The Shrike Study Guide

The Shrike by Joseph Kramm

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Introduction

When *The Shrike*, penned by Joseph Kramm, opened on Broadway on January 15, 1952, it received accolades from the public and the critics, which helped guarantee a successful run for 161 performances. Later that year, the play won the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

The Shrike chronicles the experiences of Jim Downs, a middle-aged man who has been placed in a mental hospital after a failed suicide attempt, brought on by a stalled career in the theater. His severe depression and feelings of hopelessness are alleviated, however, when an opportunity presents itself for Jim to revive his career. He insists that he is strong enough to leave the hospital and to live a productive and happy life. The doctors, however, disagree. They are convinced that his mental instability has been caused by the failure of his marriage and not because he fears that he is losing his creative energies. The play traces Jim's desperate struggle with the hospital authorities to regain his independence and retain his autonomy. His battle is complicated by his wife, Ann, who in her desperation to hold onto their marriage, becomes an effective accomplice to the hospital's autocratic system. As Kramm documents the power plays Jim must endure as he attempts to gain his release from the hospital, he presents a compelling portrait of repression and resistance.

Author Biography

Joseph Kramm was born September 30, 1907, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The Shrike is Kramm's ninth play and the first to be published or produced. Kramm spent most of his time working on amateur theatricals while he was a student at the University of Pennsylvania, which caused his grades to suffer. After enduring psychological intelligence tests and evaluations by psychiatrists to determine the cause of his poor grades, he came away with a critical view of the psychiatric field, a judgment that would reappear in *The Shrike*.

Plot Summary

Act 1

The first act of *The Shrike* opens at a city psychiatric hospital. Ann Downs arrives with her husband, Jim, who has just swallowed a number of pills in a suicide attempt. Eventually, Jim regains consciousness and admits what he has done. Dr. Kramer, the attending physician, tells Miss Hansen, one of the nurses, to order extra care for Jim during the next forty-eight hours. When Miss Hansen shows her concern that Ann won't be able to pay for this, Ann insists that Jim get "anything that's needed." Ann tells the doctor that she found him in his apartment and admits that they are separated.

The next morning, Miss Cardell notes that Ann has stayed by Jim's side all night and so tells her to go home, but Ann refuses. Ann discusses Jim's case with Dr. Barrow, one of the hospital's psychiatrists. She tells him that when Jim regained consciousness, he asked her, "why didn't you let me die?" Barrow tells her to get all the information she can from Jim, explaining that what he says now will express "what he really thinks and feels. As he regains consciousness, he will begin to build the walls again." In an effort to help determine Jim's motivation for the suicide, Ann notes that Jim once directed a Broadway show that got good notices, but he has not been able to get work since.

During a conversation with Dr. Barrow, Jim admits that he wants to die because he feels that he is "no good," that he has "gotten nowhere," and that he is too old now to be a success. When Ann tells him she loves him, Jim warns her that he does not want her love. In a private conversation with Barrow, Ann insists that Jim still loves her.

Two days later, Jim is sitting up in bed, focused on getting out of the hospital as soon as possible. He asks Grosberg, an attendant, to mail a letter for him to Charlotte, his girlfriend. Ann arrives and tells Jim that he got a call about a job in the theater. The news excites him and prompts him to speed up his recovery. Ann worries that he is pushing himself too much. When Jim tells Barrow that he wants to leave in a few days so that he can interview for the position, the doctor decides to consult with the hospital's other psychiatrists.

In a private moment, Jim tells Ann that when he gets out, he will not be coming back to her, but she refuses to discuss it with him. Dr. Kramer tells him that medically, he will be well enough to leave soon and that he could not have gotten better so quickly without Ann's help. Later, when Dr. Barrow and Dr. Schlesinger discuss Jim's case with Ann, she admits that she is not sure Jim is ready to leave. She tells the doctors that Jim's eyes do not always focus and occasionally he says "something wild and incoherent," although when pressed, she does not remember exactly what. When she wonders aloud what would happen if he did not get the job, Schlesinger concludes that Jim would be in worse shape if he failed.

Schlesinger tells Ann that a woman named Charlotte has been calling and has been trying to get in to see Jim. When Ann reveals who she is, Schlesinger decides that it would be too great a strain for him to see her. Dr. Kramer tells Jim that he will be healthy enough by Monday to leave.

Ann has further conversations with Dr. Schlesinger about her relationship with Jim. Later, when Jim speaks to the doctor, he admits that he tried to kill himself because he thought his life was "hopeless." Jim tells him that he has no plans to return to Ann when he gets out. When the doctor's questions about Ann and Charlotte get too personal, Jim refuses to answer. The doctor then tells him that his release may have to be postponed and that he will be transferred to a convalescent ward for a few days. Jim becomes dazed at this news, and later, when he expresses his fears about being made to stay in the hospital, Ann tries to reassure him that it will only be for a few days. Jim, realizing that she is in agreement with the doctors, feels a chill run through him when he looks at her.

Act 2

Jim arrives in Ward One the next day and meets the other patients. During an interview with Jim, Dr. Bellman tells him that he has acquired a reputation for being "belligerent and nasty," which shocks Jim. They discuss Jim's relationship with Ann, and then Jim takes a standard psychological test, which he criticizes. When he asks when he can go home, the doctor tells him not for a while.

After two men on the ward fight, one is sent to Ward Seven, where the violent patients are kept. Miss Wingate, one of the student nurses, gives Jim a telegram from Charlotte and warns him that if he does not break off his relationship with her, he will never get out of the hospital. She explains that his release depends on Ann.

The next day, during a conversation with Ann, Jim begins to suspect that she is trying to keep him there. He asks her to contact a psychiatrist friend in an effort to get himself released. She agrees and then asks him to sign over his paycheck to her so she can pay his bills. Later, she tells Dr. Bellman that she is worried about Jim being committed and insists that she will assume responsibility for him if he is released. She admits, however, that she is not sure he is ready. Days later, when an increasingly frantic Jim explodes at the other patients, an attendant threatens him with Ward Seven.

Act 3

Two days later, Harry Downs, Jim's brother, arrives with Ann to visit the embarrassed patient. Ann admits that she has had Jim's phone disconnected and has the calls forwarded to her. She tells Jim that she tried to contact his psychiatrist friend but that he did not want to get involved. Harry explains to Jim that he has said and done things since he has been there to make the doctors think he should remain in the hospital.

In a private conversation, Harry informs Jim that the only way he can get out of the hospital is to tell the doctors what they want to hear, including that he loves Ann and wants to go back to her. He tells Jim that Ann has rented his apartment to someone else and that all of his things have been moved to Ann's. Jim suggests that he could move back with Ann only temporarily, but Harry tells him that he will be in her custody and so she could have him recommitted at any time.

Four days later, Jim has become the model patient. When he meets with the doctors, he convinces them that he loves Ann and wants to reestablish their relationship. Later, Jim tells Ann and his brother that he loves Ann and is sorry for the way he has treated her. Ann insists to the doctors that Jim is telling the truth. They agree and decide to release him. When Jim is told, he calls Ann, asking her to pick him up. After he hangs up, he sobs, knowing that he is "trapped."

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The Shrike is Joseph Kramm's three-act play about hopelessness, desperation, and manipulation in the life of Jim Downs, a frustrated theater director, and the cunning power plays of his wife, Ann, who dominates her husband's vulnerabilities for her own gain.

The play opens in the psychiatric ward of a city hospital at 11:30 a.m. on a Tuesday morning. All the beds in the ward are filled and are tended to by the head nurse, Miss Hansen, and a student nurse, Miss Cardell. The doctor in the ward is a man named Dr. Kramer who is about thirty years old.

Miss Cardell attempts to retrieve cigarettes from a patient, Mr. Fleming, who repeatedly breaks the rule against cigarettes in the ward. Miss Hansen answers a phone call announcing the imminent arrival of a man who has attempted suicide. Miss Hansen arranges for a bed for the new patient and Dr. Kramer instructs Miss Hansen to call Dr. Barrow, a hospital psychiatrist.

Miss Cardell successfully relieves Mr. Fleming of his cigarettes but Mr. Fleming gives money to the male orderly, Grosberg, to buy him some more cigarettes. Grosberg stealthily takes the money and positions the new bed according to Miss Hansen's directions.

A bell announces the arrival of the new patient, Jim Downs, who is wheeled in on a gurney followed by his wife, Ann Downs. Dr. Kramer begins his physical exam of Jim and is soon joined by Dr. Barrow who tries to awaken Jim to determine what pills he has taken and in what dosage. Jim groggily admits to taking 156 Phenobarbital tablets but is too drowsy to answer any more questions.

Dr. Kramer orders medical procedures, and some special nurses to monitor Jim during the critical 48 hours to follow. Miss Hansen voices a concern that nurses may not be available because it is the week of Thanksgiving and most people are away for the holiday. There is also concern for the extra expense but Ann tells the medical staff to provide Jim with anything he needs.

Dr. Kramer asks Ann how Jim's suicide attempt occurred but she cannot answer with conviction because she and Jim have been separated and live apart. Ann had received a phone call from Jim's brother that morning, telling her that he had received a letter from Jim, indicating his intent to take his life. Ann had called the police and then rushed to Jim's apartment immediately after this phone call and found Jim passed out.

Dr. Kramer is desperate to find out what time Jim swallowed the pills and Ann's best guess is that it had been sometime yesterday morning. Jim had spoken to Ann very late Sunday night and they agreed to meet at four o'clock Monday but Jim never showed up.

Dr. Barrow interrupts, asking if anyone knows who Charlotte is because Jim keeps mentioning her name while in his groggy state. Ann tells the doctors that Charlotte is just someone that Jim knew. Dr. Kramer suggests the Last Rites for Jim and Ann becomes hysterical, because she did not realize that Jim's condition is so grave. Ann leaves the ward to place a phone call to Jim's brother.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The play is set in the psychiatric ward of a city hospital that is filled to capacity at the time that Jim Downs is brought in. The author makes the point that the stresses of everyday life have driven vulnerable people to this last resort when they can no longer cope with outside factors. It is not coincidental that the action occurs during the week of Thanksgiving, which is the biggest family holiday in the United States and source of major angst and suicide attempts.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

It is now several hours later at 2:00 in the morning and Ann has been at Jim's bedside since he was brought in yesterday morning. Miss Cardell suggests that Ann go home to rest for a little while but Ann will not leave Jim. Ann accepts a cup of coffee offered by Miss Cardell and is anxious to speak to Dr. Barrow who has just entered the ward.

Dr. Barrow suggests that Ann question Jim whenever he is semi-conscious because people reveal their true motives in this state when their defenses are down. Dr. Barrow questions Ann about any explanations for the suicide attempt that Jim may have provided in his letter to his brother but Ann says that there was nothing mentioned along that line.

Ann offers up the fact that Jim has not worked in his profession as a Broadway theater director since his last play several years ago and has been depressed at his failure to reclaim any of his former success.

Jim begins to rouse, stating that he wants to die and Dr. Barrow questions his motives. Jim replies that he is too old now to ever be a success in the theater and his life is over. Ann tells Jim that she loves him but he replies that he does not want that love. Ann, however, is undaunted and tells Dr. Barrow that she still loves her husband, a factor that Dr. Barrow considers positive.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

The author writes about the theme of middle-aged disappointment in this scene which is the basis for the plot line. When this play was written in 1950, the opportunities for those in the dramatic arts were severely limited as opposed to the outlets today. The stage and some cinema opportunities existed but nothing compared to the entertainment industry outlets available fifty years later. Jim's artistic sensibilities, combined with minimal professional success and a failing marriage add up to what psychiatrists today call a mid-life crisis. In 1950's America, though, men did not allow themselves to have fears or vulnerabilities and Jim's solution of suicide seems to be a dramatic and practical solution for someone in Jim's state of mind.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

It is now noon, two days later, the day after Thanksgiving. Jim is sitting up in bed and the ward is bathed in warm sunlight streaming through the barred windows. Grosberg delivers lunch to the patients and Jim jokes with Grosberg, asking him to mail a letter for him. Ann arrives soon afterward and tells Jim that she has good news, which she will reveal after Jim has eaten his lunch.

Jim balks and Ann tells him that she received a phone call about a theater job interview for Jim on Monday. Jim's spirits are instantly lifted and he wants to try to walk so that he can be ready for Monday's appointment. Dr. Kramer thinks that Jim is fine physically but leaves the final decision to Dr. Barrow and the chief psychiatrist, Dr. Schlesinger.

Ann is encouraged by Jim's progress but her spirits dip when he tells her that he will not be returning home after his release from the hospital.

Dr. Barrow and Dr. Schlesinger speak privately to Ann, who shares a concern that Jim may not be ready to return to the outside world yet because sometimes his eyes do not focus properly and he makes wild, outrageous statements. Ann offers the opinion that getting the theater job would be wonderful for Jim but Dr. Schlesinger wonders about the devastating effects on Jim if he is denied the position.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

As the scene opens, the warm sunlight and Jim's improved demeanor portend a positive turn in the action and in Jim's state of mind, but this is soon reversed. The author uses the technique of foreshadowing in this scene when Ann tells the psychiatrists that Jim may not be ready to return to the outside. The doctors press Ann for more explanation but she is vague and the doctors take her word over Jim's intentions, which will become an important fact as the play progresses.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

It is now Monday morning and Dr. Schlesinger and Ann are discussing Jim in Dr. Schlesinger's office. Ann admits that Jim has not had psychiatric problems in the past but that it would be helpful if he were to spend some time in the hospital to recover slowly. Ann also feels that Jim will come to his senses and want to heal their marriage.

Dr. Schlesinger mentions that the woman named Charlotte keeps calling his office in hopes of seeing Jim but he has denied her admission to Jim's ward at the hospital. Ann feels that Charlotte is behind Jim's suicide attempt but cannot prove anything. Ann leaves the office because Jim is expected for a meeting with Dr. Schlesinger at any time and the doctor does not want Jim to see that Ann has been meeting with him.

Jim enters the office for his appointment, anxious to be released in time to keep his job interview later today. Dr. Schlesinger asks Jim why he tried to kill himself and Jim tells him that the prior Saturday he had invited a friend to dinner at his apartment and did not have any dessert available when the guest asked for it. Jim broke down at that time because he did not have enough money to buy dessert.

Dr. Schlesinger tells Jim that it seems extreme to collapse over the topic of dessert but Jim reveals to the doctor that he is barely making ends meet with his teaching job. Jim also shares his longing to return to the theater where his last success was several years before, and he feels as if he is too old now to make a name for himself in the dramatic arts.

Jim mentions that he and Ann were to meet on that Monday afternoon and he wanted to see if his G.I. Insurance Policy were still in effect so that Ann could get the benefits if he were to die. After confirming that the policy is in good standing, Jim wrote the letter to his brother notifying him of the insurance. Jim placed the letter and his apartment key in the envelope addressed to his brother, put the envelope on the kitchen table, unlocked his apartment door, and then went to his bedroom to swallow the pills.

Jim tells Dr. Schlesinger that he had been able to collect the pills from different pharmacies around town, which gave them to Jim without a prescription. Jim decided to mail the letter to his brother and went outside after he had taken the pills. He remembers thinking that, as he greeted people on the street, he is in the process of dying. Jim returned to his bed and apparently passed out about ten minutes later.

Dr. Schlesinger wants to know if Jim will return to Ann after his release but Jim doubts that he will. Dr. Schlesinger is surprised, based on Ann's attentiveness over the last several days, but Jim reveals to Dr. Schlesinger that Ann puts on a pleasant front for other people when she is actually a manipulative and cunning woman.

Jim tells Dr. Schlesinger that Ann wants him to return to there home to avoid loneliness, not because she really loves him. Jim reveals that he has been seeing Charlotte, and Dr. Schlesinger tells Jim that his letter to her has been intercepted because of hospital rules.

The meeting ends with Dr. Schlesinger telling Jim that he is not well enough to leave the hospital and will be moved to the convalescent ward for a few days for observation.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

Ann is manipulating the situation by telling Dr. Schlesinger that Jim should not yet be released although she cannot provide any definite facts to support her case. Ann is aware of Jim's relationship with Charlotte and wants Jim to return home to her. Knowing that Jim will not want to return home, Ann plans a pre-emptive strike so that Charlotte does not have Jim either. Ann also knows that if Jim were to get the new job, his life would revive and he would divorce her to be with Charlotte, so Ann is vague in her descriptions of Jim's behavior but effectively plants seeds of doubt in the minds of the psychiatrists.

Ironically, Jim has tried to save his life by leaving the controlling and irascible Ann and through the suicide attempt, but his attempts have been thwarted by Ann's control and preferred position with the doctors.

Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

Jim returns to the psychiatric ward and tells the nurses and other patients that he is upset because he will not be released today as he had hoped but will be moved to the convalescent ward. Mr. Fleming tells Jim that nobody who goes to that convalescent ward ever leaves as soon as they expect.

Mr. Fleming and Grosberg explain to Jim that he is in the psychiatric building which Jim had not realized. Jim challenges Grosberg for not mailing his letter and Grosberg tells Jim that hospital policy will not permit him to mail anything for patients.

Grosberg tells Jim that some suicidal patients are released to go home directly from this ward and do not necessarily have to spend time in the convalescent ward. Jim begins to get upset because it seems as if he is being detained for no reason especially since he has cooperated with everyone.

Ann enters the ward and realizes the conversation Jim has been having with the other men and tells Jim that his stay in the convalescent ward will only be for a few days. Jim realizes to his horror that Ann had known about this plan and has agreed to the treatment.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

As this act ends, Jim realizes the ultimate betrayal from Ann who has obviously conspired to keep him hospitalized. Jim is able to determine from the others that he could have been released without spending time in the convalescent ward but that something has prevented that from happening. Jim knows that Ann understands the importance of the job interview but has essentially denied him the opportunity for hope and happiness by arranging for further observation in the convalescent ward.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

This act opens in the convalescent ward on the first floor of the hospital. This ward is also filled to capacity with men in various stages of hostility and complacency. The patients include a man named George O'Brien, a Hispanic, a Jewish boy named Sam Tager, a Greek man named John Ankoritis, and Joe Major, a Negro man.

Jim is escorted into the ward by an attendant named Gregory, who finds an empty bed. Jim walks slowly in a disoriented state. The men introduce themselves to Jim and then go about their conversation, from which Jim is able to discern a fear about being sent to "seven." The men tell Jim that everything they do or say is monitored and could be used against any of them at any time.

One of the men tells Jim to be careful about being sent to "seven" which is the violent ward of the hospital where patients are strapped into straitjackets and from where the possibility of being sent to the state hospital is very high. Gregory confirms for Jim that it is not up to the doctors to prove that the patients are crazy; it is up to the patients to prove that they are not.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The author sets the scene to mirror Jim's confused state of mind. The men in the convalescent ward are angry about being there with no deadline or plan for release. Some of the men have spent time in jail, which was easier than doing time in this ward because the punishment fit the crime and the release date was well known. This state of ambiguity creates tension that is bound to erupt with serious consequences.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Jim meets with another psychiatrist, Dr. Bellman, who asks Jim to recount his suicide attempt. Jim is annoyed at the repeated request but complies, and tells the doctor that his wife needed money and the insurance policy was the only option he had remaining so he tried to kill himself. Dr. Bellman wants to discuss Charlotte but Jim will not bring her into this discussion of his life.

According to Jim, suicide is not a selfish act in his case because all the people he knows would soon be over his death. Jim feels that mourning the dead is a huge waste of time and that it is an unnecessary complication to a normal fact of life.

Dr. Bellman gives Jim a standard sanity test and Jim is annoyed because he simply wants to go home and begin his life again, but Dr. Bellman cannot give Jim any immediate hope of that.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The theme of individual rights, or the lack of them, is very strong in this scene. The men are corralled into a ward and treated the same despite their individual problems. Jim's annoyance at the standard test, the answers to which mean nothing relative to a person's sanity, proves that he is just as sane as the doctor evaluating him. It is possibly Jim's awareness of this flaw in the mental health system that will keep him hospitalized because the doctors and administrators do not have the time or funding to manage individual cases properly and Jim has shed light on their flaws.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

It is nearly bedtime in the ward and some of the men ask Jim questions about celebrities he may know since he is in show business. The night nurse, Miss Wingate, enters the room and tells the men that it is time for bed and the men comply. Soon, old tensions between two of the men erupt into a fight and Miss Wingate returns to the room and sends one of the men to "seven." Two male attendants carry the man, kicking and screaming, out of the ward.

The other men are quiet for a while but Jim is in shock, never having witnessed anything like this before. Miss Wingate gives Jim a telegram that she had forgotten about. The telegram is from Charlotte, asking Jim to tell the doctors that he wants to see her because that is the only way she will be allowed to come.

Jim is required to show the telegram to Miss Wingate and she tells Jim that he needs to end his relationship with Charlotte and return to his wife. Miss Wingate provides paper and pencil so that Jim may write the letter to Charlotte. Miss Wingate also tells Jim that his wife could have him released if only she would request it.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Jim has lost all sense of independence and is even told how to manage his personal life by a nurse who knows nothing about his life prior to this stay. It is clear that fear is the main engine of patient management and drastic measures are taken with no chance for explanation. Jim also feels again betrayed by Ann when he learns that she could have had him released but has not done so. Ann's control of Jim's life is just beginning, and this betrayal serves as foreshadowing of the gravity of Ann's actions soon to come.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

Ann arrives for a visit with Jim and tells him that she has spoken with Dr. Bellman on the phone. Jim tells Ann that she can have him released if she will just make the arrangements. Ann promises to look into that option but says that Dr. Bellman thinks Jim needs to stay for a while. Jim asks Ann if she is trying to get him committed and she denies it.

Jim breaks down trying to explain the pressure to act normal in an abnormal situation and how he lives in fear of being sent to "seven" or being transferred to the state hospital. Jim agrees to get psychiatric help on the outside but wants to leave the hospital. Ann reminds Jim that they do not have the money for private psychiatrists and Jim offers the options of going to the VA hospital or a clinic.

Dr. Bellman enters the room and Jim turns so the doctor cannot see his tears. Dr. Bellman would like to speak to Ann but, before she leaves Jim, she asks about his recent contact with Charlotte and tells Jim to endorse his last paycheck so that she can pay some bills. Ann also tells Jim that he had been selected for the theater job and it is unfortunate that he will not be able to accept it because he is in the hospital.

Ann meets with Dr. Bellman and tells him that she does not think Jim is ready to be released because of some of the violent statements he has been making. Dr. Bellman agrees that Jim seems hostile and antagonistic and that he should remain under observation for a while.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

The play's title becomes symbolic in this scene with Ann's cruel behavior toward Jim. A shrike is a bird that impales its prey on a thorn or other sharp object to keep it in place while it feasts and breaks the victim into smaller, more manageable pieces for consumption. Ann is the ultimate bird of prey and has forced Jim into a position where she can break his spirit day-by-day until he agrees to love her once more. Taking Jim's paycheck, keeping him locked up, and telling him that he had the theater job are just appetizers for Ann and the manipulative tactics she has yet to put into play.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

Five days pass and Jim's nerves are increasingly on edge. When some of the other men sing and play guitar in the ward, Jim is noticeably irritated, especially when Miss Wingate and Gregory cannot tell Jim when he can talk to Dr. Bellman again. Jim loses his patience and kicks over the game table and Gregory is able to calm him temporarily but warns Jim that outbursts like that could get him sent to "seven." Jim acquiesces and stares mournfully out the window as the music and singing begin once more.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

The author builds to the climax of the play as Jim's mood grows increasingly darker and his patience is almost exhausted. Jim's outburst actually shows his sanity at the injustice of his situation among the other men who have accepted their fate and do not question the logic of their hospitalization.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Two days pass and Ann brings Jim's brother, Harry, for his first visit since Jim has been in the hospital. Jim is embarrassed that Harry sees him in this vulnerable state. Harry tells him that he has come as soon as he could, given the demands of his business and family.

Ann tells Jim that some of his students have been asking about him and that she has told the school that Jim will not be able to return to his teaching position. Ann also tells Jim that she has had his apartment phone disconnected and his calls are being forwarded to her phone number.

Harry asks for a few moments alone with Jim and Ann reluctantly agrees to leave them. Harry tells Jim that Ann is his only means of being released from the hospital and that Jim must start acting as if he loves her again. Harry also counsels Jim about cooperating with the doctors and attendants so that they will believe that he has had a change of heart and is ready to go home.

Harry also shares with Jim that Ann has rented Jim's apartment to someone else and that Jim will be forced to return home with Ann. Jim feels that he could manage this situation for a while but Harry tells him that Jim will always be in Ann's custody and she could have him committed any time she wants.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

The author uses irony in this scene with Harry's explanation of how Jim can be released from the hospital. Jim must act as if he loves his wife and wants just a regular job in order to be happy. This is the exact opposite of what Jim feels and wants, and the necessity of Jim being forced to act in this manner is the real insanity in the story.

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

A few days later, Dr. Bellman, Dr. Barrow, Miss Wingate, and Gregory are meeting to discuss Jim's condition. It is the group consensus that Jim is participating with the doctors and engaging in pleasant activities with the other patients. The doctors give Jim a word association test and question whether Jim is sincere about his professed love for Ann or if he is cleverly acting. The doctors dismiss Jim from the meeting and agree that they tend to believe that he is sincere.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Jim has managed his first hurdle in his release by convincing the doctors that he has abandoned Charlotte and any ideas of a theatrical career in favor of returning to Ann and finding a steady job. Again, the author points out the irony in Jim killing his soul in order to save his life.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

Three days pass and Ann arrives on visiting day with her brother, Tom, who wants to know Jim's intentions toward Ann. Jim tells Ann and Tom that he loves Ann and wants to return to their marriage but Tom impresses on Jim the fact that some other people in the family do not necessarily think that a reconciliation between Ann and Jim is the best solution.

Jim contends that he does love Ann, and Tom makes Jim agree to go with him to tell Charlotte that he can no longer see her. Jim agrees to the terms, embraces Ann, and returns to the ward.

Ann meets briefly with Dr. Bellman and assures him that Jim has changed and is ready to be released. Dr. Bellman will speak to Jim tomorrow and may release him then.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

The symbolic shrikes, Ann and Tom, have Jim in their clutches and Jim must play the part of the adoring and repentant husband in order to stop the immediate pain of the hospitalization. Jim's only crime is that he wanted to be happy and now he must fall back into the life he hated in order to go forward.

Act 3, Scene 4

Act 3, Scene 4 Summary

Dr. Bellman keeps his promise to Ann and meets with Jim the next day. Jim tells Dr. Bellman that he feels differently about himself than he did when he entered the hospital two weeks ago. Jim tells Dr. Bellman that he is ready to go home and find some sort of job and just recover from this whole experience.

Dr. Bellman asks Jim if he thinks he will need psychiatric help once he leaves the hospital and Jim replies that he does not think it will be necessary. Jim is also prepared to address any stigma related to his hospitalization and repeats that he is ready to be released just as soon as possible.

Dr. Bellman surprises Jim by releasing him immediately and giving Jim permission to call his wife. He reminds Jim that he will be released into Ann's custody. Jim phones Ann and tells her that he has been discharged and asks her to bring a few articles of clothing. Jim hangs up the phone and breaks down sobbing with the realization that he is completely trapped.

Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis

Jim is resigned to going back to live with Ann, finding some sort of job, and giving up his dreams of being in love with Charlotte so that he will be released. As Ann's prisoner for the duration of his life, Jim will be haunted by the fact that Ann can have him committed at any time for the slightest indiscretion. Based on Ann's characteristics and behavior during the play, she will continue to act the part of the shrike and Jim will never be free.

In the ultimate irony, Jim has killed the life he wanted because he could not effectively kill himself, leaving the job to Ann.

Characters

John Ankoritis

A patient at the hospital, John Ankoritis is proud of his Greek heritage and his intellect. He is friendly to Jim when Jim first comes to the hospital.

Dr. Barrow

Dr. Barrow, one of the psychiatrists at the hospital, discusses Jim's case at length with Ann. He allows her opinions to influence his decisions on Jim's treatment and length of stay.

Dr. Bellman

Another psychiatrist at the hospital, Dr. Bellman appears interchangeable with the other doctors in that he also tries to get Jim to conform to their notion of sanity. He tells Jim that he has acquired the reputation for being "belligerent and nasty." He, like the others, allows Ann to manipulate Jim. In his final interview with Jim, he tries to catch Jim in a lie, but when Jim calmly and passively answers questions in a way that he knows will show his submission, he decides that Jim is ready to leave the hospital.

Miss Cardell

Miss Cardell, a student nurse, works on Ward One. She maintains a tough, condescending tone toward the patients. The play opens with her chastising Mr. Fleming, one of the patients, for smoking and with her threatening to write him up. While she feels herself above running errands for the doctors, she does try to get information from the patients to give to them. As she tries to console Ann, she reveals her prejudices when she insists, "no man is worth it."

Frank Carlisle

Frank Carlisle, an elderly black patient, is "the gentlest man in the world" and expresses his desire to be left alone.

Charlotte

Charlotte never appears in the play but she plays a crucial role. She and Jim have formed a romantic relationship that impedes Jim's attempts to be released from the hospital. When he wakes from his drug induced stupor at the beginning of the play, Jim

repeatedly calls her name, and she continually tries to see him at the hospital. The doctors refuse to let the two meet, insisting that their relationship is an indication of Jim's mental instability. By the end of the play, Jim reluctantly agrees to break off his relationship with Charlotte and return to Ann to gain his release from the hospital.

Ann Downs

At the beginning of the play, Ann appears to be a concerned, loving wife. She is quite worried about her husband's condition and determined to do everything she can to guarantee his recovery. Her true motives, however, emerge as the play unfolds. Ann conspires with the doctors to keep Jim in the hospital until he agrees to come back to her.

Ann reveals her manipulative nature as she discusses Jim's condition with the doctors. She insists to Dr. Barrow that it would help Jim "immensely" to get treatment for his depression and to take things slowly, and that as a result, Jim will eventually realize that leaving her was a mistake. She takes complete control of Jim's life while he is in the hospital, renting his apartment, telling his students that he will not be back in the classroom, forwarding his mail to her, and asking him to sign over his paychecks to her.

Jim explains to the doctors that the reason he left Ann was that he did not have a stable life with her. He recognizes her controlling nature, explaining that it took him a long time to "get out of her clutches." When the doctor reminds Jim what she has done for him since he has been in the hospital, Jim insists that she is an unreasonable person and is continually angered by inconsequential things.

Harry Downs

Harry Downs, a small-town businessman, becomes very uneasy at the sight of his brother at the hospital. When he warns his brother Jim that Jim's attempted suicide and stay in a state mental hospital is not good for Harry's business or his family, he reveals his self-centeredness. Harry gets defensive when Jim expresses his anger that Harry has not come to visit him sooner, insisting, "I'm not a free man.... I've got things to do." His lack of freedom becomes apparent during a conversation with Jim about cooperating with the doctors. Harry explains that there is nothing Jim can do to win his release unless he fully cooperates with the authority of the hospital. He instructs Jim to tell the doctors what they want to hear, just as Harry does to the police or to business clients who make passes at his wife.

While he understands that Ann has been manipulating Jim's situation and that she has made her husband completely dependent on her, Harry insists that she loves him and that Jim should decide he is in love with her to get out of the hospital. When Jim maintains that he cannot love her, Harry warns that Jim will face permanent incarceration if he does not give in to her. Harry explains, "I know it goes against the grain," and that "no man is better for selling himself," yet Harry is not strong enough to fight for Jim's, or his own, freedom, and so he suggests that Jim give up the fight.

Jim Downs

At the beginning of the play, Jim's mental condition is unstable. After his failed suicide attempt, he stays in the same depressed state that prompted him to try to take his life. He quickly finds the will to live, however, when Ann tells him of the possibility of a job in the theatre. Jim has not been able to find fulfillment in his life through his work or his marriage. Years ago, he had a successful experience directing a play, but since then, he has not been able to find work in the theatre, his first love. The teaching and odd jobs he has accepted since have not assuaged his artistic desires.

Faced with the possibility of working again in the theatre, Jim gains enough strength to try to pull himself out of his depression and begin his life again. He determines to convince the doctors that he is capable of leaving the hospital and carrying on a "normal" life. Jim reveals his intelligence as he patiently and thoughtfully answers the doctors' questions, often challenging their reliability and value.

Still, the doctors, with the help of Ann, thwart his attempts to leave. Jim fights nobly to gain his freedom, trying calmly and truthfully to answer all of their questions, but to no avail. At the end of the play, Jim finds no alternative but to go back to Ann. In the last scene, he is a broken man, as he recognizes that he has forever lost his autonomy.

Fleming

Fleming is the first patient Jim meets at the hospital. His opening scene with one of the student nurses reveals how little freedom the patients have there.

Don Gregory

Don Gregory is an attendant in Ward One. Most of the time, he is friendly with the men in the ward, often getting them lights for their cigarettes, but when they do not follow the rules, he threatens them with a transfer to Ward Seven, the violent ward.

Grosberg

An attendant at the hospital, Grosberg is relatively friendly with the patients, trying to soften the blow when others threaten to send them to Ward Seven. However, he, like the rest of the hospital staff, will not allow the patients any liberties. For example, when Jim gives him a letter asking him to mail it to Charlotte, he turns the letter over to the doctors.

Miss Hansen

Miss Hansen, one of the nurses at the hospital, shows her penchant for following the rules when the doctor tells her to provide extra care for Jim and she wonders where Jim will get the money to pay for it. The stage directions note that Miss Hansen "has been soured rather than mellowed by her contact with illness."

Dr. Kramer

Dr. Kramer, the resident physician at the hospital, appears to be more rational than the psychiatrists. While the other doctors determine to demonstrate that everything Jim says proves that he is unstable, Dr. Kramer insists that it is normal for someone to declare that he will try to kill himself again right after he has made an attempt. He continually encourages Jim to work hard to improve his health and declares Jim physically fit to leave the hospital a few days after he gets there.

George O'Brien

George O'Brien, a young patient, shows his passivity when he admits that he came to the hospital looking for someone to give him a physical and they kept him there instead. His fragility becomes apparent in his emotional responses to the slurs Schloss throws at him. During one of these events, he threatens to break Schloss's neck; as a result, he is dragged off to Ward Seven.

Dr. Schlesinger

Dr. Schlesinger, the head psychiatrist at the hospital, deals with Jim in a cold, clinical manner. He continually pries into his personal life as he assesses his mental condition. His responses during his interviews with Jim reveal his notion that a sane person is one who conforms to society's norms.

William Schloss

William Schloss, the toughest patient at the hospital, initially appears friendly, offering to read to the others from the book he is writing. He admits that he has served time in jail for defrauding the government and that he was sent to the hospital after he hit his wife and children. More evidence of his cruelty, along with his racism, emerges in his constant taunting of O'Brien, which eventually causes O'Brien to be sent to the violent ward.

Sam Tager

Sam Tager, another patient, provides firsthand information about Ward Seven, which fills the others with fear. He explains that he was put in a straightjacket on Seven after trying to throw himself in front of a subway train and subsequently fighting with the police.

Miss Wingate

Miss Wingate, a student nurse, exercises her control over the men by continually threatening them with Ward Seven. She is the one who reports O'Brien after his fight with Schloss. She reinforces the power structure of the hospital when she informs Jim that he will never get out of there if he tries to hold onto his girlfriend.

Themes

Repression and Resistance

Throughout the play, Jim resists the hospital's attempts to dictate his morality. The doctors continually test Jim in an effort to establish his mental instability, yet he often proves himself to be keenly perceptive of their practices. On one occasion, when his psychiatrist asks him general questions about history and current events, Jim provides all the correct answers and argues that the questions prove nothing except "that institutional practice and honesty are not compatible." He adds, "we should be treated as individuals, but we're handled in categories, the same routine for everyone." Finally, he inquires whether the treatment the patients receive is due to the doctors' inexperience or lack of time. Yet, while Jim has clearly shown his mental acumen in his accurate assessment of hospital procedure, he does not win his freedom. When at the end of this session, Jim asks when he will be allowed to go home, his doctor tells him, "not for a while."

Jim also struggles to resist Ann's control over him. Before his suicide attempt, he had successfully broken off his relationship with her, but in the hospital, she regains her power under the guise of helping him to regain his sanity. She continually couches her motives in her seemingly selfless concern for his well being. During his stay in the hospital, she has in effect, taken over his life. She removes all of his belongings to her home, forwards his mail, tells his students that he will not be returning, and convinces Jim to sign his paychecks over to her so that she can pay his bills, all done in an effort, she insists, to alleviate any pressures on him. As a result, she has guaranteed that Jim has nowhere else to go when he is eventually released from the hospital.

As Jim tries to resist the hospital authority and his wife's manipulations, he becomes understandably upset. Yet his honest emotions are used to entrap him further. When Harry tells Jim that he "showed a great deal of antagonism and resentment" in their interviews, Jim wonders, "what do they expect? They probe and pry and get you upset and then expect you to behave like a normal human being." Jim sees the consequences of an honest display of emotion as George O'Brien, one of his fellow patients, is dragged off to the violent ward after his emotional, yet justifiable, response to another patient's racist taunts.

Gender Roles

In the play, the audience does not get a clear picture of Ann's motivation for her cold manipulation of Jim's predicament. Kramm does suggest a possible cause, though. During one of her interviews with Dr. Barrow, Ann admits that after she married Jim, she gave up her career in the theater. When Dr. Barrow asks her whether she regrets her decision, she pauses, and then responds with "a bitter smile, 'We all have our vanity, Doctor.'" In this scene, Ann suggests that her desperate desire to hold on to Jim, even

against his will, stems from her giving up her profession. As many women did in the 1950s, Ann set aside her own independence and devoted herself to helping her husband succeed. As a result, she has become understandably "bitter," and so is not willing to give up the man who has become her entire world. Jim admits that she has nothing else in her life when he notes that she is "afraid of ending up a lonely old woman."

Style

Point of View

The play is written in a documentary style, focusing on the daily experiences of the main character as he tries to navigate the world of a city psychiatric hospital. Jim Down's point of view dominates the play, as he struggles to cope with the restrictive situation in which he finds himself. The audience never gains a clear look at the motivations behind the behavior of the doctors and of Ann. Kramm places the focus instead on tracing one man's complete loss of freedom and the effect that loss has on him. As a result, audiences get an in depth portrait of one man's painful resignation and ultimate defeat as his autonomy is stripped away.

Symbolism

Kramm employs symbolism in the play to illustrate and reinforce his themes. In the opening act, he uses foreshadowing to imply Jim's fate as one of the attendants searches for a bed for Jim. When Grosberg complains, "I don't know where we'll find one unless somebody dies," he suggests that death is the only escape from the hospital. In another scene, Jim is tied to the bed after he is brought into the hospital, ostensibly to ensure that he will not try to further harm himself. Eventually, Jim will in effect be prevented from exercising any free will concerning his future.

The title of the play becomes a symbol of its main action. Shrikes are robin-sized songbirds with keen eyesight and sharp beaks. Since their delicate feet prevent them from holding onto their food while they eat it, they use tools to assist their appetites. The birds skewer their prey by impaling them with thorns, barbed wire, or anything available. This habit has given them the nickname "butcher birds." Ann serves as the shrike in the play, as she impales Jim with tools provided by the psychiatric establishment. She effectively prevents him from escaping her grasp by manipulating the system to the point where she has full control over him.

Historical Context

A Woman's Place

Women's struggle for equal rights in the Western world gained slow momentum during the middle decades of the twentieth century. During World War II, women were encouraged to enter the work-place where they enjoyed a measure of independence and responsibility. After the war, they were expected (and required) to give up their jobs to the returning male troops. Hundreds of thousands of women were laid off and expected to resume their place in the home.

Training began at an early age to ensure that girls would conform to the feminine ideal—the perfect wife and mother. Women who tried to gain self-fulfillment through a career were criticized and deemed dangerous to the stability of the family. They were pressed to find fulfillment exclusively through their support of a successful husband. Television shows (such as *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*), popular magazines (*Good Housekeeping*), and advertisements all encouraged the image of woman-as-housewife throughout the 1950s. The small number of women who did work outside the home often suffered discrimination and exploitation as they were relegated to low-paying clerical, service, or assembly-line positions. Women would have to wait until the 1960s and 1970s to gain meaningful social and economic advancement.

Social Realism

In the late nineteenth century, playwrights turned away from what they considered the artificiality of melodrama to a focus on the commonplace in the context of everyday contemporary life. Their work, along with much of the experimental fiction written during that period, adopts the tenets of realism, a new literary movement that took a serious look at believable characters and their sometimes problematic interactions with society. To accomplish this goal, realistic drama focuses on the commonplace and eliminates the unlikely coincidences and excessive emotionalism of melodrama. Dramatists like Henrik Ibsen discard traditional sentimental theatrical forms as they chronicle the strengths and weaknesses of ordinary people confronting difficult social problems, like the restrictive conventions under which nineteenth-century women suffered. Dramatists who embrace realism use settings and props that reflect their characters' daily lives and realistic dialogue that replicates natural speech patterns.

Realism remained a dominant form in twentieth-century drama. In the 1930s and 1940s, a group of playwrights, known as social realists, brought drama to American audiences that reflected the political and social realities of the period. Dramatists like Lillian Hellman, Sidney Howard, Sidney Kingsley, and Clifford Odets examined political institutions like capitalism, totalitarianism, and socialism along with social issues like lesbianism and poverty. This trend continued in the 1950s, as reflected in *The Shrike*'s examination of mental institutions.

Critical Overview

When *The Shrike* opened on Broadway on January 15, 1952, it received praise from the public and critics alike. Most reviews focused on the compelling nature of the drama as well as the outstanding staging and performances, most notably, that of José Ferrer as Jim. *Newsweek* praised its "racking tension and suspense" while *Time* noted its "scary blend of theatricalism and truth" and proclaimed it to be a "relentless, gripping theater piece." Richard McLaughlin, writing for *Theatre Arts,* argued, "the story of a man trapped in an asylum by a carnivorous wife has its grim appeal in a time when social tensions make almost all of us potentials for the psychiatric ward." Henry Hewes in the *Saturday Review* proclaimed that one of the play's "finest moments is a stripping bare of our society's norms." Brooks Atkinson in the *New York Times* raved, "the production and performance are superb," and "Mr. Ferrer has staged it with relish, and he plays it with power and dexterity."

Some critics, however, found fault with the script. The *Time* review, for example, determined the playwriting "flawed," suggesting the improbability of hospital psychiatrists not picking up on the true relationship between Jim and Ann. McLaughlin claimed that "the writing was workmanlike and uninspired." Most reviewers, though, echoed *New York Times* critic Atkinson, who praised the play's documentary format and its "sharp and austere" story. The play received the 1952 Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an instructor of twentieth-century literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines the theme of repression and conformity in Kramm's play.

Published in 1958, John Kenneth Galbraith's book *The Affluent Society* chronicles the political, cultural, and social transformations that occurred in America in the 1950s, characterizing the period as a time of unprecedented affluence. Galbraith notes that in this "age of plenty" Americans enjoyed a higher standard of living as the American economy prospered. Tensions, however, boiled beneath the successful surface of American suburbia. Galbraith noted that the rapid changes Americans were experiencing often left them confused and anxious. As a result of their eagerness to fit into the emerging community of the middle class, Americans allowed themselves to be coerced by political and religious figures to conform to social dictates instead of maintaining individual values and beliefs.

Another impetus for conformity emerged during the cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States, which ushered in a new age of warfare and the fear of worldwide nuclear destruction. The cold war induced anxiety among Americans, leading to suspicion and paranoia that communism would spread at home. This paranoia was fed by a determined and often hysterical witch hunt for communists, led by Senator Joe McCarthy and the House of Representatives' Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). As a result, many Americans felt safety could be ensured only by submitting to the traditional values of church, home, and country.

In *The Shrike*, Joseph Kramm reflects this spirit of the 1950s in his focus on the pressure Americans felt to conform to conventional notions of morality. As he chronicles the experiences of one man's struggle to gain his release from a mental institution, he examines the methods employed by a repressive system to force individuals into relinquishing their freedoms.

The play opens with an illustration of the hospital's autocratic structure, which foreshadows what is in store for Jim as he struggles to retain his individuality. In the first scene, Miss Cardell, one of the authoritarian student nurses, accuses a patient of smoking, chastising him for endangering his weak heart. When Fleming refuses to admit that he has been smoking, Miss Cardell invades his privacy by looking under his covers for the cigarettes. Finally, when she tells him that she will have to call one of the attendants, he gives in. In an effort to guarantee that he will never again disobey orders, Miss Cardell tells him that she will report him.

This opening vignette presents, in miniature, what Jim will experience during his stay in the hospital. As the officials there try to get him to conform to their notion of mental health, they invade his privacy and threaten him with physical restraint, first in the hospital's violent ward, and then through transfer to a state institution from which he would have little chance of escape. His psychiatric evaluation will go on record to guarantee his compliance to their view of proper behavior.

The psychiatrists base their assessment of Jim's mental health on his willingness and ability to conform to social mores. Initially, they consider him to be a potential murderer, as they do all those who attempt suicide. Since they determine that he is a threat to himself as well as others, they tie him down in his bed, which foreshadows the complete loss of freedom he will experience by the end of the play. The doctors eventually replace the ties on his hands and feet with psychological restraints as they investigate Jim's past and evaluate his present emotional state.

When Jim's psychiatrists discover that he has left his wife and has become involved with another woman, they try to convince him to return to a more traditional lifestyle, suggesting that his actions have caused his present mental instability. They ignore Jim's complaints that his unrealized artistic goals prompted his suicide attempt. Jim tries to explain that he felt "hopeless" not because his marriage had broken up, but because he became convinced that he was losing his creative energies. The doctors, however, insist that his depression stems from the destruction of his relationship with Ann, a position articulated by Miss Wingate when she accuses Jim of trying "to break down the sanctity of marriage." She warns him that if he continues to try to contact Charlotte, the doctors will not let him out of the hospital. Unbeknownst to Jim, they have refused to allow Charlotte to see him, determining that a meeting with her would be too much of a strain for him.

Dr. Schlesinger's discussion with Jim about his relationship with Ann illustrates the hospital's authoritarian system. When Jim admits that he would not return to Ann if he were to be released, the doctor reminds him of Ann's love and devotion. Even after Jim explains Ann's need to control him and details evidence of her erratic temper, Dr. Schlesinger counters that Jim's life would be more "stable" with her. Jim's rejection of this option results in the extension of his incarceration in the hospital. When he refuses to answer questions about his feelings for Charlotte, determining them to be an invasion of his privacy, the doctor tells him that he will not be released in time to attend his theatre appointment and would instead be transferred to another ward.

Ann aids hospital authorities during each step of their program to strip Jim of his autonomy in an effort to gain control over him and thus to force him to return to her. She ensures her constant presence in the hospital, and so her influence over Jim, by insisting that she remain at his bedside and thus aid in his recovery. She regularly meets with Jim's psychiatrists to discuss his past and present behavior. The doctors depend on her to provide personal information about Jim that they can use to help them assess his condition and "cure" him.

During her initial meeting with Dr. Barrow, he asks her to press Jim to divulge his inner thoughts, explaining that what he says in these early stages of recovery will express "what he really thinks and feels." In later conversations with the doctors, Ann continually misrepresents his behavior, insisting that he is "frequently wild and incoherent." She blames Charlotte for his suicide attempt and determines that he will not be ready to leave until he breaks off all ties with the woman—opinions that the doctors wholeheartedly support since they reinforce their sense of normalcy.

Throughout most of the play, Jim cannot understand why he is being kept in the hospital, noting that he has expressed his true feelings to the doctors. That, however, is the crux of the problem. Jim's steadfast refusal to allow the doctors to dictate his sense of morality and to outline his future extends his incarceration.

Harry, Jim's brother, tells Jim that he will never get out of the hospital unless he tells them what they want to hear, that he has decided to return to his wife. When Jim decides that he could return to her for a short while, and then leave her and so gain his independence, Harry warns that if he is released, Jim will be in her custody and so she could have him recommitted at any time.

Seeing no way out of his dilemma, Jim takes Harry's advice and tells the doctors that he made a mistake when he left Ann. He convinces them that he is still in love with her and that he has now acquired a different set of values, the one forced on him by the hospital's psychiatric establishment. As a result, the doctors determine that he is well enough to go home under Ann's care. The play closes as Jim receives the news that he has been released. Understanding that he has been trapped into giving up his freedom and autonomy, he collapses and sobs.

John Mason Brown, in an article on the play for the *Saturday Review,* complained that Kramm's development of Ann is "hazy," and that "it is the husband's weakness rather than the wife's strength which is stressed." In Kramm's artful construction of the play, Ann's motivations for helping to strip Jim of his identity are only suggested. However, Kramm's focus is on the effects of her machinations, as well as those of the hospital, not the causes. In his representation of the harrowing experience of Jim Downs, Kramm has created a compelling portrait of the interplay between dominance and submission and the devastating consequences that can result.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on *The Shrike,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Ozersky is a critic, essayist, and cultural historian. In this essay, Ozersky describes some of the ways in which Kramm's play expresses the politics and fears of the early 1950s, when it was written.

Joseph Kramm's *The Shrike* is a powerful play, even nearly fifty years after it was written. It tells a familiar story: an unhappy man is institutionalized when he attempts suicide, and finds himself a prisoner of his doctors' notion of who is "sane." While this remains a compelling scenario even today, readers will understand *The Shrike* better if they look at the play in the context of the times it was written. Like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible, The Shrike* meant something very different to its cold war audience than it might to a reader encountering it for the first time today.

Contemporary readers of *The Shrike*, however, are more likely to be reminded of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.* Although there have been many plays and movies featuring protagonists trapped in asylums, from *The Snake Pit* to *Girl, Interrupted, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is the most famous, and parallels Kramm's play very closely. Both Jim Downs and Randall Patrick McMurphy are sane men caught under the arbitrary authority of a mental institution, and both find their primary victimizers not in their doctors, but in women.

The resemblance, though superficially strong, ends there, however. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was a product of the 1960s, and it identifies freedom with sex, the life force, and creativity. Authority is repressiveness, coldness, power for its own sake. McMurphy is a kind of stand-in for Kesey himself, a counter cultural guru of great renown. *The Shrike*, by contrast, sees freedom as delusional, or at best conditional. Authority is a vast, forbidding force that the hero barely tries to resist.

More importantly, *The Shrike* is a product of the early 1950s—a period when American political and intellectual life was at an all time low point. This was the time of the "red scare," the communist "witch hunt" pursued by the House of Representatives' Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that resulted in the Hollywood "blacklist." Worse still, it was during this period that Senator Joseph McCarthy dominated the public mind with his groundless but devastating accusations of treason. For Kramm, what is objectionable about the hospital is not its purpose or values, or the larger values of the society that created it. On the contrary, Downs only wants to get a job directing stage plays again; his major despair was his failure in his profession. Even the specific decision to kill himself is un-subversive—like *Death of a Salesman*'s Willy Loman, who wants to kill himself for the insurance money.

The fact that Downs doesn't rebel at society in no way prevents the play from reflecting the times though. Broadway audiences surely must have recognized the situation Jim finds himself in. The blacklist had ruined the careers of many directors and playwrights, a number of whom had attempted suicide. The cause of Jim's failure is that he has served his country in World War II, and returned older and out-of-touch with the times.

But other possibilities could surely be inferred by the audience. Moreover, the general power of unquestioned authority, justified by a cold war that seemed to have no end in sight, made many Americans uneasy. It was a time when saying something unpopular might cause one to be branded as a "pinko" (a communist) or worse. Once Jim is inside the hospital it is up to his doctors and his wife to decide when he should be released, but neither his doctors nor his wife share his values or opinions. Jim is now in the position of having to prove to the group, which he doesn't belong to, that he shares their arbitrary values, and believes what they believe. It is the ultimate nightmare for the individual: he has no rights nor freedom except what is granted to him by society, which is represented exclusively by high-handed authority figures.

The Shrike is far from unique in positing this sinister scenario; in postwar America, it was a recurrent nightmare. Films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* sociological best sellers such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd,* and popular novels like Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* all look at the horrors of conformity, of the individual man squashed by the tyranny of the many. For Kramm, Jim's position in the hospital was not merely analogous to the injustices suffered by a few screenwriters or intellectuals; it cut right to the heart of social life in an intensely stressful time.

Consider this speech, one of the key passages in *The Shrike*. Jim's brother, Harry Downs, visits him, and manages to get a few minutes to communicate freely with him. With the urgency of a fellow prisoner, Harry communicates to Jim the essential thing he needs to know.

Downs: If you want to get out of here—you've got to
play ball.
Jim: How?
Downs: Jim—I have never paid a fine in my life.
Because I know that I never know more than a
cop. He's the smart one—not me. And it's
'Yes, officer,' and 'No, officer' and 'I'm sorry,
sir.' Don't try to know more than these people.
If you want to get out of here, you'll have to
swallow everything. Well—what's being proud
going to get you. Don't I have to compromise
every day of my life? I've got a lousy insurance
business, so I get drunk with a client,
watch him make passes at Helen—and flatter
the hell out of him.... It's no different in here.
It's no different out there. Try it. What can you
lose?

This is not just Harry speaking: it is Miller's Willy Loman, Wilson's Tom Rath, the beleaguered men of C. Wright Mills's *White Collar,* William S. Whyte's *The Organization Man.* Kramm, and presumably his audience, understood just how representative Jim's problem really was—just as, ten years later, Ken Kesey would create a quintessential

sixties hero in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*'s McMurphy. The power of *The Shrike* comes in Kramm's ability to show how the hospital is essentially a form of social coercion—conformity at figurative gunpoint. The power of conventional morality, of social expectations, and of science are all of a piece: Miss Wingate, in letting Jim know that giving up the girl he loves will be the cost of his freedom, doesn't even bother to coat it with medical euphemism. "What are you trying to do," she asks. "Break down the sanctity of marriage?" Jim has to renounce Charlotte, whom he truly cares about, and return to his wife to get out of the hospital. He understands, as he weeps at the final curtain, that this is merely exchanging one prison for another.

For Kramm, however, the horrors of conformity are not purely personal. He goes to some pains to show how they infect society. The small community of patients Jim comes to live with all live in fear of the horrible Ward Seven—the "snake pit" where violent psychotics are kept. Because any accusation is enough to condemn a patient to Ward Seven, every patient has the power to exile any other patient. This is a clear allegory of the witch hunt, when any accusation of disloyalty, no matter who the source, was enough to land you on the blacklist. Everyone dislikes Schloss, but has to fear him, since the weakest and most ruthless members of society are, in this topsy-turvy world, now in the positions of greatest power. O'Brien and Schloss dislike each other intensely, but there is nothing either crazy or violent in their quarrel; nonetheless, when Schloss informs on O'Brien ("He threatened me, Miss Wingate"), O'Brien must suffer the consequences. Because Schloss is utterly opportunistic, and authority, in the form of the stern and stupid Miss Wingate, so all-powerful, men like O'Brien and Jim are prisoners whether in the hospital or out of it.

Contemporary readers will underestimate the force of what Jim is up against unless they remember how nearly limitless the authority of psychologists were in the early 1950s, and how unquestioned were the moral norms of the day. Although the disruptions of the 1960s have made the cold war years ripe for nostalgia, these were not "happy days" by any means; some measure of their unhappiness can be taken from the violence of the subsequent reaction against them in the following decade. *The Shrike* speaks to some universal truths about human life, about society, about marriage and free will. But it speaks to them specifically in the language of the early 1950s. For men such as Jim and

so many other literary protagonists, the world was run by the animalistic by-laws of business, by dirty pool in politics, and by the repressive hand of female morality on the home front. A play like *The Shrike* goes much farther than some of the literary benchmarks of the 1960s in explaining how much America has changed—and why.

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

Adaptations

A film version of *The Shrike* was produced by Universal Studios in 1955. The film was directed by José Ferrer, who starred along with June Allyson.

Topics for Further Study

Kramm does not closely examine Ann's motivation for her treatment of Jim. Write a scene for the play in which Ann explains to Jim's brother, Harry, the reasons for her behavior.

Read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and compare its themes to that of *The Shrike*.

Research passive-aggressive behavior. How do psychiatrists treat this type of personality?

Investigate state mental hospitals in America in the first half of the twentieth century. Does the play offer a realistic depiction of the operation of these hospitals?

How do the minor characters reinforce the play's themes?

One of the characters suggests that the film *The Snake Pit* presents a similar depiction of a mental institution to that in the play. View the film and either support or refute this opinion.

Compare and Contrast

1950s: The Cold War induces anxiety among Americans, who fear both annihilation by Russians and the spread of communism at home. The fear that communism will spread to the United States leads to suspicion and paranoia, heightened by the indictment of ex-government official Alger Hiss (1950) and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (1951) for passing defense secrets to the Russians.

Today: The Cold War ended after communism was overthrown in the former Soviet Union, yet suspicion and paranoia are still prevalent in America due to the threat of terrorism.

1950s: Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy conducts hearings from 1950-1954, intended to detect communist penetration of American government and academia; for his recklessness, he is censured by the U.S. Senate in 1954.

Today: Racial profiling is being considered as a tool to help combat the threat of terrorism.

1950: David Riesman, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, and a colleague, Nathan Glazer, argue in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) that Americans have been coerced to conform to social dictates set by politicians, religious leaders, and the media. Although this conformity often results in surface unity and serenity, it could also produce underlying feelings of alienation and frustration, thus creating the sense of being alone in a crowd.

Today: Americans embrace diversity in religion, politics, lifestyles, and the workplace.

What Do I Read Next?

The Bell Jar (1963), written by Sylvia Plath, focuses on a young woman's mental breakdown in New York City in the early 1950s. The novel is based on Plath's own experiences with depression and suicide attempts.

In *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), Susanna Kaysen chronicles the author's harrowing experiences in a mental hospital in 1967. Kaysen challenges notions of sanity and insanity, concluding that the definitions of each are culturally determined.

In the short story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936), Ernest Hemingway offers a searing portrait of the power plays that can develop between a husband and wife and their destructive consequences.

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) explores the harsh realities of mental institutions in the 1950s and early 1960s, including the practice of lobotomies, a surgical procedure that involves severing the nerve fibers in the brain that connect the frontal lobes to the thalamus.

Further Study

Review of *The Shrike,* in *America,* Vol. 90, December 12, 1953, p. 306.

This piece praises the play's thematic focus.

Review of *The Shrike,* in *Commonweal,* Vol. 55, February 1, 1952, p. 422.

This review explores the play's themes and critiques its Broadway debut.

Review of *The Shrike,* in *New Republic,* Vol. 126, February 4, 1952, p. 23.

This review praises the play's Broadway debut.

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Brown, John Mason, "The Amazing Mr. Ferrer," in *Saturday Review,* Vol. 35, February 9, 1952, pp. 22-23.

Hewes, Henry, "Drama Notes," in *Saturday Review,* Vol. 35, May 17, 1952, p. 28.

McLaughlin, Richard, Review of *The Shrike,* in *Theatre Arts,* Vol. 36, July 1952, p. 4.

Review of *The Shrike,* in *Newsweek,* Vol. 39, January 28, 1952, p. 83.

Review of *The Shrike,* in *Theatre Arts,* Vol. 36, March 1952, p. 71.

Review of *The Shrike,* in *Time,* Vol. 59, January 28, 1952, p. 43.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Drama for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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