care centers, and programs for the elderly. Reagan and the Republicans believed in strong family values, and they claimed programs like these weakened families by causing people to become dependent on the government rather than on themselves and their families.

In an attempt to promote even more economic growth, Reagan also eased government control over, or "deregulated," many industries, such as banking, communications, and energy. This actually had both positive and negative effects. Because they had fewer regulations to follow, banks could invest in riskier ventures; media corporations, such as large newspapers and radio and television stations, could merge their operations; and oil companies could search for new sources of energy in previously protected lands. Profits generated by many of these companies soared, making money for the people who worked for the companies and for investors in the companies. However, relaxed safety standards and government oversight eventually also led to more bankruptcies, investment losses, large monopolies, and environmental hazards.

In Britain, Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979. Like Reagan in America, she believed in strong family and national values and in less government involvement in the economy and people's lives. Thatcher believed in

"monetarism," which was quite similar to Reagan's "supply-side" economics. Monetarism meant carefully controlling the supply of money, lowering tax rates, and removing restrictions on how businesses could expand. Thatcher immediately began privatizing industries, like health, transportation, and education, which had been government-run in Britain for decades. She also started cutting government subsidy to welfare programs, public health, and the arts.

The economic policies of Reagan and Thatcher affected the lives of individual citizens in different ways. In America, it is generally believed that the wealthiest individuals and corporations profited the most from what became known as "Reaganomics," while middle class wages and investment income improved significantly and the poor, particularly minorities, fell behind. In Britain, the effects had quite a bit to do with geography. Thatcher's policies delivered the most benefits to the financial industry, real estate, and technology companies, which were all largely based in London and southeastern England. In those areas, wages increased and new businesses flourished. The economic boom of the time is what prompts Marion in Hare's play to tell Isobel, "There's money to be made. Everyone's making it."

At the same time, Thatcher and the Conservatives were antiunion and favored manufacturing industries less. After a yearlong coal miners' strike in 1984-1985 was defeated, labor unions faced a difficult time in Britain. Without strong unions and government subsidies, large portions of Scotland, Wales, and northern England that relied on manufacturing for survival began to face extremely high unemployment rates. Poverty and crime statistics skyrocketed together, causing a social upheaval that eventually contributed to Thatcher's defeat in the election of 1990.

Critical Overview

For the most part, critics in Hare's native Britain recognized *The Secret Rapture* as a clever attempt at a modern tragedy, set squarely against the social and economic impact of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's decade-long term of office in the 1980s. They generally praised the work for both its political commentary and its intimate, personal storytelling.

Writing for the *Sunday Times* just after the play opened in London, John Peter declared, "Hare has written one of the best English plays since the war and established himself as the finest British dramatist of his generation. *The Secret Rapture* is a family play; it is also the first major play to judge the England of the 1980s in terms that are both human and humane."

In the *Observer,* Michael Ratcliffe observed, "Hare's painful, witty, and moving new play *The Secret Rapture* is a morality of modern behavior in which the people who have all the answers face, buy out, and destroy the people who thought there were no questions to ask."

However, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, American critics found less to understand and like about the play. In the *New Republic,* reviewer Robert Brustein complained, "The only thing I found provocative about *The Secret Rapture*, David Hare's new play at the Ethel Barrymore, is its title." While British reviewers appreciated the way Hare infused personal tragedy with political commentary, Brustein complained that the playwright's political agenda did more harm than good. He felt that the characters lacked depth and that they "exist primarily as symbolic reflections on life and character in Margaret Thatcher's England."

Similarly, Mimi Kramer in the *New Yorker* wrote, "On the face of it, Hare's theme seems to be family relations; unfortunately, he approaches his subject so complacently as to make a mockery of character and human experience. The people who inhabit his play are more than just caricatures; they're political stereotypes."

Whether they liked or disliked the play, both British and American critics seemed particularly intrigued, and sometimes troubled, by the character, and the contradictions, of Isobel. As Hare himself declared, with Isobel he set out to create a truly virtuous heroine in the midst of societal corruption and evil. But according to some critics, Isobel's virtue did not generate the sympathy required of a central tragic character.

In *Plays International,* John Russell Taylor suggested, "Some are certain that Isobel is a saint, a wholly good woman beleaguered by a naughty world. But she would seem to lack the ruthlessness of the real saint. Most of what she does she does from cowardice and the inability to resist."

Gerald Weales, writing for *Commonweal,* noted, "However tantalizing as a character, Isobel never achieves the force, the presence of those who surround her. Her desire to

withdraw, to find a quiet place . . . and the restraint which she brings to even her most assertive gestures make her a character for whom action is reaction. For this reason, a distance remains between Isobel and her family, her lover and, unfortunately, the audience."

Kramer simply found Isobel boring. "The central character of *The Secret Rapture*," she wrote, "the terminally good Isobel, seems a woman afflicted by a congenital inability to say anything interesting about anyone. She is surrounded by curious enough people. . . . But Isobel can't seem to pass judgment on any of them."

One fascinating and unique critical issue arose when the play appeared in New York for the first time. In London, *The Secret Rapture* had been directed at the National Theatre by Howard Davies, but Hare himself chose to come to America to direct the Broadway version. Frank Rich, the well-known *New York Times* critic, had seen the play in London under Davies's direction and praised it. However, his review of Hare's work in New York was scathing. "Mr. Hare, serving as his play's director for its Broadway premiere at the Barrymore, is his own worst enemy," Rich declared. He found fault with Hare's new casting, the revised set design, and them slow pace and monotonous tones of the actors. He ended his review by remarking, "I don't understand how a dramatist so deep in human stuff could allow so pallid an imitation of life to represent his play on a Broadway stage."

Ultimately, the production only ran for nineteen previews and twelve performances. Hare was so angered by Rich's review that he sent him a harsh letter, complaining that his column had closed the play and that Rich was power-hungry and irresponsible. Rich responded that his job as a reviewer was to tell the truth as he saw it to his readers. The very public debate between the artist and his critic raised some important questions about theatrical criticism in New York, where the *New York Times* reviewer, whoever he happened to be, certainly did wield a great deal of power. In a climate where fewer and fewer new plays were making it to Broadway, was it the responsibility of reviewers to criticize them in such a way that audiences would still attend? Or should they remain true to their opinions, however harsh they may be, and report only what they believe, regardless of the financial consequences? The issue has still not been resolved, and a bad review in the *Times* can still close a production within a few performances of opening night.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Glenn has a Ph.D. and specializes in theatre history and literature. In this essay, Glenn explores David Hare's play through Aristotle's classical theory of tragedy found in the Poetics *and Arthur Miller's modern vision described in the essay "Tragedy and the Common Man."*

When David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* opened at the Royal National Theatre in London in October 1988, critics attempted to categorize the play as something familiar. Some pointed to the exaggerated portrayals of the ambitious, self-interested politician, Marion, and her almost clownishly religious businessman husband, Tom, and called the play political satire, or a contemporary comedy of manners. Others recognized the play's deeply rooted Christian symbolism and termed it a philosophical drama about contemporary life in Britain. Writing for the *Sunday Times,* John Peter remarked, "*The Secret Rapture* is a family play; it is also the first major play to judge the England of the 1980s in terms both human and humane."

For his part, the playwright himself was quite direct on the subject of style. In an interview with Robert Crew in the *Toronto Star,* Hare indicated that he was interested in writing about the psychological effect of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government on the people of Britain in the form of a *tragedy.* "We don't have many plays with heroines or many tragedies in England at the moment," said Hare. "It is commonly said that it's not possible to write a tragedy nowadays and I was interested to see whether it was."

Hare had good reason to be uncertain. The classic definition of a *tragedy* was developed by the ancient Greeks more than 2,000 years ago. While the form was revived successfully by Shakespeare and a few of his contemporaries during the Renaissance, by the turn of the twentieth century, critics and writers alike were declaring tragedy a dead art—something that could still be read in the texts of classical writers but no longer written and performed for modern audiences. In order to determine if Hare succeeded at his task and created a modern tragedy, it is important first to understand the classical definition of the form, then to consider how it has been viewed in more recent years.

The most widespread and accepted classical definition of tragedy was described in 335 B.C.E. by the philosopher Aristotle in his *Poetics.* As it exists today, the *Poetics* is an incomplete work that has been translated from its original ancient Greek through many languages and many editions to its current twenty-six-chapter form. In it, Aristotle set out to define tragedy using the plays of classical Greek dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as examples. Aristotle's well-known definition of tragedy appears in chapter 6 of the *Poetics:*

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is
serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in
language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament,

the several kinds being found in separate parts
of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative;
through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of
these emotions.

As Aristotle explains his definition and provides examples from plays of his time, such as *Oedipus the King* and *Medea,* a clearer definition of tragedy emerges that does seem to describe many of the plays of the classical Greeks and Renaissance writers like Shakespeare. A tragedy, Aristotle suggests, is a *serious* play. Its theme generally has universal interest and appeal. That is, most or all human beings can identify with the play's concerns and can therefore develop an emotional attachment to the action and characters. The central character, or *protagonist,* is typically a person of high rank or stature, often a king or nobleman. This protagonist is essentially a good person who experiences some kind of decline in fortune that usually leads to suffering and death. The decline is caused by some error or frailty, referred to as the "tragic flaw," on the part of the protagonist. Sometime before or during his suffering, the protagonist recognizes and understands his error. And, finally, the downfall of the protagonist arouses emotions such as pity and fear in the audience and effectively purges these emotions through the act of *catharsis.*

The best example of a classical tragedy, according to Aristotle, is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King.* In this work, the protagonist is a king who, as a young man, is given a prophecy that he will one day grow up to murder his father and marry his mother. Rather than face this grisly fate, he flees what he thinks is his home and settled in a new land where he inherits a throne, a fortune, and a queen. When his new kingdom is faced with a terrible plague, Oedipus asks the gods for advice, and he is told that he must find the killer of the old king. As evidence and witnesses slowly appear, Oedipus begins to realize that he has made a terrible mistake. The family he ran away from was not his family after all. A man he thought was a ruffian and whom he killed on the road was actually his father, and the queen he married turns out to be his mother. Oedipus's "tragic flaw" is his pride: he believed he could outwit the gods and escape his fate; then for a while he refuses to see the truth. He recognizes his errors, blinds himself, and then banishes himself into exile. An audience, Aristotle suggests, can easily find pity for Oedipus, particularly as he realizes his mistakes and fear that something similar could happen to them.

In many ways, *The Secret Rapture* does seem to resemble this classical definition of tragedy. It is undoubtedly a serious play with universal themes. It begins with a funeral and ends with a funeral, and in between it addresses topics such as alcoholism, family loyalty, and obsessive love. These are all concerns that most people can relate to, and they may cause audiences to develop emotional attachments to the characters involved. The central character of the play, Isobel, is not someone of high rank or stature. In fact, the highest-ranking character in the play is probably her sister, Marion, who holds a junior minister's position in Britain's government. Still, Isobel is essentially a good person who experiences terrible suffering, followed by a sudden, violent death. Her "tragic flaw" may be her goodness. She is so committed to virtue and to doing what is right that she invites the abuse of those who are not as good as she is.

Isobel does seem to experience a flash of recognition when she understands the error she is making. Just before rejecting Irwin, she tells him, "I'm being turned into a person whose only function is to suffer. And believe me, it bores me just as much as it bores you." Her insight, however, appears long before her worst suffering and doesn't seem to affect her in any significant way. Finally, when her downfall arrives and Irwin murders her, it is quite sudden, and she is strong and commanding until the very end, leaving some question as to whether the audience experiences pity and fear for her in some sort of cathartic moment.

Even with all its similarities to classical tragedy, it is clear that *The Secret Rapture* is a very different play, culturally, than Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* or Shakespeare's *Macbeth.* On the surface, it may not seem to matter that Isobel is not a queen and that the fate of a kingdom does not hang in the balance. But classical tragedy, according to many critics, does demand more from its characters and its audiences than the ordinary lives of ordinary people. That is why, as Hare observed, "it is commonly said that it is not possible to write a tragedy nowadays." We may long for the emotional catharsis offered by a well-crafted tragedy, but we are more interested in the lives of these ordinary people and the way they parallel our own than in the lives of remote kings in even remoter kingdoms.

It is this cultural contradiction that led to the belief, for much of the twentieth century, that tragedies can no longer be written. In a famous 1929 essay titled "The Tragic Fallacy," Joseph Wood Krutch declared, "Tragedies, in that only sense of the word which has any distinctive meaning, are no longer written in either the dramatic or any other form." Krutch believed that tragedies could not exist in their pure form in the twentieth century because the view most people held of themselves and the world had changed so drastically. "If the plays and the novels of today deal with littler people and less mighty emotions," Krutch maintained, "it is not because we have become interested in commonplace souls and their unglamorous adventures but because we have come, willy-nilly, to see the soul of man as commonplace and its emotions as mean."

Krutch believed that true writers of tragedy cast their plays with kings and set them in courts and on battlefields because they really believed in human greatness and that we now cast plays with common people and set them in houses and shops because we no longer believe in nobility, either its outward appearance or its inner virtue. To illustrate his point, he compared Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* in which a Danish prince seeks revenge on an uncle who murdered his father and stole his throne, to Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts,* in which a plain young man discovers he inherited syphilis from his father, returns to his little village, and persuades his mother to poison him. Although the experiences of Ibsen's protagonist in *Ghosts* may be closer to reality for most people, Krutch insists that the play cannot be a tragedy, because it lacks the noble spirit and does not end in an uplifting or cathartic way.

Quite likely, though, Hare was less concerned with a strict, classical interpretation of tragedy when he wrote *The Secret Rapture* and more concerned with how the play would resonate with his London audiences in 1988. On a scale ranging from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Ibsen, his style is undoubtedly more similar to that of the author of

Ghosts than to the two playwrights whose lives were more affected by the comings and goings of kings and kingdoms. Yet by a more recent definition of tragedy, he still may have succeeded at his task.

In 1949, just after his masterpiece *Death of a Salesman* opened on Broadway, American playwright Arthur Miller wrote an essay for the *New York Times* called "Tragedy and the Common Man." Miller had been taken to task, by critics who thought like Krutch, for calling *Death of a Salesman* a tragedy. In his essay, Miller defended not only his play but tragedy itself as a form of drama perfectly accessible to modern playwrights and audiences.

Miller rejected the notion that tragedies must be written about and for noblemen. "I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were," he stated. Far from having to exact murderous revenge or save a kingdom, Miller felt that tragic protagonists earned the title simply from struggling to find their rightful place in society. And instead of needing fate, the gods, or some catastrophic event to prompt them into action, Miller suggested, "the fateful wound from which the inevitable events spiral is the wound of indignity, and its dominant force is indignation."

The "tragic flaw" in a character, then, could simply be the character's insistence on maintaining his or her dignity, sometimes in the face of overwhelming odds. It is this struggle between the ordinary individual and the world around us, Miller suggests, that creates the pity and the fear normally connected with tragedy. Miller wrote:

tragic right is a condition of life, a condition in
which the human personality is able to flower and
realize itself. The wrong is the condition which suppresses
man, perverts the flowing out of his love and
creative instinct. Tragedy enlightens—and it must, in
that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's
freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in
tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning
of the stable environment is what terrifies.

Miller believed that, in the end, the tragic protagonist's struggle, though doomed to failure, suggests optimism and reinforces the best qualities of human existence. Perhaps most important of all, it conveys a belief in the continual evolution and perfectibility of all humankind, kings and commoners alike.

Viewed through this critical lens, *The Secret Rapture* appears much closer to Miller's definition of tragedy for the common man than to Aristotle's noble art form. Isobel is certainly an ordinary enough person, particularly as compared to the other characters in the play. While her sister Marion is a fast-climbing politician in the national spotlight and Tom is a born-again successful and wealthy businessman, Isobel is content to operate a small graphic design company and tend to the needs of her family and friends.

Although she seems to weather most storms rather well, Isobel nevertheless suffers many indignities in the course of the play. She is initially coerced into taking care of Katherine and offering her a job, only to be betrayed by her again and again. No one seems prepared to honor the memory of Robert Glass, her father, the way she feels it should be honored. At one point she is forced to plead with Irwin, "Are we not allowed to *mourn*? Just . . . a decent period of mourning? Can't we have that?"

Perhaps worst of all, Irwin betrays her to Marion and Tom when he deals with them behind her back and accepts a salary increase to convince Isobel to accept their business offer. The cumulative effect of all this mistreatment is a tremendous assault on Isobel's dignity, Miller's "fateful wound, from which the inevitable events" of the play spiral. Isobel's indignation at this treatment causes her to rebel against the world around her. She completely shuns Irwin, ignores her floundering business, and turns to the work she believes her father would appreciate: taking care of Katherine.

Whether it seems to the rest of us that Isobel has made a wise choice or not, her choice is definitely a decision to spurn the "stable environment" offered by Marion, Tom, and Irwin, and to thrust for the freedom she believes she will find in doing what she thinks is right. In the end, Isobel's earthly struggle does fail, but we are left with a faint sense of optimism—the impression that Isobel's sacrifice has affected the lives of those around her for the better. Marion's final words, some of the last words of the play, suggest Miller's notion of evolution and human perfectibility. "Isobel," she cries. "We're just beginning."

With that, the tragedy is complete. Isobel, a common person, a *good* person to the very end, has wielded her virtue and fought for her dignity against a world that seems to care only for itself and its profits; and in the struggle, she has changed that world, if only a little bit.

Source: Lane A. Glenn, Critical Essay on *The Secret Rapture,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Golomb examines similarities between the characters and story in The Secret Rapture *and Christian motifs.*

If ye were of the world, the world would love his own:
but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen
you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.
(John 15:19)

In his latest play, *The Secret Rapture*, David Hare has given us a central character, Isobel, who is distinctly not of the world. Even her name, a variant of Elizabeth, has as one of its meanings "consecrated to God." Dramatically, Hare took a great risk in centering his play on Isobel. She is weak, pliable and abused (a stark contrast to Hare's usual headstrong women such as Susan in *Plenty* or Peggy in *A Map of the World*), yet in order for the climax to have any impact, we must feel that something has been accomplished by her destruction, not that she has been one of life's doormats who deserves what she gets. If Isobel were merely a good woman who could not exist in a corrupt world the necessary sense of loss at her death might not be evoked, but Hare has raised her to the level of saint and martyr. Her death has a purging effect on the other characters, so that while there is loss there is also hope.

Hare begins to establish Isobel's spirituality in the first moments of the play. Isobel, sitting with the body of her recently deceased father, tells her sister Marion:

There's actually a moment when you see the spirit
depart from the body. I've always been told about it.
And it's true. (*She is very quiet and still.*) Like a bird.

While Hare develops Isobel's spiritual nature, he places in contrast to her several varieties of rather earth-bound sinners, each traveling down a different path in search of salvation. Marion, the elder sister, is a Tory junior minister entirely caught up in materialism and the exhilaration of power. It is by way of this character that Hare most directly voices his familiar political dissent. Marion is so extreme in her right-wing views that she needs no opposition to make her look the fool; she is quite capable of doing it herself, as when she proudly relates her retort to members of the Green Party who opposed her standpoint on nuclear energy: "'Come back and see me when you're glowing in the dark.'"

As we meet Marion she is trying to recover a ring, which she had given to her father. In justifying her actions to Isobel (who, significantly, in no way indicates that she requires justification), she explains:

For God's sake, I mean, the ring is actually valuable.
Actually no, that sounds horrid. I apologize. I'll tell
you the truth. I thought when I bought it—I just

walked into this very expensive shop and I thought,
this is one of the few really decent things I've done in
my life. And it's true. I spent, as it happens, a great
deal of money, rather more . . . rather *more* than I had
at the time. I went too far. I wanted something to
express my love for my father. Something adequate.

Marion cannot express her feelings emotionally; instead, she equates love with a valuable object. The speech also puts Isobel in the role of confessor. Marion is driven to confess by her own guilt—guilt which she experiences because she is in the presence of such goodness. Isobel never criticizes Marion, and even agrees that she should have the ring, yet later in the scene we find that Marion is still tormented by guilt:

MARION I'm not going to forgive you.
ISOBEL What?
MARION You've tried to humiliate me.
ISOBELMarion . . .MARION
You've made me feel awful. It's not my
fault about the ring. Or the way I feel about Katherine.
You make me feel as if I'm always in the wrong.
ISOBEL Not at all.
MARION Oh, yes. Well, we can't all be perfect. We
do try. The rest of us are trying. So will you please
stop this endless criticism? Because I honestly think
it's driving me mad.

It is Marion who has been seeking forgiveness, indeed, absolution, of Isobel. When she senses that her sins have not been cleansed, she turns her guilt outward and blames the confessor. Saints, it appears, can be very difficult to live with.

The second sinner in Hare's catalogue is Marion's husband Tom, a born-again Christian and Chairman of a committee which strives "to do business the way Jesus would have done it." Tom is a rather comical example of one who uses scripture to his own advantage. The Lord has indeed moved in mysterious ways when Tom, in the first scene, explains to Isobel how the Lord Jesus delivered the exact automobile parts he needed in order to repair his car so that he could give Marion the news of her father's death:

TOM [. . .] I go to the car. Won't start. I open the
bonnet. Spark-plug leads have perished. I can't believe
it. I think, what on earth am I going to do? Then I
think, hey, six days ago an old mate called in and left,
in a shopping bag, a whole load of spare parts he'd had
to buy for his car. (*He smiles in anticipation of the
outcome.*) And, you know, as I go in and look for it, I
tell you this, I don't have a doubt. As I move towards
the bag. I've never looked inside it and yet I *know.* It's

got so I know. I know that inside that bag there is
going to be a set of Ford Granada leads. And *then* you
have to say, well, there you are, that's it, that's the
Lord Jesus. He's there when you need him. I *am*
looked after.

In addition to exploiting his comic value, Hare uses Tom to highlight Isobel's authentic Christian existence, which, interestingly, does not seem to include Christ. Isobel rather rejects Christian ideology at every turn. She is politely skeptical of Tom's faith, but more significantly, she fights against being placed in the roles of saint, martyr and savior which the other characters in the play, particularly her lover Irwin, would have her take on. Her strongest denial of these roles occurs in her last scene as she rejects Irwin's desperate effort to reinstate himself into her graces:

ISOBEL [. . .] And you have this idea that I
can't accept.
IRWIN What's that? (*She looks hard at him a moment.*)
ISOBEL You want to be saved through another
person. (*There's a silence.*)
IRWIN And?
ISOBEL It isn't possible.

Despite her protestations, Isobel makes one deliberate choice during the action of the play, and that is to forsake her own well-being by taking upon herself a burden, a cross to bear; specifically, a soul to save. Until she makes this choice she is an inactive character playing no part in her own destiny—indeed, a doormat. The burden which Isobel chooses to take upon herself is Katherine, her father's young widow. Katherine represents the Lost Soul and therefore the greatest challenge to those who would be saviors:

And Levi made him a great feast in his own house: and
there was a great company of publicans and of others
that sat down with them.
But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his
disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with
publicans and sinners?
And Jesus, answering, said unto them, They that are
whole need not a physician; but they that are sick.
I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.
(Luke 5:29-32)

It is not the part of Jesus that Isobel has consciously chosen to play, but that of her father Robert. Katherine sets herself up as the soul in need of salvation, naming Robert as her benefactor and personal savior, and indirectly challenges Isobel to carry on for her father:

KATHERINE [. . .] I met your father first in the Vale
of Evesham. Yeah, he stopped one night in a motel. It
was appalling. I don't know how I'd ended up there. I
was working the bar. Trying to pick men up—not
even for money, but because I was so unhappy with
myself. I wanted something to happen. I don't know
how I thought these men might help me, they were
travellers, small goods, that sort of thing, all with
slack bellies and smelling of late-night curries. I can
still smell them. I don't know why, I'd been doing it
for weeks. Then Robert came in. He said 'I'll drive
you to Gloucestershire. It will give you some peace.'
He brought me here, to this house. He put fresh sheets
in the spare room. Everything I did, before or since, he
forgave. (*She sits, tears in her eyes, quite now.*)
People say I took advantage of his decency. But what
are good people for? They're here to help the trashy
people like me.

A moment later, after a significant pause, Isobel decides to take Katherine into her home and into her graphic arts firm. That Katherine is an alcoholic, unqualified, unsocialized and irresponsible, are flaws which Isobel chooses to ignore, although she is well aware of them. Whereas Marion could only show her devotion to their father in materialistic terms, Isobel will show it through emulation of his good works. If Robert could unconditionally forgive all of Katherine's sins, then Isobel will too, even if it leads to her own destruction.

From the moment of Isobel's decision at the end of Scene 2, the action of *The Secret Rapture* roughly parallels that of the life of Jesus, with Isobel in the title role and Irwin playing the part of Judas. At the meeting in Robert's house in Scene 4 Isobel is being persuaded to sign her business over to a board of directors headed by Tom. There is a great sense that Tom, Marion and Katherine have conspired against her, but she still has one ally, Irwin—or so she thinks. As Irwin walks into the living room he greets Isobel and Hare's stage directions read: "*He kisses her cheek before going to sit down.*" It is the kiss of Judas, of betrayal. Irwin, it is revealed a few pages later, has sided with the others in exchange for a doubled salary, the thirty pieces of silver of the modern world.

What follows is one of the more problematic aspects of the play. Isobel can easily refuse to sign the agreement; Tom, Marion, Katherine and Rhonda (Marion's assistant) have even left the stage, thus removing the immediate pressure to sign. This is the moment when we must, in order to have compassion for Isobel, feel that when she signs the agreement she does so not because she is weak and resigned to the will of others, but because she accepts the destiny which has been written for her. Isobel here stands before an invisible Pilate and refuses to state her case and save her own life. The agreement which she will sign when the lights go down at the end of the act amounts to a renunciation of her creative and financial independence, a stripping away of both her earthly possessions and her worth as a human being. By signing, Isobel makes it

convenient for the others to relegate her to the background and effect her metaphorical death.

In trying to justify his betrayal and gain Isobel's forgiveness, Irwin points out Isobel's own share of the blame, and by her silence, Isobel accepts not the blame but the futility of engaging in a struggle for self-preservation:

IRWIN Isobel, please. Just look at me. Please. (*She doesn't turn.*) Things move on. You brought in Katherine.
Be fair, it was you. It changed the nature of the
firm. For better or worse. But it's changed. And you
did it. Not me. (*There is silence.*) I wouldn't hurt you.
You know that. I'd rather die than see you hurt. I love you.
I want you. There's not a moment when I don't
want you.

Irwin proceeds to suffer a fall from grace to which he will never be restored, and he undergoes an immediate character change. Suddenly he becomes obsessed with gaining love and approval from Isobel, and at the same time his sins multiply. It is as if he is competing with Katherine for Isobel's love by trying to prove himself more needy, since he knows he is not worthy. The second act opens with Irwin, immediately after having made the above pledge of devotion, flirting with a skimpily-clad Rhonda. They are unmistakably on the verge of physical intimacy when Isobel walks in. Isobel recognizes Irwin's action as a call for her attention but rather than oblige him, as she constantly obliges Katherine, she withdraws. Irwin then plays, as Hare puts it, his strong hand—he confronts Isobel with the truth about Katherine:

IRWIN I know, you think she's just unhappy. She's
maladjusted. She hates herself. Well, she does. And
she is. All these things are true. But also it's true,
Isobel, my dear, you must learn something else. That
everyone knows except you. It's time you were told.
There's such a thing as evil. You're dealing with evil.
(ISOBEL *turns round, about to speak.*) That's right.
And if you don't admit it, then you can't fight it. And
if you don't fight it, you're going to lose.

It is my sense that Isobel knows full well that she is going to lose to the force of evil as embodied in Katherine, but her need to sacrifice herself in the attempt to save Katherine's soul overpowers any desire she might have to save her own skin. At this point in the play Katherine has already destroyed Isobel's independence, her business, and her love affair; there is not much more she can take except Isobel's life. Isobel must decide whether to give it to her or not, and in the next scene she reveals the decision she has made to Tom and Marion while on a meditative retreat to Lanzarote:

ISOBEL [. . .] You can't get away. You think you
can. You think you'll fly out. Just leave. Damn the lot

of you, and go. Then you think, here I am, stark naked,
sky-blue sea, miles of sand—I've done it! I'm free!
Then you think, yes, just remind me, what am I meant
to do now? (*She stands, a mile away in a world of her
own.*) In my case there's only one answer. (*She looks
absently at them, as if they were not even present.*) I
must do what Dad would have wished. (*She turns, as
if this were self-evident.*) That's it.

Whether or not one cares to extend the immediate meaning of "Dad" beyond Robert to God the Father, it is clear that Isobel has put herself in the same position in relation to her father that Jesus held in relation to the Holy Father: she intends to be his emissary on earth.

Irwin has sensed the sort of experience Isobel has had, and earlier in the scene he tells Marion that he believes Isobel has taken a vow. A parallel can certainly be drawn between Isobel's escape to Lanzarote and the transfiguration of Jesus which occurred on his sojourn to the mountain; Jesus, too, is instructed by his heavenly father and given a clear sense of purpose, and while "his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow" (Mark 9:3), Hare brings Isobel into the scene with the direction "*She is also changed. She wears a long dark blue overcoat and thin glasses.*" Indeed, Isobel does seem to have taken vows, not only to continue caring for Katherine, but in the sense that a novice takes vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The next scene finds her serving Katherine in a sparsely furnished flat and eating a simple meal of shepherd's pie. Katherine rejects the food, saying: "Your cooking is unspeakable. It's all good intentions. F—shepherd's pie. It sums you up." On one level we have Isobel compared to a bland plate of mashed potatoes and ground meat, and as a surface appraisal of Isobel's character, it is not far from the mark. Isobel lacks the volatility of Katherine, the outrageous single-mindedness of Marion, and the sensuality of Rhonda. She possesses instead a quiet strength, easily mistaken for banality. The additional comment about "good intentions," however, invites a play on the word "shepherd." Isobel, after all, has become Katherine's shepherd, her caretaker, her guardian.

Marion's reaction to the idea of a vow is both comic and revealing. That promises are things meant to be made, not kept, is evident in her response to Irwin:

MARION I don't believe this. This is most peculiar.
What is this? A *vow?* It's outrageous. People making
vows. What are *vows?* Nobody's made vows since the
nineteenth century.

Surely Marion vowed a thing or two on her rise up the political ladder, but actual integrity is a concept quite foreign to her. We have seen in her speech about the ring just how many false passes she makes before she hits upon the truth, but a trait which may be merely an amusing character flaw in others is far more devastating in an influential politician.

It is worthwhile here to take a step back to the first scene in the play. Marion has asserted that Katherine took advantage of Robert's kindness and love. Isobel responds: "Honestly, I don't think it matters much. The great thing is to love. If you're loved back then it's a bonus."

A comparison of two translations of a familiar passage from the first Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians provides some interesting insight into Isobel's statement and into her decision to sacrifice herself to Katherine. The first is from the King James Version; the second, from the New American Bible:

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth
not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.
Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own,
is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;
Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;
Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all
things, endureth all things. [. . .]
And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but
the greatest of these is charity. (I Cor. 13:4-7, 13)
Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not jealous, it
does not put on airs, it is not snobbish. Love is never
rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not prone to anger;
neither does it brood over injuries. Love does not
rejoice in what is wrong but rejoices with the truth.
There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its
trust, its hope, its power to endure. [. . .]
There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope,
and love, and the greatest of these is love. (NAB I Cor.
13:4-7, 13)

The retranslation of the term "charity" as "love" in the second passage clearly expresses Isobel's attitude towards Katherine. Her love is unconditional and charitable and fulfills all of the conditions set forth by Paul. The more difficult Katherine makes it to be loved, the more Isobel must love her; her forbearance is truly limitless. Irwin's love for Isobel, on the other hand, is self-centered and self-serving; it lacks the quality of charity. He loves Isobel because she is good, but unless he can love that which is not good, his love is without meaning. In his last scene with Isobel, Irwin in his desperation has strayed so far from the true definition of love that he mistakes it for sex and begs Isobel to sleep with him. Isobel, however, continues to refuse him the salvation he seeks:

ISOBEL Force me. You can force me if you like. Why
not? You can take me here. On the bed. On the floor.
You can f— me till the morning. You can f— me all
tomorrow. Then the whole week. At the end you can
shoot me and hold my heart in your hand. You still
won't have what you want. (*Her gaze does not wander.*)
The bit that you want I'm not giving you.

The Sacred Heart imagery in this speech is not accidental. Isobel is playing out the final moments of her drama, and as she notes with some amusement when her hour has come, "I haven't got shoes. Still you can't have everything." The belief that Jesus walked to his crucifixion without shoes, although not specified in the gospels, is common; for example, note this passage from *Waiting for Godot:*

ESTRAGON (*turning to look at the boots.*) I'm
leaving them there. (*Pause.*) Another will come, just
as . . . as . . . as me, but with smaller feet, and they'll
make him happy.
VLADIMIR But you can't go barefoot!
ESTRAGON Christ did.
VLADIMIR Christ! What has Christ got to do with it?
You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!
ESTRAGON All my life I've compared myself to him.

Christian teaching demands that each of its followers compare himself to Christ and re-enact, throughout his life and at various times of the year, certain of the events of Jesus' life. Isobel, while never making the comparison between Christ and herself, has led a truly Christian existence. That she must be destroyed while Katherine, the sinner, goes free is an indication that spiritual goodness cannot coexist with the material world. Her death becomes sacrificial, as the crucifixion of Jesus is felt to have been: it is the blood of the lamb which whitens the robes (Rev. 7:14).

Irwin's reaction immediately after he shoots Isobel is perplexing: "It's over. Thank God." After spending the past two scenes virtually deranged because he can't have the woman he professes to love, it seems odd that he should be relieved by her death. Perhaps he has destroyed his only means of salvation, as he views Isobel to be. But he has released his burden as well. His cross—trying to live up to Isobel's standards—has been a hard one to bear. "I have no worth," he tells Isobel at his most desperate moment. "I can't feel my worth. When I was with you, it was there." Isobel in fact brought happiness to no one during her life. The pain of impossible love suffered by the offstage character Gordon is one manifestation of this. As Marion tells her:

MARION [. . .] Everywhere you go, there are
arguments. God, how I hate all this human stuff.
Wherever you go, you cause misery. People crying,
people not talking. It overwhelms me. Because you
can't just live. Why can't you *live,* like other people?

Alternatively or perhaps additionally, Irwin's ejaculation may be an expression of relief because Isobel has been released from her trials and been made, finally, pure spirit. Gospel text of Jesus' final words on the cross vary widely. Matthew and Mark record the very human plea, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34), while that set down in Luke lacks desperation but still betrays human concerns: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). John, however, provides the simplest and perhaps most spiritual report of the last words spoken by

Jesus before the resurrection: "It is finished" (John 19:30). In accordance with the dramatic motif of the Gospel of John which will be discussed below, these words end the action of Jesus' life on earth, but they signify the joy of being freed of the corporal as well. When asked about the meaning of the title of the play David Hare responded, "It's that moment at which a nun expects to be united with Christ. In other words, it's death." Placed in the context of Christianity death becomes a blissful experience, the happy reward for a life of suffering, and Irwin's strange gratitude makes sense.

Although her presence on earth created division and misery, Isobel's death has ironically had a cleansing effect on the other characters. Once she is gone a certain peace does take hold of them. It seems that, despite her declaration to Irwin that one could not be saved through another person, salvation does indeed take place. In the last scene Tom, Marion and Katherine restore Robert's house as though it were a shrine to him and Isobel. In a manner reminiscent of the walk to Calvary, the villagers, we are informed, want to walk to the funeral en masse. Marion and Katherine, heretofore bitter enemies or worse, self-serving allies joined against Isobel, share a closeness which they had never before experienced, and while Tom declares, "I've slightly lost touch with the Lord Jesus", we know it is only Jesus the Businessman he is abandoning. Passion, too, is restored to Marion and Tom as they reaffirm a love and desire for one another that has not been evident before the final moments of the play. Overall there is a sense of health, of well-being. At last Isobel's worth is recognized, and as the play closes Marion attempts to resurrect her sister: "Isobel. We're just beginning. Isobel, where are you? (*She waits a moment.*) Isobel, why don't you come home?"

Hare ends the text of the play here, but interestingly, in the National Theatre of Great Britain production directed by Howard Davies, Isobel is successfully resurrected. She appears upstage on a diagonal from Marion, and both sisters have their arms outstretched and are moving towards one another. Davies's addition leaves one with a very strong sense that Isobel has in fact experienced the Secret Rapture.

Thematically, *The Secret Rapture* marks something of a departure for Hare. He has seldom failed to include politics in his work, and overt references to England's economy do exist in the play; for example, the question of the ethics behind investments is raised, and Scene 6 largely concerns Isobel's realization that her business has been used as a tax write-off. A strictly political interpretation, however, yields rather unsatisfying results. One theatre monthly ironically titled its cover story preceding the New York production, "A Kinder, Gentler David Hare," and we may well wonder what sort of sociopolitical statement the playwright intended to make. This is not to say that Hare needs to provide answers in his plays, nor has it been his practice to do so. His preferred style has been to present the problem and allow the audience to draw the conclusions. *A Map of the World* (1982) intelligently presents a dialectic on poverty in developing countries while at the same time allowing the cracks in both sides to be seen. *Fanshen* (1976) tells of both fine intentions and resultant failure during economic reform in China. But *The Secret Rapture* is politically a one-sided play, pitting Isobel's innocence and goodness against Marion as quintessential Tory capitalist, and it works thematically only until the last scene. It is one thing to destroy the last vestige of pre-Thatcher England and quite another to depict the hawk as turning vegetarian after it has had its chicken dinner. The

political dimension here seems almost obligatory; Hare knows that the best arguments give some credence to the opposition, and Marion is too much of a caricature to be taken seriously. True, greed, short-sightedness and the perverse passion for "clambering on the back [of the gravy train] and joining in the fun" are the elements which caused the corruption of Irwin and the destruction of Isobel. But Isobel, eternally passive, might have been taken down by much weaker forces. The Good Individual is rarely suffered to exist, and Jesus is but one example from history of this phenomenon; several others come from the realm of public service. Yet Marion's remorse makes Hare's ending, if taken politically, seem naïvely optimistic. Surely we are not to conclude that the loss of an individual will shake the conscience of the oppressors, or that passive resistance will eventually win the war. Hare explains his new concerns in *The Secret Rapture* this way:

[I]t became clear that personal character is more important to me than ideology. My anger about what's happened to English society didn't change. The difficulty of changing people became more clear. I'm bored by propaganda, either from the left or right. But goodness makes me weep. I see Isobel that way. So I said, Why don't I write about goodness? Why be a smartass?

Although some have suggested that Hare titled his play more for its cryptic resonance than with intent to suggest a parable, these words, taken together with the title, make it difficult to ignore the validity of the analysis given here. In choosing to write about goodness, Hare could find no parallel with which his audience would be more familiar than the drama of Jesus.

It is not inappropriate to discuss the life of Jesus in dramatic terms as I have done here. The Gospel According to John introduces the concept that Jesus' betrayal was divinely scripted:

I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen: but that the scripture may be fulfilled, He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me. [. . .]
Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him, that he should ask who it should be of whom he spake.
He then lying on Jesus' breast saith unto him, Lord, who is it? Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon.
And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly. [. . .]
He then having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night. Therefore, when he was gone

out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of man glorified, and
God is glorified in him. (John 13:18, 24-27, 30-31)

John differs from the synoptic gospels in that here Jesus purposely places Satan into the body of Judas in order to fulfill the predetermined terms of the Scriptures; that is, so that the drama can unfold as written. *The Secret Rapture* is of course a drama, but in addition to the usual dictates of characters fulfilling roles, we have Isobel's choice to enact a specific part leading towards a specific and predestined end. We can question, as with Jerry in Albee's *The Zoo Story,* whether or not Isobel has knowingly moved towards her own demise. The answer in Hare's play is that it can at least be said of Isobel that she does nothing to rewrite the script. The play opens with Isobel as a figure of goodness and she remains so throughout, significantly, while everything around her changes. She comes to a crossroads where she has the option to abandon her destiny, yet she chooses to follow the path laid out for her by some Divine Playwright, ostensibly her father. It is her devotion to her role and her refusal to accommodate her own worldly needs that entitle Isobel to the status of saint.

Source: Liorah Anne Golomb, "Saint Isobel: David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* as Christian Allegory," in *Modern Drama,* Vol. XXXIII, No. 4, December 1990, pp. 563-74.

Topics for Further Study

In the play, Marion French belongs to Britain's Conservative Party, led throughout the 1980s by Britain's Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Known as the "Iron Lady," Thatcher was a strong and sometimes controversial leader. Research the government of Margaret Thatcher between 1979 and 1990. What were some of her accomplishments as prime minister? What were some of the strong beliefs of the Conservative Party? How were they different from the beliefs of Britain's other major political group, the Labour Party?

There is a lot of religious imagery in *The Secret Rapture*. Isobel seems to behave like a saint. Late in the play, Irwin says she has "made some sort of vow," much like a nun or monk might. Even the title of the play, according to the playwright, means death, "that moment at which a nun expects to be united with Christ." Investigate the life of a famous saint. (You may want to check the Internet or the library for an index of well-known saints.) How are Isobel's life and experiences in the play similar to those of the saint you have chosen? How are they different? Consider such things as good deeds, patience, love for others, and sacrifice.

The eight scenes in *The Secret Rapture* flow into each other without blackouts or curtains being drawn across the stage. This requires some creative set design and stagecraft. Pick a scene transition, such as scene 1, Robert's bedroom that changes into scene 2, the back lawn of his house; or scene 6, Tom's office that changes into scene 7, Katherine's apartment. Then, decide how you would set the stage and change the scenery right in front of the audience. You may want to draw pictures and plans illustrating your ideas or create three-dimensional models using cardboard, paper, and other craft supplies.

One of the play's central characters, Katherine Glass, is an alcoholic. She claims to have stopped drinking several times but each time manages to start again. Her drinking binges lead to depression and to horrible behavior, such as when she attacks a business client with a steak knife in a restaurant. Research the most recent statistics and medical findings about alcoholism in the United States. How many people does this disease affect? What causes it? What have governments and physicians been doing to combat the effects of alcoholism on individuals, families, and society? What can be done to help protect yourself and others?

Many critics have suggested that David Hare creates very strong, often virtuous, female characters in his plays. In an interview with *American Theatre* magazine, the playwright himself agreed, "I've written about women a lot because my subject has often been goodness. The idea of men being good seems to me to be slightly silly." Consider the female characters in *The Secret Rapture*. Are they strong? In what ways? Which of them is "good"? How?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Margaret Thatcher is the first British prime minister in more than a century to be elected to three consecutive terms (1979-1990). Her Conservative Party is credited with Britain's economic turnaround through privatizing industries and minimizing the role of government in business and welfare. Thatcher's successses closely parallel those of President Ronald Reagan in the United States.

Today: Tony Blair is the first Labour Party prime minister in nearly two decades. After a landslide victory in the 1997 election, Blair leads his Labour Party to an astonishing second landslide vote in 2001. Blair and the "New Labourites" have instituted improved health care in Britain, the national minimum wage, and careful monitoring of the country's economic stability. Blair's successes in Britain closely parallel those of President Bill Clinton in the United States.

1980s: The first mass market cellular phone system appears in America in 1981. Cellular phone equipment is large and heavy. The cost of service limits its use mainly to corporations and wealthy individuals. The number of cellular telephone subscribers exceeds one million in 1987.

Today: Advanced technology has created cell phones that fit in the palm of the hand and weigh a few ounces. Service costs are competitive with household telephones, causing many to abandon traditional phone service in favor of mobile phones. More than half of all Americans, approximately 140 million, own cell phones.

1980s: In the 1950s, Britain was leader in the construction of nuclear power plants. By the 1980s, however, nuclear power is losing its appeal. The meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania and an even more disastrous partial meltdown at the Chernobyl plant in the Ukraine in 1986 cause many environmental groups, like Britain's Green Party, to call for a ban on nuclear plants. For most of the decade, government pays little attention to environmental matters. However, by 1988, Thatcher calls the protection of the environment "one of the great challenges of the late twentieth century."

Today: While early estimates predicted that nuclear power could provide up to 15 percent of the world's energy by 2000, the figure is greatly inflated. Because of public reaction to nuclear power plant problems, nuclear energy production has been scaled back significantly and now produces no more than 6 percent of the world's power.

1980s: Although investing in stocks has previously been considered a pastime for the wealthy, the majority of Americans and a great many Europeans begin to discover the profits that can be made in a "bull market." A "bull market" begins in America on August 17, 1982, when the Dow Jones Industrial Average rises 38.81 points to 831.24. This is the biggest ever one-day gain in the hundred-year history of the Dow Jones average. In Britain, millions of new investors turn to the London Stock Exchange when more flexible investing rules are introduced in 1986.

Today: As global trade increases, more people are becoming investors. An explosion of "dot-com" companies (businesses related to the computer industry) in the 1990s cause the value of technology stocks to rise quite high. After climbing steadily since 1990, the American Dow Jones market passes 12,000 points in 1999. However, many start-up technology companies are unable to turn a profit, causing a downturn in stocks in 2000 that has continued to the present day.

What Do I Read Next?

In a career that has lasted more than thirty years, David Hare has written and adapted more than twenty stage plays and a number of screenplays, most of which combine his talents for creating intense, personal conflicts with his interest in criticizing conservative politics in Britain. Some of his best-known and most popular plays include *Plenty* (1978); *A Map of the World* (1982); his trilogy of plays about social institutions in Great Britain, *Racing Demon* (for which he earned both an Olivier Award and a Tony Award following its production in 1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991), and *The Absence of War* (1992); and *Skylight* (1995).

Besides writing plays and movies, David Hare has also become an accomplished director and has contributed essays to newspapers, magazines, and anthologies. One of his own collections of his work is called *Writing Left-Handed* (1991). The essays in the book describe Hare's thoughts on his plays (including *The Secret Rapture*), as well as his perspectives on theatre history in Great Britain and his opinions about a variety of contemporary political issues.

Very early in his career, Hare was identified with other British "political" playwrights such as Howard Brenton, Edward Bond, Snoo Wilson, and Howard Barker. All of these writers explored the effects of politics on British society. For examples of their writing, one can read Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980), Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965), Snoo Wilson's *The Glad Hand* (1978), or Howard Barker's *The Loud Boy's Life* (1980).

Margaret Thatcher served as Britain's prime minister from 1979 to 1990, longer than any other prime minister of the twentieth century. The politics of her government left a strong mark on her country and its culture, and this is reflected in the work of writers like David Hare.

Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism by Ian Gilmour (1992) is a critique of Thatcher's reign that describes the downside of her economic, foreign, and social policies.

Further Study

Eyre, Richard, *Utopia and Other Places,* Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1993.

Richard Eyre was the artistic director of Britain's Royal National Theatre from 1988 to 1997. He directed several of Hare's plays at the National during that time. This autobiographical collection of essays includes Eyre's thoughts on actors and the theatre, British politics, and the importance of social class in England.

Homden, Carol, *The Plays of David Hare,* Cambridge University Press, 1995.

This analysis of selected plays and films by David Hare, including his trilogy *Racing Demon* (1990), *Murmuring Judges* (1991), and *The Absence of War* (1992), suggests that Hare is one of the leading playwrights of Britain's post-World War II generation.

Kerensky, Oleg, *The New British Drama: Fourteen Playwrights since Osborne and Pinter,* Taplinger Publishing Company, 1977.

This book is a survey of Britain's emerging new playwrights in the late 1960s and 1970s, including David Hare, Howard Barker, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, Peter Shaffer, Tom Stoppard, and others.

Oliva, Judy Lee, *David Hare: Theatricalizing Politics,* ProQuest UMI, 1990.

This comprehensive analysis of more than twenty of Hare's plays, television scripts, and films pays special attention to how the playwright's selection of content and style create a critique of politics and British society.

Page, Malcolm, comp., *File on Hare,* Methuen Drama, 1990.

This collection of excerpted criticism of Hare's plays, taken largely from theatre reviews in London and New York newspapers and magazines, also includes a chronology of Hare's work.

Zeifman, Hersh, ed., *David Hare: A Casebook,* Garland Publishing, 1994.

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Introduction

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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

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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.

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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.□
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